

AN INSURRECTION OF THOUGHT
THE LITERATURE OF SLAVE REBELLION
IN THE AGE OF JOHN BROWN

BY

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THESIS

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2011

Chicago, Illinois

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INTRODUCTION: A STATE OF WAR

“An insurrection of arms,” said abolitionist Wendell Phillips in November 1859, “is preceded by an insurrection of thought; the last twenty years has been an insurrection of thought.”¹ The period Phillips describes is roughly bookended by the 1837 murder of anti-slavery publisher Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois (his response to which catapulting Phillips to fame as a speaker)² and radical abolitionist John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry, a period in which violent resistance as a response to slavery was debated and codified by American writers and political activists.

Phillips spoke in Brooklyn the day before Brown—Stanley Harrold calls Brown a “practical abolitionist”³ for his preference for direct action—was sentenced to death for treason against the state of Virginia after leading a group of black and white men on a raid of the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia.⁴ Brown intended the attack as the first move in an extended plan to establish Maroon-like bases of rebel slaves throughout the Allegheny Mountains (“Maroon” was a term applied to communities of escaped, insurgent slaves in the European colonies of the Caribbean; Herbert Aptheker defines Maroons usefully as “organized belligerent fugitive slaves”⁵). Brown’s idea was to move continually southward, county by county, gathering more fugitives to either strengthen the bases or be shuttled to freedom, and eventually wreck the Southern economy through the expense of fighting attrition and plundering. The raid has frequently been cited anecdotally as an event that precipitated the United States’ plunge into Civil War.⁶

This study examines literature written during this period, both fiction and non-fiction, in which the possibility and consequences of direct resistance on the part of slaves are imagined; my purpose here is to move these texts closer to the center of the discourse of the period, and to contextualize the actions of John Brown as part of a larger cultural movement in which fundamental questions about the values and functions of American institutions were closely questioned and ultimately attacked. A number of Northern writers found inherent contradictions of the United States legal system that left little choice but to engage in some sort of extra-legal, probably violent, activity to combat the slave system; they usually describe the South as an almost medieval throwback unsuited for participation in a republican government. Far from the aberrant delusions of a religious fanatic, Brown’s plans were grounded in well-established,

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mainstream political and religious tradition with numerous precedents in American culture. The arguments of prominent politicians like Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and John Quincy Adams seem to support, rather than undermine, Brown's plans. Well-known abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, David Walker, and William Lloyd Garrison, and canonical literary figures like Herman Melville and Ralph Waldo Emerson, at least implicitly acknowledge the logic and justification for slave rebellion. And a number of works, by historian/philosopher/novelist Richard Hildreth, lifelong abolitionists Lydia Maria and David Lee Child, and Brown allies Martin Delany, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and James Redpath, outline more or less explicit calls for insurgency, or describe the South as an alien and dangerous society and an enemy to U.S. efforts to perfect a republican form of government.

I will also consider the voluminous writing of Brown himself, who with increasing frequency and articulateness attempted to codify a program of resistance to the slave system that parallels and reflects the work going on in the broader culture. Brown tends to be remembered in history as a sort of violent aberration in the abolitionist movement, if not simply a deranged fanatic,⁷ or as simply an inspiring symbol to more central, more serious, activists and writers. The historiography on Brown is staggering in its volume, probably rivaling that of more accepted figures like Lincoln and Jefferson,⁸ But while recent years have seen three very sympathetic biographies—by Louis DeCaro (2002), David S. Reynolds (2005), and Evan Carton (2006)—and many articles of serious scholarship on his role in history, especially by Albert Von Frank and Hannah Geffert,⁹ Brown's presence in American consciousness continues to be as a sort of mythic prophet or avenging angel, a symbol rather than an agent making conscious decisions and weighing choices. Michael Bennet's 2005 *Democratic Discourses: The Radical Abolition Movement And Antebellum American Literature*, for example, mentions Brown only occasionally, and in passing; the Old man clearly has no relation to the Radical Abolition movement, and certainly none to American literature.

On the contrary, I argue that John Brown is a central figure in American history, not because he was some kind of pseudo-mythic avenging angel or bloodthirsty madman (or, as many pro-Confederate historians would have had, a con man and horse thief¹⁰), but because he acted on fairly straightforward principles that were explicitly stated again and again as fundamental to republican principles. To pretend he was simply a fanatic and an aberration is to engage in a

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willful denial of the reality that we are a society founded and built on violence, and Brown's conclusions, while harsh, were also astute, and nothing that hadn't been said many times prior to October 1859. To trace the course of these statements is to trace the trajectory of what Phillips described as an "insurrection of thought," a period of intense argument over how best to secure the end of slavery during the generation between the murder of Lovejoy in 1837 and the trial and execution of Brown for treason in 1859.

Throughout the 1830s, '40s, and '50's, the United States weathered an alarming series of national crises that paralleled the growth of the anti-slavery movement: Nat Turner's insurrection and the resulting debate in the Virginia legislature considering the abolition of slavery; the Crash of 1837; the invasion of Mexico and annexation of vast tracts of land that would now potentially open to agribusiness and slave labor; years of anti-black and anti-abolitionist violence and rioting; slave rebellions at sea that overtly challenged American courts' interpretations of slavery and freedom; the 1850 Compromise and restatement of the fugitive slave law, which conscripted Northerners into the hunt for escaping slaves; the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which made abolition a best-selling commodity; the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which led to outright guerilla war over slavery in the territories; the Dred Scot case, by which the United States Supreme Court codified legal white supremacy; and finally, the Harpers Ferry raid, which afforded Brown a national stage to argue his case in a Virginia court. Each of these crises in some way undermined the idea that the legal and political systems of the United States could address the issue of slavery in an effective way. Annette Gordon-Reed thinks it "safe to say that it was highly improbable that the end of chattel slavery in the United States could have been achieved through the reformist operations of the law. It was the total breakdown of law—a breakdown that resulted in a civil war—that ended American slavery."¹¹

In his 1941 essay, "Militant Abolitionism," Herbert Aptheker defines three schools of abolitionism: "that dedicated to the use of moral suasion and nothing else; that which believed in moral suasion, or argument, plus political action; and that which believed in direct, militant action, in resistance." While Brown apotheosized the last school, he was not its only student. Aptheker argues that, up until that time, "Historical literature has neglected consideration of the last group," but that "Its prevalence and importance demonstrate, however, that without careful examination of these militants the crusade against Negro slavery in the United States is but

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partially investigated.”¹² This final school of abolitionist thought and action remains less than thoroughly examined in the historiography of the period, both in the way that they related to other abolitionists and in their connections to the broader culture. Here I will attempt to further that discussion. Much of the work presented here has been looked at before, but what I hope to shed light on here is the central role in the abolition movement of antebellum writers who argued that slave rebellion was the very heart of patriotism. I will not pretend that this is an exhaustive treatment of this topic; rather, I attempt to position Brown in relation to scholarship tying antebellum literary and political writing together, and offer further analysis and detail on what I would argue is Brown’s role in *conceiving*, as well as attempting, an end to slavery, and the numerous parallels to his ideas in some of the most important intellectuals of the period, not only associates of his like Douglass, Higginson, and Theodore Parker, but to those apparently outside conventional abolitionist circles like Hildreth and Melville.

My intent here is to demonstrate that Brown’s raid was not the fancy of a madman, nor even the desperate act of a desperate movement, but a logical outcome not only of governmental intransigence but of the ideological underpinnings of American political thought. To do so I will map a set of coordinates, a web of textual precedents and alliances, that lead to the logic of revolutionary action. Brown took seriously Jefferson’s admonition to remake the government when it no longer functioned. I’ll take seriously Brown the writer and thinker, dismiss Brown the religious fundamentalist, and draw parallels between brown and other self-marginalized white men as Richard Hildreth and herman Melville—and draw contrasts between the marginal Brown and the privileged Higginson. I’ll chart the drift of Stowe from horrified, racialized pacificism to a consideration of black revolution in the face of the failure of white reform.

Though at the time the raid was a shock, the very real possibility, perhaps the inevitability, of violent upheaval (and not only by slaves) is a constant theme in American thought from the signing of the Declaration up to the Civil War;¹³ the irony, or hypocrisy, of the document in founding a republic financed by forced labor was not lost on the signers or on their descendents. Brown’s ideas for widespread, well-planned black insurgency did not develop in a vacuum, but in a highly-charged culture of conflict, in which calls to arms were frequent. Brown acted on long-standing arguments that, just like the North

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American colonists, slaves had the right to rebel against unjust rule and exploitation; that free white citizens, if they believed in democratic institutions, were obligated to support any efforts by the slaves to free themselves, not only individually but collectively, and through the use of violence if no other possibilities were forthcoming; and that the existence of the political and economic institutions of slavery were a threat to the existence of the republic so dire that they would ultimately lead to the destruction of the United States' democratic experiment; the Southern planters were an enemy within, determined to destroy the country for their own gain.

Phillips' conceit, "an insurrection of thought," meant simply that Brown did not act in a vacuum, but that his plan had deep roots in a generation of struggle and theorizing against the political and economic institutions of slavery. Far from precipitating the United States' descent into violence, Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry represents a turning point in an existing climate of violence, which some abolitionists and politicians already considered an extended state of war between the Southern planters and their captive workers, as well as between two at least superficially opposed economic systems and cultures. Phillips' point is that the stage had been set for Civil War years, even decades, before Harpers Ferry. In the twenty years he describes, some abolitionists had argued repeatedly that democracy was not compatible either with slavery or white supremacy, and attempted to convince Northern citizens that their enemies were the planters, and that by definition their allies must be the slaves. The "state of war" they described was of one social vision, supported and expanded by vast political, legal, and military resources, against another, alluded to in the language of the nation's founding documents but tragically unrealized in fact.

More pointedly, Phillips' "insurrection of thought" revolved around the question not simply of whether slaves should be free, but whether black Americans had the right to fulfill the promise of the American Revolution and earn their freedom, if not through legislation, then through rebellion. From the very beginning of the antislavery movement the question of violence was significant and more or less pressing. It arose as a matter of course, whenever "means" were considered. Would the slaves be justified in resorting to insurrection, in order to secure their freedom? What sort of pressure should the North bring to bear upon Southerners? What was the proper reaction to pro-slavery legislation and expansion, to Southern violence against slaves, and to anti-abolition mobs?¹⁴ "At the start," John Demos claims, "abolitionists nearly

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everywhere tried to disassociate themselves from the idea of a violent overthrow of slavery. By 1836-1837, however, this consensus was beginning to break down,” and opposing ideas about how to confront slavery began to become defined. By the 1850’s, “driven by the rapid pace of events,” acceptance of the potential for the use of violence became more widespread, and the discussion turned in some cases to methods.¹⁵ The question of “means,” though, had been present at the beginning of Phillips’ “insurrection of thought;” the avowed pacifism of William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* was not to the taste of every abolitionist. One reader wrote shortly after the Fourth of July in 1831 to ask Garrison whether “only the slaves must forbear from fighting” for their freedom, “or do you mean that our Revolutionary fathers were wrong?”¹⁶

Lovejoy’s murder several years later added fuel to this controversy. Threatened by a mob in Alton, Illinois, after having had his printing press destroyed repeatedly, he had not only armed himself and his men in defense of a new press, keeping “a loaded musket . . . standing at my bedside, while my two brothers, in an adjoining room, have three others,” but had killed one of the mob before being murdered. Demos tells us that “the prior resort to arms seriously compromised his ‘martyrdom’” among some Garrisonians.¹⁷ “The Grimke sisters, for instance,” he says, worried that God would soon “take the work of abolishing slavery out of our hands” for Lovejoy’s transgression.¹⁸

Garrison himself mitigated Lovejoy’s actions; while he was not a “*Christian* martyr [emphasis added],” Lovejoy had conducted himself like “our revolutionary fathers.”¹⁹ The appeal to violent means drew its justification from the American Revolutionary tradition and the Declaration of Independence, which by definition rejected the kind of codified institutional injustice that the slave economy represented. The imbalance of power in Congress in favor of slaveholders, ensured by the three-fifths clause²⁰ and the fugitive slave laws in the Constitution, suggested that it might by necessity be extralegal and possibly violent tactics that would finally overcome what seemed an egregious violation of Revolutionary principles. As the “slave power”²¹ in the national and state capitals became more intractable, more abolitionists sought to imagine its overthrow, alluding to rebellion in speeches, pamphlets, novels, and short stories. By the decades that Phillips alludes to, black rebels were often envisioned as heroes upholding Jeffersonian ideals, while the Southern states were a sort of Orientalized²² throwback to the despotic Old World. Texts meant to rationalize and familiarize this vision proliferated, bringing

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the U.S. closer to the day when black freedom and full citizenship became possible.²³ These texts were a significant part of Phillips' insurrection of thought, a series of representations of black self-assertion and struggle, and white aid and solidarity with slave rebellion, that sought to prepare the Northern audience for the inevitable resolution to the conflict over slavery.

While imaginative stagings of black rebellion were being articulated, a few white abolitionists began imagining how to realize such an event on American soil. John Brown is arguably the most famous, and certainly the most infamous, white abolitionist in the history of modern slavery precisely for this reason—that he sought to fulfill what he saw as the most effective, and probably only possible, end to the slave system: widespread armed slave resistance, with its own strategies, principles, and documentation.²⁴ Upon his capture and trial, Brown came to embody, in the imaginations of many, the principles that abolitionists had tried to articulate in descriptions of rebellion: a commitment to universal freedom and democratic principles, and a willingness to face the violence of the Slave Power with steadfastness, self-sacrifice, and force of his own.²⁵

John Brown was fairly unique in his willingness to go beyond rhetoric, but he proceeded not from the delusions of an isolated zealot, but ideas that sprang from a widespread sense of outrage and irony that found articulation in numerous texts throughout the period Wendell Phillips describes. Though he was frequently presented in 20th century historiography as a somewhat isolated figure, Brown may have been the best-networked abolitionist on the continent, and one of the most respected, counting among his friends and allies most of the significant black leaders of the era, including Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, James McCune Smith, and Henry Highland Garnet; many of the great literary and religious leaders of New England, including Theodore Parker, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau; Gerrit Smith, son of the business partner of John Jacob Astor and one of the wealthiest men in the country; Jim Lane, who would become a longtime U.S. Senator; future private security tycoon Allan Pinkerton (I like to believe that his friendship with Brown would not have survived his move from abolitionist to anti-labor goon); as well as the founders and trustees of Oberlin College, and many prominent businessmen, lawyers, and anti-slavery elected officials. He was one degree of separation from both Walt Whitman (through James Redpath,

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who later became close friends with the poet),²⁶ and Abraham Lincoln (with whom Brown's friend Thomas Thomas became acquainted in Springfield, Illinois; Lincoln reputedly offered Thomas a job with the White House domestic staff).²⁷

Brown has remained one of the most controversial figures in American historiography for almost 150 years: an enigmatic, even bizarre figure, claiming a Providential role in the fight to end slavery and rejecting uncategorically the assumptions and privileges of a white supremacist culture, going so far beyond the pale as to commit himself to violence in the name of a despised class of people with whom he had no material connection.²⁸ But Brown's invocation at his trial of the Declaration of Independence and the Golden Rule as justifications for his actions, and as legal arguments that trumped contemporary legislation—the 1850 Compromise, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Dred Scot Decision, among others—were not new or unique to him, but part of a discourse normalizing slave revolt that was as old as any other branch of American rhetoric. Brown proceeded from a fairly simple assumption: that as an American citizen, he was at war with the Slave Power.²⁹ His assumption was ultimately taken up by the federal government when the war to save the Union became the war to free the slaves. A great success of the abolition movement was that they were able to convince a significant portion of the American public—at least temporarily—that it was not black people who were not Americans, but slaveholders.

The language of this period seems to rely in many cases on overheated, paranoid accusation on both sides.³⁰ But the nature of the struggle almost demands this approach. For abolitionists, the Slave Power, a term with admittedly conspiratorial overtones in the first place, seemed to so dominate legitimized institutional discourse and commerce that abolitionist language was alive with conspiracy theory; the legal, scientific, political, military, and even religious resources of the United States all seemed bent to the will of the planters, and so all “legitimate” discourse and channels of address were suspect. Some abolitionists saw the maneuverings of the slaveholding majority in Congress and one presidential administration after another as explicitly conspiratorial, and paranoid fantasy mixed with verifiable fact in a difficult tangle.³¹

For the planters, the level of power they actually wielded seemed under constant attack, and so pro-slavery rhetoric exhibited a similar level of paranoia.³² Black rebellion was a subject of endless speculation, accusation, and conspiracy theory, partly out of well-placed fear and partly

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as a means of control, of both the black population, who had to be very careful of what they said and did for fear of reprisal, and the white population, most of whom otherwise had no stake in an economy based on ownership rather than labor and exchange. Real events like the Stono Rebellion and Nat Turner's uprising were lumped together with thwarted plots like Gabriel's conspiracy and possibly fictitious schemes concocted by white authorities to justify harsh repression of slave meetings, race mixing, black literacy, and other practices that threatened slaveholder power.³³ The Harpers Ferry raid was planned and executed within this culture of conspiracy, paranoia, and sudden, unforeseen violence. It was perceived by many in the Northern and Southern press as part of a larger conspiracy leading all the way to leaders of a very young Republican Party.³⁴ As such it became part of an American mythology that had mixed fact, fantasy, and propaganda for well over a century prior to Harpers Ferry. As we will see, conspiracy and "conspiracy theory" are not aberrations that contrast the normal, reasonable workings of American society, but central to the normal functions of U.S. political economy, where it is reasonable to assume a level of government obfuscation and paranoia.

In these chapters I will explore the origins and evolution of arguments for, and images of, slave rebellion in the decades preceding the war, and how they attempted to shape perception of the resistance to slavery up to its outbreak. The Harpers Ferry raid was not a sudden flash of fanatical violence, but the culmination of decades of cultural work representing the United States as a deeply flawed creation based on an essential contradiction, and arguing that revolutionary violence, in which enslaved blacks had the right and the reason to participate, would be fair and just if and when it came, just as it had been in the 1770's. The question of how Americans in Brown's day dealt with this claim of a right to revolution places Brown's ideas, and texts that expressed similar notions, at the center of antebellum culture.

The inherent logic of slave revolt as an extension of American revolutionary logic was obvious during the Revolutionary period itself, and had to be deliberately dismantled by the paternalist, racist ideology of pro-slavery theorists during the 19th century. In opposition to this ideology, the logic of slave revolution persisted, maintained by abolitionist commentary and literature and sustained in the beliefs and arguments of people like Brown. Nat Turner, Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, Cinque, Madison Washington, and especially Haitian Revolutionary leader

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Toussaint L'Ouverture became stock figures in a counter-narrative to the American Revolution, ironically mirroring the actions and character of George Washington and other heroes.³⁵ Arguments over Brown's actions take up arguments in an existing antebellum debate, and are couched in similar terms; Eric Sundquist points out that Thomas R. Gray, author of 1831's *The Confession of Nat Turner*, made Turner's revolt "an aberration inspired by religious madness,"³⁶ just as critics of Brown have questioned his sanity and the stability of his religious beliefs.

The real and imagined threat of black insurrection³⁷ had been a constant presence in the Americas from the beginning of the slave economy, and the realization of slave revolution in Haiti at the end of the 18th century gave form to the slaveholders' worst nightmares. But for some abolitionists, this threat was not a nightmare, but a promise of the logical fulfillment of the claims of the Declaration of Independence, and the logical end of both the slave economy and the legislative compromises that enabled it. Attributing black discontent and abolitionist commitment to madness and fanaticism allowed the fiction of happy, docile slaves to continue, quieting Southerners' fears of retributive slaughter. On the other hand, Southern planters, including Thomas Jefferson, found the very existence of Haiti, a nation founded by successful slave rebellion barely a hundred miles off the United States' shores, not simply an affront to their way of life but a threat to their very lives. Radical abolitionists like Brown, though, found Haiti an inspiration, proof of the intent, and the potential success, of Jefferson's stated vision of universal human equality, and men like Toussaint and Turner found their way into abolitionist literature as harbingers of a new revolution.³⁸

In anti-slavery literature the South became a site of the erosion of liberty; United States intellectual tradition had it that American institutions were designed to stand in stark contrast to "Old World" European empires, which were corrupt and despotic, ruled by papist oligarchies. In these terms, black rebels stood for human rights and human decency in a way that the Founding Fathers had not managed themselves; abolitionist writers turned repeatedly to themes of justified rebellion and the failure of the U.S. to champion the end of slavery. Though American culture seemed to rest firmly on the foundations of reasoned, Enlightenment-inspired discourse, the motivation, even the logic and sanity, of United States legislative debate was often called into question³⁹—the slave economy was indicted by its own appeals to natural law and by the self-evident absurdity of intellectual justifications for slavery, which often rested on the codification

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of pseudoscientific “racial” and psychological categories in clear violation of the principles of the Declaration of Independence, reducing slaves to the status of livestock and categorizing political activists (and simply those who disagreed with slavery) as “fanatics.” Anti-slavery texts often struggle with the meanings, even the linguistic structure, of law and science, seeking to expose the self-serving intellectual constructs at the core of anti-democratic oppression. Finding both legal and scientific language complicitous with slavery, these writers logically envision a solution to the slave question outside these discourses.

The complicated geography of the New World also became a theme through which abolitionists imagined black freedom. Since escaped slaves were not safe from recapture anywhere in what Francis Scott Key had called “the land of the free,” several abolitionist texts posit an alternate geography and topography for the legitimacy of revolution, countering or complicating Southern images of “outlaws” hiding in swamps like beasts, and instead creating a literature of guerilla insurgency inspired by the Maroons of the Caribbean mountains. The Dismal Swamp that Nat Turner escaped into after his rebellion had stood for the devil-haunted wilderness of the European imagination since the continent had been conquered. In contrast, John Brown himself told Frederick Douglass that “God has given the strength of the hills to freedom; they were placed here for the emancipation of the negro race.”⁴⁰ Freedom fighters, tradition had it, were mountain fighters, and the guerilla tactics at the heart of Brown’s plans symbolized legitimate revolt, as opposed to savage lawlessness.

The sea was also a complicated setting on which rebellion was imagined, partly due to several famously successful attempts at ship-board rebellion.⁴¹ Free from the constraints of national borders and the sophistry of American law, the Atlantic Ocean also bound the continents of the Old, New, and Third Worlds together, and was a mass grave for Africans killed by the Middle Passage. The sea represents a stage on which slavery could be seen as the global issue it was, and we can find foreshadowings of 20th century anti-imperial and anti-colonial movements in this strain of abolitionist writing, in which descriptions of, for instance, Caribbean Maroon communities represent a significant departure from the official American version of New World history, which places the U.S. at the apogee of human progress. Grave, escape route, no-man’s land, and war zone, the Atlantic was also a barrier that contained the Slave Power between itself

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and the Alleghenies, a boundary that the South pushed against continually, seeking to expand not only westward over the mountains but southward into the Caribbean and Central America.

In this sense the sea mirrors the western frontier, itself was a symbol of the contest between freedom and slavery. For many abolitionists, the Old World despotism maintained by the South continued the imperial ambitions that the Revolutionary generation had supposedly fought against, and the struggle against slavery was also a struggle against the United States' participation in the western drive for empire. The South needed new lands for cash crops as mass agribusiness destroyed existing lands, as well as new states to continually raise the number of pro-slavery representatives to maintain control of Congress. Several anti-slavery writers, thinkers, and activists, including John Brown, recognized these needs as the motivation for the increasing militarization and aggression of the U.S. throughout the abolitionist era, and the fight against slavery became by necessity a fight against empire.

All of these themes are present in works of American antebellum literature, furthering our understanding of the ways Americans have conceived of the legacies of democracy, slavery, and U.S. power. This genre should not be seen as an obscure, distaff branch of American Studies but as central to the period often called the American Renaissance; forgotten writers like Richard Hildreth and David Lee Child share in this discourse with "classic" writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe, and even venerable "literary" writers like Herman Melville. The attack on Harpers Ferry should similarly be seen as a central event in American history, in its real causes and consequences and as a symbolic act. The raid was both the culmination of the abolition movement's struggle to define the South as an enemy within, and blacks and whites as allies in the war against it, and the first real move since Gabriel's failed rebellion to demonstrate black and white solidarity in the war that had already started in Kansas, a war that was meant to complete the work left unfinished by the American Revolution.

I will discuss both political discourse and imaginative writing here. The fiction of the 1830's through the 1850's gave as clear a sense as public speeches, pamphlets, and other sources of polemical non-fiction of the escalation of barely-contained violence that pervaded the U.S. between the 1829 appearance of David Walker's *Appeal* and the Harpers Ferry raid. Idyllic novels of plantation life like John Pendleton Kennedy's 1832 *Swallow Barn*, romantic fantasies of the slave system, began to be countered not only with polemics but with anti-slavery novels

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that sought to present the South “realistically,” until the enormous success of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1852, and Southern responses like William Simms’ 1852 *The Sword and the Distaff*, signaled that the U.S. had reached of a sort of critical mass in the sectional battle of representation. The conventions and parameters of anti-slavery fiction, and the volatile political situation it detailed, were established much earlier than Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, and throughout the 1850’s, the willingness to openly discuss black rebellion increased until, by the time of John Brown’s foray into Virginia, a serialized African-American novel, Martin Delany’s *Blake*, was outlining hemispheric revolution in a manner remarkably similar to that envisioned by some of Brown’s closest friends.⁴²

It is fitting, then, to discuss fiction alongside “factual” texts, since the line between fact and fiction blurs easily in this work: historical figures enter works of fiction, sometimes altered slightly, sometimes thinly veiled, while works of “fact” are filled with imaginative reworkings of reality, literary and biblical allusions, and the unquiet ghosts of the unrealized past. These texts create a context for Brown’s violent actions, his “fanaticism,” his ideas and beliefs; and they help us better understand the role that race, rebellion, and violence played in forming an American self-image prior to the Civil War. Many of Brown’s ideas were common currency, heavily debated over the decades prior to the war.⁴³ Brown should be seen on a continuum, as part of a tradition, and its radical culmination. I’ll organize these texts as follows:

In Chapter One I will establish the basis of Brown’s thinking as a set of widely held and disseminated assumptions concerning the right of revolution. A cornerstone of abolitionist theory and tactics was the combination of “the Declaration and the Golden Rule”—Revolutionary era political rhetoric and the message of social justice in the Gospels, as interpreted by Calvinist followers of Jonathan Edwards. Revolutionary era political discourse, particularly Thomas Jefferson’s language, draws on a long precedent that claims violence as a necessary tactic in the struggle for social justice and therefore an intrinsic part of American ideology. Brown is familiar with these arguments, as well as those of the New Divinity clerics with whom he is linked through his father Owen. New Divinity preachers like Samuel Hopkins, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., and Lemuel Haynes, embraced Revolutionary ideology as a step toward universal justice, and the boldest of them demanded that the abolition of slavery be a part of the accomplishments of the Revolution.

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In Chapter Two I will argue that works like David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* were crucial to creating the conditions that make sense of Brown's plan to establish a Maroon nation of ex-slaves in the Southern mountains. Walker and William Lloyd Garrison articulated a vision of America as a civilization locked in a state of war that would end in divine retribution against a corrupt and depraved society. Religious fervor and anti-racist language mix here in a vivid picture of slaveholders and the American citizens who tolerate them as a barbaric Other. In contrast to Tocqueville's assertions of American exceptionalism, Walker sees America's uniqueness mainly as a measure of their savagery and sinfulness, and their consequent impending doom. Walker codifies a set of images, of white American society as a bloodthirsty, doomed civilization, a throwback to the ancient, barbaric empires, and of a day of judgment to come, that would influence American thought for a generation. The biblical language of guilt and retribution for slavery reached a peak of articulation with Walker's *Appeal*, which Brown came to admire so much that he sought to have it reprinted in the late 1840s⁴⁴.

