

This paper is from a seminar at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation titled "Ego or Justice? The Raging Fight in Every Man." Mr. Bernstein discussed the John Drinkwater play, *Abraham Lincoln*, and a portrait of Lincoln by Alexander Gardner. The Aesthetic Realism Foundation, is a not-for-profit educational foundation, at 141 Greene St., NYC 10012, (212) 777-4490.

Ego or Justice?

The Raging Fight in Every Man

By Len Bernstein

“The loveliest question a person has,” Eli Siegel wrote, “also the most insistent and most powerful,” is “What is coming from me to what is not myself?” Yet “Man has so far seen himself as hindered by justice, not expressed by it. This is man’s greatest misfortune: that he has come to see justice as restriction, not as the largest way of being or becoming himself.”

This was true of me—I felt that while justice was an admirable thing, it wouldn’t get me ahead. I learned from Aesthetic Realism that a fight between selfishness and justice, between feeling less and feeling more, begins early. I remember in first grade being very upset over losing a dollar—my school lunch allowance. But when my teacher said it was found by a classmate and suggested that I show my appreciation to this student, I thought indignantly, “He only gave me back what was mine!” I couldn’t understand why the idea of even thanking him made me so uncomfortable. I see now that I preferred feeling the world was unjust to me, to being grateful someone was kind.

Meanwhile, I had a desire to be generous. As a boy, I put away a dollar each week in a Christmas Club account at the local Lincoln Savings Bank so that I could buy presents for the people I knew. I enjoyed thinking of what each particular person needed and would like most.

But in high school I felt the way to showcase my personality was to appear unaffected. And I found it difficult to concentrate in most of my classes. Then, in 11th grade, I fell in love with chemistry, and spent hours studying the Periodic Table of Elements, learning what made up individual elements and how they combined to make something new—a molecule. I didn’t know that here I was getting pleasure from looking deeply at a specific substance, trying to be exact. This was so different from the way I looked at people. I felt being interested in what was within a person, his or her thoughts and feelings, would corrupt the purity of my being. I know now this is why I was nervous around other students: I didn’t like myself for being so cold.

I wanted to see myself as more refined than others, including very much my father, Milton Bernstein. He (different from me) liked talking to people. He had fought with the courageous Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, and had more feeling about things happening in the world than I did. I'm sorry to say I took pleasure in trying to punish him and the other members of my family through being moody and acting glum.

Years later, in an Aesthetic Realism class, Mr. Siegel so kindly asked me: "Did you ever act as if you hadn't heard your father?" I said, "Yes." And he asked: "Does that mean you were annulling him?" That was exactly what I was doing. And I learned that one of the first forms of injustice is simply not to listen, to make another person like a dim shadow, less real than oneself.

In this class I told about something that had terrified me, which seemed to be a recurrent dream, but also a sensation I would have in a semi-wakeful state: I would desperately try to move, to get free—but could not. Among the questions Mr. Siegel asked was: "Is there a certain triumph in not being able to feel anything?"

I said yes, I'd had it. Then he asked, "Do you think it would be a triumph to take the whole world and say: "I feel nothing."

I answered, "Yes!" And for the first time I could criticize that contemptuous triumph with clarity, and didn't have to punish myself for it so frighteningly.

The Battle in History

While men have wanted to see the world and people as opponents, the biggest fight, I learned, is within ourselves—between respect and contempt; and the outcome guides our thoughts, actions and emotions, making us either kind or cruel. "There is much about magnifying self in the history and literature of the world," Mr. Siegel wrote:

How can one stop such an attractive inward activity?...The only way...to stop the spurious magnifying of self is to identify true increase of self with justice to all one meets or can think of.

The importance we get from spuriously magnifying ourselves—as commonplace as a young man walking stonily through the halls of a high school feeling he is too good to talk to anyone—is also what impels our economy, which is based on some people making profit from the labor of fellow human beings, and this contempt is also what made for the horror of slavery.

A powerful example combining history and literature which shows the fight between "the magnifying of self" and justice to people, is a play I am grateful to have learned about through my study of Aesthetic Realism—*Abraham Lincoln*, written by the English playwright John Drinkwater and produced in 1918. This one act play begins with Abraham Lincoln's nomination for the Presidency in 1860 when the South was

threatening to secede from the Union, and combines the imagination of the dramatist, and actual dialogue recorded by history.

