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The horrors visited upon Americans during their nation’s civil war led contemporaries to describe their country – in Frederick Law Olmsted’s words – as a ‘republic of suffering’. The people of the Union and Confederacy, burdened and shattered by the experience of military slaughter and disease, and experiencing privation and hardship beyond the battlefield, had every reason to mourn and, in their mourning, to ponder the meaning of an existential struggle that cost almost three-quarters of a million lives. Few were not touched by the death of a loved relative or friend. No one has better described the universal trauma of the carnage than the historian Drew Gilpin Faust, whose recent prize-winning work on death and the Civil War took Olmsted’s phrase for its title: This Republic of Suffering.

What, then, is the case for exploring expressions of humour in the wartime North? Is it not flippant – tasteless, even – to search for the comic in the midst of intolerable human pain? One answer is that Americans did not stop laughing while war continued around them. Playgoers continued to patronise theatres for all kinds of dramatic fare, including comedies; journals like Vanity Fair, Comic Monthly and Harper’s Weekly fed an appetite for popular – especially graphic – humour; Charles Farrar Browne, David Ross Locke and Robert H Newell, and their alter egos, Artemus Ward, Petroleum V Nasby and Orpheus C Kerr, were just three writers whose comic creations touched the funny bone of Union loyalists; and in the military camps, fighting men filled the long hours between battlefield engagements with story-telling, jokes, and humorous songs.

There is, however, a deeper rationale for examining the expressions of wartime laughter. Some forms of humour invite investigation into the values and ethical imperatives of those who contrived and appreciated them. It was Plato who reflected that ‘serious things cannot be grasped without ridiculous ones’; and Aristotle who said, quoting Anacharsis, ‘Be merry, so you can be serious.’ More apposite still, here in the Netherlands, are the words of Erasmus of Rotterdam. ‘Nothing is more fun,’ the Renaissance theologian maintained, ‘than treating jests seriously.’ There may be no better test of this assertion than to take as a case study the wartime president of the Union. Overburdened,
oppressed, and tending to melancholia, Abraham Lincoln provides a compelling example of the complex, meaningful and sometimes ambiguous role that humour played in the wartime North.

**Lincoln’s Sense of Humour**

Laughter was an important ingredient in Lincoln’s life, one almost universally noted by his contemporaries – friend and foe alike – and by his subsequent biographers. His humour encompassed not only the frontier stories that he relished, but mimicry, political satire, morality tales, bawdy, and biblical, classical and Shakespearean allusion. Many have characterized Lincoln’s humour as a ‘way of life’ or ‘habit of mind.’

More often than not, students of Lincoln have reflected on two particular aspects of his use of laughter. The first is its function as therapy. Recent scholars, including Michael Burlingame, follow the lead of Lincoln’s Old Salem acquaintances in depicting his humour as his ‘life preserver’. In his psychological study, *Lincoln’s Melancholy*, Joshua Shenk identifies humour as the salve of Lincoln’s depression. ‘Somewhat in the way that insulin allows diabetics to maintain their lives without eliminating the underlying problem, humor and poetry gave Lincoln succor without taking away his need for it. … He used his humor to respond to his melancholy, and drew on his melancholy to fashion a worldview rooted largely in humor.’

‘If it were not for these stories, jokes, jests I should die,’ Lincoln told the painter Francis Carpenter: ‘they give vent – they are the vents – of my moods and gloom.’ He was evangelistic about the *reviving* power of laughter and wanted others to share the tonic. At the landmark cabinet meeting of 22 September 1862, when he announced his decision to issue the preliminary emancipation proclamation, the president first read a passage from Artemus Ward, to the bemusement of his colleagues. ‘Gentlemen, why don’t you laugh?’ he asked. ‘With the fearful strain that is upon me night and day, if I did not laugh I should die.’ Of an unspecified member of the cabinet Lincoln said, quoting Sydney Smith, that it would take a surgical operation to get a joke in his head. In fact, he could have directed the barb at several of his departmental secretaries. By contrast, he likened himself to the gravedigger in Hamlet, ‘for am I not noted as a fellow of infinite jest and humor, and is not my present life typical of that vocation?’

The second more-or-less constant theme in the story of Lincoln’s humour is the ease with which he summoned up stories and jokes, and deployed them...
for practical effect. ‘Mr. Lincoln had an astonishing memory,’ a colleague reflected. ‘He could recall every incident of his life particularly if any thing amusing was connected with it. [He] … used anecdotes as labour saving contrivances. He could convey his ideas on any subject through the form of a simple story or a homely illustration with better effect than any man I ever knew.’

Lincoln himself is reported as saying: ‘I believe I have the popular reputation of being a story-teller, but I do not deserve the name in its general sense; for it is not the story itself, but its purpose or effect, that interests me. I often avoid a long and useless discussion by others or a laborious explanation on my own part by a short story that illustrates my point of view. So, too, the sharpness of a refusal or the edge of a rebuke may be blunted by an appropriate story, so as to save wounded feeling and yet serve the purpose. No, I am not simply a story-teller, but story-telling as an emollient saves me much friction and distress.’

For Lincoln, then, stories sometimes acted as parables, to illustrate, clarify, and teach. They were a means of driving home his argument, a technique he had mastered during his days on the circuit as a trial lawyer. For instance, Lincoln understood from the outset of the armed conflict that avoiding war with Britain and France was an absolute. When Orville Browning urged Lincoln not to acquiesce in British demands during the Trent crisis, saying he was sure England was only bluffing and would not dare to fight, Lincoln told of a vicious bulldog back in Springfield. Neighbours said it wasn’t dangerous, but Lincoln recalled the words of a man who wasn’t sure: ‘I know the bulldog will not bite. You know he will not bite, but does the bulldog know he will not bite?’

Lincoln also used stories, not only to clarify, but as a means of polite refusal, diversion and obfuscation. John Hay told how ‘an infernal nuisance … fastened himself to the Tycoon … and tried to get into conversation on the likelihood of the president’s re-nomination and re-election. The Honest Abraham quickly put him off with a story of his friend Jesse Dubois, who … had control of the State House at Springfield. An itinerant quack preacher wanted the use of the Representatives Hall to deliver a religious lecture. ‘What’s it about,’ said Jesse. ‘The Second Coming of Christ,’ said the parson. ‘Nonsense,’ roared Jesse, ‘if Christ had been to Springfield once, and got away, he’d be damned clear of coming again.’