Garrison, something of an alter-ego to Brown in abolitionist historiography (the pacifist vs. the warrior, the New Testament vs. the Old), criticized Walker but used similar language in his attacks on the slaveholders, arguing early in his career that slave rebellion was inevitable and just. Two years after Walker published the *Appeal* in 1829, Garrison founded *The Liberator*, the most influential abolitionist paper in the country, which ran until just after the Civil War. Garrison argued that the 1831 Nat Turner rebellion, in which over fifty white Virginians were killed by slaves, was an ever-present, and justified, possibility in the South. Garrison and other radical white abolitionists like Gerrit Smith (later a close associate of Brown) began in the early 1830s to argue that slaves had an inherent, self-evident right to claim the Revolutionary legacy for themselves and demand their freedom, or fight for it. This was often a rhetorical ploy, and a threat, but it was an effective one, especially since Turner's rebellion had spread paranoia and vigilante militarism throughout the slave states. Abolitionists themselves were seriously persecuted in the 1830s, often beaten and occasionally—like Lovejoy—killed, and, coupled with the daily violence of the slave economy, a peaceful solution to the issue already seemed unlikely.⁴⁵

In Chapter Three I assert that the language of moral suasion, made popular by Garrison's *The Liberator* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was challenged and transformed in

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the hands of radical abolitionists, some of whom became later allies of Brown, into a call to militancy that pushed the abolition movement closer to active resistance. Many Americans, from about the 1830s on, became familiar with abolition and other reform movements through the language of sentiment, a mixture of moral indignation and pity; the most famous example of sentimental language is Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Late 20th century critic Philip Fisher characterizes sentimental language by using an image from Rousseau, in which a spectator watches a mother and child attacked by a wild beast without the ability to intervene. The very image Fisher describes recurs again and again in abolitionist literature, not as an admission of passivity but as a call to arms. Henry Highland Garnet uses this imagery in the early 1840s to insist that black men physically resist their oppressors, and Brown adopts this language when he helps form the League of Gileadites after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. At Brown's death, Victor Hugo applies the image to Brown himself, but this time the watcher is not voyeur but witness—Hugo promises that the world will respond to the U.S. treatment of slaves and abolitionists with horror and anger.

In Chapters Four and Five I argue that a pointed critique of the South as a dysfunctional and dangerous enemy had to be constructed in order to justify the kind of extra-legal resistance that Brown attempted. That critique was presented by New England journalist and historian Richard Hildreth, whose assertions anticipated Brown's view of black character and the need for direct resistance. As the slave economy became not only more entrenched but more dependent on new territory, economic as well as moral and political critiques of the Southern economy became more sophisticated. The Calvinist and Revolutionary imagery that developed to describe the break between the Old and New Worlds came to be applied to the break between the North and South, which was seen by abolitionists as a backwater reminiscent of feudal Europe. For the remainder of the antebellum period, abolitionists would draw connections between the old papist monarchies, filled with Inquisitory superstition, and the South.

Hildreth produced the 1836 novel *The Slave* and 1840 polemic *Despotism in America*, both of which serve as analyses of the Southern economy and its effect on both black and white character as well as the economy, the political structure, education, and even the environment. *The Slave* is clearly an influence on Stowe and other later novelists, but like Brown's, Hildreth's vocabulary and frame of reference are not 19th century evangelical moral suasion and sentimental

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imagery but Revolutionary era outrage. And like Brown, Hildreth rejects race as a category, and sees slavery as a state of war; by the mid-1850s his reworking of/sequel to *The Slave* advocates the sort of disruptive guerilla invasion of the South that Brown would soon attempt.

In Chapter Six I argue that abolitionist fiction attempted a symbolic rearrangement of the American landscape in order to redefine the nature of society itself, with blacks as allies and inheritors of revolutionary principle and planters as depraved despots. In 1842's "The Black Saxons," Lydia Maria Child recasts the Southern gentry as ruthless Norman Invaders, not Walter Scott's noble Highland Saxons, as they liked to imagine themselves. The real heirs to Saxon insurgency are the slaves who meet clandestinely in the swamps just out of earshot of the plantations; the swamp is transformed from an anarchic wilderness into a kind of Sherwood Forest filled with "Robin Hoods and Wat Tylers" debating their course of action.

Taking the battle over slavery out of the swamps and the mountains and into the sea, Frederick Douglass tells the story of real-life slave mutineer Madison Washington in his only work of fiction, 1853's *The Heroic Slave*. In choosing Washington as a subject, Douglass builds in the irony of the slave's status and the revolutionary heroism the real Washington displayed in seizing the slave ship *Creole* and sailing it to a free port in the Caribbean.⁴⁶ This lone piece of fiction in Douglass' long career punctuates his developing radicalism and turn away from Garrisonian pacifism, toward the confrontational position of his friend John Brown.

In these works, the possibilities for successful slave rebellion begin to emerge in abolitionist debate. As a backdrop to these fictional or fictionalized incidents is a history of actual international slave insurgency and the reactions among the United States' imperial competitors. Nat Turner's rebellion remains a Southern nightmare to be invoked as a threat, but the successful revolution in Haiti, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, becomes a touchstone for abolitionist arguments about black self-efficacy and the effectiveness of guerilla tactics. These debates had a profound impact on John Brown, who studied Toussaint closely and worked increasingly with black communities to further the cause of abolition.

Chapter Seven considers two works by Herman Melville and their connection to both anti-slavery and pro-slavery conspiracy literature, positing for Melville the role of a kind of amanuensis for John Brown's emerging worldview. Though they never knew each other, Melville and Brown shared a fall from middle-class grace; both chose economically marginal

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vocations that led to struggle and discomfort, and both saw slavery and its attendant drive for empire at the center of their country's self-destructive quest.

Complicating Douglass' vision of the sea as a cradle of liberty, Melville stages cataclysmic confrontations over slavery and the drive for empire on the seas in *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*. He expresses an appropriately international perspective on slavery, extending it beyond the plantations and across the globe, and back into the beginnings of the republic and the empire. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville picks up a set of images common to anti-slavery diatribes of the period between the Invasion of Mexico and the Fugitive Slave Act, specifically that of the American "Ship of State" being threatened by the Leviathan of slavery and empire—Theodore Parker was particularly fond of them. In using this central metaphor as his starting point, Melville posits the history of the United States as more or less a history of conspiracy, rebellion, and disaster, supported by both delusional religion and fraudulent pseudo-science.

Melville also anticipates the debate between Brown and the pro-slavery forces arrayed against him by questioning the nature of sanity itself; Ahab, Babo, and Delano lampoon the reasonableness of American discourse and claims that abolitionists were "fanatics." Melville's father-in-law, Massachusetts chief justice Lemuel Shaw, formulated a legal definition of "monomania" that was clearly political, setting complacent acceptance of an unjust social and economic system as normative, and anything outside this narrow definition aberrant. Melville played with this tension between "sanity" and "madness" in *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, just as he played with the limits of the law as a vehicle for adequately addressing social justice.

Melville's view of the courts is played out again and again in relation to slave "conspiracies," including Brown's trial.

In Chapter Eight I argue that Harriet Beecher Stowe herself turns from the sentiment and hopes of redemption in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to a darker vision of immanent rebellion and ineffectual legal reform, a vision in line with that of Brown or Melville. Stung by criticism of her pacifist protagonist Tom in her famous 1852 novel, Stowe tried to create a Nat Turner figure in 1857's *Dred*—the title itself a rebuke to the Supreme Court—and reconsidered the hope she held out in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that Jefferson's fears of retributive violence would not come to pass. She contrasts the prophecies of the visionary "mad" rebel Dred against the reformism of lawyer Edward Clayton, with unresolved results. Like *Moby-Dick*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* comes after the

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Fugitive Slave Act, when Northern abolition became mainstream. *Dred* comes after the war in Kansas, and widespread rumors of slave conspiracy throughout the South, and even Stowe no longer offers much hope of peace. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, though she constructs a withering look at Southern, and Northern, legal and political structures, her focus is *feeling*, and she hopes to ignite a sort of Third Great Awakening of anti-slavery sentiment. In *Dred*, feeling and character are no longer an issue; the slave economy makes questions of individual decisions irrelevant. The stage is set for a confrontation, and Stowe's novel mirrors Brown's rejection of the law and science of anti-democratic oppression.

Also in Chapter Eight, I argue that *Blake*, a novel written in serial form by Dr. Martin Delany, is a virtual fictionalization of Brown and other radical anti-slavery conspirators of the 1850's, and an attempt to mainstream the history of revolutionary resistance to slavery. A black abolitionist whom Brown turned to in 1858 to help recruit men for his Southern raid, Delany plays on his own knowledge of the South—he was raised in Harpers Ferry—as well as widespread rumors of slave conspiracy, to paint a picture of a world about to explode into the kind of hemispheric black revolution that some of Brown's associates, young radical intellectuals like John Kagi, Richard Hinton, and James Redpath, envisioned.

Delany's pseudo-documentary vision of global black revolution is mirrored by entrance into American literature of the story of Brown himself, not only in the work of sympathetic Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, but in the biography written by Redpath on the verge of Civil War. Redpath not only makes his case for Brown's place in history, but begins assembling a revolutionary canon of documents building a historiography of radical democracy around Brown in *Echoes of Harpers Ferry*.

In Chapter Nine, I argue that with the rapid approach of real sectional conflict, Brown himself became a cultural figure, mythologized by both radical journalist James Redpath and to a lesser extent by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who wove Brown into the fabric of the history of black rebellion, and the story of hemispheric slave rebels into the story of American freedom itself. Here I also argue that the radical implications of Brown's anti-racism had a direct impact and important consequences in the very war he sought to avoid. Inspired by Brown, Higginson writes a series of articles telling the heroic story of slave rebellion that Brown was part of, and then attempts to follow through on Brown's plan for armed black struggle, this time backed by

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the resources of the federal government, leading a regiment of black soldiers into the South to the strains of “John Brown’s Body.” Higginson struggles to live up to Brown’s memory, but in remembering the Old Man’s claim that he would take the fight to Africa—an explicit declaration that the battle could no longer be the white against white struggle that the war in Kansas had been—Higginson helps realize Brown’s vision.

Throughout these chapters I will refer not only to Brown’s actions, but to his voluminous writing, arguing that he, too, was deeply involved in the struggle to define and re-imagine the future and past of American democracy. The cumulative impact of the texts I place together here argues for a central place in Antebellum and American renaissance studies for a key vision of radical abolitionism—the battle between the slaveholders and the slaves, and the necessity of Northern citizens to ally themselves with the slaves—and for the man who became this vision’s key advocate and practitioner, John Brown of Harpers Ferry.

There are far-reaching implications for American Studies here. Brown was one of many abolitionists inspired by the example of Toussaint L’Ouverture’s Haitian rebels and other Caribbean Maroon groups, suggesting a link between the American abolition movement and anti-colonialism. Brown’s challenge to norms of white male success and to racism make him an interesting alternative model for studies of race and gender⁴⁷. And Brown’s challenge to the political and military hegemony of the slave economy, inspired in part by the New Divinity rejection of millennial nationalism, should also be seen as a challenge to American imperial ambition and the ideology of Manifest Destiny; this aspect of the anti-slavery struggle makes it an important area of study in the nascent (and long overdue) Americanist field of Imperial Studies. Part of the machinery of empire is the militarization of the population and culture; slavery required every white American to serve as potential soldier and spy, watching the enemy within for signs of danger and acting with impunity against any perceived threat⁴⁸. The mission of the radical abolition movement was to convince free white Americans that it was not black slaves who were the enemy within, but white slaveholders, and it would ultimately be them against whom the machinery of war had to be turned. In this sense, the War on Terror, and the vociferous conspiracy theories that it has inspired, has precedents in Southern efforts to maintain slavery, the abolitionists’ calls to reject and resist them, and the often violent opposition such calls met with.

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IN his 1841 lecture on the Haitian revolution, abolitionist and intellectual James McCune Smith acknowledges that “there was something startling in the nature, and fearful in the details of that revolution” that “cannot be denied.” However, he argues, these shocking details, “far from being reasons for mere exclamations of abhorrence, in reality form the strongest inducements to a calm and careful examination into the causes which gave rise to the revolution, and of their adequacy to produce such a result. . . .” Smith believes that “the more extraordinary the revolution, the greater should be [our] care in dispassionately analyzing the events which constitute its history.”⁴⁹

So, too, with the Harpers Ferry raid, and with the long consideration of black rebellion that preceded it. I argue in these chapters that Brown represents an important tradition in American thought and political action; I demonstrate that his beliefs are part a coherent discourse shared and developed by a number of important American writers in the era of abolition, approximately 1829 to 1865. This discourse stands in stark contrast, in opposition, to prevailing cultural, legislative, and judicial discourses that themselves might be viewed as, politically and socially speaking, insane. Their terms actively prevented slavery from being dealt with through the channels of reasonable debate in the courts and halls of Congress, almost guaranteeing that the worst possible outcome would result. That Brown and others categorically rejected the terms of this debate and sought to impose an alternative logic, a logic that sheds further light on the buildup to the American Civil War.

John Brown was born on May 9, 1800, in Torrington, Connecticut, to the family of devout Congregationalist and ardent abolitionist Owen Brown. The Brown family traced their ancestry to the *Mayflower*, though this lineage has been disputed by some historians.⁵⁰

Accurate or not, this was a potent symbol for the Browns, as was the legacy of the first Captain John Brown, Owen’s father, who died in the Revolutionary War. The family’s roots in New Divinity theology, Connecticut Puritan abolitionism, and Revolutionary rhetoric and struggle, formed a core of John Brown’s understanding of how to respond to social injustice, particularly slavery⁵¹.

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Little is known of Brown's childhood, except what he himself wrote to the young son of a friend in 1857; as biographer Louis DeCaro points out, the piece is primarily didactic and should be read more as an example of Brown's thinking and his skills as a teacher than as a record of his past.⁵² In it Brown describes an ugly encounter with slavery he had as a twelve-year-old boy, possibly an actual event, perhaps a composite or entirely invented scene to encapsulate the viciousness of slavery and an appropriate response to it. Regardless of when and how, he came to hate slavery with the same passion his father did, and he claims to have resolved at an early age to involve himself in antislavery activities.

But in his young adulthood, more conventional concerns also occupied Brown. He married, had children, and worked to acquire marketable skills, following his father not only in Calvinism and abolitionism but in the businesses of tanning and land speculation. Though the latter would be his financial downfall, he was talented in the former; he also became an expert in livestock, and was a respected member of the towns and church congregations in the various places where he sought his fortune, in Connecticut, the Western Reserve of Ohio, and Pennsylvania. For Brown and his family, the years “from 1826 to 1835,” Louis Ruchames tells us, “were filled with business successes and noteworthy achievements in commercial leadership.”⁵³ Though he thought about what role he could play in the nascent abolition movements that followed the buildup of the slave economy in the 1820's and early '30's, he led a fairly conventional life (though he came off as bull-headed and idiosyncratic, and was at first an extremely strict parent, a position he later repudiated) until the Crash of 1837 ruined him.⁵⁴

Like many would-be entrepreneurs, Brown had joined the mass speculation in real estate in the mid-30's, mostly accomplished on credit, and he never recovered financially, and never regained his social standing after the Crash. 1836 and 1837, years in which Brown's fortunes turned forever, represent a profound break in the stability of the U.S. political economy; its collapse coincided with the beginning of the long struggle by the United States to annex Texas in order to gain more slave territory. More than a few abolitionists traced both events to the policies of president Andrew Jackson and his successor, Martin van Buren, and the rise of what they came to call the Slave Power. Such a stark contrast, between the ruined futures of small businessmen and workers and the imperial ambitions of the Southern planters and an

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administration aligned with them, can be marked as the beginning of the generation-long slide toward Civil War, and its coincidence with Brown's financial fall from grace is significant.⁵⁵

Though Brown had numerous skills, his principles increasingly conflicted with his ability to function as a businessmen, and his desperation to erase his numerous debts after the Crash got him into more and more trouble, as he borrowed from Peter to pay Paul, once absconding with funds given him by business partners to pay other debts in the hopes of gaining more loans to pay back the money he stole, and so on and so on. Brown's unstable career in the 1840s, embroiling him in numerous lawsuits, has provided many 20th century writers with material with which to cast Brown as a common criminal and hustler, but his troubles and his unfortunate solutions were not uncommon among men thrown from the middle class by U.S. economic instability of the period.⁵⁶

Brown's heart was much more in his activities in the Underground Railroad, and he considered other ways to become a more active abolitionist as well, moving frequently to pursue his goals both in business and in activism.⁵⁷ He began by hoping to adopt a slave child to raise to citizenship among his own large family, then toyed with a plan to establish a school for blacks; his father Owen was already involved in the establishment of both Western Reserve College (which he left for their failure to uphold anti-slavery principles) and Oberlin College in Ohio.⁵⁸ But Brown became convinced, as many others were, that slavery would finally only be uprooted by force. He saw no reason to imagine that the United States government would initiate such a battle, and at some point, possibly in the mid-40s but perhaps later,⁵⁹ began to conceive of plans to launch guerilla raids to liberate slaves from southern plantations himself. Though he discussed his scheme with prominent black leaders, notably Frederick Douglass, whom he became close friends with, it lay untouched for many more years while he struggled to recover his financial footing and care for his growing family (Brown fathered twenty children in his lifetime, though, typical of the time, several did not survive to adulthood).

Just as he was not alone in his failures, Brown was not alone in his passion. The wave of anti-abolitionist violence that coincided with the Crash was met by growing resolve among anti-slavery activists. The escalation of the Texas crisis heightened sectional tensions for a decade before the U.S. finally invaded Mexico, and abolition's most fervent voices were raised against the aggression.⁶⁰ Regardless of how he was seen in the mid-20th century, Brown was hardly the

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only angry Northern abolitionist in 1848, a year of world revolution. Ohio's Western Reserve was, according to a Richmond, Virginia, paper, full of a "hypocritical, canting, whining, totally depraved and utterly irredeemable set of rascals," all opponents of slavery.⁶¹ The hyperbole is typical; "fanatic" was a common insult at the time, and typically meant anyone who expressed a commitment to reformist politics.⁶²

In 1849 Brown moved his family for the last time, to upstate New York to settle in an all-black community established on land granted by wealthy abolitionist Gerrit Smith. Brown continued his Underground Railroad work, but was otherwise occupied with more mundane concerns until a few of his oldest sons, also involved in abolitionism, moved to Kansas Territory during the war set in motion by Stephen Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska Act. They wrote back to their father for help in fighting the pro-slavery faction, and Brown saw an opportunity he had waited for. Upon arriving in Kansas, the Old Man involved himself in organizing resistance to pro-slavery settlers in the land south of Lawrence, ultimately earning the unofficial title "Captain" in a number of armed skirmishes. He also led one of the most infamous attacks in the history of the territory, and the most notorious act of his life, murdering five pro-slavery men in a nighttime raid in which he and his sons took the men from their homes and killed them with swords. Brown directed the violence without participating himself (except to fire one shot into a man probably already dead), and later concealed or denied his involvement.⁶³

Now Brown was fully committed to the fast approach of all-out hostilities between North and South. After leaving the territories for a short time, he returned to lead another raid, liberating eleven slaves and guiding them to freedom in Canada, killing one slaveholder in the process. He now began planning his guerilla raid into the south itself, gathering men from black communities and radical circles and seeking funding from prominent activists in New England. He became the toast of Boston, entertained by Emerson and Thoreau and forming strong alliances with more politically active men like Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Theodore Parker. These two, Gerrit Smith, Samuel Gridley Howe, Franklin Sanborn, and George L. Stearns became the "Secret Six," financing Brown's plan for an incursion into the South. The size and scope of the project continues to grow; there is reason to believe that the plan was well-planned and included the participation of far more people than first imagined (except by Southerners and Democrats who suspected the involvement of Henry Seward and other prominent Republicans).

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After many delays and near-mishaps, and with far fewer men than he originally hoped for, Brown finally executed his plan, seizing the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia on October 16, 1859. Ironically, the first casualty of the raid was Heyward Shepherd, a free black man who worked for the railroad, and what first went smoothly quickly became a debacle; Brown waited too long to retreat into the hills, and was surrounded and captured by U.S. Army Colonel Robert E. Lee and his lieutenant, J.E.B. Stuart. Most of his band of black and white guerillas were killed, including two sons and a son-in-law, and Brown was tried for treason by the State of Virginia and sentenced to death. In the month between his sentencing and execution, he gained nationwide notoriety for his eloquent defense of his cause and his stoic acceptance of his fate (his friend Higginson, for one, planned a rescue, but Brown decided he could only salvage his failure by being hung and martyred).⁶⁴ He was hung in Charlestown, Virginia, on December 2, 1859, under heavy guard. Besides the presence of Lee and Stuart, the scene is famous as well for the presence of one of the foot-soldiers in the ranks around the gallows, John Wilkes Booth.

Though news of the raid inspired mostly negative reaction in the North and South, Brown's composure, eloquence, and courage—at his trial, in a series of letters he wrote in prison, and on the day of his hanging—caused many in the North to see him as a hero and many on the South to offer him grudging respect. Union soldiers sang the fighting song “John Brown’s Body” throughout the Civil War, which eventually became, as he predicted, a battle to end slavery. Brown, one of the most radical dissenters in American history, was a “prophetic minority;” never in the mainstream, his “fanatical” views on slavery at the time of his execution would find their way to the mainstream during the war, and his words would be taken up a few years later by Abraham Lincoln in the beleaguered president’s second inaugural address. Just as Brown had predicted that “the crimes of this *guilty land*” would “never be purged *away*; but with Blood,” Lincoln argued in this famous passage that every drop of blood would be paid for:

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein

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any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."⁶⁵

One of the most respected speeches by one of our most revered leaders echoes the scrawled prophecy of a treasonous fanatic almost to the letter.⁶⁶ In fact, it's Lincoln's speech that adds biblical portent; Brown's note is terse, resigned, barely religious in tone at all (except in his self-recrimination for his "vanity")—not a prophecy but a prediction. Brown doesn't use the word *sins*, but *crimes*:

I John Brown am now quite *certain* that the crimes of this *guilty land*: will never be purged *away*; but with Blood. I had *as I now think*: vainly flattered myself that without *very much* bloodshed; it might be done.⁶⁷

What is easy to miss in these words is the confession, Brown deciding—perhaps a rationalization based on his failure to execute it—that his plan proved too small an effort to dislodge an entire entrenched economic system. Brown's final text is not prophecy but analysis; he finally admits that the problem is too big for him. His effort to manage and direct the inevitable current of violence that would wash away the dam between slave economy and republican government proved too much for such a small group, and his final "prophecy" is a realization that he could not avert the bloodbath. It's difficult, given the events that followed, to see Brown's words as anything but a clear-eyed assessment of the situation.⁶⁸

Brown maintained that he did not intend insurrection, and recent historians have made convincing arguments that this is true (it's also likely that Brown meant this purely in the sense that he dismissed the term "insurrection" as inappropriate and invalid, since the slaves self-evidently had the right to claim their freedom).⁶⁹ But Brown clearly meant to facilitate militant resistance among the slave population, and was the leader of extremely violent acts of aggression against pro-slavery factions in Kansas. His actions were based on assumptions that, if not widespread, were shared by a number of astute political actors in the antebellum United States, from Garrison to John Quincy Adams.⁷⁰ These assumptions were that the enslavement of a segment of a nation's population constituted an act, and an ongoing state, of war, and that the

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entrenched political support for this continuing violence made it unlikely that the situation could be resolved peacefully.

Brown also shared the view with many other abolitionists that the Declaration of Independence established the inherent, inalienable right on the part of slaves to claim their freedom, and to use similar means to do so if necessary. Further, Brown drew on long-standing legal precedents that argued that citizens committed to a democratic system of government were obligated to assist those oppressed in their struggle against oppression, again by whatever means necessary. By holding these assumptions from a relatively early age, Brown represented the vanguard of anti-slavery, anti-racist thought in the United States, but these ideas predated Brown himself by decades.

Brown's violent tactics should be seen as the endpoint of a process—on a personal level, as an evolution of his approach to activism, and on a social level, as the logical endpoint of a generation of compromise, obfuscation, conspiracy, and intransigence that finally left no options open to millions of people living in America to gain the legal rights the nation's founding documents promised. Brown's actions lie on a continuum of responses to slavery that became progressively more extreme and desperate as Southern power became more entrenched and Northern politics more compliant—the same events that gave rise to fighters like Brown also led to the collapse of the Whigs and the birth of the Republican party. Brown's tactics were accepted as necessary, even visionary and heroic, by a number of prominent religious leaders and philosophers, if none were as courageous or foolhardy to lay down their lives alongside him (it seems that prominent Boston minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson was not terribly far behind Brown in his resolve, and Harriet Tubman considered joining the Harpers Ferry raid, though Frederick Douglass chose not to). An invitation to actions like his was also implicit, and explicit, in the words of radicals as well as Congressional leaders throughout the revolutionary and abolitionist eras.

Brown's religion has also been a main point of contention; to critics, his intense religiosity proved his "fanaticism." George Fredrickson is shocked that Theodore Parker, "the nation's foremost liberal clergyman" would be taken in by "a narrow-minded and possibly insane religious fanatic" who could only "justify his actions by the literal and unintelligent reading of certain Biblical passages".⁷¹ But this renders Brown's religious beliefs simplistically. It was his

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Transcendentalist admirers more than anyone who advanced the image of Brown as a stern avenging pilgrim, starting with Higginson, who saw in him “simply a high-minded, unselfish, belated Covenanter; a man whom Sir Walter Scott might have drawn.” Higginson also saw in Brown “that religious elevation which is itself a kind of refinement; the quality one may see expressed in many a venerable Quaker face at yearly meeting.”⁷² Thoreau and Emerson followed suit, comparing Brown to Cromwell and the Puritans.

Later historians who were sympathetic to Brown took these men’s views as holy writ, right up to recent bestseller David Reynolds. Louis DeCaro’s 2002 religious biography of Brown sheds light on this issue, illustrating Brown’s dissatisfaction with one church after another that refused to take strong stands against slavery. Political novelist, historian, and activist Truman Nelson, writing in the March 29, 1971 issue of *The Nation*, attacked another of Brown’s bestselling biographers, Stephen Oates, for his characterization of Brown as an “orthodox nineteenth-century Calvinist who believed in fore-ordination and providential signs, in the doctrine of election, innate depravity and in man’s total dependence on a sovereign and arbitrary God.” Nelson’s reading is far less orthodox; though “Brown might have said he believed in some of these things,” he was hardly a straight Calvinist and in fact was not even a regular Church-goer for the last third of his life. If Brown was a Calvinist, Nelson argues, he was one “who so disbelieved in the innate depravity of man that he fought to free men often chained up like ferocious animals, who put guns in their hands and depended upon them to act toward their oppressors with justice and mercy.”