In the international journal *The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known* No. 916, Ellen Reiss describes this crucial time in American history, and its significance for our lives today:

[S]lavery is a form—utter, elemental—of man’s seeing man with contempt; it is the epitome of the feeling, You are different from me; therefore you are less; I do not have to see you as real; and I have pleasure looking down on you. The Civil War, with all its deaths, uncertainties, emotions, was essentially a fight between contempt and respect. And the fight, Shall I see the world and people with contempt or respect? is the fight within every individual right now; it is our constant, inward, personal civil war.

In this play are four characters in particular I will be discussing, because of how they represent different aspects of this “inward, personal civil war.” There is Abraham Lincoln whose feeling for people was very great; he abhorred slavery and stands magnificently for justice as self-expression and deep obligation; Secretary of State William H. Seward who is admirable, but also shows the desire for narrow importance. Then there is the fictitious Cabinet member, Burnet Hook, who represents contempt sheer. And Mrs. Goliath Blow stands for the ordinary American citizen who doesn’t want his or her comfort disturbed by seeing other people as fully existing, or having too much feeling for them.

Scene I opens in the Springfield, Illinois home of Lincoln in early 1860. His friends have come to congratulate him on his imminent nomination for the Presidency; and Samuel Stone, a farmer says:

It makes a humble body almost afraid of himself, Abraham, to know his friend is to be one of the great ones of the earth, with his yes and no law for these many, many thousands of folk.

Lincoln: It makes a man humble to be chosen so, Samuel. So humble that no man but would say “No” to such bidding if he dare. To be President of this people, and trouble gathering everywhere in men’s hearts. That’s a searching thing. Bitterness and scorn, and wrestling often with men I shall despise, and perhaps nothing truly done at the end. But I must go.

The ego says “You don’t have to question yourself!”, but Lincoln sees the most powerful position in the country as “a searching thing.” With great humility, he asserts his feeling of personal responsibility, saying “I must go,” impelled by his love of America and what people deserve.

Lincoln shows the crucial difference, explained by Aesthetic Realism, between anger that is in behalf of justice because it wants to protect what is beautiful, and make the lives of all people stronger; and anger that makes a man ashamed and potentially dangerous because it is impelled by the desire to be superior. Mr. Siegel writes in *The Right of No.249*:

Many historians have said that Abraham Lincoln was angry accurately. I remember being affected by Abraham Lincoln's expression of anger with slavery in John Drinkwater's play about him. Drinkwater has Lincoln saying:

When I was a boy I made a trip to New Orleans, and there I saw them, chained....And I said then, "If ever I get a chance to hit that thing, I'll hit it hard...."

After Lincoln accepts the nomination, he is alone in his living-room looking at a map of the United States, thinking of what lies before him. Drinkwater's stage directions are quiet, powerful, and very moving as they put together opposites central in justice: self and world, personal and impersonal.

Lincoln stands silently for a moment. He goes...to the map and looks at it. He then turns to the table again, and kneels beside it, possessed and deliberate, burying his face in his hands. THE CURTAIN FALLS.

A question each of us has is, How steadily do we want to think about what things deserve, what people deserve? Unlike Lincoln, I preferred forays into the field of justice with the option to retreat when it suited me. While I could be sociable, I pretty much kept to myself, feeling my time and thoughts were to be preciously guarded. In a class discussion some years ago, Ellen Reiss asked:

Do you think in some way you would like to see yourself as a person who should have himself to himself and occasionally come out and be useful, and be valued greatly for the usefulness you have?

I said yes.

[Like many people] you want to own yourself, and you also like to be useful. The question is, does your approach to this make you proud or ashamed?

I said "Ashamed," and studying these questions enabled me to change—to have more feeling about people and to be really useful.

Justice Is a Oneness of Severity and Compassion

Scene II begins with the first days of Lincoln's Presidency, just before the fall of Fort Sumter and the start of the Civil War. Two commissioners of the Confederate States are meeting secretly with Secretary of State William Seward, hoping to gain his support by appealing to his ego. Commissioner Johnson White says:

It's the common feeling in the South, Mr. Seward, that you're the one man at Washington to see this thing with large imagination. I say this with no disrespect to the President.

