

GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE: A CONUNDRUM IN A CHEF D’OEUVRE

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Abstract: In this article I attempt to shed new light on one of the most famous passages in American literature: Abraham Lincoln’s “government of the people, by the people, for the people”.

Key words: literature; ambiguity; interpretation

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«НАРОДНОЕ ПРАВИТЕЛЬСТВО»: ЗАГАДКА ШЕДЕВРА

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Аннотация. В статье уделяется внимание интерпретации одной из известных в американской литературе цитат из высказываний Авраама Линкольна – «правительство народа, избранное народом и для народа».

Ключевые слова: литература; двойственность; интерпретация

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In the climax of his masterpiece, the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln called upon his hearers to defend “government of the people, by the people, for the people”. The parallelism of these three marching phrases suggests a parallelism of their meanings. And indeed two of those meanings seem clear enough. “Government for the people” means government in the people’s interest: government in the interest of the people”. “Government by the people” means ‘government by means of the people themselves’: self-government either directly (direct democracy) or through representatives (republican democracy).

But what about “government of the people”? That phrase is ambiguous. It could mean ‘government consisting of the people’: in which case it

would be almost synonymous with government by the people. But it could also mean ‘governing [of] the people’. In that case it would be superordinate to both government by the people and government for the people. President Lincoln’s memorable words would then be glossed as ‘governing the people by means of the people themselves and in the interest of the people’.

The ambiguity of the phrase “government of the people” is reminiscent of the ambiguity of the famous example “the love of God”, which can mean both ‘God’s love of us’ and ‘our love of God’. Analogously, “government of the people” can mean both ‘the people’s government of the State’ and ‘the State’s government of the people’.

Have we any way of deciding between those two interpretations of “government of the people”? Probably not with any certainty. But there is at least one clue of some weight. According to Wikipedia, William Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner, had shown Lincoln a sermon by “the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker” that includes the formula “Democracy is direct self-government, over all the people, for all the people, by all the people”; where “self-government, over all the people” seems equivalent to “governing all the people (by the people)”. That’s the solution I favour, and it fits well into an imaginary conversation such as the following:

“How should the people be governed?” “By the people themselves and in their interest”.

Or to put it into the text of the Gettysburg Address:

“we here highly resolve ... that government of the people, which should be by the people and for the people, shall not perish from the earth”.

Another phrase that comes to mind in connexion with “government of the people” above is “government on behalf of the people”. But that phrase seems to be unambiguously synonymous with “government for the people”.

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