Here was an “orthodox Calvinist” who, for the last weeks of his life, preached in a Dunker church whose congregation believed in universal redemption and, in matters of faith and practice, resembled the Society of Friends. . . . it is true that he used a profoundly religious idiom in his writing and his speech, but, as Donald Freed recently pointed out, before Marx, the Bible provided radicals with an acceptable vocabulary of dissent which “allows one to take extreme positions when required and yet not cede an inch of humanism or patriotism to the status quo.”⁷³

A major problem with much of the commentary on Brown’s Calvinism stems from the fact that his background in New Divinity theology, which I will describe below, has rarely been discussed or understood. However, Nelson has a point; many of Brown’s contemporaries had, if they paid attention, found his beliefs slippery as well. The Reverend H.D. King, who knew

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Brown in Iowa shortly after the abolitionist's first sojourn in Kansas, "tried to get at his theology," he reported to Katherine Mayo:⁷⁴

But I never could force him down to dry sober talk on what he thought of the moral features of things in general. He would not express himself on little diversions from the common right for the accomplishment of the greater good. For him there was only one wrong, and that was slavery. He was rather skeptical, I think. Not an infidel, but not bound by creeds. He was somewhat cranky on the subject of the Bible, as he was on that of killing people. He believed in God and Humanity, but his attitude seemed to be: 'We don't know anything about some things. We do not know about the humanity matter. If any great obstacle stand in the way, you may properly break all the Decalogue to get rid of it.'⁷⁵

Another great question, that of Brown's "character," frequently turns on his bankruptcies and business failures, but the extremely unstable boom-and-bust economic cycle of the mid-19th century United States ruined many men of character, and enriched many with no scruples, so Brown's financial problems, and inability to lead a "normal", stable middle-class life, cannot be taken to mean much in terms of his career as an abolitionist. If anything, Eric Foner suggests, "Brown's career of business failures in the 1830s and 1840s, usually taken by historians as evidence of maladjustment, may have made him rather more skeptical of the virtues of the northern economic order than other abolitionists."⁷⁶ Garrison and Douglass were staunch supporters of Northern industrial capitalism, and neither was friendly to the nascent labor movement of their time; in that regard, Brown was more far-sighted than either.

Brown was not simply thoughtful and informed but penetrating and astute. His knowledge of slavery as a system was thorough, and—a point I want to make with this work—he understood the political and legal, and therefore Constitutional crises that the system created for a democracy—very well. This insight had come at great cost to him and to his family, but he saw through the self-delusion of middle-class American success as well as anyone of his time. In a 1879 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, journalist William A. Phillips published his account of various encounters he had had with Brown in the years between Bleeding Kansas and Harpers Ferry.⁷⁷ At their last meeting, Brown "sketched the history of American slavery from its beginnings in the colonies." Brown's history lecture is concise and accurate, and though Phillips saw it at the time as a conspiracy theory (a theme I will return to at length in this work), he later reconsidered his earlier doubts.

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He recalled many circumstances that I had forgotten, or had never heard of. He said the founders of the republic were all opposed to slavery, and that the whole spirit and genius of the American constitution antagonized it, and contemplated its early overthrow. He said this remained the dominant sentiment for the first quarter of a century of the republic. Afterwards slavery became more profitable, and as it did the desire grew to extend and increase it. The condition of the enslaved negroes steadily became worse, and the despotic necessities of a more cruel system constantly pressed on the degraded slaves . . . Gradually the pecuniary interests that rested on slavery seized the power of the government. Public opinion opposed to slavery was placed under ban. The politicians of the South became slavery propagandists, and the politicians of the North trimmers. When the religious and moral sentiment of the country indicated a desire to check this alarming growth, a threat of secession was uttered, and appeals were made not to risk the perpetuation of this glorious republic by fanatical antislaveryism. Then began an era of political compromises, and men full of professions of love of country were willing, for peace, to sacrifice everything for which the republic was founded.

Bringing them up to the present in his narrative, Brown claimed that "we have reached a point where nothing but war can settle the question."

"Had they succeeded in Kansas, they would have gained a power that would have given them permanently the upper hand, and it would have been the death-knell of republicanism in America. They are checked, but not beaten. They never intend to relinquish the machinery of this government into the hands of the opponents of slavery. It has taken them more than half a century to get it, and they know its significance too well to give it up. If the republican party elects its president next year, there will be war. The moment they are unable to control they will go out, and as a rival nation along-side they will get the countenance and aid of the European nations, until American republicanism and freedom are overthrown."

Brown continued, describing the Buchanan administration's pro-slavery machinations, tipping the scales in favor of the south in military and economic power. But while Brown "had been more observant than he had credit for being," having turned "the whole powers of his mind (and they were great) . . . to one subject," Phillips believed at the time that his interpretation was "incredible, or the dream and vagary of a man who had allowed one idea to carry him away," but it all "has a strangely prophetic look to me now." The writer protested, arguing that Brown had "confounded everyday occurrences with treacherous design." Brown replied that this was a "lull before the storm. We are on the eve of one of the greatest wars in history, and I fear slavery will triumph, and there will be an end of all aspirations for human freedom." Phillips argued that if

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both sides continued their bellicosity, “there will be collision, which will produce the very state of affairs you deprecate. That would lead to war, and to some extent we should be responsible for it.” Better to trust that there is “virtue enough in this people to deserve a free government.”

“You forget the fearful wrongs that are carried on in the name of government and law.”

“I do not forget them,—I regret them.”

“I regret and will remedy them with all the power that God has given me.”

Phillips ended his last interview with Brown by arguing over the possibilities of servile insurrection in the South, at which point Brown famously replied to Phillips’ contention that “negroes were a peaceful, domestic, inoffensive race . . . incapable of resentment or reprisal,” that “You have not studied them right . . . and you have not studied them long enough. Human nature is the same everywhere.” Finally the writer confronted Brown on the nature of his plans:

I told him that I feared he would lead the young men with him into some desperate enterprise, where they would be imprisoned and disgraced.

He rose. “Well,” he said, “I thought I could get you to understand this. I do not wonder at it. The world is very pleasant to you; but when your household gods are broken, as mine have been, you will see all this more clearly.”

There is hardly a more concise, poignant, hardwon—or definitive—disavowal of the comforts and complacency of American consumption anywhere. As we will see, Brown was as thoughtful, articulate, and sometimes as eloquent, a spokesman for his cause as any of the more recognized writers I will examine here. Brown clearly developed a public voice and persona as his struggle with slavery went on, and a specific voice and point of view emerge. In private, writing to his family, his religiousness and tenderness come through, as well as his endless worries about money. In public that vulnerability and doubt disappear; he is cavalier, stern, filled with confidence, sarcasm, and self-regard. His voice comes in part from the New Divinity preachers of his home state, Connecticut; it is revolutionary in that it draws from the vocabulary and ideas of the Revolutionary era—there is none of the sentiment of his and later generations, none of the romantic racializing—no racism at all, in fact, a shocking difference between Brown and almost any other white American of his or almost any generation. As a writer and speaker Brown is calm, angry, rational, sardonic, almost erudite, even funny—an easy match for a nation of entrenched foes.

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But he was not alone. For not twenty, but thirty years, the final wave of the abolitionist movement built momentum, a chorus of voices arguing that the Southern slave economy, and Northern rejection of black equality, would be the ruin of the United States. Brown's was one of those voices, and one of the few who put his body on the line in the terms that Thoreau suggested in *Resistance to Civil Authority*—throwing it on the gears of the machine. Some of Brown's actions were astonishingly brave, some shockingly brutal, some simply inexplicable, but all of the logic of his actions is foreshadowed in the work of the generation of writers who watched their country unravel and who called out to stop it.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

¹ Wendell Phillips, "The Lesson of the Hour," in *Echoes of Harpers Ferry*, James Redpath, editor (reprinted by Negro Universities Press, 1970), p. 43.

² It was believed for decades, and still occasionally stated—based on the aging Phillips' own memory—that his famous speech on Lovejoy's murder was "impromptu," but Louis Ruchames clears up this argument in "Wendell Phillips' Lovejoy Address" in *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 1. (Mar., 1974). Phillips was a lawyer in his mid-20's when mob violence against abolitionists drove him to devote himself to become an activist. Interestingly, for our discussion, he abandoned practicing law when he decided to become an abolitionist speaker and writer, and his parents accused him of insanity when they learned of his decision—his later affinity for Brown may in part lie in his recognition that active opposition to slavery put one beyond the pale in mid-19th century American society. Phillips' famous speech, delivered "without notes," was in response to an address by the Massachusetts Attorney-General denouncing Lovejoy and comparing his killers to the participants of the Boston Tea Party. The text of Phillips' address can be found at Bartleby.com, <http://www.bartleby.com/268/8/30.html>. "The difference between the excitements of those days and our own," Phillips insisted, "is simply this: the men of that day went for the right, as secured by the laws The rioters of our day go for their own wills, right or wrong for the sentiments [John Austin, the Attorney-General] has uttered, on soil consecrated by the prayers of Puritans and the blood of patriots, the earth should have yawned and swallowed him up." The audience erupted at this remark, both for and against it, but Phillips refused to "take it back," as many called for him to do. Also see James Brewer Stewart, *Wendell Phillips: Liberty's Hero* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986, 1998), and Warren Leming, *The Lesson Of The Hour: Wendell Phillips On Abolition & Strategy* (Chicago: Charles H Kerr, 2001)

³ Harrold uses this term in the "Who's Who" section of his *American Abolitionists* (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2001, p. 140), but only to describe Brown: the Old Man is the only "practical abolitionist" listed, though Brown is "closely allied with the radical political abolitionists," the leader of whom is Gerrit Smith; other radical political abolitionists listed are Charles Torrey and Beriah Green. This is, I think, an accurate and useful description; I would

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define men in Brown's immediate circle, like James Redpath and John Kagi, as practical abolitionists as well. Harrold does not define Douglass, Theodore Parker, or Higginson this way, and none of the other members of the "Secret Six" are listed.

⁴ Harpers Ferry is now in West Virginia. Brown and his men at least partly hoped for some support from the white population in the area (see Karen Whitman, "Re-evaluating John Brown's Raid at Harpers Ferry," *West Virginia History* v34, #1, (October 1972, <http://www.wvculture.org/history/jb11.html>), an expectation not entirely unrealistic, since this mountainous region of Virginia seceded from the Old Dominion during the Civil War and re-entered the Union as a new state opposed to slavery. While locating the raid at Harpers Ferry is usually seen as a tactical blunder on Brown's part, since the slave population was relatively thin, one of its advantages would become clear when it became part of West Virginia during the war; Brown was well aware that poor whites had little stake in the battle to maintain slavery, and could not necessarily be counted on to support the planters.

⁵ Herbert Aptheker, "Additional Data on American Maroons," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Oct., 1947), pp. 452-460.

⁶ This has been a common trope; almost any superficial description of Brown states it, and David Reynolds includes it (carefully) in his book's subtitle. It's a sort of corollary to the old story about Lincoln calling Harriet Beecher Stowe the person who started the war. Both stories obscure the long history of almost immediate, and ever-increasing, conflict between anti-slavery (in the broadest sense) Northerners (and Southerners) and the powerful planter class.

⁷ Kenneth R. Carroll attempts "A Psychological Examination of John Brown" in *Terrible Swift Sword*, applying modern clinical methodology to a psychoanalysis of the Old Man across a gulf of 150 years. The problem with such analyses is that many people—certainly many 21st Century Americans—can be described as depressed, bipolar, or otherwise mentally "ill," but few of those commit their entire lives to an attack on an insidious economic institution, while many American soldiers kill and die for commitments to far more abstract, and arguably far more deluded, aims. This argument also fails to explain the men who willingly went with Brown, and those who supported him materially. It was popular for a time to explain this away by describing a kind of hypnotic magnetism on Brown's part, but this is hard to swallow; the words of his sons and daughters reveal a fairly clear-eyed recognition of who and what their father was, as well as a passion that may not have rivaled his, but certainly surpassed the average citizen.

Hewing to a pre-Civil Rights era interpretation, James Oakes has recently described Brown as having "a romantic disdain for the rule of law," just like the "Yankee Intellectuals"—the Transcendentalists—who "lionized him." For Oakes, the Provisional Constitution was, *ala* Villard, a "preposterous document," and Brown's presence at the 1855 Radical Abolitionist Party convention served only to confirm the party's "political irrelevance," since he had convinced them to "formally endorse revolutionary violence." Douglass' praise of Brown was "implausibly grandiose," and most simply dismissed the Old Man as a "lunatic." Oakes underlines his assessment with a letter to Brown in jail from Mahala Doyle, whose husband and son Brown and his sons brutally murdered in Pottawatomie in 1856. Oakes' point seems to be "the power of mainstream politics" in ultimately defeating slavery, but in the terms he employs, the Civil War was a far greater "bloodbath" than the butchery at Pottawatomie, and hardly a triumph of the political process, which both Brown and Douglass—rightly, I think—both saw as so thoroughly corrupt and violent in its protection of slavery as to leave nothing but such a hideous confrontation possible, and they were hardly alone in this. It should again

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be suggested that, had Brown's plan succeeded, the war might have been avoided entirely. See James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Anti-slavery Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), pp. 96-98. For other recent treatments of Brown that stick to "fanatic" interpretations, see Sarah Vowell's essay, which I mention below, and William T. Vollman's discussion of Brown in *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), pp. 375-383, in which he is able to compare Brown to both Hitler and Stalin in just a few pages.

⁸ Merrill D. Peterson wrote a short but excellent survey of this historiography, as well as novels, movies, and so on, *John Brown: The Legend Revisited* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002). See note 21, and Chapter One note 21, below.

⁹ See Albert J. Von Frank, "John Brown, James Redpath, and the Idea of Revolution," *Civil War History*, Vol. 52, # 2, June 2006, and Hannah Geffert, "They Heard His Call: The Local Black Community's Involvement in the Raid on Harpers Ferry," in *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown*, Paul Finkelman, editor (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Robert Penn Warren, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr (Southern Classics Series)*. Nashville, TN: J.S. Sanders & Company, 1993.

¹¹ Annette Gordon-Reed p. 5. (5). In reality, though, it was the breakdown of the slaveholders' faith that the law—in the form of a built-in advantage in Congress—would continue to protect them, that led to secession and the war.

¹² Herbert Aptheker, "Militant Abolitionism," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 26, No. 4. (Oct., 1941), p. 438, an essay that briefly and succinctly covers much of the ground I will tear back up in these chapters.

¹³ For decades Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1943, 1968) was almost the only in-depth treatment of the subject as an ongoing part of the American experience, but the ambitious two volume *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance and Rebellion*, edited by Junius P. Rodriguez (Oxford: Greenwood Publishers, 2006), is an attempt to remedy this. There are many detailed accounts of individual plots and events: for Gabriel's rebellion see Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993) and James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Recent individual treatments of the Vesey conspiracy are David M. Robertson, *Denmark Vesey: The Buried Story of America's Largest Slave Rebellion and the Man Who Led It* (New York: Vintage, 2000), and Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). The actual documents are in *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Hardcover) Edward A. Pearson, editor (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Michael P. Johnson created a stir with his argument that the conspiracy was an invention of the city government, and that the court "colluded with a handful of intimidated witnesses to collect testimony about an insurrection that, in fact, was not about to happen," in "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 58, No. 4. (Oct., 2001); Johnson, Egerton, Robertson, and Pearson debated the issue in the January 2002 issue of the same journal. Other recent treatments of individual rebellions, conspiracies, and hoaxes are Mark M. Smith, *Stono: Documenting And Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), and Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty and Slavery in an 18th Century City* (New

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York: Knopf, 2005). Also see Dan T. Carter, "The Anatomy of Fear: The Christmas Day Insurrection Scare of 1865," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 42, No. 3. (Aug., 1976), pp. 345-364 and Edwin A. Miles, "The Mississippi Slave Insurrection Scare of 1835," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 42, No. 1. (Jan., 1957), pp. 48-60.

¹⁴ John Demos, "The Antislavery Movement and the Problem of Violent 'Means,'" *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4. (Dec., 1964), p.501.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 502.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 504.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

¹⁸ One might say that God *did* take it out of their hands, and into the hands of those like Brown, who were willing to act with more militance. Aptheker notes that the sisters bitterly decided that all bets were off with Lovejoy's transgression, and especially over "the absence of an expression of regret over this on the part of the American Anti-Slavery Society" over it: "Surely to be consistent,' said these earnest young women, "'abolitionists sh'd go South and help the slaves to obtain their freedom at the point of the bayonet.'" Hindsight shows us that Brown literally did just that. See Aptheker, "Militant Abolitionism," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 26, No. 4. (Oct., 1941), p. 454. Brown's assertions that God had chosen him to end slavery—which have more than a trace of sardonic self-mockery in them—follow directly from Grimke's statements here, and partake of the widespread 19th century intellectual conceit of reference to Providence. Brown's language and thinking were typically no more "religious" than that of the average American politician or rhetorician of the time.

¹⁹ See Aileen Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1989—originally published in 1967), pp. 82-83, Henry Mayer, *All On Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition Of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), pp. 237-239; Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970—reprint 1975), pp. 100-111.

²⁰ The three-fifths clause counted a portion of the slave population to include in "the federal ratio" for representation in Congress, ensuring Southern planters federal power far beyond their actual numbers. In Gary Wills' *"Negro President": Jefferson and the Slave Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 2003), Wills places the three-fifths clause at the center of the struggle between the North and South, quoting Richard H. Brown: "From the inauguration of Washington until the Civil War, the South was in the saddle of national politics. This was the central fact in American political history to 1860" (7). It's crucial to understand the trajectory of the abolition movement to recognize this fundamental barrier to the political process; as long as Southern planters were able to wield such power, legislative action against slavery was unlikely. It's important to see, too, that this was representation in the House, so it wasn't simply "the South" that had so increased its share of power, but the planter class specifically; it was districts where slaves were concentrated that benefited from the clause.

²¹ Wills defines the term as "the political efforts exerted to protect and expand slavery." All of these efforts proceeded from the three-fifths clause, which "permeated the process of representative government" (11). Much of the historiography, from an influential 1921 essay by Chauncey Boucher on, dismisses it as a conspiracy theory. Instead, Wills explains that the Federalists predicted that this Negro "representation" would increase year by year so long as the federal ratio were retained. This prospect is what they meant by "the slave power." They did not mean the power plantation owners exerted over their black slaves, or the power slaves

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might someday use in retaliation. They meant the power that slave states wielded over non-slave states. (3)

So while Boucher and many historians after him saw Garrison, for instance, as a conspiracy-monger, Wills, rightly, I think, legitimizes the fears of the Federalists and other opponents of the planters. To some degree the three-fifths clause and other Constitutional and extra-Constitutional protections for slavery made “conspiracy” unnecessary and redundant; the planters could act with a degree of impunity, regardless of their own fears, real or imagined, of threats to their power.

²² I obviously use this term loosely and with apologies to Edward Said and to the field of post-colonial studies in general; what I am trying to get across here is that what abolitionist literature attempted, which is reflected very clearly and in more complicated ways in Melville’s fiction, was to turn the South, culturally and economically, into an Other, but of a very specific sort—a kind of Old World despotism that the American Revolution was designed to destroy. The abolitionist construction of the South as a bizarre throwback to medieval, pre-Enlightenment feudalism was based directly, and with all ironies in place, on Jefferson’s language, particularly the Declaration and the relevant passages from Notes on the State of Virginia, as I discuss in the next chapter.

²³ In *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press, 1993), Eric Sundquist takes up the contradiction between the slave system and “the right of revolution” with its attendant “right of slaves to claim the same moral authority for their own freedom that had served as the foundation of the United States itself” (Sundquist 9).

²⁴ A few historians have taken Brown’s “scheme” seriously, and argued for its potential effectiveness, with convincing results. Hannah Geffert sums up like so:

Brown was convinced that slavery could be most effectively attacked in Jefferson County. Harpers Ferry would be seized but not held. After the first blow, blacks from the North and from Canada would join Brown and in turn inspire support among the slaves. Slaves would be funneled North, along the Great Black Way, to freedom; a small cadre would stay with Brown. The fight would be carried on in the mountains of Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, and then in the swamps of South Carolina. Virginia’s mountains would be an opportune place to begin a guerrilla war.

See Hannah Geffert, “They Heard His Call: The Local Black Community’s Involvement in the Raid on Harpers Ferry,” in *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown*, Paul Finkelman, editor (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), p. 25. also see Whitman, “Re-evaluating,” Albert J. Von Frank, “John Brown, James Redpath, and the Idea of Revolution,” *Civil War History* Vol. 52, # 2, June 2006, pp. 142-160, and Louis A. DeCaro, *John Brown—The Cost of Freedom: Selections from His Life & Letters* (New York: International Publishers, 2007). In *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman: Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: One World/Ballantine, 2004), Kate Clifford Larson suggests the possibility that Tubman participated in the raid, traveling through the outlying areas preparing slaves for Brown’s move into the hills. Though she admits this as an intriguing possibility only, other historians have revealed the extent to which the black communities around Harpers Ferry were prepared to participate. Also see Geffert (with Jean Libby), “Regional Black Involvement in the John Brown Raid,” *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Stauffer, editors (New York: The New Press, 2006). For Tubman’s possible involvement in the raid, see Larson, *Bound for the*

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Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Heroine (New York: Ballantine, 2003), pp. 174-175. For Tubman's first meeting with Brown, see Larson, p. 156ff.

²⁵ The historiography on Brown is staggering in its volume, probably rivaling that of more accepted figures like Lincoln and Jefferson. No definitive, exhaustive account of Brown's life exists, and each treatment adds necessary wrinkles. Most contemporary scholars rely on Oates for a basic outline of Brown, but this is not without problems, as we will see. There has yet to be a satisfactory collection of documents on Brown as well, though a number have been published. In several ways the best overall compendium is Hinton, who has the benefit of firsthand knowledge without the rhetorical grandiosity and willful evasiveness of Redpath.

Recent years have seen three very sympathetic biographies—Carton, DeCaro, and Reynolds—and many articles of serious scholarship on Brown's role in history, but attacks on Brown as a bloodthirsty, self-aggrandising nut continue.

²⁶ For the only full treatment of Redpath in decades, see John R. McKivigan, *Forgotten Firebrand: James Redpath and the Making of Nineteenth-century America* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

²⁷ Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. *"Fire from the Midst of You": A Religious Life of John Brown* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002), p. 163.

²⁸ Brown's first biographer was his friend and ally, Scottish journalist and activist James Redpath, whom Albert Von Frank calls the "architect" of Brown's legend. Many later 19th century biographies were similarly favorable; two were by close allies of Brown: Frank Sanborn's 1882 *Life and Letters* and Richard Hinton's 1894 *John Brown and His Men*. Sanborn was one of the "Secret Six," Brown's affluent Massachusetts financiers. Hinton, like Redpath, was a political radical and journalist who believed in a vision of revolution and who provides the most complete documentary account of Brown's raid.

The reformist ethic of the Progressive era brought a less favorable view of violent rebellion, and Oswald Garrison Villard's mammoth *A Life Fifty Years Later* finds Brown's greatness in his rhetoric in court, abhorring his violence in Kansas and Virginia. Villard is also troubled by Brown's business failures. Dubois' biography is much more accepting of Brown's plans, and places him even higher in the pantheon of great Americans. In the following decades, Brown fell from grace with American intellectuals, enamoured of the literary experimentation of Southern writers who attempted to emulate the great William Faulkner, and the myth of the Old South that they spun about the gentility and erudition of the planter class. Robert Penn Warren and James Malin saw Brown as little more than a megalomaniacal horse-thief, and this view began to win out against Brown's champions like Langston Hughes, whose grandmother had been married to one of the raiders killed at Harpers Ferry, and Vernon Parrington (who, despite his admiration of "Old Brown," doesn't mention a single black writer contributing to his *Main Currents of American Thought*). A great deal of mid-20th century and Cold War American historiography argued that not simply Brown, but all the abolitionists, were fanatics whose self-righteousness destroyed the possibility of a peaceful resolution to the slavery question; even George Frederickson disapproved of the abolitionists, calling Brown "narrow-minded and possibly insane.. Stanley Elkins' *Slavery: a Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (XX) may be the most well-known of these treatments, most of which have been effectively argued against in the ensuing decades. See, for instance, Merton L. Dillon's "The Abolitionists: A Decade of Historiography, 1959-1969," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 35, No. 4. (Nov., 1969), and "Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond: An Appraisal," *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 21, No. 3. (Sep., 1993);

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Bertram Wyatt-Brown's "Stanley Elkins' Slavery: The Antislavery Interpretation Reexamined," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2. (May, 1973); Ann J. Lane, *The Debate Over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and His Critics* (Illini Books, Ib-73); and Lawrence J. Friedman, "Abolitionist Historiography 1965-1979: An Assessment," *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 8, No. 2. (Jun., 1980).

The Civil Rights movement brought a reassessment of the Anti-Slavery movement and a flurry of interest in Brown, leading to several more major works at the beginning of the 1970s, but Stephen B. Oates' *To Purge This Land with Blood*, which takes a middle path between Oates' predecessors' dismissiveness and horror and Villard's reluctant admiration, became the definitive treatment for many years. Another wave of interest came with a collection of essays edited by Paul Finkelman, *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid* (Charlottesville: University Press of London, 1995) and with Russell Banks' novel *Cloudsplitter* (New York: HarperFlamingo, 1998), not simply a sympathetic treatment of Brown and his family but a meditation on the cultural legacy of the American Renaissance. In 2001 PBS featured Banks in what was otherwise an unimaginative reliance on Brown's wild-eyed religiosity to explain the raid, but within a few years an enormous amount of scholarship began placing Brown back into the context of broader events. This work culminated with David Reynolds' large, sympathetic bestseller collecting the sources, and with Louis DeCaro's original *Religious Life*.

²⁹ The importance of the belief in—or recognition of—the Slave Power conspiracy is that it offsets the Garrisonian insistence that moral suasion is the strategy most likely to succeed. In the first issue of *The Liberator*, in 1831, Garrison would claim that "An enlightened, consolidated, and wisely-directed *public opinion*" was the only weapon "able to overthrow the present system of slavery," by "disseminating LIGHT—by preaching the TRUTH." But if a powerful, organized, and devious opponent was committed to obfuscation and force to secure their aims, the efficacy of "preaching the TRUTH" was already circumscribed, suggesting that only direct confrontation and possibly violent resistance would be effective against it.

³⁰ For more on this, see David Brion Davis, *Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithica, NY: Cornell Paperbacks, 1971, reprinted 2008). Davis dismisses the conspiratorial tone of the texts he studies, drawing on Richard Hofstadter's famous *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Dismissal of conspiratorial/"paranoid" rhetoric as a psychological flaw, however, sidesteps discussion of its political purposes and its social impact.

³¹ Garrison has been called a conspiracy monger, who called the Constitution a pact with death; his language on the subject is often cited but rarely quoted. Here is a passage on the Constitution from 1832, clearly owing some of its tone to David Walker's *Appeal*:

There is much declamation about the sacredness of the compact which was formed between the free and slave states on the adoption of the Constitution. A sacred compact, forsooth! We pronounce it the most bloody and heaven-daring arrangement ever made by men for the continuance and protection of a system of the most atrocious villany ever exhibited on earth. Yes – we recognize the compact, but with feelings of shame and indignation; and it will be held in everlasting infamy by the friends of justice and humanity throughout the world. It was compact formed at the sacrifice of the bodies and souls of millions of our race, for the sake of achieving a political object — an unblushing and monstrous coalition to do evil that good might come. Such a compact was, in the nature of things and according to the law of God, null and void from the beginning.

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Text recovered from <http://www.theliberatorfiles.com/5-the-constitution-and-a-call-for-disunion> on February 29, 2008.