Seward is swayed by the flattery, and shows the desire to be superior to Lincoln, whom he respects very much. Then, Lincoln arrives, and speaks with passionate logic to the commissioners with the hope they will see what is best for all of America. They leave, and Lincoln speaks to Seward in a manner deeply critical and encouraging:

Lincoln: Seward, you may think I'm simple, but I can see your mind working as plainly as you might see the innards of a clock. You can bring great gifts to this government, with your zeal, and your administrative experience, and your love of men. Don't spoil it by thinking I've got a dull brain.

Lincoln is severe out of love and gratitude for another man's best qualities, which he hopes to strengthen. It is very moving when Seward sees his mistake and says, "I beg your pardon." And taking his hand warmly, Lincoln replies "That's brave of you." This scene importantly shows that when a man welcomes criticism he is smart, and that gratitude, as shown by Lincoln, is a form of justice—manly, strong, admirable.

At various points in the play *Drunkwater* has two Chroniclers speak in verse. They are like a Greek Chorus, and I respect very much how the playwright has them represent the voice of reality, as when they say of Lincoln:

When the high heart we magnify,
And the sure vision celebrate,
And Worship greatness passing by,
Ourselves are great.

The feeling that in respecting what is great, we ourselves are added to, is the beginning of all justice and, I learned, the source of all art.

A character who acts cheerful, but is unfeeling and cruel, is Mrs. Goliath Blow, who visits the Lincolns in the White House. The way she speaks is terrifically self-absorbed, cold, and very ordinary. She stands for the way I once saw people as less real than myself, or the way an employer sees the worker he underpays or fires to make more profit. Appearing in Scene III, Mrs. Blow asks: "And is there any startling news, Mr. President?"

Lincoln: Madam, every morning when I wake up, and say to myself, a hundred, or two hundred, or a thousand of my countrymen will be killed to-day, I find it startling.

Mrs. Blow: Oh, yes, of course, to be sure. But I mean, is there any good news?

Lincoln: Yes. There is news of a victory. They lost twenty seven hundred men—we lost eight hundred.

Mrs. Blow: How splendid!

Lincoln: Thirty-five hundred.

Mrs. Blow: Oh, but you mustn't talk like that, Mr. President. There were only eight hundred that mattered.

Lincoln: The world is larger than your heart, madam.

Every character in this short play can teach us about the raging fight between less feeling and more feeling in ourselves. We can learn from the brutal coldness that impelled Southern slave owners, described by Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address as “wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces.”

A feeling I once had—and I’m so thankful it was criticized, that the world should do my bidding, is embodied in the character of Burnet Hook, who I think Drinkwater created to represent the worst possibility in us; he is described as “sinister,” and is said to embody “certain forces that were antagonistic to the President.” Hook, we will learn, is in a conspiracy against Lincoln. He has the qualities which Mr. Siegel has described as “sinuosity, swerving, evasion.”

The play shows what history has given evidence for—that there were people run by ego who resented Lincoln’s tremendous desire for justice to come to all the people of America, and wanted to water it down so they could be comfortable and have their way. With this historical perspective, we can see even more clearly the hideous brutality of the press’s resentment of the beauty and integrity of Aesthetic Realism and Mr. Siegel.

With the opening of Scene IV we learn there has been a pivotal victory by the North, and the members of the Cabinet are awaiting the President’s arrival to vote on the “Emancipation Proclamation”:

Hook: He will bring up his proclamation again. In my opinion it is inopportune.

Seward: Well, we’ve learnt by now that the President is the best man among us.

Hook: There’s a good deal of feeling against him, everywhere, I find.

Blair: He’s the one man with character enough for this business.

Hook: There are other opinions.

Seward: Yes, but not here, surely.