As president, Lincoln used his humour to deal with hard cases. One of his stressful tasks as leader of the new administration was dealing with the avalanche of applicants for government posts. Lincoln was bombarded with far more requests than he had jobs (‘The fact is,’ he said, ‘I have got more
pigs than I have teats’). One day a delegation called on Lincoln to ask for the appointment of a gentleman as commissioner to the Sandwich Islands. They presented their case as earnestly as possible; and beside their candidate’s fitness for the place they urged that he was in bad health, and that a residence in that balmy climate would be of great benefit to him. The President closed the interview with this discouraging remark: ‘Gentlemen, I am sorry to say that there are eight other applicants for that place, and they are all sicker than your man.’

Lincoln’s calculated use of laughter and the therapeutic qualities of humour leads us to ask: what exactly was it that touched his funny bone? And what might we learn from this? In fact, Lincoln’s sense of humour was capacious and catholic. At one end the spectrum, he drew pleasure from the ludicrous. Of one fellow, Lincoln remarked that he was ‘the biggest liar in Washington. You can’t believe a word he says. He reminds me of an old fisherman I used to know who got such a reputation for stretching the truth that he bought a pair of scales and insisted on weighing every fish in the presence of witnesses. One day a baby was born next door, and the doctor borrowed the fisherman’s scales to weigh the baby. It weighed forty-seven pounds.’

At the other extreme, he secured a certain cerebral joy in the plasticity and ambiguity of language. He several times prompted laughter with his remark about the ‘specious and fantastic arrangement of words, by which a man can prove a horse chestnut to be a chestnut horse’; and he got enjoyment from passages replete with spoonerisms and transposed words.

He said he was riding bass-ackwards on a jass-ack, through a patton-cotch, on a pair of baddle-sags, stuffed full of binger-gred, when the animal steered at a scump, and the lirrup-steather broke, and threwed him in the forner of the kence and broke his pishing-fole. He said he would not have minded it much, but he fell right in a great tow-curd; in fact, he said it give him a right smart sick of fitness—-he had the molera-corbus pretty bad. He said, about bray dake he come to himself, ran home, seized up a stick of wood and split the axe to make a light, rushed into the house, and found the door sick abed, and his wife standing open. But thank goodness she is getting right hat and farty again.

It seems likely that most of Lincoln’s stories were, in John Hay’s words, ‘unfit for family reading’. The crude and the sexually suggestive were a mainstay of his humour. Leonard Swett was certain that his friend’s ‘love of the ludicrous … made him overlook everything else but the point of the
joke sought after. … If it was outrageously low and dirty, he never seemed to see that part of it. … It was the wit he was after – the pure jewel, and he would pick it up out of the mud, or dirt, just as readily as he would from a parlor table.” One of the more repeatable tales was that of a collector of relics who heard about an old lady in Illinois with a dress she had worn during the Revolutionary War. He visited her and asked if she would produce the dress to satisfy his love of aged things. She did so and he enthusiastically held it up, saying “Were you the dress that this lady once young and blooming wore in the time of Washington? No doubt when she came home from the dressmaker she kissed you as I do now!” At this the relic hunter took the old dress and kissed it heartily. The old lady, resenting such foolishness, said: “Stranger if you want to kiss something old you had better kiss my ass. It is sixteen years older than that dress.”

Although sharp wit was not Lincoln’s prevailing mode of humour as president, he had a capacity for impromptu and apposite responses in the moment. When Jay Cooke commented on the Attorney General Edward Bates’s grey beard and contrasting ‘youthful’ dark hair, Lincoln remarked ‘it could hardly be otherwise’ because ‘he uses his jaws more than he does his brains.’ Receiving a despatch from General Joe Hooker issued from his ‘headquarters in the saddle’, Lincoln famously quipped ‘he’s got his headquarters where his hindquarters ought to be.’

Lincoln’s liking for clever humour of all kinds, including smut, left him open to attack. Many contemporaries deemed him ‘an aimless punster, a smutty joker.’ As Mark Neely has noted, ‘Much respectable opinion saw Lincoln as a jokester too small for his office, a trifling Nero who fiddled with funny stories while the Constitution and the republic burned.’ The attacks peaked in the election of 1864. Democrats circulated the false claim that when Lincoln had toured the site of the battle of Antietam with Ward Hill Lamon in 1862, he revealed his love of jesting, lack of gravitas, and disrespect for the dead, by asking Lamon to sing the minstrel song ‘Picayune Butler’. Typical of Lincoln’s critics was ex-governor William Allen of Ohio, who maintained that the people ‘don’t want a cold-blooded joker at Washington who, while the District of Columbia is infested with hospitals, and the atmosphere burdened by the groans and sighs of our mangled countrymen, when he can spare a minute from Joe Miller’s jest book, looks out upon the acres of hospitals and inquires “What houses are those!”’

Here I want to argue that in the catholicity of Lincoln’s comic taste we may have lost sight of what was arguably Lincoln’s chief pleasure: humour that elicited not just laughter or mere merriment but that also prompted righteous
mirth – a *just* laughter occasioned by comic writing designed to deliver a moral critique. The case depends on appreciating a text that by Lincoln’s own account gave him the greatest and most constant pleasure: the work of a gifted young newspaperman, David Ross Locke. The following discussion shines a light on Locke’s extraordinarily imaginative creation, the egregious Petroleum V Nasby.

Nasby was a pro-slavery Copperhead pastor whose illiterate columns first appeared in April 1862. The middle initial stood for ‘Vesuvius’, a signal for his readers to steady themselves for regular, caustic eruptions on the pressing issues of the day. Nasby was a selfish and conniving political office-seeker: dissolute, whisky drinking, red-nosed, greedy, loud, unprincipled, bigoted, hypocritical, dissembling and sordid. The residents of Findlay, according to Locke’s modern biographer, speculated on the inspiration for the villain. In the town’s tavern a man once asked Locke, ‘Just what kind of a man is Nasby, really, as you write him?’ The editor allegedly replied, ‘He’s something like you – a sort of nickel-plated son of a bitch.’

To register the nuances of Locke’s invention, more gargoyle than human being, calls for some appreciation of the value-system and moral ethos of the wartime Union’s Peace Democrats, the ‘Copperheads’. Then, after showing how Locke used Nasby to ridicule these opponents of the Union administration, I shall conclude by asking what this reveals about the moral springs of Lincoln’s humour.