³² Beyond the frequent alarms concerning real, imagined, or concocted slave plots or interference by foreign powers like the British, which I will discuss later, Southern legislators consistently warned of their power being undermined by Northerners, and Northerners did the same—probably, based on the built-in advantage of the 3/5 clause, with more reason. Southern rhetoric was often a tool, helping the planters control the poor white population as well as the slaves. It's important to note that threats of secession on both sides were frequent almost from the beginning of the Union itself. See, for instance, Kevin M. Gannon, "Escaping 'Mr. Jefferson's Plan of Destruction': New England Federalists and the Idea of a Northern Confederacy, 1803-1804," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 21, No. 3. (Autumn, 2001).

³³ The 1741 New York rebellion has been convincingly called a hoax, most recently in Lepore, *New York Burning*, and Andy Doolen, "Reading and Writing Terror: The New York Conspiracy Trials of 1741," *American Literary History* 16.3 (2004). In 2001, Michael P. Johnson started a heated controversy in "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 58, No. 4. (Oct., 2001), by arguing that Vesey's plot was fabricated by city officials. Johnson's assertions came in a review of three historical treatments of the Vesey plot. The authors of these books responded to Johnson in the January issue. I will touch on this briefly in my discussion of Melville's *Benito Cereno*, but Johnson certainly presents an interesting—and plausible—possibility in relation to the culture of conspiracy and control created between slaves, the "Slave Power," and their political rivals in the North. 1856 conspiracy scare, which delany used in Blake

³⁴ Many such columns can be found at the Furman University Department of History's *Secession Era Editorials* collection at <http://history.furman.edu/editorials/see.py>.

³⁵ Influenced himself by the American Revolution, L'Ouverture's victory ended Napoleon's bid to establish a North American base, which in turn led to the Louisiana Purchase, an irony that could not have been lost on Thomas Jefferson. The literature on Toussaint is too voluminous to survey in this work; Harriet Martineau wrote a novel based around his life, and prominent abolitionists like Phillipps and William Wells Brown wrote biographies as well. To some extent Toussaint is the literary predecessor to Brown, filling a similar role in the debate over black freedom and revolutionary action, and so becoming the subject of both hagiographies and hatchet jobs.

³⁶ Sundquist, p 37. Gray wrote *The Confession of Nat Turner* after interviewing the captured rebel in his cell. Sundquist suggests that his reasons for doing do were complex and conflicted, and that the text represents an intense struggle between the two men's voices.

³⁷ The precise meaning of the term "insurrection" is disputed, at least legally. Regardless, however, the Insurrection Act of 1807 was designed to give planters access to the United States military in order to control potential black rebellion, allowing Virginia governor Henry Wise to deploy federal troops against Brown's men at Harpers Ferry in 1859. See the discussion of "Dictator John" Rutledge's arguments linking treason and insurrection and slavery in Lawrence Goldstone's *Dark Bargain: Slavery, Profits and the Struggle for the Constitution*, pp. 154-155.

³⁸ For more on literary treatments of Nat Turner, see Adeleke Adeeko, *Slave's Rebellion: Literature, History, Orature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005); Mary Kemp Davis, *Nat Turner Before the Bar of Judgment: Fictional Treatments of the Southampton Slave Insurrection* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999); and Albert E. Stone,

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The Return of Nat Turner: History, Literature, and Cultural Politics in Sixties America (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

³⁹ In 1856, with the war already begun in Kansas, Richard Hildreth managed to combine a critique of the legal system, clerical power, and the feudalism of the South, publishing several biographies of English judges written by Chief Justice John Lord Campbell under the title *Atrocious Judges: Lives of Judges Infamous as Tools of Tyrants and Instruments of Oppression*. "It has not been so much by the aid of mercenary soldiers," Hildreth writes in his introduction, "as by the assistance of lawyers and judges, that tyranny has sought to introduce itself into that country." Tracing the history of law in England, Hildreth marks a turning point in the 11th century. With the Norman Conquest, "Law now became a science," Hildreth tells us, which "required so much study that . . . it was a mystery almost solely confined to the clergy, and chiefly to the monks" (16). Hildreth's combination of elite intellectual obfuscation and anti-democratic mystification cuts to the heart of the critique of the South and its federal support system with the same imagery as Melville's *Benito Cereno*; European monks were almost shorthand for the despotic Old World that the American Revolution had been fought against.

⁴⁰ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself. New Revised Edition* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske, 1892). Text recovered from *Documenting the American South*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/dougl92/dougl92.html> February 28, 2008. p.340. In this famous account of the first revelation of his ideas, Brown told Douglass that "the far-reaching Alleghanies" (as Douglass calls them)

are the basis of my plan . . . they are full of natural forts, where one man for defense will be equal to a hundred for attack; they are full also of good hiding-places, where large numbers of brave men could be concealed, and baffle and elude pursuit for a long time. I know these mountains well, and could take a body of men into them and keep them there despite of all the efforts of Virginia to dislodge them. The true object to be sought is first of all to destroy the money value of slave property; and that can only be done by rendering such property insecure. My plan, then, is to take at first about twenty-five picked men, and begin on a small scale; supply them with arms and ammunition and post them in squads of fives on a line of twenty-five miles. The most persuasive and judicious of these shall go down to the fields from time to time, as opportunity offers, and induce the slaves to join them, seeking and selecting the most restless and daring. (340-341)

James Redpath also reports that Brown thought that "Twenty men in the Alleghanies could break slavery to pieces in two years." In Redpath's account, Brown explicitly links his efforts to those of Nat Turner, who, "with fifty men, held Virginia for five weeks; the same number, well organized and armed, can shake the system out of the State. . . ." see Redpath, *Public Life*, p. 206.

⁴¹ At the end of the 1840s cases of shipboard insurrections like those on the *Amistad* and *Creole* became rallying points for abolitionists, who argued that the mutinies disproved theories of black docility and stupidity. They also introduced thorny issues of legal jurisdiction and foreign policy into the slavery debate. Slave mutinies inspired Douglass' *the Heroic Slave* and Melville's *Benito Cereno*, and Martin Delany devotes a long section of *Blake* to slavery issues at sea. See Roy E. Finkenbine, "The Symbolism of Slave Mutiny: Black Abolitionist Responses to the *Amistad* and *Creole* Incidents," *Rebellion, Repression, Reinvention: Mutiny in Comparative Perspective*, Jane Hathaway, editor (Westport, CN, 2001), as well as Howard

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Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1997), Iyunolu F Osagie, *The Amistad Revolt: Memory, Slavery, and the Politics of Identity in the United States and Sierra Leone* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003).

⁴² Von Frank, "John Brown, James Redpath, and the Idea of Revolution." Many of Brown's closest friends and allies in Kansas—Redpath, William Phillips, Richard Hinton, Hugh Frobes (who later fell out with Brown and warned the U.S. government about the Harpers Ferry raid) were young European revolutionaries dedicated to just such a vision of hemispheric revolt.

⁴³ Merton L. Dillon is brief but does the best job in print of placing Brown as one of a number of abolitionists not simply imagining, but planning, forays into the South. See *Slavery Attacked: Southern Slaves and Their Allies 1619-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), as well as Stanley Harrold's "On the Borders of Slavery and Race: Charles T. Torrey and the Underground Railroad," *Journal of the Early Republic* Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer, 2000), pp. 273-292.

⁴⁴ This is reported as a rumor in several texts on Brown; Reynolds says the Old Man "reportedly tried" to issue the publication (p.103). DeCaro states it as fact in *Fire*, p. 41. Herbert Aptheker, in "Militant Abolitionism," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 26, No. 4. (Oct., 1941) cites historians W. M. Brewer, Vernon Loggins, and Carter G. Woodson, who all state that the volume was published and that Brown financed it.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Leonard L. Richards, *"Gentlemen of Property and Standing": Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), and David Grimstead, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

⁴⁶ Aptheker tells us that "the sterling character displayed by the Negroes, their success in getting the ship to Bermuda and the resulting international complications, brought the question of pacifism amongst Abolitionists once more to the fore." It had considerable national political impact, as well. Ohio congressman Joshua Giddings, and "One of the country's most eminent fighters against slavery," sponsored a bill arguing that slavery lacked standing as federal law, and that once on international waters, natural law restored their rights. Giddings was censured, resigned, and was reelected and sent back to Washington, "an important milestone in the Abolitionist movement." See Aptheker, "Militant Abolitionism," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 26, No. 4. (Oct., 1941), p. 457.

⁴⁷ This, of course, only goes so far; Brown assumed many of the roles of a male head of household, and safely conducted himself with the confidence of a white heterosexual male. I reject the argument, presented by John Stauffer in *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists And The Transformation Of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), that Brown imagined himself as a sort of black man. There is simply no evidence that any of the four men Stauffer discusses, except for Gerrit Smith, played with such romantic racialism. The argument seems to me little more than a conceit, and represents a major flaw in an otherwise very important book.

⁴⁸ In this sense, the culture of slavery and racism prepared Americans for the wildly increasing militarization and drive for empire in the 20th and 21st centuries. Ironically, one result of the Civil War was the final step toward a standing army that the Revolutionary generation, and several subsequent generations, saw as such a threat to democracy.

⁴⁹ Smith, James McCune. *A Lecture on the Haytien revolutions: with a sketch of the character of Toussaint L'Ouverture : delivered at the Stuyvesant Institute (for the benefit of the Colored orphan asylum)* February 26, 1841, p. 3

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- ⁵⁰ During his lifetime, Brown's family history was accepted as fact, but Villard didn't believe the Brown family claims. However, David Reynolds and R. O. Boyer both found the story "plausible," Reynolds credits Boyer's reliance on "the genealogical studies of Brown's family made by the Rev. Clarence S. Gee and by George F. Williams, who support the Mayflower story." See David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*. (Westminster, MD, USA: Alfred A. Knopf Incorporated, 2005). p 510n, and Boyer, *The Legend of John Brown*, p. 168.
- ⁵¹ Higginson tells how Brown recovered his grandfather's gravestone, an action at once poignant, morbid, and self-aggrandising, a novelist's dream, in an article for the *Atlantic*. Redpath reprints it in *The Public Life*; see pp. 61-62 for the description of the headstone.
- ⁵² DeCaro discusses the letter in *Fire*, pp.51-56; though "we are largely dependent upon" it for any knowledge of Brown's childhood, he wisely points out that "[Brown's] autobiographical sketch is really didactic rather than strategic," as earlier writers had claimed, a ploy to gain his backers' trust and therefore their money. "Brown was primarily interested," DeCaro argues, "in crafting a story that would affect the life of a young man."
- ⁵³ Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader: The Story of John Brown in His Own Words, in the Words of Those Who Knew Him, and in the Poetry and Prose of the Literary Heritage* (London, New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1959), p. 17
- ⁵⁴ Generalizations about Brown's business failures have often failed to contextualize them as part of a massive economic failure during the Crash, or Panic, of 1837 Oates acknowledges that "after the election of Martin Van Buren, the entire U.S. financial system . . . became extremely unstable," but singles out Brown as an aberration anyway. He points out that "capital was plentiful" and "credit was easy," and seemingly paints Brown as a man of his time, partaking in "that reckless, go-ahead spirit which typified the frontier speculator," but then suggests that there is something more to Brown, who began "speculating in land with single-minded zeal." Oates seems to attribute Brown's failure to his fanatical nature rather than the dysfunctional economy: "For a man who believed in signs and omens," he says, "Brown should have expected the worst." The "vortex of business ventures" that Brown "plunged" into "defy clear description," but rather than getting out immediately, Brown satyed in, hoping that "all will be well some way or other." But as Oates says, "all was not well," and Brown "would never fully recover from the wounds sustained in the Panic . . ." See Oates, pp.34-36.
- ⁵⁵ One of the strongest cases made for the link between the Crash and the Texas "conspiracy" is David Lee Child's *The Taking of Naboth's Garden*, which I will discuss later. The single-minded irresponsibility of the Jackson administration in their pursuit of land and power for the slaveocracy, Child argues, is the cause of the financial disasters of the late 1830s.
- ⁵⁶ John Stauffer says that "although historians have tended to downplay the depression that followed" the crash, "its impact shook American culture to its roots." See Stauffer, pp.114-115.
- ⁵⁷ Several biographers took Brown's frequent moves as an indication of his waywardness and instability, or at least his deseration and inability to find a niche or make a living. Decaro argues convincingly that his moves from state to state, town to town, and church to church were connected to his abolition activities. See DeCaro, *Fire*, pp. 71-73, 132, 165, 211.
- ⁵⁸ DeCaro, *Fire*, p. 101.
- ⁵⁹ See Whitman, who reports that according to Brown's friend Thomas Thomas, in the mid-40s and up until 1851, Brown was planning to pose as a slaveholder in the South in order to set some sort of plan in motion; she suggests that Douglass may have conflated his first meeting with Brown with later conversations. Brown had surveyed land in Virginia for Oberlin (they

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acquired it through a grant by Gerrit Smith), hoping to settle on it himself and possibly already considering establishing an outpost in the South. See DeCaro, pp. 105-106, and Boyd B. Stutler, "John Brown and the Oberlin Lands," *West Virginia History* Volume 12, Number 3 (April 1951). available online at http://www.wvculture.org/history/journal_wvh/wvh12-3.html. Through this experience, Brown got a first hand look at the deplorable state of Southern life for poor white farmers; Smith's land was already filled with squatters (though Smith wrote to Charles Finney that there "have been repeated applications for small parcels of it. There are a few families on it, who pay rent enough to cancel the demands for taxes and for the fees of my Agent") when he arrived, and he was apparently shocked at their ignorance and lack of skills.

⁶⁰ The "War with Mexico," though famously defended by Justin H. Smith in the 1910's, now appears as it did to abolitionists of the era: an imperialist invasion launched under false pretenses in order to secure resources—mainly, argued abolitionists like Benjamin Lundy and David Lee Child, land, representation, a secure border, and peace of mind for the Slave Power. See Joel H. Silbey, *Storm over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2007), as well as older studies like John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1973) and David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973). As I will discuss below, David Lee Child's *The Taking of Naboth's Garden* is an extended attack on Jackson and what Child calls the conspiracy to annex Texas, and seems to provide a good deal of vocabulary to Melville for his novels dealing with American politics in the 1850s. On the charge of conspiracy, Silbey says that the "notion of a slaveholders' conspiracy to control the Union . . . had been largely confined to a few anti-slavery activists usually considered extreme in their views about all aspects of public policy," but by the maneuvering around the Texas issue in the mid-1840s, "the evidence was piling up" even among elected officials "that there was a great deal more to the long-rejected claim than they had realized" (117-118).

⁶¹ DeCaro, *Fire*, p. 57.

⁶² As we've seen, American historians accepted this hyperbole as analysis from about 1920 to the 1960s; Brown himself is now the lone remaining "fanatic" of the era.

⁶³ Knowledge of Brown's leadership of the massacre seems to have been fairly widespread in the area at the time. Brown evaded questions about it for the remaining years of his life, and Redpath denies Brown's involvement, while seemingly hinting at his knowledge of it, in *The Public Life* (at least his lies seem pretty bald-faced in hindsight). The topic was still controversial in the 1870's, and proved embarrassing to Frank Sanborn, who maintained Brown's innocence far past the point at which most had accepted the fact that the Old Man had led the murderers.

⁶⁴ Almost no account except Redpath's does the process of Brown's decision-making justice. Regardless of his bravado when interviewed by Henry Wise and Frothingham, Brown was angry and mortified at his failure and poor judgment in not retreating quickly, and only decided to allow himself to be hung when he realized that it was a way to salvage the operation with a dramatic flourish. See Redpath, *Public Life*, pp. 291-392.

⁶⁵ Lincoln's speech is ubiquitous; it can be read in its entirety on the walls of the Lincoln Monument in Washington, DC. It can be read in its handwritten manuscript form at <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mal&fileName=mal3/436/4361300/malpage.db&recNum=0>. As well as in any Lincoln collection or biography worth its salt. The

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text here was recovered from Yale Law School's Avalon Project, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/presiden/inaug/lincoln2.htm>, on March 3, 2008.

⁶⁶ Vernon Parrington actually compares Lincoln to the Old Man in *Main Currents of American Thought Volume II: The Romantic Revolution in America, 1800-1860* (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987, p. 159; original New York: Harcourt-Brace 1927), saying that "the Gettysburg speech and the Second Inaugural are marked by the sincerity and self-effacement that ennobled the words of John Brown in the Virginia courtroom—it is the eloquence which rises from the heart when life has been felt in its tragic reality, an eloquence that Webster could not rise to."

⁶⁷ Brown's "final prophecy" is nearly as ubiquitous, though interestingly, it is not mentioned by Redpath or by the account published in 1859, compiled from newspaper accounts (this account, *The Life, Trial and Execution of Captain John Brown*, was reprinted by Da Capo in 1969). Similarities in these two texts make it clear that Redpath had a hand in putting together *The Life*.

⁶⁸ The stereotype of Brown as a wild-eyed fanatic is played for laughs, and rather poor history, by Sarah Vowell in her essay on the song "John Brown's Body" in *The Rose & the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), Sean Wilentz, Greil Marcus, eds., p.83

⁶⁹ See discussion of the term "insurrection" above in note 30; also see a discussion of Brown's legal maneuverings at trial in Steven Lubet, *Nothing But the Truth: Why Trial Lawyers Don't, Can't, and Shouldn't Have to Tell the Whole Truth* (New York: NYU Press, 2001). In Chapter Three, "John Brown: Political Truth and Consequences," Lubet discusses the fact of Brown's awareness that it was not simply he who on trial, but abolitionism itself, and that he conducted himself accordingly.

⁷⁰ For a discussion of Adams, see Chapter Three.

⁷¹ Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York, Harper & Row, 1965), p.38.

⁷² Quoted in Villard, p. 326.

⁷³ Truman Nelson, "You Have Not Studied Them Right," *The Nation* Vol 212 #13, March 29, 1971, p. 406.

⁷⁴ Katherine Mayo was Oswald Garrison Villard's research assistant, and, according to DeCaro, Brown's greatest biographer, to whom Villard's book doesn't do justice. She conducted virtually all the interviews and kept all the notes from them for the book. See DeCaro, p. xi.

⁷⁵ Villard, p. 299.

⁷⁶ Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 1981), p. 68.

⁷⁷ Phillips, "Three Interviews with Old John Brown," *The Atlantic Monthly*, Volume 44, No. 266, December 1879, pp. 738-744. The text can be found at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/1879dec/phillips.htm>.

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CHAPTER ONE: FATHERS OF THE INSURRECTION

John Brown's Provisional Constitution and Declaration of Liberty, Thomas Jefferson, and Lemuel Haynes

I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against
every form of tyranny over the mind of man.

--Thomas Jefferson

In May 1858, Brown organized a convention with a group of black ex-patriots in Chatham, Ontario,¹ in preparation for his Southern raid and the maintenance of a Maroon society of escaped slaves in the Allegheny mountains. The meeting was attended by thirty three black and ten white “friends of freedom;”² Brown needed leaders for his Southern adventure, and he expected to find them among these men. Many of them were former slaves, and one of them, physician Martin Delany, himself a prominent abolitionist author and later a military commander in the Union Army, had been raised in the immediate vicinity of Harpers Ferry.³

To prepare for the raid and ensuing conflict, Brown composed a remarkable series of documents, including a *Provisional Constitution and Ordinances for the People of the United States*, by which he meant to organize his Maroon camps. Written at the home of his friend Frederick Douglass, the Provisional Constitution was intended as a fulfillment of the revolutionary intentions of the Declaration of Independence and a rejection of what the Old Man perceived as the United States' corrupt existing legal structure. As its opening statement, the document explicitly defines slavery as a state of

barbarous, unprovoked, and unjustifiable War of one portion of its citizens upon another portion; the only conditions of which are perpetual imprisonment, and hopeless servitude or absolute extermination; in utter disregard and violation of those eternal and self-evident truths set forth in our Declaration of Independence.⁴

The articles were not meant to express the desire to “overthrow of government,” or “look to . . . dissolution of the Union,” but to “repeal” the legal injustices of slavery, and he is careful to state that “our flag shall be the same that our fathers fought under in the Revolution.”⁵ For Brown, the recent Supreme Court decision in the Dred Scot case was the abolition-era corollary to the revolutionary-era Stamp Act—the final straw in a long series of outrageous legal declarations by an oppressive power that had already deployed military and vigilante violence

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against American citizens to impose its will. The Provisional Constitution codifies the rights guaranteed in the Declaration into legal terms—something the U.S. Constitution does not do—and describes the workings of a society under siege; alongside provisions for three branches of government and the disposition of property are instructions that families be kept together and all members of the community be openly armed.

According to Brown biographer Oswald Garrison Villard (grandson of William Lloyd Garrison), the document provides some of the best ammunition for those claiming that Brown was insane. While he finds a “keynote to Brown’s philosophy” in the Chatham Constitution’s opening statement, Villard describes many of the provisions with genuine shock and horror, appalled that Brown believed that “with a handful of men and a few hundred guns and medieval pikes, he could grapple and shake to its foundations an institution the actual uprooting of which nearly cost the United States Government its existence.” Villard sees the constitution as a “scheme” that “forbids discussion as a practical plan of government for such an uprising as was to be carried out by a handful of whites and droves of illiterate and ignorant blacks.” Brown “contemplates not merely the government of forces in armed insurrection against sovereign States and opposed to the armies of the United States, [but] actually goes so far as to establish courts, a regular judiciary and a Congress;” he also includes the desire to establish churches and schools for the mountain-dwelling insurgents as soon as possible. Though “many of its articles [are] admirable in spirit,” Villard finds it better “not to attempt to analyze the Chatham Constitution, but to admire its wording and its composition,” and consider it “a temporary aberration of a mind that . . . defies successful classification as unhinged or altogether unbalanced” and was still “capable of expressing itself with rare clearness and force”⁶

While it might be easy to dismiss the Provisional Constitution as a rhetorical flourish, it’s worth noting that the Declaration of Independence would have been no more than that had the British maintained control of the colonies; as Wendell Phillips pointed out shortly after Brown was arrested, “George Washington, had he been caught before 1783, would have died on the gibbet.”⁷ What’s more important to see is that the document is a radical attempt to repair what more abolitionists than Brown saw as the major flaw in the United States’ legal system: the discrepancy between the conceptual promises of the Declaration—not a legally binding document, but the one in which the principles of democracy are actually articulated—and the

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ambiguity of the Constitution, a legal framework that both evades discussion of, and tacitly condones, slavery, and which was hotly contested by abolitionists.⁸

Brown carefully and deliberately weaves the two together, using the Constitution as a model for its formal structure but appealing to the Declaration's establishment of inalienable rights as a binding legal precedent, codifying the rights guaranteed in the Declaration into legal terms that prevent the implementation of slave codes. This was not a novel idea; Lysander Spooner argued for the legal standing of the Declaration on the grounds that it established the legal right of the colonies to reject British rule in the first place. All its other claims, therefore, must be legally binding as well, including the "law of nature, that all men are born free," a principle that predates Roman emperor Justinian, who had claimed that "Captivity and servitude are both contrary to the law of nature." The concept "is as old as man—and the race of man generally, has acknowledged it."⁹ In 1858, the same year Brown prepared his constitution for the Chatham convention, Spooner used these principles to argue that "Slaves have a natural right to their liberty," that if "governments, under which they live, refuse to give them liberty or compensation, they have the right to take it by stratagem or force," and that "it is the duty of all, who can, to assist them in such an enterprise."¹⁰

These arguments were the core of Brown's Provisional Constitution. Slavery had been defined as a "state of war" many times before this, most significantly by Jefferson himself;¹¹ Brown's innovation is to revise the Jeffersonian revolutionary legacy he draws on in order to challenge racist nationalism; the Provisional Constitution allies black slaves and white citizens, "the oppressed people" of the United States "together with all other people degraded by the laws thereof," against the despotic Slave Power, in direct opposition to the explicit white supremacy that the Dred Scot decision codifies as law. Brown specifically references the opinion of the Taney court as the final straw in what he sees as the long process of legalizing the slaveholders' unending assault against the natural rights not only of the slaves, but of the entire American population:

Therefore, we CITIZENS of the UNITED STATES, and the OPPRESSED PEOPLE, who, by a RECENT DECISION of the SUPREME COURT ARE DECLARED to have NO RIGHTS WHICH the WHITE MAN is BOUND to RESPECT; TOGETHER WITH ALL OTHER PEOPLE DEGRADED by the LAWS THEREOF, DO, for the TIME BEING ORDAIN and ESTABLISH for

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OURSELVES the *FOLLOWING PROVISIONAL CONSTITUTION* and *ORDINANCES*, the *BETTER* to *PROTECT* our *PERSONS, PROPERTY, LIVES,* and *LIBERTIES*: and to *GOVERN* our *ACTIONS*.¹²

Brown articulates a U.S. Constitution as it *should* have been—linked spiritually and literally to the Declaration, and reflecting its principals, not the contradictory expression of tolerance for slavery and inequality that the U.S. Constitution became. For W.E.B. DuBois, who published his biography of Brown almost simultaneously to Villard’s, Brown’s document is a major step forward for American political life. DuBois notes that Brown included an article insisting that “the marriage relation shall be at all times respected, and families kept together as far as possible; and broken families encouraged to reunite.”¹³ This is not an expression of narrow-minded Calvinist prudishness, but the promise of an alternative society, one that reestablishes basic human rights and rejects the most essential attributes of the slave codes, like the refusal to legally acknowledge marriage among slaves and therefore more easily sell individuals separately. Unlike Villard, DuBois doesn’t blink at the audacity of Brown’s constitution; clearly the one enforced by the United States was inadequate to the task of protecting human rights. For DuBois, Brown’s document is a major step forward for American political life: “there were millions of human beings to whom the last word of the Chatham Declaration of Independence was more than mere rhetoric: ‘Nature is mourning [sic] for its murdered and afflicted children. Hung be the Heavens in scarlet!’”¹⁴

In his explicit attempt to revise some of the most glaring omissions in the United States Constitution, Brown’s document restores a long abandoned and forgotten rhetorical link between the fates of black and white Americans, one that dates back to the founding of the nation itself. Thomas Jefferson’s autobiography included an account of the writing and signing of the Declaration that contained his original draft, with language cut by the committee responsible for the document.¹⁵ Though Jefferson’s authorship had only occasionally been remarked upon during the Federalist era and early 19th century, his notoriety as the writer of the document became more widespread following his death, and to a great degree this notoriety was ironic; Jefferson was attacked again and again in abolitionist literature for the apparent hypocrisy evident in his failure to end slavery.¹⁶ His original draft of the Declaration further complicates the trajectory of his almost always abortive attempts to limit or end slavery. Jefferson’s lost

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paragraph is the absent presence in American history from which almost a century of conflict was generated, the lost opportunity that made the efforts of the abolitionists necessary. Brown's Provisional Constitution becomes a sort of act of deconstruction, revealing the invisible lever by which Brown not so much declares war, but reveals and joins a war already being waged, crossing the fictional line of race and disregarding the fiction of legal slavery to do so.

The major passage cut from Jefferson's original is a bold rhetorical move¹⁷ that would not only conceivably end slavery, but absolve the colonists of blame¹⁸ for the institution: Jefferson lays the entire mess at George III's feet. He also anticipates a number of abolitionist tropes, from the Orientalizing¹⁹ of the Slave Power to the threat of inevitable revolt. Jefferson invokes natural law to assert that the King "has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's [sic] most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him," sending them into a life of bondage or death in the Middle Passage, making it explicit that Africans inherently possess the same inalienable rights he claims for the colonists. The institution amounted to nothing more than "piratical warfare" of a nation upon an entire race, precisely the argument Brown would make over and over—the act of enslaving humans was by definition an act of war. Jefferson further insults George by pointing out that kidnapping humans into slavery which incurred "the opprobium [sic] of INFIDEL powers," was accepted by "the CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain." This sounds like nothing as much as David Walker's *Appeal*, in which European and American Christians are attacked again and again as the most barbaric society in history.