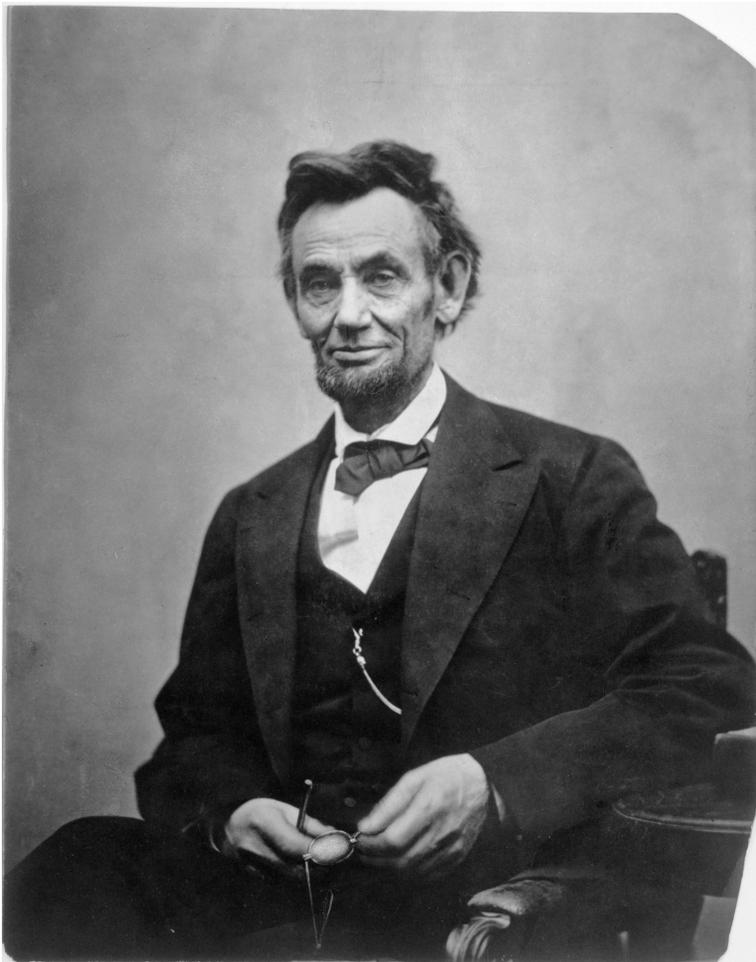
Hook: It's not for me to say....To issue the proclamation now, and that's what he will propose, mark my words, will be to confuse the public mind, just when we want to keep it clear....I shall oppose it if it comes up.

But Abraham Lincoln will not be swerved from his purpose. Drinkwater has Lincoln saying at Ford's Theatre, shortly before he will be assassinated:

I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me....The task of reconciliation, of setting order where there is now confusion, of bringing about a settlement at once just and merciful...

Respect for the World Is a Man's Glory and the Cause of Art

This is a famous photograph by the Civil War photographer Alexander Gardner taken in 1865.



Gardner is esteemed in the history of photography because he wanted to be fair to the greatness of Lincoln, and the result is in one of the mighty portraits of the world. He made justice visual—a oneness of personal warmth and massiveness, for and against, sadness and hope, accuracy and pleasure. What feeling is in this portrait! Lincoln's eyes are so alive—the left one, under an arched brow, is penetrating and knowing; and the right seems more inwardly thoughtful, kind, but no less conscious of what is before it. His mouth, so firm, has the hint of a grateful smile. (Lee had surrendered at Appomattox a few days before.) The opposites of seriousness or heaviness and lightness are in his clothing and the very objects he holds. For instance, within the large, dark form of Lincoln's black jacket is the playfully sportive—as the cravat, white shirt, and silver chain are all a relation of sharp point and graceful, flexible curve.

And Gardner made an artistic, ethical choice not to smooth out the angles in the suit, or the President's hair; he saw a man greatly affected by events, with tremendous dignity and sureness because of it, and he made its beauty permanent for us to see. We see power at one with respectful thought. Lincoln's strong hands that wielded the ax and earned him the name of "rail splitter," hold pen and spectacles firmly, yet almost tenderly. These objects stand for Lincoln's desire to be affected by the meaning of things, and to express himself forthrightly. And justice is not only personal, narrow, it is wide—there is a dot of light on the end of the pen, and the swirling mist in the lens of the spectacles. There is also a width and point in the composition, a sweep and convergence. This stands for Lincoln's way of seeing: sweeping and particular, justice to one person and justice for all people.

Opposites that make this portrait beautiful—firmness and compassion, power and humility, are made one in Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address" which Mr. Siegel said has "some of the greatest music in literature":

With malice towards none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.

I love these words of Lincoln, and I love this question, which articulates their deep ethical meaning: "The loveliest question a person has" is "What is coming from me to what is not myself?" When people everywhere can study Aesthetic Realism and ask it, justice will be loved, and men and women will have the kind of emotions they are hoping for.