**The Copperheads’ moral order**

The Copperheads’ view of the world had its own philosophical dimension, however uncomfortably its moral grounding sits with us today. The Peace Democrats drew their support from within several denominational families: Irish and German Catholics, and in many parts of the lower north and the border area hard-shell Calvinists, especially Baptists and Disciples. Sometimes the disaffected drew attention by their reticence: ministers avoided taking the oath of allegiance, or failed to pray for the nation, or to display the flag. Some openly critical ministers were expelled and several churches in the lower Midwest split apart. ‘We are having some schism in the church,’ the Illinois Methodist minister Leonard Smith recorded in his diary in May 1863. ‘Scratched the name of Thomas Austin off the Class Book. Has let the Devil & politics lead him from the right. Is an old rebel & slave admirer. Poor old sinner. Wants slavery perpetuated.’ Smith, a young
antislavery Unionist, found the going hard in parts of central Illinois, where a critical mass of southern-sympathizers raised his blood pressure. Lamenting the blighting effects of Copperheadism amongst those he described as ‘old hard shell Baptists’, rigid Campbellites, and antimission Methodists, he reflected: ‘It is some consolation that they are old & shortly will die & then better things will be accomplished.’

These theological conservatives bitterly opposed what they denounced as unscriptural Puritan meddling in the lives of others. Campaigns for moral and social reform – abolition above all – were simply presumptuous in the face of God’s sovereignty and predetermined plan for the world. Caustic and often brilliant, Copperhead polemicists defended slavery as a scriptural institution, one legitimized by the practices of the Old Testament patriarchs and the ‘curse of Ham’ (Noah’s curse on Ham’s son Canaan to be ‘a servant of servants’). They denied that slavery was against natural justice, insisting that slaves would face greater prejudice and cruelty in freedom than under the protective care of pious and civilizing Christian southern masters. ‘Where,’ they asked, ‘do the Christian Scriptures pronounce slaveholding a sin?’ Nowhere. Yet, ‘if Jesus Christ and his apostles were on earth now, they would be denounced as “traitors” and “sympathizers with rebellion”’ because they had tolerated slaveholding in the Roman world.

Thus Copperhead religion provided moral grounding for the extreme racial antipathies amongst white northerners who lamented what they branded ‘a vulgar and brutal quarrel about negroes’. An Indianapolis Catholic asked rhetorically: ‘who will assert, that the Church, as such, has ever attempted to place all men, without regard to races, on an equality, in social, political and civil positions?’ It was an enquiry admitting only one answer from James McMaster, editor of the widely-circulating New York Freeman’s Journal and Catholic Register, who – holding that ‘the slaves are black as ink, and of a race marked by God Himself for inferiority in the social hierarchy’ – lamented that the ‘bloody work’ of ‘a most … pernicious philanthropism … threatens to destroy the negro on this continent, by throwing him out of his Providential place, and thrusting him into a state of life where he cannot long exist.’

Another berated Lincoln for ‘striving to make the war a conflict between the white and black race. … How long will the caucasian man allow this blasphemy to go out to the nations that “God and the negro are to save the Republic!”’

The lament became all the more anguished as Union military campaigns evolved into a hard war against southern civilians and their property, and as black troops took their place in the federal front-line. Pious Peace Democrats
rebuked the administration for its bloodthirstiness: ‘Instead of feeding your people with “the bread of life,” you feed them with blood and gunpowder.’

‘Christian ethics’, McMaster insisted, ‘have settled it that you cannot plunder the private property, of the people of States with which you go to war. Christian civilization has made the people of all Christian States brethren. Attack governments, attack armed forces, but the non-combatant people are not the spoil of any power, according to the ameliorated code of Christian civilization.’

Copperheads’ Christian pacifism was tactical and contingent, not fundamental, but it struck a chord with those troubled by what they regarded as the blood lust and dictatorship of the Lincoln administration. Democrats felt a powerful sense of religious superiority in the face of the most fearsome Unionist rhetoric. The Methodist ‘Parson Brownlow’ shocked Democrats with the tenor of his support for arming African Americans. ‘The true Union sentiment of the country calls for the putting down of this hell-bound rebellion at any cost of human life and … treasure’, Brownlow insisted. ‘And if we had the power … we would arm and uniform, in Federal habiliments, all the fowls of the air and the fishes of the sea – every wolf, panther, catamount and bear in the mountains of America – every tiger, elephant and lion in Europe – every rattle-snake and crocodile in the swamps of Florida and South Carolina – every negro in the Southern Confederacy, and every devil in hell. … Aye, we say put down the rebellion … [even] if, in doing so, we have to exterminate from God’s green earth every living human being south of Mason and Dixon’s line.’ Aghast, one Democratic editor remarked, ‘The author … is confessed to be a minister of the gospel.’

We perhaps are more aghast at his placing the African American one step short of the devil.

Central to their religious indictment of the Union leadership was its assault on constitutional rights: suspending habeas corpus, relying on military courts, and closing down newspapers. Lincoln, they declared, was a traitor to America’s providential role as the repository of individual freedom, civil and spiritual. ‘Mobs, bastiles [sic], suspensions of the Courts, arbitrary arrests, destruction of democratic newspapers, and all the old fashioned machinery of despotism’, one Copperhead declared, ‘have sufficiently attested that this is a war of Puritanism against the free institutions established by our Revolutionary fathers.’ ‘Personal liberty, in any sense of the word, is a peculiarly Christian idea. It has its birth in the idea of the value of the individual human soul.’ But the administration was fighting for the ‘pagan idea’ that the individual was nothing and the State was all. Peace Democrats were defending the holy cause of ‘UNION AND CONSTITUTIONAL
LIBERTY THROUGH AN HONORABLE PEACE.’ Fusing fidelity to God and to the Constitution, they found a Christian martyr in Ohio congressman Clement Vallandigham, who, following his military arrest for disloyalty, was subsequently banished to the Confederacy.  

Lincoln himself took a prime place in the demonology of pious Democrats. He was not only, as one put it, the agent of ‘meddlesome, domineering and intolerant’ Puritanism, prepared to seize the levers of power to advance the grotesque emancipationist vision of radical abolitionist preachers. He was also ‘steeped in vulgarity and obscenity’. He had spread a ‘foetid moral atmosphere’ throughout the land, and had ‘Sodomized the nation’, allowing Washington to ‘become a den of … indecency and vice’, and tolerating the Federal armies’ complicity in rape and miscegenation. His character spoke through his face – that ‘of a demon, cunning, obscene, treacherous, lying, and devilish’. In one imaginative satire Lincoln appeared as a Satanic wizard, directing three devil-possessed Shakespearean witches around a bubbling cauldron: the Secretaries of State, War and the Treasury – Seward, Stanton, and Chase. ‘When shall the Cabinet meet again, /In fraud, corruption, or for gain?’ asks the president – eliciting from Seward this reply:

When the country’s lost and done –
When sinks in blood its setting sun –
And Time’s decree its doom unrolls,
And Satan’s contract claims our souls.  