Jefferson also ties the existence of slavery to the act of violent revolution itself, claiming that George has "suppress[ed] every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce." Every legal and political avenue has been exhausted, and "NO LAW CAN STOP" the institution of slavery. This claim not only predicts that only a military, revolutionary solution will end slavery; it also justifies the use of extralegal means to overthrow the slave economy, and paves the way for Brown's plan if no other solution were forthcoming.

Jefferson can certainly not be mistaken for a radical abolitionist on the level of Brown or even Garrison. Although he seeks to end slavery, he clearly conceives of the enslaved population as a foreign Other. Accusing the King of "exciting" the slaves "to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he also

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obtruded them,” he envisions two separate “peoples,” arguing that George seeks to remedy “former crimes committed against the LIBERTIES of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the LIVES of another.” Here Jefferson introduces not only an end to slavery, but the unending threat of further rebellion and constant unrest; he differentiates here between the legitimate violence of his revolution and the “crimes” and “murder” of slave revolt. It would be radical, anti-racist abolitionists’ greatest challenge to overcome the perception that the black population was a danger not only to individual safety but societal stability, and this effort was at the core of Brown’s project of re-imagining American society.

However, the accusation that the British sought to destabilize the slave population was accurate, unlike the one blaming George III for the existence of the slave economy in the first place. The British government recognized that slavery was what James Madison called the colonists’ Achilles’ heel; the possibility of slave unrest was “the only part in which this Colony is vulnerable;” and that the Revolutionaries would “fall like Achilles by the hand of one that knows that secret.”²⁰ In 1775, Lord Dunmore had issued a proclamation promising freedom to slaves who came to the loyalist side, and ironically, Sidney Kaplan argues that this threat was “perhaps one of the crucial pressures swinging the Congress to outright revolution.” The fear was widespread; Georgians claimed that if a small British force were willing to arm and supply any slaves who came to them, “twenty thousand negroes would join it from the two provinces in a fortnight.” Kaplan explains that Thomas Paine’s 1775 *African Slavery In America* presented a solution to the problem clearly; asking the “great question” of “What should be done with those who are enslaved,” Paine suggests that if granted rights and freedom, “they may become interested in the public welfare . . . instead of being dangerous as now they are, should any enemy promise them a better condition.” But Payne’s advice went unheeded, and the fear of “insurrection” remained, a fear of what would come to be known in the 20th century as a “fifth column,” the presence of “domestic enemies,” always ready to exploit division and weakness in the façade of a monolithic culture. It was crucial to the abolitionist project that this perception was reversed—that it was not the slaves, but the slaveholders, who were seen as the enemy within.

John Brown probably made the most diligent efforts toward accomplishing this reversal, but as the time for the Harpers Ferry raid approached, Brown was still not content that he had been

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able to make the connection between the end of slavery and the survival of democracy explicit enough, or that the purpose of the plan had been made clear, with the Provisional Constitution. In 1859 Brown composed a *Declaration of Liberty by the Representatives of the Slave Population of the United States of America*,²¹ weaving Jefferson's original text into his own, and returning abolition to its prominence as a central theme of the unfinished American Revolution. Brown's intent is clear in the first paragraph; rather than simply rearranging existing political arrangements, like Jefferson's comparatively mild opening, Brown seeks to assert the demands of natural law and human rights immediately. Abolitionists frequently made the argument that the slaves had far more reason to rebel than the pampered and privileged "founding fathers,"²² and Brown's forceful opening follows this logic. Jefferson claimed simply that the time had come in 1776 "for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another." Brown is bolder, justifying war and claiming equality and full citizenship for the slave population:

"When in the course of Human events, it becomes necessary" for an oppressed People to Rise, and assert their Natural Rights, as Human Beings, as Native and Mutual Citizens of a free Republic, and break that odious yoke of oppression, which is so unjustly laid on them by their fellow countrymen, "and to assume among the powers of Earth the same equal privileges to which the Laws of Nature, and nature's God, entitle them; A moderate respect for the opinions of Man kind requires that they should declare the causes which incite them to this Just & worthy action."²³

It's perhaps this document, more than any of the many that Brown produced, that most clearly ties together his commitment to the United States as an idea and his insistence that the fates of black and white Americans are intertwined. Slavery is "ruinous to a Nation," and "Any Tribe, Rulers, or People, who Rob and cruelly oppress their faithful Laboring Citizens, have within themselves the Germ, of their own certain and fearful overthrow." Brown argues that "It is one of Nature's Immutable Laws; that 'According to the measure that ye mete; so shall it be measured to you again.'" Throughout the document, Brown speaks for the "circumscribed citizens," the slaves, of the country, and presents himself and his allies as their "Representatives." What could be interpreted as an arrogant appropriation of an oppressed people's voice is for Brown an assumption of responsibility and a drawing of lines; for him,

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“we” represents not only the slaves but all those white citizens—many, in his view—who, by virtue of “our common nature, our Brotherhood, & common Parentage,” will fight at their side.

As further evidence of his attempt to tie black and white freedom together, the voice that Brown uses as a counterpoint to Jefferson’s is David Walker’s; U.S. history, Brown claims, is a history of “barbarity not surpassed by the most savage Tribes.” This is a familiar trope to a reader of the *Appeal*, where Walker claims that American exceptionalism, the real uniqueness of the nation, is its “avaricious and blood-thirsty” savagery, and asks those scholars most “acquainted with the histories of the Antideluvians and of Sodom and Gomorrah, to show me a parallel of barbarity.” For Walker, “the sufferings of Israel . . . under *heathen Pharoah*,” are nothing compared to those of blacks “under the *enlightened Christians of America*,” who have surpassed “the Sodomites—the Cathagenians—the Persians—the Macedonians—the Greeks—the Romans—the Mahometans—the Jews—or devils” in depraved brutality.”²⁴ Brown’s list of grievances abandons Jefferson’s measured tone for Walker’s harshness, accusing elected officials of sending “Swarms of Blood Suckers, and Moths to harass the People, and eat out their Substance.” They are “totally unworthy the name of Half Civilized Men,” and the president himself is a “Leech.”²⁵

Throughout, however, Brown returns to Jefferson’s original phrasing. His wording in at least one passage suggests knowledge of the anti-slavery paragraph that the committee had excised: he refers to the “base Men” who are “engaged in a most Inhuman traffic” of slaves, and are protected by the government, as “Pirates.” He also echoes its tone in his accusations of conspiratorial governmental maneuvering, charging the “servants of the People” with “call[ing] together legislative, or treasonable Bodies, at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of our public records.” As his closing statement, though, he leaves the Declaration behind and quotes Jefferson in a less guarded moment: “I tremble for my Country, when I reflect; that God is Just; And that his Justice; will not sleep forever.” Jefferson himself had imagined “that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation is among possible events,” that successful slave rebellion “may become probable by supernatural interference!” God, Jefferson thought, “has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.”²⁶

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By the late 1850s, many abolitionists felt that Jefferson's "Almighty" was ready to take sides, and take up arms, against the Slave Power. Ultimately the most important parallel between the Provisional Constitution and the Declaration is that neither document is legitimate without military success; both carry the weight of their appeal to natural law and justice in the willingness of their signers to back up their claims with blood. In this, Brown's revolutionary documents recall a precursor to the Declaration, also composed partly by Jefferson, the *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*. In even less measured tones, this statement equates slavery with war and asserts the right to respond with violence:

If it was possible for men, who exercise their reason to believe, that the divine Author of our existence intended a part of the human race to hold an absolute property in, and an unbounded power over others . . . the inhabitants of these colonies might at least require from the parliament of Great-Britain some evidence, that this dreadful authority over them, has been granted to that body. . . . The legislature of Great-Britain, however, [has] attempted to effect their cruel and impolitic purpose of enslaving these colonies by violence, and have thereby rendered it necessary for us to close with their last appeal from reason to arms.²⁷

The irony of such forceful assertions wasn't lost on abolitionists, and evocation of the colonists' struggle was constant in discussions of black freedom; as Eric Sundquist claims, "the slave rebel" was "a son of the Revolution," part of the "flawed family of [American] liberty;" he notes that though Northern leaders during the Civil War frequently evoked "the fiery vision of the revolutionary fathers," Lincoln's hope to preserve their Union without ridding it of that which had destroyed it, slavery, "betrays a problem that the national (northern) consensus could not in retrospect conceal." It wasn't Lincoln, Sundquist argues, "who may best have embodied the clarified will of the founders," but black abolitionists like Fredrick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet.²⁸

And, perhaps, their greatest white ally, John Brown. Though 19th century abolitionism was a largely religiously-based movement, Brown responded not to the moral suasion of abolitionists of a generation growing up during the Second Great Awakening, but to the revolutionary traditions honored by his family (his grandfather and namesake fought and died in the Revolutionary War) and the teachings of the New Divinity preachers who educated his father Owen. Brown decided to act not out of pity, but outrage and solidarity, opening the only door left in 1859, or perhaps in 1829, or 1789. As Sundquist argues, the "spread of black rebellion in the

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New World” was not “the erosion of the ideology of American Revolution” into mere insurrectionary anarchy and barbarism, “but rather its transfer across the color line.”²⁹ John Brown received this “transfer;” his rebellion was its transfer *back*, the taint of racist nationalism removed. A number of antebellum writers tried to articulate this same “transfer,” arguing that it was not the slaves, but the slave economy and the planters, who threatened democratic civilization with anarchy and barbarism.

Brown’s appeals to what would ultimately be called Higher Law also echoed Jefferson, who used natural and sacred law to justify his position, appealing “not . . . to the feeble and sophistical investigations of reason,” but the “evidence of natural right” that “is impressed on the sense of every man,” claiming “We do not claim these under the charters of kings or legislators, but under the King of kings.”³⁰ And though he once “lamented that . . . the endeavors to obtain this should have been attended with the effusion of so much blood,”³¹ he famously asked in 1787:

. . . what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms. . . . What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants. It is its natural manure.³²

Evidence of John Brown’s fanaticism and mental instability frequently rests on his declaration “that it is infinitely better that this generation should be swept away from the face of the earth, than that slavery shall continue to exist,”³³ but Brown was, again, echoing Jefferson, who, in mourning the fate of innocent victims of the “Jacobins,” claimed that he “would have seen half the earth desolated” than sacrifice the liberty that “their posterity will be enjoying,” and “for which they would never have hesitated to offer up their lives.” He thought that “Were there but an Adam & an Eve left in every country, & left free, it would be better than as it now is.”³⁴ Jefferson saw natural law, the innate sense of law and justice in humanity and the world, as the final ruin of the United States. The logic of revolution, so clear to him, made the ultimate fate of the U.S. inevitable—the judgments of the Lord would eventually descend. The contradiction between obvious natural law and a racist caste system had to violate the “conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God,” the “only firm basis” for “the

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liberties of a nation[.]” This violation would only incur “his wrath”; “Indeed,” Jefferson writes, in the words that Brown included in his *Declaration of Liberty*,

I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.³⁵

So the violent end of slavery and God’s wrath were inextricably linked in the minds of Americans, even one with such unorthodox religious beliefs as Jefferson, and it is this, as much as anything, that allows the image of John Brown as a religious fanatic to linger in the American memory. Annette Gordon-Reed points out that Jefferson, despite “the dissection of [his] career and personality,” has to be recognized as “extremely effective” in his public life. “No one could have been in the places and positions that he held,” she says, “without having an instinct for just the right move at just the right time What does it take to be able to do this?”³⁶ Jefferson’s critics would charge that it takes a willingness to place career and personal comfort over principle; it’s interesting, in this light, to compare Jefferson to Brown, a man who seems to have operated on precisely the opposite principle, and who measured success in different terms.

By the time Brown wrote his constitution at Frederick Douglass’s house in 1858, a number of abolitionists had attempted to deconstruct the legal fiction of slavery. Lysander Spooner, who argued for *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery* in 1845, used Jeffersonian terms to defend the right to interfere with and resist laws that made Northerners complicit in the slave system: “A government so powerful and so tyrannical as to restrain men from the performance of these primary duties of humanity and justice, ought not to be suffered to exist.”³⁷ *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery* dismantled legal arguments for the protection of slavery, making a simple and definitive distinction between slaves—humans—and the livestock to which they were frequently compared³⁸. In so doing, Spooner asserts that no child born into slavery can be legally held. The “principle of natural law” that “makes a calf belong to the owner of the cow, does not make the child of a slave belong to the owner of the slave;” cattle are “*naturally* subjects of property,” and the reasons why “the natural increase” of a herd “should belong to the owner of the original stock” are “obvious.” People, self-evidently, are

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not naturally subjects of property. Since the “law of nature gives no aid to anything inconsistent with itself,” it “gives no aid to the transmission of property in man.” Natural law “will not transmit any right of property acquired in violation of her own authority” and so “cannot perpetuate or transmit such rights—if rights they can be called.”³⁹ For Spooner, the entire slave system is a house of cards, not simply morally reprehensible but constitutionally indefensible. Regardless of the spurious claims of slavery advocates, there are simply no meaningful categories by which humans can become chattel.

The revolutionary implications of this claim are as clear as they are in the Declaration of Independence. Though “Natural law may be overborne by arbitrary institutions . . . she will never aid or perpetuate them,” Spooner argues; “Instead of this, she asserts her own authority on the first opportunity.”⁴⁰ The pretense that slavery can be defended legally in a nation whose independence is based on an appeal to natural law is patently false; Spooner’s position is that the U.S. Constitution does not and cannot legally support slavery, since it

recognizes the principle that all men are born free; for it recognizes the principle that natural birth in the country gives citizenship—which of course . . . implies freedom. And no exception is made to the rule. Of course all born in the country since the adoption of the constitution of the United States, have been born free, whether there were, or were not any legal slaves in the country before that time.⁴¹

Spoooner bases his claim on the status of the Declaration as a legal document, the one from which all other legal documents must spring, since it establishes the legal right of the colonies to reject British rule. All its other claims, therefore, must be legally binding as well, including “This law of nature, that all men are born free,” a principle that predates Roman emporer Justinian, who

says, "Captivity and servitude are both contrary to the law of nature; for by that law all men are born free." But the principle was not new with Justinian; it exists in the nature of man, and is as old as man—and the race of man generally, has acknowledged it. The exceptions have been special; the rule general.⁴²

In 1858, the same year Brown prepared his constitution for the Chatham convention, Spooner used these principles to argue that “Slaves have a natural right to their liberty,” that if “governments, under which they live, refuse to give them liberty or compensation, they have the right to take it by stratagem or force,” and that “it is the duty of all, who can, to assist them in

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such an enterprise”⁴³ Brown’s reliance on the Declaration of Independence as the moral and legal basis for slave rebellion, parallels Spooner’s argument, which, if correct, renders the Constitution irrelevant insofar as it contradicts the precedent of the Declaration.

While Spooner and Brown needed go no further than these documents to justify the Right of Revolution, the idea that the end of slavery would not simply be violent, but that the violence would be sanctioned by heaven, had many precedents leading up to the era of the colonial independence movement. In 1739, Methodist preacher George Whitefield insisted, in a public letter to Southern slaveholders, that “*The blood of them, spilt for these many years, in your respective provinces, will ascend up to heaven against you.*”⁴⁴ Scottish lawyer George Wallace also developed a theory of inalienable freedom based on the “Law of Nature which is obligatory on all Men, at all Times, and in all Places,” and which rendered void any law allowing the sale of a person; the “arbitrary and inhuman Laws” made by slaveholders were simply not as “binding as the eternal Laws of Justice.” While Scotland is admittedly at quite a remove from the North American colonies, Wallace’s argument resonated in a part of the colonies in which the New Divinity Calvinism from which Brown’s family came; it was reprinted in the *United States Chronicle* in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1784, as part of a running series debating the rights of slaveholders.⁴⁵ Wallace claimed that if the slave trade “admits of a rational or a moral Justification, every Crime, even the most atrocious, may be justified”. His rationale relied on a concept of natural rights that allowed for the existence of government only insofar as it promoted “the Good of Mankind.” Rulers “are not Proprietors of those who are subject to their Authority; they have not a Right to make them miserable,” therefore “they have not a Right to dispose of their Liberty, and to sell them for Slaves.”⁴⁶

Wallace flatly rejects the rights of property that American slaveholders commonly used to defend their position; he argues that “Men, and their Liberty, are not *in commerce*; they are not either saleable or purchaseable,” and that therefore, “every one of those unfortunate Men, who are pretended to be Slaves, has a Right to be declared to be Free, for he never lost his Liberty; he could not lose it;” the sale of a human being is “*Ipse Jure Void.*” This right travels across any borders, and when such a person “comes into a Country in which the Judges are not forgetful of their own Humanity, it is their Duty to remember that he is a Man; and to declare him to be

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Free.” The claim, therefore, that free citizens have a duty to obey laws like the Constitution’s fugitive slave provision in “a Doctrine than which nothing can be more barbarous.” Morality and common humanity very clearly counter business interests here, and Wallace scoffs at the idea that resisting slavery can lead to anything but social instability. While some argue that “our Colonies would be ruined if Slavery was abolished,”

would it not from hence follow, that the Bulk of Mankind ought to be abused, that our Pockets may be filled with Money, or our Mouths with Delicacies? The Purses of Highwaymen would be empty in Case Robberies were totally abolished; but have Men a Right to acquire Money by going out to the Highway? Have Men a Right to acquire it by rendering their Fellow-creatures miserable?

Have not these unhappy Men a better Right to their Liberty, and to their Happiness than our American Merchants have to the Profits which they make by their Kind? Let, therefore, our Colonies be ruined, but let us not render so many Men miserable.

Wallace’s argument ignores racial difference; Africans are “Men as well as we,” with “the same Sensibility.” It’s this argument that passes into American discourse as an inspiration to radical abolitionists like John Brown—an alternative to the mono-racial society conceived by Jefferson, who believed that only separation of the races would prevent the “convulsions, which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other,” based on, Jefferson claimed, the “ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained” as the source of endless racial discord and future violence.⁴⁷ Anti-racist abolitionists like Brown had to navigate between this pessimistic view that blacks would never forget their wrongs, and the sentimental racialism of the mid-19th century, which put forth the idea that blacks were a race of Uncle Toms—in the words of journalist William Phillips, “a peaceful, domestic, inoffensive race . . . incapable of resentment or reprisal.” In 1856, Brown told Phillips, in response to this position, that “You have not studied them right . . . and you have not studied them long enough. Human nature is the same everywhere.”⁴⁸

Though he was clearly influenced by revolutionary era principles, John Brown has traditionally been described as driven by religious belief. Upon examination, though, it is difficult to maintain that his Calvinism played a larger part in his militancy than his Revolutionary political beliefs. While he stated repeatedly that his position was based

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on the Golden Rule and the Declaration of Independence, his straightforward declaration of principles masks a complex, idiosyncratic understanding of the versions of Calvinism and republican ideology he grew up with as well as a larger context of Calvinism, republicanism, and anti-racism as understood in a particular place and time. The Brown family's lineage, as they understood it, placed them firmly within the two defining ideologies of democratic New England, the Calvinism of the Puritans and the republicanism of the American Revolution. Their belief in a lineage going back both to the *Mayflower* and the Revolutionary War defines the fierce, deeply-rooted anti-slavery of at least three generations of Browns. Their origins in Connecticut put them in a time and place where both revolutionary republicanism and experimental Calvinism intertwined in a way crucial to the development of the Browns' abolitionism. The element seemingly unique to Brown, his unflinching rejection of white supremacy, may very well come from this peculiar set of circumstances.

Brown's intense commitment to fight slavery and racism should be viewed in relation to New Divinity theology that emerged in his native Connecticut in the last half of the eighteenth century; his thinking and activities may represent the remnants of this tradition of anti-racist anti-slavery, in which democratic principle and Calvinist social consciousness merged. The New Divinity, or New Light, clerics, a generation of Connecticut, Rhode Island, and western Massachusetts preachers who matured under the direct influence of Jonathan Edwards, embraced revolutionary doctrines and used these ideas to preach against slavery in the second half of the 18th century, significantly building on Edwards' teachings to devise a sort of liberation theology, an anti-slavery position as radical as anything on the continent, that formed a cornerstone of Brown's anti-slavery activism.⁴⁹

The influence of the New Divinity movement on abolitionism in general is great; almost all the basic rhetorical devices I identify as common to the abolitionist literature of the 1830's, 40's, and 50's are already present in the anti-slavery writing of the "New Light" preachers of Connecticut, Rhode Island, and western Massachusetts. New Lights compared King George to the doomed tyrants of the Old Testament like Nebuchadnezzar and Ahab, just as David Lee Child and Herman Melville would later do with American presidents. Edwards' son, Jonathan Edwards Jr., "argued [that] Christians ought to disregard unjust laws in favor of the divine, moral law" and that Christ's "perfect laws" are "higher than [those] of human princes,"⁵⁰ restating the

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position of legal theorists like Wallace and anticipating the Higher Law arguments that culminated in William Seward's 1850 speech during the entry into the Union of California and Texas. New Divinity preachers noted that slavery reduced humanity to the status of livestock, and they saw both the triumph of freedom, and eventual retribution for American injustice, as inevitable.

The New Lights' anti-slavery positions shifted and evolved alongside the independence movement. Kenneth P. Minkema and Harry S. Stout note that "the early New Divinity immediatists were born in the second quarter of the eighteenth century,"⁵¹ like many of the colonial independence leaders: Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Patrick Henry, George Mason, and so on. The generation born during and just after the revolution were "moderates—gradualist advocates of colonization at that movement's height" while a new breed began to emerge in the early 19th century, "

a group of neo-Edwardsean immediatists, if we may call them that, were a distinct generation and of a new century, nearly all born a few years before or after 1800. This new breed of Edwardseans, small in number, focused on the immediate abolition of slavery and on finding a place for blacks in American society.⁵²

This group includes men like Joshua Leavitt, a follower of burned-over district evangelist Charles Finney who became a radical convert to immediatism in the mid-1830's, and Beriah Green, "a faculty member at Western Reserve College and an activist in the Liberty party, used disinterested benevolence to criticize colonization" and urge his audiences to "give free blacks a place in American society."⁵³

It should also include John Brown, who, like other anti-slavery Calvinists of his generation, grew increasingly radical in his convictions between the 1830's and the Civil War. Brown's affinity for, or adherence to, the precepts of New Divinity theology is clear in statements like his enthusiastic letter to his wife in December 1851, in which he mentions the widespread revolution in Europe; he rejoices in the news, he says, "from the full belief that God is carrying out his eternal purpose in them all."⁵⁴ For Brown, as for Hopkins and Edwards, Providence revealed itself in the progress of universal justice, not millennial nationalism.

Brown was only one generation removed from a direct connection to the elder Jonathan Edwards' students; Louis DeCaro points out that Samuel Hopkins was a friend of Reverend

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Jeremiah Hallock, minister of the Congregational Church at West Simsbury. Hallock had taken Brown's father Owen under his wing when Owen was a young man. Owen later wrote that

In 1790, when I lived with the Rev. Jeremiah Hallock, the Rev. Samuel Hopkins, D.D. came from Newport, and I heard him talking with Mr. Hallock about slavery in Rhode Island, and he denounced it as a great sin. I think in the same summer Mr. Hallock had sent to him a sermon or pamphlet-book, written by the Rev. Jonathan Edwards [the younger], then at New Haven. I read it, and it denounced slavery as a great sin. From this time I was anti-slavery, as much as I be now.⁵⁵

The New Divinity emphasis on anti-slavery was an outgrowth of their acceptance of the ideology of Revolution. Mark Valeri explains that the entry of New Divinity clerics into social activism and “vindication of the Revolution culminated their efforts to express the moral implications of Calvinism in terms of ethical theories that had become popular in New England after the Great Awakening.” The younger Edwards, Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, and their followers

eventually asserted that Providence ruled through a moral law that had republican political implications. This republican rendition of providential rule through law—the concept of moral government—explains how these Calvinists came to embrace Independence and to do so in alliance with patriots who rejected many of the doctrines central to Calvinism⁵⁶

The New Divinity movement was a response to liberal criticism of the elder Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening; critics saw Calvinist enthusiasm as dangerous not only to reason but to morality, since through the belief in grace it claimed that a person's acts were of no account. Bellamy and Hopkins set out to demonstrate that experimental Calvinism “could sustain rational discourse and encourage social responsibility without capitulating to liberal doctrines of free will, sin, and regeneration.”⁵⁷ To solidify these claims, Valeri explains, they drew on British Moral Sense philosopher Francis Hutcheson, who rejected both Locke and Hobbes, the period's great figures of English political philosophy, to postulate that morality sprang not from “abstract rationalizations of the intellect,” as Locke would have it, or “the passions of self-interest,” as Hobbes would argue, but rather “on the innate sense that judged benevolence to be the prime virtue and self-interestedness to be the root vice.” As a descendant of New Light Revolutionary anti-slavery, Brown's ultimately violent activism rejects both the Lockean complacency of

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Jefferson's intellectual dithering and the Hobbesean despair of Herman Melville's 1850's fiction (which otherwise provides so many parallels to Brown's worldview).

Hutcheson's conception of a "divinely ordained" society, or "moral government," was one that was organized around "benevolent policies," which "led to the happiness and upheld the rights of the most people," and was therefore prosperous and successful. "Self-interested policies (those that harmed the many for the sake of the few)," in contrast, "led to the downfall of society and the demise of its government."⁵⁸ Hutcheson's ideas take one step past Jefferson's Lockean politics in that they predict the downfall of an unjust social system, rather than hoping, as Jefferson did, to sidestep the catastrophe he saw built into the compromised social contract established by the U.S. Constitution. It is easy, too, to see Brown's dismissal of pro-slavery policies as self-evidently unjust and illegitimate, based on the Calvinism of the New Lights.

