

**ABRAHAM LINCOLN:**

***Redeemer President.***

By Allen C. Guelzo. Eerdmans. 516 pp. \$29

This rich and subtle study of Lincoln's intellectual life well deserves to have received the prestigious Lincoln Prize; it is superb. Guelzo, a professor of history and dean of the honors program at Eastern College outside Philadelphia, argues that the 16th president was no orthodox Christian and in some sense not even a believer. Though he loved many passages in the Bible and drew great comfort from them, his bereavements, losses, and crushing disappointments had left him inwardly empty. It was next to impossible for him to experience God as Father (or even as Redeemer), given his own tyrannical father. The one thing he knew for certain was the inscrutability of a harsh if somehow just Judge, counseling the utmost humility and forbearance.

Undergirding this belief was the terrifying "doctrine of necessity" that Lincoln's father dunned into the sensitive youth—as did, it sometimes seemed, Providence itself, through frequent visitations of death and setback. In Guelzo's telling, this doctrine gave Lincoln unparalleled strength, an iron fatalism that enabled him to endure, and wait, and bear intense suffering, until the outcome manifested itself—as he knew it would, no matter his exertions. Given his fatalism, he learned early to bear inner pain with outward humor, warmth, and wisdom, "with malice toward none." At the same time, by a kind of back door, the doctrine gave him the keenest possible pleasures in whatever liberty daily life afforded, and he learned to love biblical texts such as those instructing the laborer to labor while letting the harvest rest in the hands of a wiser Providence.

One of my favorite passages considers Lincoln's lifelong dislike for Jefferson, or at least for Jefferson's agrarian fancies. Lincoln was injured to 14 hours a day of farm labor under his father with nary a penny to show for years of toil. All well and good for the owner of a plantation to praise honest farm labor; he knew little of it. One day, young Abe was asked to row two men out to a riverboat, and they flipped him two silver half-dollars for this brief exertion. "That day," Guelzo writes, Lincoln "met the cash economy." He became a capitalist for life, the very progenitor of land ownership (a renewed Homestead Act), of research and invention (the

Morrill Land Grant Act), of "the fuel of interest" as the engine for economic betterment, and of liberty over slavery. Lincoln not only freed the slaves, he freed "white trash," too—indentured labor, quasi-serfs, slumbering rural oafs. His "new birth of freedom" was simultaneously a birth of industry, imagination, and discovery.

Without quibbling over the written record, I find Lincoln a bit more of a Christian than Guelzo does. Had Lincoln professed unmistakable Christian belief but failed, like so many of us, to practice it, what sort of orthodoxy would that be? If we do not find in him a clear profession of faith, we do find its practice. Shouldn't that count for plenty?

—Michael Novak

**LIFE IS A MIRACLE:**

***An Essay against Modern Superstition.***

By Wendell Berry. Counterpoint. 153 pp. \$21

The "against" tract has a long and mostly forgotten tradition in literature. The second-century African church father Tertullian, for example, came to prominence by writing Latin polemics with such titles as "Against Marcion" and "Against Hermogenes" in which he argued for his vision of faith. This short book by Berry, the naturalist and poet, might be called *Against Wilson*, for all its pages take issue with E. O. Wilson's *Consilience* (1998). And Berry, too, argues for a vision of faith—in his case, faith in the primacy of life and the irreducible mystery of why life is here.

Many critics have already taken on *Consilience* for, among other faults, proposing to "reconcile" science, religion, and art by letting science prevail on all counts, and for presenting Wilson's ideas as bold iconoclasm when most are conventional wisdom. In Wilson's defense, envy seems to have motivated some of the sniping—*Consilience* became a surprise bestseller, while many books of similar merit making similar points have sunk without a trace. Wilson may be defended, too, for championing the Enlightenment ideal of objective knowledge, a goal commonly scorned in today's upper academia.