Locke’s Nasby

David Ross Locke was one of those ‘meddlesome, domineering and intolerant’ Puritans who so unsettled the Copperheads. Born in 1833, Locke moved from upstate New York to Ohio at the age of twenty. Here he edited a succession of small-town papers, in which he strenuously championed antislavery and the nascent Republican party, before buying the Jeffersonian newspaper at Findlay in 1861.  

Locke’s earliest Nasby letters developed an imaginative comic narrative for the grotesque he had created. Nasby – a disciple of the peace Democrat, Clement Vallandigham, and an inhabitant of the fictional southern Ohio village cross-roads, Wingert’s Corners – is established as the determined enemy of reform, abolition, and the progressive causes championed at the other end of the state, culturally speaking, at Oberlin. To escape the Union draft Nasby
takes refuge in Canada. Returning home, he is seized and conscripted. He
flees to the Confederacy and enlists in an infantry regiment, the Louisiana
Pelicans. Disillusioned with the straitened conditions of Confederate service,
he again returns home, is arrested for desertion, and is imprisoned. Returning
to Wingert’s Corners on his release, Nasby organizes a Democratic church
through whose pulpit for the rest of the war he preaches the anti-black, pro-
slavery, peace gospel of ‘St Valandygum’.

Locke’s biting and merciless satire was designed to arouse an indignant
patriotism amongst his loyal Unionist readers. One literary scholar has rightly
described Nasby’s papers as ‘the Civil War etched in sulphuric acid’: ‘The
literature of the Civil War without the Nasby Letters would be as incomplete
as that of the American Revolution without the writings of Thomas Paine.’
They won a huge and devoted readership across the North. Well before they
appeared in pamphlet form they were already circulating in the Republican
newspaper press beyond Ohio; they would reach readers in New England, the
Midwest, the west coast, and even parts of the upper South. Their audience
ranged from more conservative Unionists to radicals subscribing to William
Lloyd Garrison’s The Liberator. The Philadelphia North American believed
Nasby would help crystallise ‘that right public sentiment which now rules
all of the north. He puts both rebel and copperhead arguments on the public
green with a drapery so thin that every deformity shows through.’
Charles Sumner was certain they were ‘among the agencies by which disloyalty in all its
forms was exposed, and public opinion assured on the right. It is impossible
to measure their value.’ More pithily, the Commissioner of Internal Revenue,
George S Boutwell deemed Union victory attributable to three forces: the
Army, the Navy and the Nasby Letters.

What was it that readers so admired? It is rare to find any extended
discussion of this question, perhaps because the answer appears self-evident
(after all, Nasby was, and still is, I think, a genuinely funny creation – not
something that can be said of all mid-nineteenth century comic fiction), and
perhaps, too, because of the sensitivities involved in dissecting a text whose
intentionally coarse, disturbing, offensively racist language touches a raw
nerve in today’s reader. Locke’s biographer, John M Harrison, locates the best
commentary on the charge of vulgarity by quoting Locke’s niece, who some
years after his death responded to the observation, ‘Your Uncle Nasby had no
taste’ with the prompt reply: ‘Oh, yes he had – bad taste.’

What gave Nasby the edge over Artemus Ward, Orpheus C Kerr and the
others was Locke’s devastating satirical voice and the uncompromising cultural
critique and ethical standpoint that it expressed. Like all memorable satire,
Nasby’s letters stake out a conflict between two worldviews, one *explicit* and ridiculed by the resort to absurdity, the other *implicit*. Nasby was the negative photographic print which, when reversed, yielded the positive moral order. Locke himself described his creation as ‘a convenient vehicle for conveying political truths backwards’. The author’s implicit voice was that of the New England moralist. He was not deeply religious. Over his life he moved from an evangelical to a more liberal Protestantism. But the influence of a staunchly antislavery father and an equally devout mother left its mark. He passionately hated slavery and was as close to a racial egalitarian as one could find amongst white Americans of his time. When white printers went on strike in Cleveland to protest against working on the same terms as a qualified African American printer, Locke refused to join them. At the core of Locke’s astringent satire is a concern for justice in the face of racial bigotry and the distorted Christianity that sustained it. 

He had not created this grotesque from mere whimsy or easy-going jocularity. Rather, its genesis lay in the wartime circumstances that confronted Union loyalists in the lower North and border: deep anxiety, split communities, and proximate violence. Locke’s own church fractured when the minister failed to face down the anti-abolitionist, Democratic elements who controlled his purse-strings. Locke and the congregation’s other Republicans defected and installed him as pastor of a new Congregational church. Franklin’s two newspapers, Locke’s *Jeffersonian* and the Democratic *Courier*, suffered violent attack. Years afterwards Locke earnestly explained:

If I wrote strong during war times it was only because I must. It was a strain to live in those days. Imagine a town of 2000 inhabitants sending out a company of 100 of her bravest young men. … One hundred young men from such a town means nearly the entire list. Imagine of that 100, 65 killed in one afternoon. Imagine the black pall that spread over that town as one by one, the telegraph ticked off the names of the dead. Imagine the streets filled with hair disheveled, shrieking mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts. Imagine the marble-faced fathers and brothers, friends. … If you can imagine this, you can get an idea of what I saw in an Ohio town in ’62. Write strong? We lived a year each day from ’61 to ’65. 

It was no coincidence that it was in this Ohio town in ’62 – in this white-hot crucible of strife, anxiety, and mutual suspicion – that Nasby saw the light of day.
Locke’s appalling creation generates a biting satire by virtue of the moral universe he inhabits and by the deformed piety with which he sanctifies it. Locke uses Nasby to target the Copperheads’ racial prejudices, partisan greed, moral degeneracy, draft-dodging, and general disloyalty to the Union. Locke installed Nasby as the Christian pastor of ‘a strikly Dimekratic Church’, at Wingert’s Corners in June 1862. By the summer of 1863 it was the ‘Church uv St Valandygum’ (sometimes ‘Vanlandigum’), and later that year the ‘Church uv the Slawterd Innocents’. It would reach its apotheosis in January 1864 as the ‘Church of the New [or ‘Noo’] Dispensashun’. Many of the three-dozen letters and sermons collected for publication as the Nasby Papers in 1864 took on an explicitly religious cast. Nasby’s church stands Puritanism on its head. Nasby himself is cast as the complete antithesis of the moral self-improver shaped by the Protestantism of New England. He is fundamentally feckless and lazy. Addicted to tobacco and whisky, he bears a butternut nose, whose ‘buches beekun lite wuz never got out uv spring water’. He labels his pastoral work the ‘aposel biznis’: he plunders his congregation, by coercion and outright cheating. Unembarrassed greed has him in crass pursuit of lucrative political jobs, above all the plum of a ‘post orifis’.