Bellamy studied the Moral Sense philosophers at great length, deciding "that Hutcheson, Lord Shaftesbury, and David Hume were the most important—though not the most godly,"⁵⁹ and his willingness to accept their contributions to his thinking anticipates John Brown's catholic attitudes toward his friends' religious ideas, forming close bonds with people of all faiths, including the Transcendentalists, the Jewish Kansas fighter August Bondi, and his own agnostic sons; what mattered to him was their stand on slavery, not their doctrinal positions. As we'll see in a later chapter, Brown articulates this ecumenical approach to activism in his 1848 article "Sambo's Mistakes," and his Harpers Ferry campaign was built around goals rather than doctrine. "Sambo's Mistakes" resembles the approach Bellamy took in "encourag[ing] his people to end social schisms and perform acts of charity and self-sacrifice."⁶⁰

With their intellectual ties to secular political philosophy, New Divinity preachers differed from competing versions of Calvinism in their rejection of millennialism. It's often assumed that Brown himself was a millennialist (this is a central argument of John Stauffer's *The Black Hearts of Men*, an interesting but flawed look at some of Brown's associates; Brown himself remains in the background), but this is arguable at best.⁶¹ Valeri points out that New Divinity preachers did not participate in the covenant theology of many other New England Calvinists, but instead "used the language of the moral law rather than that of the covenant." Covenant theology was the basis for religious nationalism, claiming that "Providence worked in favor of selected nations." This seems the basis of much of the United States' most deeply-ingrained

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ideology, a sort of theological underpinning to Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism. The language of moral law, though, “implied that divine justice was not partial toward any one nation or civil order and held all nations accountable to universal moral standards.” New Divinity thinkers “employ[ed] moral philosophical images rather than referring to a peculiar covenant between God and America,” and so “de-emphasized the presumptions of national election.”⁶²

Valeri’s argument that the New Divinity movement “eschewed civil millennialism” and therefore “predicted no eschatological intervention in behalf of American interests” suggests alternatives to common ways of considering John Brown’s actions, which were not eschatological but progressive—not seeking an endtime, but simply a just society. Brown’s own language reveals this; as we have seen, his “last prophecy” itself employs legal, not religious, language: the “crimes,” not “sins,” of this “guilty land” are what hurtled the United States toward the bloodbath of the Civil War. It also suggests an alternative ideology to the white supremacist doctrine of Manifest Destiny that supported violent expansion and Southern hopes of empire from the late 1840s through the Civil War (and resurgent at the end of the 19th—and 20th—centuries). “The terminology of law” used by the New Divinity preachers “implied that divine justice was not partial toward any one nation or civil order and held all nations accountable to universal moral standards,” which also “de-emphasized the presumptions of national election.”⁶³ It suggests that Brown represents not the madness of unfettered Calvinist millenarianism, but pointed political action intended for the resolution of injustice—not the dawn of a new era of “Bible politics” that Stauffer suggests.⁶⁴ For New Lights, the United States was not a “divinely favored political order;” they rejected the idea that a “peculiar future for America had been revealed.”⁶⁵

Though they rejected the idea that America was a Promised Land, they seemed to accept that social justice had to be fought for. As the Revolution approached, they encouraged people to “prepare for trials”; in Bellamy’s view, “‘martyrdom’ [was] more blessed than ‘a natural death.’”⁶⁶ Levi Hart went further than Bellamy or Edwards in justifying violent resistance to oppression. In a 1775 tract, *Liberty Described and Recommended*, he claimed that since “the peace and happiness of mankind depend on being free from oppression and violence,” then “our duty and that in which true religion consists . . . implieth vigorous opposition . . .” Hart explains

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that “people may appeal to God as their patron in the struggle” when they fight a “*just war*,” one in which they defend their safety or rights.⁶⁷

Seen in the context of a tradition one generation removed from the New Lights, Brown’s willingness for self-sacrifice, and his conviction that the United States existed in a state of war regardless of his actions, makes sense. The Brown family brought an ethic of Revolutionary era Calvinism forward into the 19th century, and with it the commitment to anti-slavery that developed in New Divinity circles as a logical outgrowth of their concerns with social justice during the War of Independence. In 1774 the younger Jonathan Edwards told Connecticut’s General Assembly that “it is no man’s duty to submit to suffering Such encroachments upon our natural rights as men, and such infringements on the laws of justice and equity, we are bound to oppose in all lawful ways in our power.”⁶⁸ Edwards listed the colonists’ grievances in standard terms of unrepresented taxation. Later arguments comparing the condition of slavery with the relatively minor troubles of the revolutionary colonists made it clear that slavery had to be resisted as well, and the unjust laws propping up the system were by definition not binding.

In their 2005 study, “The Edwardsean Tradition and the Antislavery Debate, 1740–1865,” Minkema and Stout cite Bernard Bailyn’s claim that a “contagion of liberty” swept through the colonies, “from revolutionary ideas to institutions such as the state, churches, and antislavery organizations,” though they contend that it should be revised; in the case of Hopkins, “it was the reverse: abolitionism, grounded in disinterested benevolence, carried its own contagion of liberty that spread to politics.” Hopkins “invoke[d] republican ideology . . . as a rationale for abolition [rather] than as a political end in itself.”⁶⁹

In 1773, Jonathan Edwards, Jr. and Ebenezer Baldwin also drew the comparison between the case of the slaves against North American slaveholders and that of the colonists against England, highlighting the relative paltriness of the colonists’ complaints: “If it be lawful and right for us to reduce the Africans to a state of slavery,” they asked, “why is it not as right for Great Britain, France, or Spain, not merely to exact duties of us; but to reduce us to the same state of slavery, to which we have reduced them?”⁷⁰

Hart, “[t]aking almost a verbatim cue from Edwards’s *History of the Work of Redemption*,” tied Christian theology, natural law, and republican ideology together in a social contract that anticipates liberation theology and demanded commitment to emancipation. “The whole plan of

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Redemption,” Hart argued, is “bestowing liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to the bound;” to enslave humans “is a most atrocious violation of one of the first laws of nature, . . . utterly inconsi[s]tant with the fundamental principle and chief bond of union by which society originally was, and all free societies ever ought to be formed.”⁷¹

In Massachusetts, Nathaniel Niles’ thinking “bore the unmistakable imprint of his teacher Joseph Bellamy and of the elder Edwards.” Niles’ 1774 Lord’s Day sermon anticipates Thomas Jefferson’s later statement of despair that slaveholders cannot hope to appeal to God for justice, as well as the apocalyptic rage of David Walker’s 1829 *Appeal*. Niles says that “God gave us liberty and we have enslaved our fellow-men. What can we object against it? What excuse can we make for our conduct? What reason can we urge why our oppression shall not be repaid in kind?” Samuel Hopkins developed similar arguments, making “what is perhaps the first documented antislavery argument citing” the newly issued Declaration of Independence, preaching that “Tis self Evident, as the Honorable Continental Congress observed: *‘that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, as Life, Liberty, the persute [sic] of happiness* [emphasis in original].”⁷²

Setting a precedent for Brown’s anti-slavery Calvinism in their acceptance of the Declaration, the New Lights also prefigure Brown in their dim view of imperial politics and compromise; growing increasingly radical between the French and Indian War and the Revolution, Edwardseans tended to dismiss mild reform and minor adjustments as inadequate to stop the impending crisis.⁷³ The influence of the New Lights was extensive, not only in northwestern New England, but in the burned-over district of upstate New York and in the Midwest; based in great part on Hopkins’ sermons and the New Divinity concept of “disinterested benevolence,” the Second Great Awakening can be seen as part of this “extended culture of Edwardseanism.”⁷⁴

Still unusual in Brown’s thinking, however, is his steadfast anti-racism, which was not uniform among New Lights, many of whom supported colonization.⁷⁵ It’s important, then, to take note of the career of a prominent New Divinity preacher who categorically rejected racism. Lemuel Haynes was born in 1753 in West Hartford, Connecticut, to a black father and white mother. Abandoned as an infant, Haynes was raised by a white

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Congregational deacon; though “legally an indentured servant”, Haynes was “a virtual member of this deeply pious white family.”⁷⁶ He served as a minuteman during the Revolutionary war and preached mainly to white congregations, including a brief stint in Torrington, John Brown’s birthplace.⁷⁷ Though Haynes was thought for years to have commented little on slavery, a text discovered around 1980 reveals a carefully articulated argument against slavery, racism, and colonization. Haynes wrote “Liberty Further Extended” as a young man, not yet finished with his studies, and perhaps without a forum to present such a sermon yet, but which articulates a strong, fully developed anti-slavery argument. Compared by one 20th century historian to Frederick Douglass for his oratory skills,⁷⁸ Haynes was, at his death in 1837, described by *The Colored American* as “the only man of *known* African descent [who] ever succeeded in overpowering the system of American *caste*.”⁷⁹ His “genius,” John Saillant claims,

was to grasp the abolitionist elements within republicanism and the New Divinity and to argue that terminating slavery and welcoming blacks into commonwealth and congregation were essential to the politics and religion of the American Revolution.⁸⁰

Haynes saw “abolitionist and problack republicanism” as true republicanism, not tainted by the hypocrisy of slaveholders. For Haynes, Saillant says, slavery was “identical to the usurpation of liberty and rights” that the colonists suffered, but slaveholders were no better than the “despots and tyrants” who ruled England. Haynes believed that “[b]oth republicanism and the New Divinity offered an ideal of interracial accord, even love,” and his thinking stands as a rebuke to the racial ambivalence of both Jefferson and Hopkins.⁸¹

Even before the discovery of this unpublished sermon, the brief public comments Haynes was known to have made are pointed and forward-looking. A sermon commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Declaration in 1801 prefigures many another Fourth of July speech and anticipates many more anti-slavery tropes from the height of the abolitionist era. Here Haynes asked “What has reduced [slaves] to their present, pitiful, abject state?” It was not “any distinction that the God of nature hath made in their formation,” but the “cruel hands of oppressors” by whom they were “taught to view themselves as a rank of beings” lower than whites, and so “become despised, ignorant, and licentious.” For Haynes, this proves “the effects

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of despotism, and should fill us with the utmost detestation against every attack on the rights of men.”⁸²

It might be said that Haynes makes use of the language of sentiment long before it becomes a fixture of 19th century abolitionism, inviting white men and women to view slaves with pity rather than horror, to see the common humanity they share. “Liberty Further Extended” begins by urging his audience to look into its own collective heart, to see that the tyranny that drives both slavery and the English crackdown on the colonies is not “Lurking in our own Bosom.” Just as Stowe would later tell her readers that the first thing to do to end slavery was to “feel right,” Haynes demands that his followers examine their feelings. Saillant points out that “While his white contemporaries, including men who influenced him, like Hopkins and Thomas Jefferson, gazed with horror at a future black American population, Haynes delved into the horrors of the slaves’ lives.”⁸³

Haynes’ catalog of wrongs brought about by slavery is already complete decades before the 19th century abolition movement gained strength in the 1830s; the separation of families, the moral degradation of slaves and slaveholders, the equation of humans and livestock, the poverty forced upon poor whites who can’t compete with forced labor for work, the perversion of biblical texts to rationalize inhuman practices, are all already available for analysis. Haynes also makes the same connection that later abolitionists make between slavery and empire, quoting at length a pamphlet by Benezet describing the wars provoked among African tribes by European nations competing for better access to the slave markets. These passages prefigure Walker’s descriptions of the demonic hypocrisy of white Christians, bringing “ignominy upon our holy religion”: “Wherever Christianity comes, there comes with it a Sword, a gun, powder, and Ball.”⁸⁴ Haynes, like John Brown, saw Christians as bound to take up arms *against* oppression.

Haynes foreshadows David Walker in equating slaveholders with devils who usurp the role of God; “As *tyrony* [sic] had its Origins from the infernal regions,” he writes, “every son of freedom” must “repel her first motions,” so those who fight oppression from England must by definition fight against slavery. A “Jewel . . . handed Down to man from the cabinet of heaven,” freedom cannot be interfered with; to do so is to claim a “prerogative that Belongs to another.” Haynes, in fact, preempts later Garrisonian arguments for non-resistance and pacifism; since freedom is “an innate principal,” as would be evident to anyone who sought to recognize the will

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of God in the world, “he that would infringe upon a mans Liberty may reasonably Expect to meet with oposition, seeing the Defendant cannot Comply to Non-resistance, unless he Counter-acts the very Laws of nature.”⁸⁵ Human laws, if they do not conform to this “Edict” from “the Court of Heaven,” are “void,” and it should be no surprise that men, black or white, “manifest the most sanguine resolution not to Let their natural rights go without their Lives go with them.”⁸⁶ As a model for a “system of Law whereby to regulate our moral Conduct,” Haynes turns to the same principle that Brown later claimed as his precedent for resisting the slave system: “*As you would that men should do unto you, so you Even so to them.*” As a man who combined republicanism and Calvinism to justify anti-racist political militancy, he seems a clear model for Brown.

Minkema and Stout describe New Divinity anti-slavery activism, fleeting as it was, as “a comet or a shooting star in freedom's galaxy” rather than “a fixed planet in the Quaker or Garrisonian orbits,”⁸⁷ but it was a shooting star that crossed the orbit of John Brown, the “meteor” of the Civil War. Edmund Burke described New England Calvinism as “a refinement of the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion,”⁸⁸ more than the New Lights, John Brown represents this position of extreme resistance, carrying this tradition of activism forward as he carried “the war into Africa.” Anti-slavery, as defined by the New Lights, was a counter-narrative to the story of Manifest Destiny; the anti-slavery narrative stressed the principles of democracy rather than the privilege of the proper recipients of democratic rights. This counter-story implied loyalty to an idea rather than to a government or “race,” and so was inherently destabilizing. The anti-slavery narrative replicated the Revolutionary Era narrative by articulating a fundamental conflict between a government and its unrepresented people.⁸⁹ Brown’s Provisional Constitution and the raid that followed were symbolic acts, playing out the loyalty to principle and population that Brown had learned from the New Divinity preachers. Having grown up with these ideas, Brown devoted his life to bringing about an end to slavery. It was Brown, not Jefferson, who carried Jefferson’s own ideas to their conclusion. If Jonathan Edwards, in Perry Miller’s phrase, was so far ahead of his time that we haven’t caught up yet, so was John Brown, “who, Richard Hinton says, “in a quiet, unbending way, was preparing to

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precipitate a conflict to make of Jefferson's Declaration a practical fact, and of Hamilton and Franklin's Constitution something more than a mere verbal phantasmagoria."⁹⁰

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

¹ See Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men*. (New York: Funk and Wagnall, 1894; re-issued by Digital Scanning, Inc., 2001) pp. 170-191 and 634-637.

² The phrase is Brown's. Quoted in Fred Landon, "Canadian Negroes and the John Brown Raid," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 6, No. 2. (Apr., 1921), p. 174.

³ Delany's novel *Blake*, which I will discuss later, synthesizes the history of slave rebellion and conspiracy, including some elements very reminiscent of Brown's character and ideas, into a story of a coordinated plan for hemispheric rebellion.

⁴ Brown's Provisional Constitution is reprinted in most long treatments of his life, starting with Redpath, *Public Life*, pp.234-236.

⁵ This language caused some contention; George Reynolds, "a leading member of the 'League of Liberty,'" moved to have it stricken, but was overruled. See Hinton, pp. 179-181.

⁶ Villard, pp. 334-336

⁷ *Echoes*, p. 58

⁸ The parameters of the controversy are probably best set as, on the one hand, Garrison's frequent rejection of the Constitution as a pact with Hell, and Lysander Spooner's long treatise on the *Unconstitutionality of Slavery*.

⁹ Spooner, *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery* (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1845), p. 156.

¹⁰ Spooner, "To the Non-Slaveholders of the South: A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery," 1858; recovered from <http://praxeology.net/LS-PAS.htm>, June 10, 2007. Spooner was persuaded to postpone distribution of this pamphlet by Higginson, an agreement that was connected to the need to keep from drawing attention to the Harpers Ferry project. For this and a discussion of Higginson's early attempts to articulate a justification for Brown's ideas, see Jeffery S. Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, the Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 182-188.

¹¹ See below for a discussion of Jefferson's conception of slavery as a state of war.

¹² Redpath, *Public Life*, pp.234-236.

¹³ Du Bois, p. 132.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 135.

¹⁵Text of Jefferson's autobiography recovered from <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/jeffauto.htm>.

¹⁶ William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter*, for instance, is an explicit attack on Jefferson as a Founding Father and the father of some of his own slaves, like the fictional eponymous heroine of the book. The character Augustine St. Clare in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* represents Jefferson in a number of ways, not least his benign ineffectualness in freeing his own slaves, and his intellectual rationalizations. See especially the debate between

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Augustine and his brother Alfred, in which a number of Jefferson's pet themes regarding slavery are covered, starting on page 388 (1985 Penguin edition).

¹⁷ Bold rhetorical moves seem to have been Jefferson's forte, which is part of the point here; it seems clear that he never took the idea of giving up the benefits of the slave system seriously. Annette Gordon-Reed points out that while "Jefferson styled himself a revolutionary, forever fighting against the forces of (what he viewed as) reaction that could come in any guise," the structures of "Slavery and white supremacy were salient features of the legal world in which Jefferson operated, and it is well-known that he lived on the fruits of the former and adhered to the tenets of the latter," (pp. 3-4) and that his training as a lawyer taught him to expect results within the framework of existing law.

When faced with the problems of the day, lawyers looked for solutions that could be obtained within the legal system as they knew it. For the most part, Jefferson's dealings with the laws regarding slavery and black people adhered to this formula The high flying rhetoric of his natural law formulations in the Declaration was simply no match for a mind trained to value, apply, and rely heavily upon the positive laws that served as the practical engine and protector of the society in which Jefferson lived.

See Annette Gordon-Reed, "Logic and Experience: Thomas Jefferson's Life in the Law" *Slavery and the American South*, Winthrop D. Jordan, editor (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2003) p. 5.

¹⁸ Knowledge of the language of Jefferson's original draft emerges in various anti-slavery documents, like Henry Highland Garnet's 1843 Address to the Slaves of the United States; laying out a brief history of the institution, Garnet states simply that "the colonists threw the blame upon England." See Stanley Harrold, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism: Addresses to the Slaves* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), p. 182.

¹⁹ I use this term with some caution and trepidation, but Said's term captures this revolutionary/abolitionist rhetorical strategy fairly well. The United States' self-image as a new world in direct opposition to the backwards, despotic politics of the European powers (including, importantly, the Church), which were themselves throwbacks to the supposedly decadent civilizations of Asia, was endlessly attacked and lampooned in anti-slavery rhetoric. Though a discussion is not included here, the most effective and self-aware examples of this set of tropes are Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*.

²⁰ Sidney Kaplan, "The 'Domestic Insurrections' of the Declaration of Independence," *Journal of Negro History*, v61, n3, July 1976, 251

²¹ The *Declaration of Liberty* is dated "____ 4th, 1859;" it's clear that Brown meant the date to correspond symbolically with the date on which the Declaration of Independence was signed. The *Declaration of Liberty* has received considerably less attention than the Provisional Constitution—almost none, in fact; it is not included in Ruchames' *Reader* or its 1969 revision re-titled *John Brown: The Making of a Revolutionary* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap 1969), or Zoe Trodd and John Stauffer's *Meteor of War: The John Brown Story* (Maplecrest NY: Brandywine Press, 2004). It is not mentioned in recent scholarship like Paul Finkelman, ed., *Terrible Swift Sword: The Legacy of John Brown* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), or in major biographical works on Brown: James Redpath, *The Public Life of Captain John Brown* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860); Franklin B. Sanborn, *The Life and Letters of John Brown* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891, c.1885), Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown: A Biography Fifty Years Later* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1911); Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood; A Biography of John Brown* (New York, Harper &

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Row Torchbooks, 1970); or Louis A. DeCaro, Jr. *“Fire from the Midst of You”: A Religious Life of John Brown* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002); and only in passing by W.E.B. Du Bois, *John Brown* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 135. and Evan Carton, *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (Free Press, 2006), 295. David S. Reynolds devotes a page to it (300-303) in *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), and his brief commentary is nearly the only scholarly attention to the piece that we have so far.

²² See Walker’s *Appeal*, discussed further below, as a typical example of this: the “sufferings under Great Britain” of the Revolutionary generation was not “one hundredth part as cruel and tyrannical as you have rendered ours.” p. 75.

²³ Hinton, pp. 637-643. Brown’s idiosyncratic spelling, punctuation and capitalization, noted by many scholars, is retained here. It’s interesting to note that Brown alters some of Jefferson’s original punctuation, capitalization, and even wording, even inside quotation marks. The fact that Brown eliminated the phrase “separate & equal” is an ironic coincidence given its prominence in the history of American segregation. The phrase, as it was used to rationalize segregated schools, originated with Massachusetts Supreme Court Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw, who, being Herman Melville’s father-in-law, was subjected to thinly-veiled satire in Melville’s *Benito Cereno*; see Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). Whether the phrase comes finally from Jefferson is a question worth pursuing. For the record, the wording of the opening paragraph of the Declaration of Independence is:

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate & equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

It’s interesting, too, that Brown retains the language of Jefferson’s reference to God *exactly*, further evidence suggesting that Brown’s inflexible orthodox Calvinism has been greatly overstated by many biographers and historians.

²⁴ The text referenced is the 1995 Hill and Wang printing; these quotes are scattered throughout: “avaricious and blood-thirsty” p. 16; “show me a parallel of barbarity” 53-54; “the sufferings of Israel,” 11; “the Sodomites,” 74.

²⁵ Hinton, pp. 639-640.

²⁶ Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” from *the Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 215.

²⁷ *A Declaration by the Representatives of the United Colonies of North-America, Now Met in Congress at Philadelphia, Setting Forth the Causes and Necessity of Their Taking Up Arms*, July 6, 1775. Text recovered from The Avalon Project at Yale Law School, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/arms.htm#b2>

²⁸ Sundquist, p. 36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Thomas Jefferson to John Manners, June 12, 1817, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Andrew A. Lipscomb, editor (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903), p. 124.

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- ³¹ Thomas Jefferson to Jean Nicholas Demeunier, Apr. 29, 1795, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Volume 28: 1 January 1794 to 29 February 1796*, John Catanzariti, editor (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 340.
- ³² Thomas Jefferson to William Smith Paris, Nov. 13, 1787, *The Essential Jefferson*, Jean M. Yarbrough, editor (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006), p. 167.
- ³³ See Reynolds, p. 275.
- ³⁴ Thomas Jefferson to William Short, January 3, 1793, *Political Writings*. Joyce Appleby and Terence Ball, editors (Port Chester, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p 134.
- ³⁵ "Notes," p. 215.
- ³⁶ Gordon-Reed, "Logic and Experience," p. 11.
- ³⁷ Truman Nelson, *The Truman Nelson Reader*, William J Schafer, editor (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), p. 175.
- ³⁸ Describing the Federalist outrage at the election of Jefferson based on the voting power that the three-fifths clause gave the South, Gary Wills cites a December 1800 *Columbian Centinel* article which notes bitterly that, for all the choice these slaves had, it would be as though an election had been decided by "New England horses, cows, and oxen" (Wills, "*Negro President*," p. 2).
- ³⁹ Spooner, *Unconstitutionality*, p. 153.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 154.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 156.
- ⁴² *Ibid*, pp. 155-156.
- ⁴³ Spooner, *To the Non-Slaveholders of the South: A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery*, text recovered from <http://praxeology.net/LS-PAS.htm>, March 5, 2008
- ⁴⁴ Quoted in Reynolds, p. 24. Radical (or common-sense) interpretations of slavery were widely disseminated in the Revolutionary period. David Brion Davis describes an anonymous dialogue from an English paper that Quaker anti-slavery pamphleteer Anthony Benezet reprinted in the colonies in 1762; Benezet excised the most provocative passages, which Davis calls "the most radical antislavery doctrine that I have found in any publication that appeared before the French Revolution;" they declare not only the slaves' unqualified right to revolt, and to "lawfully . . . recover their liberty [and] destroy their oppressors," but white obligation to join them: "it is the duty of others, white as well as blacks, to assist those miserable creatures, if they can, in their attempts to deliver themselves out of slavery . . ." Though slaves "have none on earth to appeal to," they are entitled by natural law, and the law of God, to claim their liberty. See Davis, *From Homicide To Slavery: Studies in American Culture* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 235-237
- ⁴⁵ It should be remembered that Northern abolition was a slow and contentious process, one that would have been fresh in the mind of a man the age of Brown's father Owen. It was in 1784 that Rhode Island and Connecticut abolished slavery, but only through gradual emancipation. Part of the vehemence of the New Light attack on slavery should be attributed to the fact that Rhode Island and Connecticut were areas in which the subject was heavily contested; Providence had been an active port for the slave trade, the black population was comparatively large for the area, and slavery was actually present in both states for decades after legal emancipation. See Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 67-68 David Menschel, "Abolition Without Deliverance: The Law of Connecticut Slavery 1784-1848," *The Yale Law Review*, Vol. 111:183, September 24,2001

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⁴⁶ This and the following quotes are from George Wallace (1727-1805), excerpt from “System of the laws of Scotland,” *United States Chronicle*, Thursday, February 19, 1784. text recovered from *Documenting the African American Experience*, University of Virginia Electronic Text Center, <http://etext.virginia.edu/readex/44623.html>, on March 5, 2008.

⁴⁷ Thomas Jefferson, *Laws*, in “Notes on the State of Virginia,” *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, Merrill D. Peterson, editor (New York: Penguin, 1977) p. 186.

⁴⁸ Phillips, “Three Interviews.”

⁴⁹ William Breitenbach offers a succinct genealogy of the “perplexing” New Divinity movement, which he contrasts to the “proto-Unitarian” Liberals at Harvard and the Boston environs—who contributed so much to the intellectual heft of the American Renaissance—and the Old Calvinists, who stuck more closely to the original Puritan doctrines. Breitenbach notes the difficulty in defining the movement; “some scholars see them as desiccated metaphysicians; others, as gushing humanists,” and while some note their emphasis on evangelizing, “others accuse them of . . . secularizing New England.” It’s no wonder, with their doctrine generating this much interpretive disagreement, that John Brown’s personal theology is so flexible, regardless of traditional views of him as a conventional Puritan. Breitenbach continues: “The New Divinity men were a school of preachers and theologians who accepted and extended the departures from Puritan federal theology suggested by Jonathan Edwards. Most of the early New Divinity ministers received their collegiate education at Yale and their theological training in the homes of Edwardsian divines. The educational bloodlines running from Edwards himself through Samuel Hopkins and Joseph Bellamy, and then through Jonathan Edwards, Jr., John Smalley, Levi Hart, Stephen west, Samuel Spring, Charles Backus, Timothy Dwight, Ashel Hooker, Nathaniel Emmons, and on, resemble nothing so much as one of those interminable series of ‘begats’ that dishearten readers of the Old Testament” (242-243). The movement’s genealogy extends into the abolition movement as well; obviously Timothy Dwight Weld, whose “American Slavery As It Is” was so influential, was named for Dwight. See William Breitenbach, “The Consistent Calvinism of the New Divinity Movement,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 41, No. 2. (Apr., 1984), pp. 241-264.

⁵⁰ Mark Valeri, “The New Divinity and the American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 46, No. 4 (Oct., 1989), pp. 757-758.

⁵¹ Kenneth P. Minkema and Harry S. Stout, “The Edwardsean Tradition and the Antislavery Debate, 1740-1865,” *Journal of American History* Vol. 92, No. 1 (Jun., 2005), p. 71.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Von Frank, *Brown, Redpath*, p. 144.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Sanborn, p. 11; also see DeCaro, *Fire*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ Valeri, p. 743.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 748.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 749.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 750.

⁶¹ As we’ve seen, Truman Nelson rejects the idea that Brown was a doctrinaire Calvinist. DeCaro explains that Jonathan Edwards was post-millennial in his thinking, but the evidence he provides for Brown’s position could be read non-committally—his knowledge of millennial discourse doesn’t necessarily amount to a commitment to the apocalypse (see DeCaro, *Fire*, pp.59-60). I contend that Brown’s public rhetoric is more pointedly political, based on

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Revolutionary era ideas, than on millennial Calvinism. A telling insight into Brown's religious thinking comes in an interview Katherine Mayo conducted with Reverend H.D. King, an acquaintance of Brown's in Iowa, who said that

I tried to get at his theology But I never could force him down to dry sober talk on what he thought of the moral features of things in general. He would not express himself on little diversions from the common right for the accomplishment of the greater good. For him there was only one wrong, and that was slavery. He was rather skeptical, I think. Not an infidel, but not bound by creeds. He was somewhat cranky on the subject of the Bible, as he was on that of killing people. He believed in God and Humanity, but his attitude seemed to be: 'We don't know anything about some things. We do not know about the humanity matter. If any great obstacle stand in the way, you may properly break all the Decalogue to get rid of it. (See Villard, 299)

⁶² Valeri, pp. 744-745

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 745.