Going further than other critics, Berry develops a nuanced and thought-provoking critique of *Consilience* and its rationality-rules worldview. He really doesn't like Wilson's book, though he speaks of it respectfully. (Wilson can't complain—reading *Life Is a Miracle*

won't mean much unless you also buy and read *Consilience*.) Berry's accusations boil down to these: First, Wilson would make science the new religion; second, contemporary science is guilty of hubris; third, Wilson would reduce all life to gears and whorls, eliminating wonder.

"This religification and evangelizing of science," Berry writes, "is now commonplace and widely accepted," as scientists rush in to fill the we-have-all-the-answers role once performed by priests. Berry believes this leads directly to the excessive materialism of our age, since, after all, science teaches that the material is all there is.

*Life Is a Miracle* takes strong exception to Wilson's boast concerning the celestial: "We can be proud as a species because, having discovered that we are alone, we owe the gods very little." I cheered along with Berry as he blasted the rivets off that sentence. The scientist's claim that we know we are alone is as dogmatic as the cleric's claim that there must be a God: It is far too early in the human quest for knowledge to be sure of either point. When scientists treat this matter as already settled, they betray a closed-mindedness that is supposedly the bane of the scientific method. As for our existence, we surely ought to take the humble position of admitting that we owe something to some office somewhere. Either the divine created us or nature created us; in either case, gratitude and humility are called for.

Perhaps the most telling section in *Life Is a Miracle* is where Berry objects to Wilson's use of the machine as a metaphor for life. Like many works of modern biology and materialist thought, *Consilience* stresses that life is a mechanism, just an organic machine. Wilson seems to want to persuade us that we are not miracles, merely the deterministic results of amino acids and heat exchange.

At the first level, the metaphor seems superfluous—who doesn't think that *Homo sapiens* is made up of lots of complicated parts with complicated functions? But at the second level, the one that concerns Berry, the metaphor is disturbing. If we are just machines, what is the worth of our lives? Why care about individual uniqueness? (All the cars in the parking lot are different, but hey, they're just machines.) And how will we preserve the status, to say nothing of the existence, of biological life if scientists devise electronic awareness and then teach the new life form that, in the end, people and com-

puters are interchangeable, all just machines? Berry probes these questions in depth in this beautifully humanistic book.

—Gregg Easterbrook

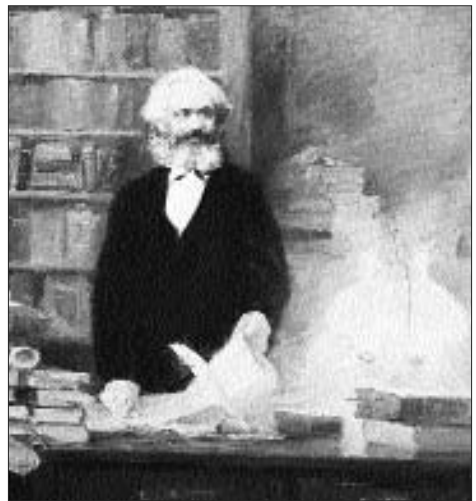
#### KARL MARX:

##### *A Life.*

By Francis Wheen. Norton. 431 pp.  
\$27.95

There are good reasons for not reading this biography. First, although Marx was German, his mode of thought was German, and he wrote mainly in the German language, the author's reach does not extend beyond English-language sources. Second, Wheen, a columnist for the *Guardian* in London, sometimes writes in an infuriatingly chatty style, as if sitting in a pub describing an irksome colleague. When Marx embraced a bizarre theory that soil triggers evolutionary changes, for instance, we learn that his lifelong friend and patron Friedrich Engels "thought the old boy had gone barmy." A third possible complaint is that the book offers little that is new. The author simply read 10 or 20 books and wrote one more.

If these objections turn away the potential reader, though, it would be a pity, for this is a good read and something more besides. Having earlier published a study on the 1960s and a history of television, Wheen rolls out his tale at a brisk clip. He spares us the turgid details of how Marx the intellectual gymnast stood Hegel on his head. And, unlike most biographers of this prickly and often savage polemicist, Wheen actually seems to like Marx, or at least the Marx he conjures up for his 21st-century readers.



Karl Marx in His Study, by Zhang Wun