Locke uses his creation as a less-than-subtle rebuke to the routine hypocrisy of Democrats who attacked the ‘political’ preaching of Unionist and antislavery clergy. The holy Trinity devoutly worshipped in Nasby’s Copperhead citadel is a trio of Confederate sympathisers: Fernando Wood of New York, Jesse Bright of Indiana – expelled from the U.S. Senate for acknowledging Jefferson Davis as president of the Confederacy – and the martyred Vallandigham, ‘who went to the stake with a kamness onparralled fer prinsipple.’ Nasby the preacher sanctifies resistance to the arrest of southern sympathizers, to the draft, and to ‘Evrything the Administrashen hez dun, is doin, er may hereafter do.’ Adamant in his ‘unfaltrin trust in the rychusnis uv the Suthrin coz,’ he ‘viggerously’ encourages the ‘mobbin uv Methodis, Presbyterin, Luthrin, Brethrin and uther hetrodox churchis.’

The motors that drive Nasby’s religion and politics are racial animus and pro-slavery fervor. Of these conjoined prejudices Locke makes racial bigotry – ‘a holesum prejoodis agin evrything black’ – the more potent. (He has Nasby, during his earlier soldiering days in Louisiana, take a rich widow for a wife, only to discover in horror that she ‘wuz a OCTOROON, one 8TH NIGGER! … A purty goak to play upon a Dimekrat! Nasby marryin a Nigger!’). No scriptural literalist himself, Locke happily guyed what he saw as the casuistry of those who found justification for slavery
and white supremacy in select Biblical episodes: the story of Hagar, the Egyptian servant who gave birth to Abraham’s son Ishmael and was expelled into the wilderness; the curse of servitude that Ham’s father Noah placed upon Canaan after Ham saw him naked as he lay drunk in his tent; and the Apostle Paul’s instruction to the runaway slave Onesimus to return to his master (and fellow Christian) Philemon. Locke uses Nasby’s vulgarity to expose the racial animus that infuses this reading of the Bible. Here is his first order of service:

Readin uv one uv the follerin passages uv Skripter: – 9th chapter uv Jennysis, wich relates the cussin uv Canaan, provin that niggers is Skriptooral slaves, and the chapters about Hagar and Onesimus, wich proves the Fugitive Slave Law to be skriptooral. (The rest uv the Bible we consider figgerative, and pay no attenshun to, whatever.)

Religious exercises culminate in a lecture ‘on whatever phase uv the nigger question may seem approprit.’ Nasby’s addresses exploit fear of fugitive slaves’ migration from the South and their threat to white labor. He cooks up preposterous numbers of blacks settling in Ohio, including over 100,000 around abolitionist Oberlin (‘All uv wich is studying fer the ministry, drawin cavalry captin’s pay and rashens, … inclooding 2 white servants, each’). ‘The taler shops, blaksmith shops, shoe shops, and stores is all filled with these noosences.’ Making hay with the internal contradictions in the Copperhead argument, Locke has Nasby address serving white soldiers on the danger of shiftless incomers who ‘hev seezed upon yure labor [while] you air taxt by a nigger-luvin Government to support them in idlenis …, who wont work, and who by takin your plasis on the farms and in the workshops, will prevent you from ernin a onist livin wen yoo git back.’ Nasby fulminates equally against miscegenation – the races’ sexual mixing – and calculates that in Wingert’s Corners alone ‘238 white men hev marrid black femails, within 2 weeks, also 803 white wimmin to black men, … the Guverment payin license, preecher’s fee, and the bridle outfit, incloodin furnytoor to start ‘em howskeepin.’ Nasby urges that ‘the niggers be druv out’:

Arowse to-wunst! Rally agin Conway! Rally agin Sweet! Rally agin Hegler! Rally agin Hegler’s family! Rally agin the porter at the Reed House! Rally agin the cook at the Crook House! Rally agin the nigger wider in Vance’s addition! Rally agin Missis Umstid! Rally agin Missis Umstid’s childern by her first husband! Rally agin Missis Umstid’s childern
by her sekkund husband! Rally agin all the rest uv Missis Umstid's childern! Rally agin the nigger that kum yesterday! Rally agin the saddle-kulurd girl that yoost 2 be hear! Ameriky fer white men!

Locke, the racial egalitarian, throughout uses Nasby’s uninhibited and exuberant recourse to the word nigger as a means of ridiculing its ubiquity in Democrats’ political rhetoric and highlighting the disproportionate load that racial issues bore in the Copperheads’ appeal. Reflecting on how ‘Dimocrisy’ could best keep the people ‘strung up the proper pitch,’ Nasby concludes: ‘Nigger is all the capital we hev left.’

Lincoln and Nasby

Nasby found no more avid reader than the president himself. Locke had first spoken with Lincoln in Quincy, Illinois, during the senatorial campaign of 1858 and he would later meet with him in 1863 and 1864. Lincoln prompted the first of those White House meetings. ‘Why don’t you come to Washington and see me?’ Lincoln had written. ‘Is there no place you want? Come on and I will give you any place that you ask for – that you are capable of filling – and fit to fill.’ Locke went, though not to solicit a post. He found the president ‘very much pleased’ with the Nasby letters, which he read regularly. Lincoln was a fan even before individual letters appeared in pamphlet form in 1864. That collection, Locke recalled, the president kept ‘in a drawer in his table, and it was his wont to read them on all occasions to his visitors, no matter who they might be, or what their business was.’

Lincoln seriously offended many of the great men of the Union Party in this way. They included some of his cabinet secretaries. When the president read Nasby aloud to Edwin Stanton and Charles A Dana as they waited for the October 1864 election returns at the telegraph office, the Secretary of War grew increasingly impatient. With the arrival of the equally humourless Chase, Stanton pulled Dana into an adjoining room and exploded: ‘God damn it to hell. Was there ever such nonsense? Was there ever such an inability to appreciate what it going on in an awful crisis? Here is the fate of this whole republic at stake, and here is the man around whom it all centers, on whom it all depends, turning aside from this monumental issue to read the God damned trash of a silly mountebank.’ Dana himself recalled Stanton’s indignation: ‘The idea that when the safety of the Republic was thus at issue, ... the leader ... could turn aside to read such balderdash and
to laugh at such frivolous jests, was to his mind something most repugnant and damnable.  