⁶⁴ Stauffer's reasoning is based mostly on the thinking and language of Gerrit Smith, an important abolitionist but also something of a dilettante who toyed with numerous ideologies and beliefs (he was certainly not alone in this; millions of other Americans did likewise in the faddish 19th century). See Stauffer, pp. 134-181.

⁶⁵ Valeri, p. 759.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 760.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 764.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 762.

⁶⁹ Minkema, Stout, p. 56.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 53.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 54.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 56.

⁷³ Valeri, pp. 755-756.

⁷⁴ Minkema, Stout, p. 69.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, pp.62-63. Minkema and Stout tell us that

Joseph Tracy (1793–1874), secretary of the Massachusetts Colonization Society and inventor of the term "the Great Awakening" to describe the religious revivals of the 1740s, argued in 1833 that the declaration was a dangerous document that in the hands of radicals such as immediatists led to "Jacobinical" abuses. The colonization movement, in contrast, was by reasonable and necessary "degrees" and "preparatory" measures educating blacks for freedom with the goal of building a "civilized, well-governed nation of free colored people"—not in North America, however, but in Liberia. That, for Tracy, was a "benevolent end."

⁷⁶ Ruth Bogin, "Liberty Further Extended": A 1776 Antislavery Manuscript by Lemuel Haynes," *The William and Mary Quarterly* > 3rd Ser., Vol. 40, No. 1 (Jan., 1983), p. 85.

⁷⁷ Racism protest drove Haynes from his post in Torrington, just as controversy over racial membership created a rift in Owen Brown's church. See John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican : The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 85-86

⁷⁸ Vernon Loggins' 1931 *The Negro Author: His Development in America*, quoted in Bogin 89

⁷⁹ Quoted in Bogin, p. 87.

⁸⁰ Saillant, p 5.

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⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Bogin, p. 88.

⁸³ Saillant, p. 20.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Bogin, p. 97.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁸⁷ Minkema, Stout, p. 74.

⁸⁸ Stanley K. Schultz, "The Making of a Reformer: The Reverend Samuel Hopkins as an Eighteenth-Century Abolitionist," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* Vol. 115, No. 5 (Oct., 1971), p. 350.

⁸⁹ As we have seen, the "federal ratio" of the three-fifths clause allows a bizarre inversion of the principle of representative government, partially counting a segment of the population not actually protected by Constitutional law in order to distribute representation away from them to their owners, perhaps the first—but not the last—instance of the codification of a guaranteed upward redistribution of resources in U.S. history.

⁹⁰ Hinton, p 25.

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CHAPTER TWO: ALLIES FOR FREEDOM

Walker, Garrison, and Brown's Antecedents

Their destruction may indeed be procrastinated awhile,
but can it continue long, while they are oppressing the Lord's people?

--David Walker, 1829

By the infamous bargain which they made between themselves,
they virtually dethroned the Most High God, and trampled beneath their feet their own
solemn and heaven-attested Declaration

--William Lloyd Garrison, 1832

The tragedy of the omission of Thomas Jefferson's original passage condemning slavery in the Declaration of Independence was that the situation he described was real, and by not addressing it, the new government was essentially recasting itself in the role King George played in the Declaration—the villain waging cruel war against a people who never offended them. The eventual end of the slave trade simply meant that instead of a “distant people” in “another hemisphere,” the war could be waged against a now-indigenous population. The perception of the slave population as a foreign presence was a difficult one to overcome, and abolitionists worked hard to characterize not the slaves, but the planters, as a foreign, destructive presence, while at the same time often resorting to emphasizing the threat of retributive black-on-white violence as a reason to end slavery quickly and unconditionally.

The interpretation of the United States as a country suffering an internal war was central to a document that John Brown helped create at the beginning of 1851, shortly after the passage of the new Fugitive Slave Act, a piece of legislation meant to calm growing sectional tensions that instead inflamed them. Now the existing laws that impelled Northerners to assist in the capture of escaped slaves became a symbol of the encroachments of the Slave Power; Northern citizens were now implicated directly in the slave system (as though they were not before), and free Northern blacks had more to fear than ever—they could now be seized at whim, without recourse or protection.

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Brown helped form one of the many black self-protection vigilance committees, the League of Gileadites,¹ in Springfield, Massachusetts, and he helped compose their statement of purpose, which included an admonition by Brown that claimed that “Nothing so charms the American people as personal bravery,” and that “*No jury can be found in the Northern States that would convict a man for defending his rights to the last extremity [italics in original].*” Like many abolitionists, Brown compared American blacks to the “Greeks struggling against the oppressive Turks, the Poles against Russia, [and] the Hungarians against Austria and Russia combined,”² insisting that blacks and Northern whites were allied against the same tyrannical foe, evoking the names of other white radicals who had suffered imprisonment and death for supporting black freedom, and berating African-American Northerners for not engaging in more shows of force:

Colored people have more fast friends amongst the whites than they suppose, and would have ten times the number they now have were they but half as much in earnest to secure their dearest rights as they are to ape the follies and extravagances of their white neighbors, and to indulge in idle show, in ease, and in luxury. Just think of the money expended by individuals in your behalf in the past twenty years. Think of the number who have been mobbed and imprisoned on your account. Have any of you seen the Branded Hand? Do you remember the names of Lovejoy and Torrey?³

Inspired by David Walker’s *Appeal*, and taking seriously Walker’s demand that blacks resist white tyranny a step further, Brown offers concrete advice on effective tactics, implicitly sanctioning violence against whites. League members should “*not do your work by halves; but make clean work with your enemies,*” though making certain to “*meddle not with any others.*” Whites attempting violence “will be wholly unprepared with either equipments or matured plans; all with them will be confusion and terror.” Brown again echoes Walker in suggesting that slavery will eventually bring factions of the white population to blows with each other, and in so doing, Brown redraws the lines of alliance between slaves and free citizens. If pro-slavery whites—“Your enemies”—attack Gileadites or their friends, “they will have to encounter your white friends as well as you, for you may safely calculate on a division of the whites,” but he sees the purpose of this not to encourage a bloodbath but to “get to an honorable parley.” These are the terms of war, and it is no longer race against race, but the free men and women of the North vs. the tyranny of the Southern slave economy and its minions. Throughout Brown’s

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“Words of Advice” he encourages League members to think like soldiers under siege, expecting an attack at any moment:

Be firm, determined, and cool; but let it be understood that you are not to be driven to desperation without making it an awful dear job to others as well as to you. Give them to know distinctly that those who live in wooden houses should not throw fire, and that you are just as able to suffer as your white neighbors.⁴

Brown has clearly thought out how to win Northern loyalty to blacks, and suggests ways to forcing white Northerners into a sympathetic position; Gileadites should flee to the homes of “*your most prominent and influential white friends*” if they are pursued, taking their wives along with them. If nothing else, the presence of vulnerable women will shame reluctant white Northerners into giving aid. The presence of a black family in a white home will “*effectually fasten upon them the suspicion of being connected with you, and will compel them to make a common cause with you, whether they would otherwise live up to their profession or not.*” He even suggests that “A lasso might possibly be applied to a slave-catcher for once with good effect,” but reminds the League to “Hold on to your weapons, and never be persuaded to leave them, part with them, or have them far away from you,” and to remain as silent as Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner in death: “*Stand by one another, and by your friends, while a drop of blood remains; and be hanged, if you must, but tell no tales out of school. Make no confession.*”

The Gileadites see themselves, “whether male or female, old or young,” as part of a patriotic tradition as “citizens of the United States of America” who “*will ever be true to the flag of our beloved country, always acting under it,*” and who value only “wisdom and undaunted courage, efficiency, and general good conduct” in their leaders. For the Gileadites, for John Brown, and for the abolitionists, it was not the black population of the United States that was the enemy within, but the slaveholders. The state of war that existed was not racial, but moral, political, and economic, and abolitionists like Brown, engaged in a generation-long “insurrection of thought,” attempted to build a vocabulary of words and images to communicate this to Americans. Though they failed to bring slavery to a peaceful end, they helped spread the idea that white Americans had a stake in what Brown and the Gileadites called the “desired end” of the battle between slaveholders and slaves, “the enjoyment of our inalienable rights.”⁵

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Brown's confidence that the nation would ultimately come to blows over the issue of slavery was hardly the delusion of a fanatic. "At the time of the Missouri compromise" in 1820, historian Daniel Walker Howe points out, future president, Congressman, and "crypto-abolitionist" John Quincy Adams already "foresaw that the slavery issue would eventuate in the 'dissolution, at least temporary, of the Union'"; Adams already imagined war, followed by a reconstruction of the Union "reorganized on the fundamental principle of emancipation." With grim poetry, Adams found the idea "awful in its prospects, sublime and beautiful in its issue. A life devoted to it would be nobly spent or sacrificed."⁶

Adams devoted himself as completely in his way as Brown did to this object, through his early career, his presidency, his seventeen years in Congress after he left the White House, and his legal advocacy. Adams confronted threats of Southern secession and international aggression with provocative, and prophetic, interpretations of Constitutional law that the Radical Abolitionists of the 1850s would use to articulate the consequences of the impending crisis. John Stauffer tells us that

In 1836 Adams had first proposed that Congress, under its war powers, could emancipate slaves in one or more states: "From the instant your slaveholding states become a theatre of war, civil, servile, or foreign," he told Southerners, "from that instant the war powers of Congress extend to interference with the institution of slavery in every way by which it can be interfered with."⁷

The Radical Abolitionist Party, according to Stauffer, "reinterpreted Adams' writings to legally justify their platform of armed aggression." They read his statement "with a twist," claiming at their 1855 Syracuse convention that, since "until slavery is abolished, we are continually exposed to a state of war," slaves constituted a nation within a nation—a nation of enemies—and that "Congress therefore had the power and duty to 'make peace with the slaves by restoring to them their rights.'"⁸

The idea that the slaves constituted a more or less foreign presence also lies at the heart of Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of slavery in *Democracy in America*. Having already observed that "almost all the differences which may be noticed between the characters of the Americans in the Southern and in the Northern states have originated in slavery,"⁹ Tocqueville anticipates a looming race war. He displays a skepticism toward the United States' struggle over emancipation ("Although the Americans abolish the principle of slavery, they do not set their slaves free"),

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observing that it is “not for the good of the Negroes, but for that of the whites, that measures are taken to abolish slavery in the United States,” and that “the prejudice which repels the Negroes seems to increase in proportion as they are emancipated, and inequality is sanctioned by the manners while it is effaced from the laws.” Colonization is the only workable solution to the “inevitable” danger of race war, a danger that “perpetually haunts the imagination of the Americans, like a painful dream.”¹⁰

The inhabitants of the North make it a common topic of conversation, although directly they have nothing to fear from it; but they vainly endeavor to devise some means of obviating the misfortunes which they foresee. In the Southern states the subject is not discussed: the planter does not allude to the future in conversing with strangers; he does not communicate his apprehensions to his friends; he seeks to conceal them from himself. But there is something more alarming in the tacit forebodings of the South than in the clamorous fears of the North.¹¹

But while he is convinced that abolition is impossible, Tocqueville’s analysis suggests that the presence of freedom is itself the danger in an unequal society. Though he would not advocate immediatism, Tocqueville argues that gradualism cannot work “without incurring great dangers” because “if this faint dawn of freedom were to show two millions of men their true position, the oppressors would have reason to tremble.” Establishing a cutoff date at which children born to slaves would be legally free would be “to introduce the principle and the notion of liberty into the heart of slavery,” and for those remaining in chains, the institution would lose, “in their eyes, that kind of moral power which it derived from time and habit; it is reduced to a mere palpable abuse of force.”¹² At that point “the same abuses of power that now maintain slavery would . . . become the source of the most alarming perils to the white population of the South.”¹³ In Tocqueville’s view, the danger doesn’t end there; once race no longer determines social status, the economic plight of the black population would be a source for potential conflict, for “Men are much more forcibly struck by those inequalities . . . within the same class than by those . . . between different classes,” he believes. Without race as a category by which status is determined, grinding poverty and brutal oppression become simply “a load of eternal infamy and hereditary wretchedness,” not to be tolerated.¹⁴

Free from the constraints of “polite” (that is, safe) discourse about slavery imposed in the South, though, Tocqueville feels at ease to indulge a fantasy of terror for the region. Since “it is

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impossible to foresee a time at which the whites and the blacks will be so intermingled as to derive the same benefits from society,” the inevitability of “open strife” seems obvious to him. In such a contest, Southern whites “will enter the lists with an immense superiority of knowledge and the means of warfare; but the blacks will have numerical strength and the energy of despair upon their side, and these are powerful resources to men who have taken up arms.”¹⁵ The entire hemisphere will be engulfed in the conflagration, but, due to differing concentrations of the races in different regions, “in the West Indies islands the white race is destined to be subdued, and upon the continent the blacks.”¹⁶ Interestingly, this is likely only if the Union holds; Tocqueville foresees an interesting course of events leading to disunion:

If the white citizens of North America remain united, it is difficult to believe that the Negroes will escape the destruction which menaces them; they must be subdued by want or by the sword. But the black population accumulated along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico have a chance of success if the American Union should be dissolved when the struggle between the two races begins. The Federal tie once broken, the people of the South could not rely upon any lasting succor from their Northern countrymen. The latter are well aware that the danger can never reach them; and unless they are constrained to march to the assistance of the South by a positive obligation, it may be foreseen that the sympathy of race will be powerless.¹⁷

Tocqueville’s rather grim assessment resonates through later events; Frederick Douglass, among others, also sees the all-or-nothing aspect of emancipation, agreeing with his master Thomas Auld that teaching a slave to read, and therefore giving them access to the “free” world of ideas, “would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master,” as well as making them “discontented and unhappy.”¹⁸ Tocqueville’s vision of armed blacks marching against the South in a broken Union was prophetic in ways that he couldn’t have imagined; seeing, at best, a North turning indifferently away from the carnage of a race war, Tocqueville did not envision a Northern army marching into the South itself, and certainly not uniformed black soldiers sanctioned by the government. In this sense the radical frontier farmer and herdsman John Brown was far more prescient than the conservative French aristocrat; Brown’s plan was to avert this imagined catastrophe by organizing slave resistance into careful, strategic strikes that would empty the South of slaves county by county without

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widespread military confrontation between large armies. Recognizing, like Tocqueville, that “the energy of despair” was a powerful weapon, he sought to help organize and channel it.

Tocqueville was a relative latecomer in predicting the bloodbath in which American slavery would end. The most radical abolitionist language already contained an implicit—sometimes an explicit—threat of violent black rebellion and divine retribution. This language is meant to drive home the logic of emancipation and the insanity of slavery; a republic founded on the rights of man could not expect to withhold these rights from a segment of the population without profound consequences, and the threat increased as time passed. When William Lloyd Garrison delivered a particularly threatening address in 1829, he hadn’t yet become an immediatist, but the urgency of the situation is already clear: emancipation, as a means to avert insurgency and violence, “is a delicate subject, surrounded with many formidable difficulties,” but, he argues, “if delay only adds to its intricacy, wherefore shun an immediate investigation?”¹⁹ Putting off the logical inevitability of ending the slave system will only make the end more difficult, he argued. If the situation was dire in 1829, how much more so, then, in 1859? This problem occupied the nation, and frequently drove the government to the point of crisis or standstill repeatedly throughout Brown’s long adulthood, and his ultimately violent attempt to settle the question has to be measured against the numerous missed or rejected opportunities for a less bloody solution.

If any document of the early stages of the antebellum abolition movement channels “the energy of despair” into an effective weapon, it is David Walker’s 1829 *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of The United States of America*, a text filled with a militancy and vehemence that would only grow over in the movement the next thirty years. Little, if anything, can be asserted definitively about Walker’s life. He was born—probably—a few years before Brown, probably in Wilmington, North Carolina, to a slave father and free mother, so he was free himself; As an adult he probably lived in Charleston for a time before (definitely) leaving the South and settling in Boston, where he was reasonably successful as a clothing merchant, and where he involved himself in anti-slavery activism, especially in black newspapers. Walker faced down an all-white jury in 1828, when he was arrested for, and then acquitted of, selling stolen merchandise. In 1830, Walker’s

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activities came to an abrupt end with his sudden death, which may have been from illness but has led to speculation about his murder.²⁰

The *Appeal* remains by far the most important artifact of Walker's career as a journalist and activist, and one of the most important documents of the abolitionist era; to read it is to view the nation through a prism that brings the violent core of American life—and activists like John Brown, who were willing to use violence themselves—to the center of 19th century American history. It is an attack on United States claims to Christian virtue and Republican enlightenment, which mask an “avaricious and blood-thirsty” barbarism.²¹ Eric Sundquist argues that Nat Turner's “*pre-secular* revolt [emphasis added]” revealed “the fraudulence” of the “revolutionary paradigm,” which sought to replace “ideas of supernatural deliverance” with the democratic common sense of the body politic, but at the same time fused “the secular and the sacred traditions of revolution” to form “a national ideology of the Revolution as a vehicle of Providence.”²² Turner, and Walker, contradicted this providential view; both these radical anti-slavery fighters attacked the assumption that the U.S. enjoyed the favor of Providence. The hypocrisy of slavery proved that what Sundquist calls “the redemptive time of the Revolution,” which freed the colonies from the King, and “the redemptive time of Christ,”²³ which would free all people from oppression, were at odds. And while the genteel rationalism of Virginia planters “allowed Turner to be cast (as a) fanatic”²⁴ for his supposed dependence on visionary millenarianism, Walker makes clear that the progressive secularism of Jeffersonian democracy, tied to economic expediency and the stability of an unjust social *status quo*, is incapable of creating universal justice. Where Gabriel's planned rebellion in 1800, and the Haitian revolt a few years before, were based on Enlightenment principles, to the chagrin of Jefferson and Monroe,²⁵ Walker rejected Jeffersonian revolution as a farce and sought, at least rhetorically, millenarian revolt, in which God will “hurl tyrants and devils into *atoms*”²⁶ and “tear up the very face of the earth.”²⁷ Though white critics²⁸ took it as a call for a slave uprising, Walker's most direct threat is of divine retribution, whatever its source.

Walker's biblical, pan-historical frame of reference turns the American notion of its Providential role in history on its head. For Walker, the U.S. is not the City Upon the Hill, but a nation fallen from grace, peopled by wicked angels escaped from hell to wreak havoc on God's people. Many American settlers, he says, “were, for stealing, murdering, &c. compelled to flee

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from Europe, to save their necks or banishment.” Having “affected their escape” to the Americas (Walker’s vision is hemispheric, including “North and of South America [and] the West India Islands”), “where God blessed them with all the comforts of life,” they became even greedier; “not satisfied” with what they found in the New World, “they wanted slaves, and wanted us for their slaves, who belong to the Holy Ghost, and no other, who we shall have to serve instead of tyrants.”²⁹

Walker articulates a version of American exceptionalism before Tocqueville “invents” it, positing a very different claim to a unique American character. The United States is not new and unequalled in its love of freedom but in its commitment to violence and oppression: “the sufferings of Israel . . . under *heathen Pharoah*,” is nothing compared to that of blacks “under the *enlightened Christians of America*,”³⁰ “the Antideluvians—the Sodomites—the Cathagenians—the Persians—the Macedonians—the Greeks—the Romans—the Mahometans—the Jews—or devils”³¹ can’t compare to the Americans, and the “sufferings under Great Britain” of the Revolutionary generation was not “one hundredth part as cruel and tyrannical as you have rendered ours”³² Walker asks “the most skilful historians . . . who are mostly acquainted with the histories of the Antideluvians and of Sodom and Gomorrah, to show me a parallel of barbarity.”³³

Writing in 1829, with Jefferson only recently dead and the legacy of the revolutionary generation—not yet quite lost to living memory—still open to debate, Walker attacks both. Evoking the Seal of the State of Virginia, a symbol of anti-tyranny, in much the way Melville would in *Benito Cereno* when he describes Americans as standing with “their feet on our throats,”³⁴ Walker calls for the next generation of black intellectuals to refute the racist cant of *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which should be bought by every man and “put . . . in the hand of his son.”³⁵ “Let no one of us suppose,” he insists, “that the refutations which have been written by our white friends are enough.”³⁶ Walker reserves even more spleen for the still active Henry Clay, quoting him at length, and implicitly finding in his words the crux of the issue.

[Clay] wants to know, what he has done, to merit the disapprobation of the American people. In a public speech delivered by him, he asked: "Did I involve my country in an unnecessary war?" to merit the censure of the Americans—"Did I bring obliquy upon the nation . . . ?" How astonishing it is, for a man who knows so much about God and his ways, as Mr. Clay, to ask such frivolous questions?

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Does he believe that a man of his talents and standing in the midst of a people, will get along unnoticed by the penetrating and all seeing eye of God, who is continually taking cognizance of the hearts of men? Is not God against him, for advocating the murderous cause of slavery? If God is against him, what can the Americans, together with the whole world do for him? ³⁷

For Walker, the answers to Clay's questions are *yes*—the state of U.S. society is a state of war. Though they differed in their beliefs in millennial violence, Walker and Brown were alike in recognizing that the United States, by supporting itself with a slave economy, was entrenched in a war that would ultimately have to be decided, and that, as Jefferson himself had seen, a just God could not possibly side with the slaveholders.

Brown admired Walker's text so much that, ignoring his own financial difficulties, he had it reprinted in 1848, when the U.S. was engaged in an aggressive imperial war against Mexico. Part of its strength, for him, may come from its similarity to the position of the New Divinity Calvinists who influenced Brown; their theology built on the demand for social justice, not a providential view of the United States as a chosen nation. Brown may have also admired Walker's commitment to a cause beyond his personal gain, perhaps hearing in Walker's claim that "I am compelled to do the will of my Master"³⁸ the kind of pull toward activism that he felt himself. He would mimic Walker's ironic use of passages from the Declaration of Independence³⁹ in his own "Declaration of Liberty," as would William Wells Brown in *Clotel, or, the President's Daughter*, considered the first African-American novel. He may have also responded to Walker's demand that white Americans choose sides—they could side with the slaveholders, or side with God. Like Stowe would in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Walker calls on white Americans to repent before it's too late: "some of you are good men ; but the will of my God must be done. Those avaricious and ungodly tyrants among you, I am awfully afraid will drag down the vengeance of God upon you."⁴⁰ Walker makes this threat repeatedly, "that the destruction of the Americans is at hand, and will be speedily consummated unless they repent,"⁴¹ and though he is frequently ambiguous about how exactly this destruction will be accomplished, the threat is racial: "some of you (whites)," he claims, "on the continent of America, will yet curse the day that you ever were born My colour will yet root some of you out of the very face of the earth."⁴²

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It's possible to see Brown's efforts to have the *Appeal* reprinted, along with Henry Highland Garnet's 1843 *Address to the Slaves of the United States*, as part of project to help the slaves claim their won freedom, to prepare for insurrection. Knowledge of the *Appeal* implies knowledge of its history as an "Incendiary Pamphlet" sent south with the intention of getting it into the hands of slaves themselves. Walker used an extensive network of black and white sailors to smuggle the pamphlet into the South, and it found its way to Savannah and beyond, igniting panic and outrage throughout the South.

It's also quite likely that Brown found Walker an inspiring role model, who, when urged to flee to Canada after the eruption over the discovery of his book in the South, replied, "I will stand my ground. Somebody must die in this cause. I may be doomed to the stake and the fire, or to the scaffold tree, but it is not in me to falter if I can promote the work of emancipation."⁴³ Walker's radicalism as a corollary to his martyrdom was an easy assumption to make. Walker biographers like Hinks and David Jacobs are cautious in their assessments of his death; no evidence exists that foul play was involved. But Hasan Crockett points out not only that "most historians" may be more prone to conspiracy theory, but that Garnet, who wrote a biographical sketch of Walker in 1848, likely in connection to Brown's project, believed that Walker had been poisoned, and it's not a stretch to assume that Brown thought the same thing.⁴⁴ Brown's admiration of Walker had to be the recognition of a kindred spirit and a fallen comrade; despite any anti-white rhetoric in the *Appeal*, Walker is tied in real ways to the kinds of cosmopolitan cross-racial alliances and networks, and their reliance on Revolutionary human rights beliefs, that anti-slavery conspirators from Gabriel to Brown had participated in. His use of white ship stewards to take the *Appeal* to southern seaports says more about his expectations regarding black and white cooperation than accusations of white diabolism in his text.

Walker's influence extended beyond Brown; as a piece of writing, it resembles the gothic fiction of Brockden Brown and Poe, and the sensationalistic sentimental novels of the same period, and many of its tropes would become common years later in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other anti-slavery literature. Filled with grotesque embellishment and melodrama, Walker's prose sets a precedent for later abolitionist writers like

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Weld and Stowe; “I can hardly move my pen,” he claims at one point,⁴⁵ so painful is it to dwell on the sufferings of black Americans; any human’s heart would “bleed” for them “if he is not a tyrant.”⁴⁶ He deploys these strategies not to evoke sentimental tears of sympathy, but militant outrage, and in so doing he sets a standard and maintains a tradition of a view of slavery as a violation of fundamental human law that would have to be destroyed by revolutionary force if no other solution could be found.

One such trope doesn’t simply overturn the idea of “the redemptive time of the Revolution;” it suggests that freedom would have been better served had the United States never existed. An escaping slave, to completely evade pursuit, must leave the “hell on earth” of the U.S. for the “hospitable shores of Canada,”⁴⁷ an escape back across the line of the Revolution to the British Empire; for the slave, freedom means turning back the clock to a date before 1776. A later corollary to this argument is the trope of the Constitution as a “pact with death;” for Brown, it meant that the founding documents of the U.S. needed to be completely rewritten, and a separate nation, a republic of Maroon slaves, would have to be temporarily established in the mountains until the changes could be implemented by the federal government; Brown sought to bring free ground into the South rather than simply carry slaves to free ground.