Locke was, in Charles Sumner’s words, Lincoln’s ‘favorite humorist’, a verdict given substance during the senator’s visit to the White House in March 1865. As the two men dealt with a matter of some seriousness, Lincoln quoted Nasby from memory. Sensing that Sumner was at a loss, he offered to ‘initiate’ him and repeated to Sumner the tribute he had previously delivered to Locke himself: ‘For the genius to write these things I would gladly give up my office.’ Pulling out the pamphlet of Nasby letters from his desk, Sumner recalled, Lincoln ‘proceeded to read from it with infinite zest, while his melancholy features grew bright. It was a delight to see him surrender so completely to the fascination.’ Although there were some thirty people waiting in the ante-chamber, some of high political rank, Lincoln went on reading for twenty minutes or more, and would have gone on longer had not Sumner tactfully drawn this ‘lesson of the morning’ to a close. The copy of *The Nasby Papers* from which the president recited with such appetite was in all likelihood the pamphlet lodged in the Library of Congress half a century ago – known to have been Lincoln’s personal copy, whose candlelight singeing testifies to its being Lincoln’s night-time companion and comforter. Nasby was so much a staple of his reading that Leonard Swett believed the president read him ‘as much as he did the Bible’.

What was it that Lincoln so admired in Locke’s creation? He has left us no explicit statement. But we may draw some inferences about the sources of Lincoln’s laughter.

Vulgar and enthusiastic preaching that appealed more to the heart than the head had long prompted him to frivolity: as a boy Lincoln had mimicked frontier exhorters, and their physical religion later led him to remark, ‘when I hear a man preach, I like to see him act as if he were fighting bees!’ His conflict with the Methodist Peter Cartwright was more than narrowly political: it was the clash of two cultural outlooks. Lincoln would certainly have delighted in Locke’s echoes of the tub-thumping sermon built on a mercilessly repeated text. Nasby is the epitome of ignorance, drawing his verses from such concoctions as the books of ‘Joab’ and ‘Abiram’. He compliments his congregation for smiting an enrolling officer ‘hip and thigh, even ez Bohash smote Jaheel.’ He has the cadences of the practiced preacher, but instead of gravitas there is bathos. Urging his flock to copy the Israelites’ blowing of rams’ horns and so flatten the walls of the ‘Abolishn Gerryko’, he tells them: ‘Blow your horns, my brethren, for
who so bloweth not his own horn the same shall not be blown, but who so bloweth his own horn the same shall be blown with a muchness.'

Some of Locke’s humour lies in his verbal inventiveness: his contrived misspellings, spoof dialect, wild grammar, misquotations, and a ‘shattered orthography’ that presages today’s text messaging. This certainly played to Lincoln’s taste – already noted – for linguistic tricks, and he would surely have chuckled at Nasby’s mangling of Shakespeare. ‘Adoo, vane world, ado! I’ll be a nunnery’, he declares when learning of Vallandigham’s banishment.

Then, too, there is absurdity of gothic proportions. When Nasby visited Camp Dennison to electioneer for Vallandigham, he ‘wuz pelted with offensiv eggs, and rotten cabbig, and decayed pertaters, in fact at wun time the air wuz so full uv eggs, that I might hev thot, hed I bin poetikle, that the blessid sun wuz a mammoth hen, badly diseazd, and a layin rotten eggs a milyun a minnit.’ Seized and threatened with burning, he ‘broak and fled, pursood by 1000 uv these infosoriated demuns. I finelly escai[p]d by passin myself orf ez Horris Greely ... I am at present confind to my bed, sustainin myself by takin dosis of terbacker joose from J Davis’ spittoon, dilooted with whisky. It inwiggoraits me.’ Equally silly is Nasby’s lengthy and self-contradictory catalog of ‘fizzekle’ defects that must stand in the way of military service: he suffers from bald-headedness and dandruff, ‘kronic diarrrear and kostivness.’ Absurdly implausible, too, is his listing of church members as they face the draft:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hole number uv male members</th>
<th>200</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over 45</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badly rupcherd, and otherwise diseasd</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gone to Canady 2 visit their uncles</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nasby also provided a vehicle for simple jokes. Reflecting on the unbridgeable chasm between war and peace Democrats, Nasby is reminded of the ‘spritely boy’ who put 200 eggs in a nest for a hen to sit on. ‘Sez his maternal mother, “My son why puttist thou so many eggs under the hen. She cannot kiver em.” “Certainly she canst not, [replies the son] but thunder, I want to see her spread herself.” Jest so. … The outside egg in the Dimekratik nest is opposition to the war. Tother side uv the nest 200 eggs distant, is the support uv the war. To kiver em all requires great stretchin capacity.’

But what above all appealed to Lincoln, in Locke’s judgment, was the savagery of the satire. Lincoln admired the genre and had tried his hand
at it. Even as an adolescent he revealed an aptitude for what a historian of his writings calls ‘satiric bite’. Later Lincoln won admirers amongst his male acquaintances for a rough, obscene, and cutting satire that dwelt on sexual inadequacy – ‘The Chronicles of Reuben’ – and targeted the family of his brother-in-law, Aaron Grigsby. Later still, sarcasm, anonymous scurrility in the newspaper press, and a sharp tongue – ‘the power to hurt’ – punctuated his writing and political exchanges during his years as a state legislator. In 1842 he contributed to a satirical series in the *Sangamo Journal* at the expense of James Shields, the state auditor and a Democrat. In crossing the line from political satire to derogatory personal assault, Lincoln left himself open to Shields’s challenge to a duel, one that was avoided by the good sense of the seconds and by the ludicrous conditions Lincoln himself set. Deeply embarrassed and alert to the dishonour involved, Lincoln never again essayed satirical writing, though his appetite for reading it remained as sharp as ever.

Of Lincoln’s satirical sense Locke declared that it ‘was at times as blunt as a meat-ax, and at others as keen as a razor’, and he located its inspiration in Lincoln’s hatred of ‘horrible injustice. … Weakness he was never ferocious with, but intentional wickedness he never spared.’ In identifying Lincoln’s appreciation of the Nasby papers in its assault on injustice, Locke recognized a close kinship with his own values and political impulses. If, as Russell Conwell would recall, Lincoln told him that ‘the devil cannot bear a good joke’, then satire was a weapon whose power increased in proportion to the depth of the wrong it addressed.

From his campaigning experience, especially in lower Illinois, Lincoln knew well enough the rural Copperhead Democrat type whose commitment to continued African-American enslavement challenged his profound sense of justice. If there is one mantra that consistently stands out amongst the recollections of Lincoln’s friends and closest acquaintances, it is of his being guided by the pole star of justice. This was no posthumous discovery shaped by sentimentalism. William Herndon told Henry Wilson in 1860 that Lincoln ‘loves all mankind – hates Slavery – every form of Despotism. Put these together – Love for the Slave and a determination – a will that justice, strong and unyielding, shall be done, where he has got a right to act; and you can form your own conclusion.’ When handling a question raising issues of ‘justice – right – Liberty the government and Constitution – Union – humanity, then … no man can move him.’ Joseph Gillespie deemed his friend’s ‘love of justice & fair play … his predominating trait… [It] was intensely strong. It was to this mainly that his hatred of slavery may be attributed.’ 'He was extremely
just and fair minded. He was gentle as a girl and yet as firm for the right as adamant. ‘In wartime, this feature fused with on increasing reflection on the ways of the Almighty, an interventionist Providence, and divine justice. As Leonard Swett explained, ‘As he became involved in matters of the gravest importance, full of great responsibility and great doubt, a feeling of religious reverence, and belief in God’s justice and overruling power, increased upon him. He was full of natural religion … He believed in the great laws of truth, the rigid discharge of duty, his accountability to God, the ultimate triumph of right, and the overthrow of wrong.’

Lincoln’s celebrated empathy and tolerant understanding of those who differed from him were stretched to breaking point by what he deemed the injustice of southern proslavery theologians and the doctrines that their northern Democrat sympathizers parroted. He scorned the Presbyterian Frederick A Ross for concluding that ‘it is better for some people to be slaves; and, in such cases, it is the Will of God that they be such.’ The fact that determining God’s will was to be left to Dr Ross, who ‘sits in the shade, with gloves on his hands, and subsists on the bread that Sambo is earning in the burning sun’, gave little confidence that he would ‘be actuated by that perfect impartiality, which has ever been considered most favorable to correct decisions.’ Late in 1864 a Tennessee woman pestered the president for the release of her Confederate husband from a prisoner of war camp in Ohio, making much of his piety. Lincoln eventually granted her request, but in doing so delivered a ‘political sermon’ that he got Noah Brooks to publish in the Washington Chronicle under the headline (which he himself supplied) of ‘The President’s Last, Shortest, and Best Speech’: ‘You say your husband is a religious man; tell him … that … I am not much of a judge of religion, but that, in my opinion, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government, because, as they think, that government does not sufficiently help some men to eat their bread on the sweat of other men’s faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get to heaven!’

If a sharp sense of the injustice of slavery shaped Lincoln’s response to Nasby, so too – albeit with greater complexity – did the injustice of negrophobia. Racial egalitarians were rare amongst whites of his era. Lincoln himself was not one of them; Locke came closer to the standard than he. Indeed, when Locke heard him speak at Columbus, Ohio, in September 1859 it seems he was startled by Lincoln’s defensive and ungenerous statements about race; he thought it ‘curious’ that he denied supporting negro suffrage and ‘took pains to go out of his way to affirm his support of the law of Illinois forbidding the intermarriage of whites and negroes.’ Both the context and
substance of his speech, however, reveal why Lincoln would later warm to Locke’s withering assault on the racial inhumanity of Nasbyites – those who played upon, and were consumed by, fear of blacks. The very morning of Lincoln’s address the Ohio Statesman, the state capital’s Democratic newspaper, claimed he had supported the ‘vile conception’ of black suffrage during the 1858 senatorial campaign. Lincoln began by quoting passages from his joint debates with Douglas including the disclaimer that he had ‘no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and black races.’ His rebuttal done, he turned to his main purpose: to show the ‘insidious’, essentially proslavery, character of Douglas’s doctrine of popular sovereignty and its betrayal of the nation’s founding principles. In a stern conclusion, Lincoln returned to the issue of race, but now – in sharp contrast to its opening section – scolded Democrats whose fear of being called ‘negro worshippers’ charted their politics. He made inclusive claims for negroes; insisted that the Declaration of Independence embraced both white and black when it spoke of the equality of ‘all men’; and protested against the ‘popular sovereigns’ who taught that ‘the negro is no longer a man but a brute.’ This was an allusion to Douglas’s recent declaration: ‘As the negro is to the crocodile, so the white man is to the negro.’ Lincoln’s Columbus speech was the first of several during 1859 and 1860 where, outraged at this crass cascade of disdain, he rebuked Douglas for ‘teaching that the negro … ranks with the crocodile and the reptile,’ a formula that sought to ‘brutalize the negro’ and legitimize slavery. Lincoln’s unequivocal words made clear the chasm between his own racial ideas and those of the Little Giant.59

After Lincoln had spoken, Locke privately asked him about the value of his stand against black voting and racial intermarriage. Lincoln implied it was tactical: ‘The law means nothing. I shall never marry a negress, but I have no objection to anyone else doing so. If a white man wants to marry a negro woman, let him do it – if the negro woman can stand it.’ Lincoln knew how much it paid northern Democrats to portray Republicans as racial amalgamationists. Locke acknowledged these constraints and admired in Lincoln a good man of exceptional political honesty.60

Dispassionate historians recognize what Locke could not know in the late 1850s, that Lincoln was set on an evolutionary course that would see him sign an emancipation edict freeing most of the country’s black slaves, press for a constitutional amendment to end slavery, and entertain an embryonic program of black rights and citizenship. It was a course that gave an ever-keener edge to his reading of Nasby. It was a journey, too, on which he was capable of his own humorous sallies at the expense of negrophobes.61 A certain John McMahon
of Towanda, Pennsylvania, sent a telegram to the president to educate him in ‘what is justice & what is truth to all men.’ Lincoln, he wrote, should respect the proposition: ‘Equal Rights & Justice to all white men in the United States forever. White men is in class number one & black men is in class number two & must be governed by white men forever.’ Lincoln drafted a reply purporting to be composed by his secretary; he kept a straight face as he explained that the president wanted to know ‘whether you are either a white man or black one, because in either case, you can not be regarded as an entirely impartial judge – It may be that you belong to a third or fourth class of yellow or red men, in which case the impartiality of your judgment would be more apparant.’ In the light of all this, Lincoln’s pleasure in the egregious Nasby was far more than the relish of a joke. It was the double joy of recognizing a brilliant assault on ugly racial stereotyping, too. Nasby may have been wickedly funny, but he was also a scoundrel – and equally wicked with it.

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The evidence I have laid out here suggests how humour helped Lincoln engage with the world and, more particularly, how at its best – in the genius of Locke – it crystallised his political and ethical values. My case is that people like Edwin Stanton had a superficial understanding of what Nasby was and what he meant to Lincoln. The humour of Nasby was not, as the Secretary of War described it, ‘the God damned trash of a silly mountebank’. Rather, Locke’s creation was the weapon – as much broadsword as stiletto – that punctured the dubious morality of Copperheadism. Lincoln’s appreciation of Nasby, as is true of all effective satire, had a moral dimension. If, as Leonard Swett maintained, Lincoln really did read Nasby ‘as much as he did the Bible’, then their twin appeal lay in their working towards a common truth by radically different routes. That Lincoln turned to the pastor of ‘the Church uv the Noo Dispensashun’ on what would be the final afternoon of his life, delaying dinner by reading Nasby aloud to two old friends from Illinois, has its own poignancy. Lincoln’s last hours are more commonly remembered by his fateful visit to Ford’s Theatre to watch a frivolous Victorian comedy, ‘Our American Cousin’. The more fitting marker of that time, and one better to remember him by, because it better represents his fundamental moral seriousness, was his continuing engagement with the ethical monstrosities of Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby.
Notes


17. *CW*, 3:16, 249; 8:420. It is not certain that Lincoln was the author of this passage, but at the very least he liked it enough to transcribe it.

18. Wilson and Davis, eds, *Herndon's Informants*, 165-66. Herndon noted how he ‘often and often’ heard Lincoln describe a party where a self-possessed fellow ‘was put at the head of the table to carve the turkeys, chickens, and pigs.’ The other guests watched him wet ‘his great carving knife with the steel …. [He] commenced carving the turkey, but he expanded too much force and let a f---t, a loud f---t, so that all the people heard it distinctly. … [I]t shocked all terribly. A deep silence reigned.’ Keeping his cool, the gentleman ‘with a kind of sublime audacity, pulled off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, put his coat deliberately on a chair, spat on his hands, took a position at the head of the table, picked up the carving knife, and whetted it again, never cracking a smile or moving a muscle of his face. It … became a wonder … how the fellow was to get out of his dilemma; he squared himself and said loudly and distinctly, “Now, by God, I’ll see if I can’t cut up this turkey without f---ting.”’ The whole company, men and women, ‘as quick as a bolt of lightning … threw off all modesty,’ collapsed into universal, laughter, and cheered him for ‘his cunning audacious victory.’ ‘I worshiped the fellow,’ Lincoln declared. (The event was a fiction but for effect he appears to have told it as if he had been there himself.) ‘The nib of the thing’, that which ‘pleased Lincoln admirably,’ Herndon reflected, was not its vulgarity, but its celebration of ‘audacity, self-possession, quick wittedness, etc.’ Emanuel Hertz, ed., *The Hidden Lincoln, from the Letters and Papers of William H Herndon* (New York: The Viking Press, 1938), 398-99.


24. Leonard F Smith, ‘Diary’, 31 July 1862, 4 February, 10 May 1863, Leonard Francis Smith Diaries and Notes, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL.


27. *New York Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register*, 9 May 1863. Previously the official mouthpiece of Archbishop John Hughes, the paper now pursued a Copperhead course under McMaster, a Catholic convert from Presbyterianism.


30. *Illinois State Register*, 16 September 1864.


35. [David Ross Locke,] *The Struggles (Social, Financial, and Political) of Petroleum V. Nasby, Sometime Pastor of the “Church uv the Slawtered Innocents” (Lait St Vallandigum), Wingert’s Corners, Ohio, and of the “Church uv the Noo Dispensashun,” Saint’s Rest, New Jersey; …. Embracing His Trials and Troubles, Ups and Downs, Rejoicings and Wailings, Likewise His Views of Men and Things, together with the Lectures “Cussid be Canaan”, “The Struggles of a Conservative with the Woman Question,” and “In search of the Man of Sin.”* With an introduction by Hon. Charles Sumner. Illustrated by Thomas Nast (Boston: I.N. Richardson and Company, 1872), 13-14.


39. Locke took pleasure in constantly mangling the spelling of Vallandigham, his most inspired version being ‘Vandaligum.’


42. *The Nasby Papers*, 3-4, 22-26, 41. Locke’s purpose in peppering Nasby’s language with the term nigger was manifestly moral. He meant to shock as well as amuse. A crude and derogatory term, the northern social elite generally thought it degraded both user and subject.

43. Locke interviewed Lincoln after his debate with Douglas at Quincy in October 1858, when the Republican candidate, he recalled, ’talked to me without reserve.’ Rice, ed., *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln*, 439-43, 446-47.

to have shielded his annoyance from Lincoln: John Hay, who found the Papers ‘immensely amusing’, was present and recorded that Stanton and Dana ‘enjoyed them scarcely less than the President.’ Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettinger, eds, Inside Lincoln’s White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 239.


46. The Struggles (Social, Financial, and Political) of Petroleum V. Nasby, 15. Rep. James Ashley recollected a similar sentiment on an occasion when heard Lincoln talking to himself. Lincoln explained that he was ‘just repeating’ one of Nasby’s phrases, and added, ‘I must invite Nasby to come to Washington and make me a visit, and you may say to him that I should be willing to resign the Presidency if I could write such letters.’ Harrison, The Man Who Made Nasby, 112-13.


52. The Nasby Papers, 40.

53. The Nasby Papers, 9, 34.

54. The Nasby Papers, 35.


56. Lincoln used the phrase the ‘power to hurt’ in a congressional speech in 1848. As Douglas Wilson suggests, his likely source was Shakespeare’s Sonnet 94. Douglas L Wilson, Honor’s Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1998), 303; CW, 1:509. For Wilson’s investigation of Lincoln’s anonymous or pseudonymous ‘attack journalism’ and satirical voice, see 175-78 (the ‘Sampson’s Ghost’ letters), 265-76 (the Lost Township letters), 298-304 (the assault on the Rev. Peter Cartwright).


60. Rice, ed., *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln*, 440, 447. In his address ‘On Negro Emigration’ Locke satirized the negrophobe’s logic on these two issues: ‘Wareas, wen you giv a man a hoss, yoo air obleegd to also make him a present uv a silver plaited harnis and a $350 buggy, so ef we let the nigger live here we air in dooty bound to let him vote, and to marry him off-hand.’ *The Nasby Papers*, 3.


62. There is no evidence that the letter was sent. J McMahon to Lincoln, 5 August 1864; Lincoln to J McMahon, 6 August 1864; J G Nicolay to J McMahon, 6 August 1864, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

63. We can only speculate about how Lincoln read Locke’s extravagant and pointed use of the word nigger. In private, Lincoln used the term (along with cuffee) in jokes and anecdotes. Yet he knew its offensive quality. He rarely used it in his letters or other texts, official or unofficial: when he did so he wrapped it in quotation marks as a form of disinfectant. If newspaper reports can be trusted (which is questionable), then the word featured in a few of his speeches during the 1850s, but only very occasionally and never as a term of deliberate disparagement. For an illuminating and nuanced discussion of Lincoln’s use of the phrase ‘The damned or Eternal nigger, nigger’ during a private conversation in August 1862, see Elizabeth Brown Pryor, ‘Brief Encounter: A New York Cavalryman’s Striking Conversation with Abraham Lincoln’, *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, vol. 30 no. 2 (Summer 2009), 16-19, 22.
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