Walker’s stand on colonization also helped establish a standard vocabulary for anti-slavery that would become useful in Garrison’s battle against the colonizationists; Walker insists that colonization is simply ethnic cleansing—a purging of blacks. While Southerners like Clay argued that colonization would teach blacks the lessons of liberty, Walker claims that the intent is quite the opposite: it is to prevent them from learning these lessons. If free blacks remain in the South, he says, they will teach slaves “*bad habits*, by teaching them that they are MEN . . . and must be FREE.”⁴⁸ Walker insists on the “salvation of our whole body,”⁴⁹ not just the souls that pro-slavery ideologues claimed to be rescuing through the Christianizing of slaves. Of the pro-slavery use of the Gospels, Walker simply sees the words cut with “blood and oppression” in the hands of the “Europeans.”⁵⁰

All of these positions became common among abolitionists; what was much less common was Walker’s unambiguous call to arms. The “appeal” of his title is to Americans of color to recognize their condition and revolt. Walker begins confrontationally, referring to his “beloved Brethren,” his black audience, slave and free, as “Fellow citizens, ” and describing white

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Americans as “unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty,”⁵¹ their version of Christianity nothing but “distinction, blood, and oppression.”⁵² His position throughout is that reckoning is at hand, and “wo, wo” to whites “if we have to obtain our freedom by fighting;”⁵³ rebel slaves and free blacks will be “a gang of tigers and lions to deal with,” that “one good black man can put to death six white men,” though only if he and his readers can “get courage into the blacks.”⁵⁴ While he castigates his people for proving Jefferson correct about their apathy and docility, he assures them that “the Lord our God . . . will give you a Hannibal” to deliver them from the oppression of the “Christians of America.”⁵⁵

John Brown did not seek to fulfill Walker’s prophecy that “the Lord our God will bring [white Americans] to rise up one against another, and sometimes to open hostilities with sword in hand,” but he certainly finally came to see and accept the accuracy of the prediction, and may have taken Walker at his word that God would not affect “the destruction of the oppressors . . . by the oppressed,”⁵⁶ and would need assistance in their beleaguered state. And he would certainly have agreed that “though others may lay the cause of the fierceness with which [Americans] cut each others’ throats, to some other circumstance, yet they who believe that God is a God of justice, will believe that SLAVERY *is the principal cause.*”⁵⁷

Like Brown three decades later, Walker was labeled a fanatic. Such militancy was already beyond the pale of civilized discourse in the eyes of most whites; Walker was charged with “reckless fanaticism” by one of the nation’s most prominent abolitionists, Benjamin Lundy. In his paper, *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, Lundy, a Quaker, condemned the *Appeal*, claiming that the promotion of “turbulent and violent commotion, will only tend to procrastinate the march of justice.”⁵⁸ But for Lundy’s protégé, William Lloyd Garrison, who soon left Lundy’s paper to start his own, *The Liberator*, “slavery and insurrection, like cause and effect, are inseparable.”⁵⁹ Walker’s *Appeal* played out the logic of a violent culture: “it is not for the American people, as a nation, to denounce it as bloody or monstrous. Mr. Walker but pays them in their own coin.”⁶⁰ Walker’s militance and the obvious threat of retributive violence implicit in slavery helped Garrison develop one of his most effective rhetorical ploys, that moral suasion that would not simply appeal to pity and

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compassion, but to guilt and—especially—fear. 20th century journalist, novelist, and activist Truman Nelson argues that Garrison

felt only one aspect of moral suasion would work, the persuasion of terror. His problem now was how to work on the white South's deadly fear of a slave upheaval, to keep threatening it by predicting it, without ever having to go through with it.⁶¹

Garrison's pacifism did not prevent him from playing this card, and the threat of bloodshed he often evoked, over the course of the many years he agitated against slavery, was always laced with the irony that it would be deserved. Though his stated position regarding the *Appeal* was that "men should never do evil that good may come,"⁶² he gave the pamphlet a great deal of attention. While he continued to claim "dismay" at the idea of servile rebellion, he refused to pass up an opportunity to point out the hypocrisy of the slaveholders: "every resistance they make, against foreign oppression, is a call upon their slaves to destroy them."⁶³ He argued, likewise, that if whites loved liberty, then they were "bound, by every conceivable motive, to assist in breaking [the slaves'] fetters."⁶⁴

Nelson argues that Garrison's pacifism was to some degree tactical to begin with; having already served prison time for his writing, Garrison protected himself from further imprisonment by

retreat[ing] a little from the Declaration of Independence and put[ting] forward the Sermon on the Mount, and so he was whipsawed between these positions for the next thirty-five years, trying desperately to combine them, or reconcile them.⁶⁵

Garrison was never above evoking racial terror; beyond the numerous sensational depictions of violent slave revolt that regularly appeared in *The Liberator*, Garrison was capable of playing on slaveholders' fears more subtly, as when he describes a scene certain to chill the blood of a planter:

. . . a few years since, being in a slave state, I chanced one morning, very early, to look through the curtains of my chamber window, which opened upon a back yard. I saw a mulatto with a newspaper in his hand, surrounded by a score of colored men, who were listening, open mouthed, to a very inflammatory article the yellow man was reading . . . I afterwards learned that the paper was published in New York, and addressed to the blacks. It is but reasonable to suppose that such scenes are of common occurrence. . . .⁶⁶

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The story itself is dubious—whether men engaged in such dangerous illegal activity would expose themselves to view seems doubtful. But the elements of the scene—the “yellow man,” son of the ruling class; slave literacy; inflammatory abolitionist literature in the wrong hands—that “such scenes are of common occurrence” is a clear threat and a taunt.

Garrison used *The Liberator* as a vehicle for a grim and interesting calculus, weighing the threat of rebellion against the cost of freedom and the value of American society as it stood, and considering the legacy of the Revolution against the human rights of slaves. While treading a careful line as a Christian pacifist himself, he often allowed militant outrage to emerge by proxy, giving column space to writers like one named “Consistency,” who scoffed at the “effrontery” of imagining “that our fathers were justified in their rebellion against the mother country, for a petty tea-tax,” while “the slaves (trodden down to the earth, as they are, by the iron heel of tyranny) have no right to regain their liberty by violence.” Consistency wonders “how they will reconcile such a gross paradox.”⁶⁷ Another writer, identified simply as “V” (perhaps both are assumed identities under which Garrison staked out more radical positions), supposes that “it may one day be, that every drop of ink wasted in [slavery’s] support will cost a drop of human blood,” a remarkable claim, bolder than Lincoln’s equation of a drop of blood drawn by sword for every one drawn by the lash, almost thirty-five years later—here it is not simply the violence of actions that will be repaid, but the violence of words. Every legal maneuver to suppress the struggle against slavery would “only put off,” in V’s words, “not prevent the catastrophe.”⁶⁸

It’s again worth putting what are considered Brown’s most outrageous comments in context; Garrison’s columnist “V” also claims that it “would indeed grieve” him “to hear that one of my southern brethren had died at the hands of his slaves,” but “it is still more grievous to think that he holds a score of my black brethren in degrading thralldom.” V chooses “the least” of “two evils”: “it is better that one man should lose his life than that a score should lose their liberty.”⁶⁹ Not as extreme as Brown’s, and Jefferson’s, claims that a generation were better wiped from the earth than that their conceptions of freedom be defeated, but the equation is more or less the same. It not only plays on Patrick Henry’s famous choice between liberty and death, but one in which life is valued *in relation* to freedom, a calculus considered by everyone who argued or fought for or against slavery. Perhaps more boldly, Garrison equates the lives and the personhood of black slaves and white revolutionary heroes—he refuses “to argue the question of

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whether the slaves have the rights of citizens” until “the people repudiate the Declaration of Independence” and “brand Washington, Jefferson, Adams and Hancock as fanatics.” Until then, the Fourth of July holiday remains a “great carnival of republican despotism, and of Christian impiety.”⁷⁰

For Garrison, the glaring hypocrisy and violence of the slave economy and the government institutions that support it make disaster inevitable. Almost a generation before Harpers Ferry and Bleeding Kansas, the seeds are sown, and twenty more years of political evasion would make it inescapable; “slavery and insurrection,” Garrison claimed in 1838, “that like cause and effect, are inseparable.”⁷¹ He added, almost as a taunt, that the fact that “no insurrection has taken place” since Turner’s was “attributable to the fact, that the slaves are acquainted with the real sentiments of those who are pleading their cause.”⁷² By this time, he had been making the same argument for almost a decade. Invited to address the American Colonization Society for a Fourth of July gathering in 1829—for whites, abolition went hand-in-hand with colonization until Garrison—he took the opportunity “not to impeach the character of one man, but of a whole people.”⁷³ His performance is stunning; Garrison proceeds as though he is addressing abolitionists of his own stripe—he almost never even mentions colonization. And like Walker, Garrison’s verbal ploys shape anti-slavery discourse until the Civil War. Twenty years before Thoreau wrote *Resistance to Civil Authority*, and twenty-five before *Slavery in Massachusetts*, Garrison points out the slavery not of the Southern field workers, but of Northern voters:

We boast of our freedom, who go shackled to the polls, year after year, by tens, and hundreds, and thousands! *We* talk of free agency, who are the veriest machines—the merest automata—in the hands of unprincipled jugglers! *We* prate of integrity, and virtue, and independence, who sell our birthright for office, and who, nine times out of ten, do not get Esau’s bargain . . .⁷⁴

And while his assertion that “education and freedom will elevate our colored population to a rank with the white—making them useful, intelligent and peaceable citizens”⁷⁵ seems a fairly conventional argument against the kind of racist theory supported by Jefferson in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Garrison makes a far bolder claim. Unlike Walker, who differentiates between his own people and Americans—blacks and whites—Garrison claims that blacks *are* Americans, “born on our soil, and . . . therefore entitled to all the privileges of American citizens.” The

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children of slaves “possess the same inherent and unalienable rights as ours, and it is a crime of the blackest dye to load them with fetters.”⁷⁶

This is the difference between Walker and Garrison, and ultimately between Walker and Brown (though Brown held Walker in higher esteem than he did Garrison)—that Walker, rightly, saw slaves and free blacks as a sort of colonized and conquered people, excluded from the political system of their oppressors. Garrison imagined an America that didn’t actually exist, one in which a bi-racial population enjoyed the rights articulated in the Declaration. John Brown was one of very few white Americans who lived this vision of an integrated society on a day-to-day basis. The rationale for Brown’s ultimately violent actions against the South is already explicit in Garrison’s arguments. A state of war exists between the slaveholders and slaves that will inevitably erupt into violence, and it is up to Northerners to decide where their loyalties lie, and whether they will make their choice based on racism or on the political principles embodied in their form of government.

So while Walker quotes Richard Allen, Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, saying “America is more our country than it is the whites—we have enriched it with our *blood and tears*,”⁷⁷ Garrison claims America as the birthright of the slaves, extending inalienable rights to them in a specific and measurable way, using the language of the United States’ revolutionary documents against established U.S. policy, and so articulating the inherent logic of American political theory—the logic of John Brown’s later actions—against the irrationality of U.S. law. He confronts the racist nonsense of the slave economy with a very simple question: “Suppose that,” he asks his audience, “by a miracle, the slaves should suddenly become white.” Would Northerners “calmly talk of Constitutional limitations” and, presumably, discuss methods of colonizing a segment of the population in the Old World? No, the abolitionist replies; “your voice would peal in the ears of the taskmasters like deep thunder.”⁷⁸

Garrison is fully in command of the language of moral suasion—sentimental rhetoric⁷⁹—which he will employ for the remainder of his career as an abolitionist, and which will be picked up not only by Harriet Beecher Stowe but by almost every other anti-slavery writer “to obtain the liberation of two millions of wretched, degraded beings, who are pining in hopeless bondage—over whose sufferings scarcely an eye

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weeps, or a heart melts, or a tongue pleads either to God or man.” Like Stowe would later, Garrison mastered a mixture of sentiment (“My heart swells up like a living fountain”⁸⁰) with invective and irony, blending the personal, the religious, and the political—and the anti-racist, creating a strategic vocabulary that would mobilize the Northern white population the way that Walker hoped to mobilize Southern blacks in a rhetorical war against slaveholders. Attacking the narrow self-interest that tolerates slavery in a republic, Garrison presents a vision as global as Walker’s, claiming to “pity that man whose heart is not larger than a whole continent” and to “despise the littleness of that patriotism which blusters only for its own rights;” to “suspect the reality, and deny the productiveness, of that piety which confines its operations to a particular spot—if that spot be less than the whole earth.”⁸¹ In the graphic language of gothic sentimentalism that became common among 19th century American reformers, Garrison links America’s bad politics and poor religion to its cold heart: “The blood of souls is upon her garments, yet she heeds not the stain. The clankings of the prisoner’s chains strike upon her ear, but they cannot penetrate her heart.”⁸² At every level—the personal, the religious, the political—Northerners failed to recognize their real self-interest and ally themselves with the slaves, not slaveholding whites.

Garrison’s tactics create a palpable tension between pacifist entreaty and militant threat, holding out a chance for whites to avoid a fate he presents as immanent and logical—the fate that Walker foresees for them. Despite the violence and immorality of the South, he claims that the “insolence, and pride, and selfishness” of slaveholders “can be easily conquered by meekness, and perseverance, and prayer.”⁸³ His basic arguments combine private entreaty with revolutionary justification and intent. At his 1829 Independence Day address to the Colonization Society he notes the “sublime indignation” with which Americans present the Declaration every year “to challenge the admiration of the world.” Garrison dismisses the “unmeaning declamation in praise of liberty and equality” as “hypocritical cant.” In one breath he claims that American slaves “are preeminently entitled to the prayers, and sympathies, and charities, of the American people” and that “their claims for redress are as strong as those of any Americans could be in a similar condition,”⁸⁴ invoking the right of revolution. Eerily echoing Walker’s contemporaneous pamphlet, and creating a template for Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*, Garrison dismisses white Americans’ own claim to that right “in comparison with the wrongs which our slaves endure;”

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the colonists' grievances are "hardly the plucking of a hair from the head," while the slaves' sufferings are "the crushing of a live body on the wheel—the stings of the wasp contrasted with the tortures of the Inquisition." Like Walker, Garrison sees the United States political economy "such a glaring contradiction . . . between our creed and practice the annals of six thousand years cannot parallel." He concludes that "I am ashamed of my country."⁸⁵

Garrison already draws a distinction between the unfinished business of the Declaration, underlined by the occasion for the speech, and the morally and politically compromised Constitution, by pointing out that the free States "are constitutionally involved in the guilt of slavery, by adhering to a national compact that sanctions it." He insists that it is both the "duty" and the "right of the free States" to "assist in its overthrow," confronting the North morally and threatening the South with violence.⁸⁶ For Garrison this would not be Northern invasion but slave revolt; the North would "*assist* in the overthrow of slavery [emphasis added]."⁸⁷ Garrison is willing to commit the North to full-scale war, arguing that there is no legal or moral "barrier against our righteous interference, in the laws which authorize the buying, selling and possessing of slaves, nor in the hazard of a collision with slaveholders."⁸⁸ Again, Garrison works both ways here—on one hand claiming that the Constitution does not protect slavery, and therefore no legal impediments prevent the government simply wiping it away, and on the other, arguing that the North's participation in immoral law demands that it act on what would later be called Higher Law, the long-standing concept that institutional law must conform to a pre-existing natural or divine law in order to be legitimate.⁸⁹

Garrison carefully backs off his threats almost as soon as he makes them. "I grant that we have not the right," he says, "and I trust not the disposition, to use coercive measures." All his threats are meant to be warnings. Garrison claims to be trying to avoid the "danger" that Northern complicity in the slave system exposes them to; they must put an end to it before they are "called upon for aid in case of insurrection," since in such a case they would actually be morally bound to fight on the side of the slaves, not the slaveholders.⁹⁰ Turning from threats, he returns to sentiment and moral suasion, asking if "these laws hinder our prayers, or obstruct the flow of our sympathies? . . . Can we not operate upon public sentiment, (the lever that can move the moral world,) by way of remonstrance, advice, or entreaty?" Garrison hopes to destroy slavery "not by force, but by fair persuasion,"⁹¹ and though he persisted in this hope for over

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thirty more years, by the time of Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859, the moment for peaceful resolution had passed. Garrison warns of this in 1829, eerily mirroring Walker's soon-to-be-published pamphlet, and anticipating Brown's "final prophecy" and Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address by a generation. If voluntary abolition is not accomplished,

woe to the safety of this people! The nation will be shaken as if by a mighty earthquake. A cry of horror, a cry of revenge, will go up to heaven in the darkness of midnight, and re-echo from every cloud. Blood will flow like water—the blood of guilty men, and of innocent women and children. Then will be heard lamentations and weeping, such as will blot out the remembrance of the horrors of St. Domingo. The terrible judgments of an incensed God will complete the catastrophe of republican America.⁹²

Garrison controls the threat in his language carefully, always asserting his own love of peace, but always making violent insurgency a logical endpoint of the slave economy; while he pleads for prayer and hard work, he ends his address with the image of "millions of armed and desperate men" that America will finally have to face "if slavery do not cease."⁹³

“**T**he Abolitionist revolution,” Truman Nelson writes, “brought forth both an Old Testament prophet and a New Testament prophet, John Brown and William Lloyd Garrison.”⁹⁴ It's easy to accept this simplistic duality—Garrison a New Testament peace-maker and Brown an Old Testament avenger—but a number of Garrison's addresses make it more accurate to compare him not to the mild Jesus, but to John the Baptist prophesying the arrival of a deliverer. Nelson himself doesn't fully support his own clever trope, pointing out that Garrison's pacifism was at least partly strategic, an effort to keep himself out of jail, where he had already spent time for slander for his early anti-slavery writing.⁹⁵ Since the Civil Rights era and the anti-war movement of the 1960s, Garrison—once considered as bizarre and unhinged as Brown—has been accepted as a mainstream American hero. But recent Brown biographer Louis DeCaro argues that it was the militancy of Brown whose actions put Garrison's words into their proper context:

The notion that “non-violent resistance” and pacifist protest “draw out and expose the angry violence of a society and compel humanity to alleviate the suffering it caused” is really a myth. *Any expression of anti-racism*, whether from a pacifist or an advocate of force, will draw out the bigotry and prejudice of society. Indeed, fear of escalating violence is a far greater catalyst for change within an indifferent majority than “moral

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suasion” or appeals to the conscience of a society. In short, there would be little reason to celebrate William Lloyd Garrison without Elijah Lovejoy, Nat Turner, or David Walker.⁹⁶

Though Garrison’s stance on moral suasion is more complicated than many give him credit for, moral suasion—the practice of attempting to make social change by appealing to citizens’ individual consciences—approaches slavery primarily as an ethical dilemma, not a social structure. In those terms, Brown was more insightful than Garrison in recognizing the need to attack and incapacitate the slave economy; his intent in launching “Railroad business on a *somewhat extended scale*,”⁹⁷ as he described the raid, was to render the slave system economically untenable, regardless of how planters “felt” about it. If we credit him with the foresight or intuition to have seen this, Brown found a solution to the seeming impasse of the inefficacy of moral suasion and the horror of black rebellion. Moral suasion as a strategy would conceivably avert war and uphold the democratic process, because “feeling right”⁹⁸ would lead to pressuring representatives, in turn leading to a political rather than military solution. However, black rebellion would earn former slaves membership in a free republic through the ordeal of battle. Brown’s plan finds a way between: the raid’s purpose is to create small-scale, episodic black “revolutions” to cripple the Southern ability to comfortably hold its property, while at the same time staging a demonstration of bi-racial solidarity, galvanizing Northern sympathy and support. It was Brown who imagined an alternative to “the cry of horror,” the blood flowing “like water,” that Garrison foresaw in the South, by helping insurgent slaves to organize a planned resistance. Brown modeled the surrogate rebellion against slavery that the Union Army would eventually enact; his handful of black and white militants were followed into Virginia and other Confederate states by thousands of armed men, white and black.

NOTES

¹ These groups, like the Attucks Guards and Massasoit Guards on the East Coast and the Attucks Blues, Loguen Guards, and Henry Highland Garnet Guards in the Northeast and Midwest, were the forerunners of Robert Williams’ Black Guard and the Black Panther Party for Self-Protection of the 1960s. Williams noted that “for us there was no Constitution, no such thing as moral persuasion—the only thing left was the bullet,” echoing the abolitionists as the struggle for African-American rights continued over a century later.

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² Ruchames, p. 76. Hinton takes a slightly truncated form of the document from Sanborn's *Life and Letters* (pp. 125-126), telling us that it was William Wells Brown who first published the document, in 1870.

³ *Ibid.* The "Branded Hand" was Captain Jonathan Walker, arrested for attempting to sail escaping slaves to the Bahamas in 1844; Walker's right hand was branded with the letters *SS* for "slave stealer," which poet John Greenleaf Whittier changed to "slave savior." A brief introduction to Walker's case and some links are provided at <http://www.geocities.com/brandedhand/walkerbook.html>. Brown was an observant and saavy participant in popular culture, and it's possible that when he asks whether anyone has "seen *The Branded Hand*," he means an 1845 play by Sophia Little by that name. See Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, "'Let Your Names Be Enrolled': Method and Ideology in Women's Antislavery Petitioning," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, edited by Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Cornell 1994), p. 197n., and Lorenzo Dow Turner, "The First Period of Militant Abolitionism (1831-1850)." *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Oct., 1929), pp. 425-426. Elijah Lovejoy is discussed above. Charles Torrey was a predecessor of sorts to Brown—a white abolitionist who was arrested and imprisoned for his activities aiding escaping slaves in Maryland; he died in a Southern prison in 1846. See Stanley Harrold, "On the Borders of Slavery and Race: Charles T. Torrey and the Underground Railroad," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer, 2000), pp. 273-292.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶ Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 63.

⁷ Stauffer, p. 26

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), Volume 2, p. 365.

¹⁰ Belying his almost universal acceptance as a prophet of sorts, Tocqueville's stand on colonization is already passé by the time his famous book appears.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 372.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 372-373.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 376.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 375-376.

¹⁸ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, David W. Blight, editor (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press 1993), p. 57.

¹⁹ William Lloyd Garrison, "Address to the American Colonization Society, July 4, 1829), in *William Lloyd Garrison and the Fight Against Slavery: Selections from the Liberator*, William E. Cain, editor (Boston, New York: Bedford Books 1995), p. 65.

²⁰ In the most recent, and one of the most thorough, scholarly treatments of Walker's life, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), Peter P. Hinks still qualifies most of his conclusions regarding the trajectory of Walker's life, certainly up to the

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time he arrived in Boston. *Freedom's Journal*, the first U.S. newspaper owned and operated by African-Americans, which Walker wrote for, can be viewed online at <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/aanp/freedom/>.

²¹ David Walker, *An Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829*, Sean Wilentz, editor (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), p. 16.

²² Sundquist, pp. 78-79.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 78.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 77.

²⁵ See Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*.

²⁶ Walker, p. 30.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 39

²⁸ The pamphlet caused a sensation; Walker Walker printed and distributed the *Appeal* himself in September 1829, establishing a network of white and black sailors to carry it south. By its third edition, in June 1830, the South was in an uproar over it, passing laws to suppress or seize it, though at the moment Virginia itself was still ambivalent enough about slavery that it was unable to pass any laws censoring the pamphlet. See Hinks, as well as Sean Wilentz' introduction in the 1995 Hill and Wang edition of the *Appeal*; also see Hasan Crockett, "The Incendiary Pamphlet: David Walker's Appeal in Georgia," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 86, No. 3. Summer, 2001, pp. 305-318, and W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 197-198.

²⁹ Walker, p. 49.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 11.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 74.

³² *Ibid*, p. 75.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 53-54.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 55n..

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 14.

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 51.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 45.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 72n.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 47..

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 71n.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 72.

⁴³ Quoted in Crockett, "The Incendiary Pamphlet," p. 307.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

⁴⁵ Walker, p. 22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 49.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 29.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 35.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 16.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 46.

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⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 70.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 25.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ Truman Nelson, *Documents of Upheaval: Selections from William Lloyd Garrison's the Liberator, 1831-1865* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), pp. 4-5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. xiv.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. xviii.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 5.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Nelson, *Reader*, p. 181.

⁶⁶ Nelson, *Documents*, p. 14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 14.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁷⁰ William Lloyd Garrison, *An Address Delivered in Marlboro Chapel, Boston, July 4, 1838* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), p. 7, p. 3. text online at *The Antislavery Literature Project*, <http://antislavery.eserver.org/tracts/garrisonmarlborochapel/garrisonmarlborochapel.html>.

⁷¹ *Ibid*.

⁷² *Ibid*.

⁷³ Cain, p. 62.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 63.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 64-65.

⁷⁷ Walker, p. 65.

⁷⁸ Cain, p. 67. I will argue later that Herman Melville seems to have had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of anti-slavery literature. Here is another coincidental foreshadowing of a famous phrase of his: "No! in thunder."

⁷⁹ I will discuss this more fully later, but what I mean by sentimental rhetoric here is language and imagery that illustrates the common humanity of the slave and the white reading or listening audience in order to invoke pity for the slave. As we'll see when we discuss John Stedman, this imagery was usually sensational—the parting of parents and children, beatings, suicides, and so on—often verging on—or becoming—pornographic in its intimacy, dwelling on the sexual vulnerability and degradation, and the bodily exposure, of slave women.

⁸⁰ Cain, p.63.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 63-64

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 64

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 67.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 63.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 65.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 63.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 65.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 63.

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⁸⁹ The concept of what became known as a Higher Law, to which political law had to conform, finally reached Congress itself on March 11, 1850, at the height of debate over the Fugitive Slave Law. Whig (and later Republican) Senator William Seward of New York, who Eric Foner calls “the intellectual leader of the political anti-slavery movement,” (see Foner, p. 41), addressed his colleagues regarding the admission of California into the Union, augmenting his Constitutional arguments against the extension of slavery and the admission of Texas with a comparison between the 1793 Fugitive Slave Law and the “despotism” of “the Dark Ages,” and a theory of Manifest Destiny that implicated the South in the potential destruction of the Union. Arguing for the existence of “a higher law than the Constitution, which regulates our authority over the domain, and devotes it to the same noble purposes,” he invokes the “emphatic words” of British political philosopher Algernon Sidney’s *Discourses on Government*:

There is but one law for all, namely, that law which governs all law, the law of our Creator, the law of humanity, justice, equity, the law of nature and of nations. So far as any laws fortify this primeval law, and give it more precision, more energy, more effect, by their declarations, such laws enter into the sanctuary and participate in the sacredness of its character; but the man who quotes as precedents the abuses of tyrants and robbers, pollutes the very fountains of justice, destroys the foundations of all law, and therefore removes the only safeguard against evil men, whether governors or governed; the guard which prevents governors from becoming tyrants, and the governed from becoming rebels.

Seward argues that “[w]e cannot . . . be either true Christians or real freemen, if we impose on another a chain that we defy all human power to fasten on ourselves,” drawing parallels between natural law, Christian ethics, and democratic government. Freedom and slavery are “conflicting systems” in “radical” and “perpetual” contradiction, and their co-existence merely deepens the rift: “Compromise continues conflict.” Seward again uses Sidney, “an author whose opinions did not err on the side of superstition and tyranny,” for support:

“if it be said that every nation ought in this to follow their own constitutions, we are at an end of our controversies; for they ought not to be followed, unless they are rightly made; they cannot be rightly made if they are contrary to the universal law of God and nature” (quote from Sidney—original Seward pamphlet).

⁹⁰ Regardless of questions of moral duty, United States soldiers were bound by law to aid the slaveholders in case of insurrection, leading to the ironic case of Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart, who would both fight to uphold the slave system for the Union—when they were sent to capture Brown—and the Confederacy. Lee and Stuart, in their mission against Brown and their decision to fight on the side of Virginia later, would embody the reprehensible moral compromise that Garrison outlines here (Truman Nelson, appalled that they are canonized American military heroes, called them “treasonous racists”).

⁹¹ Cain, p.66.

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 68.

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 70.

⁹⁴ Nelson, *Documents*, p. xvi.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*.

⁹⁶ DeCaro, p. 40. Conversely, Lewis Perry tells us, Garrison’s sons thought that “the pacifism of their father had prepared the way for the violence of Brown.” Perry calls the comment unfair, but as we see in this chapter, their feelings were well-founded. Perry’s well-known *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Knowxville:

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University of Tennessee Press, 1995; originally published in 1973) deals mainly with Garrisonian abolitionism, and so Brown stands out as an aberration. For the quote above, see p.260; for a discussion of how Garrisonians reacted to the Harpers Ferry raid, see pp. 251-267.

⁹⁷ Hinton, p. 165.

⁹⁸ Harriet Beecher Stowe's words, which I will explain in more detail later.

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CHAPTER THREE: SENTIMENTAL RADICALISM

Abolitionists and the Representation of Slavery

The decade between Hildreth's *The Slave* and Brown's *Sambo's Mistakes* was also roughly the decade that stretched from the enormous economic Panic or Crash of 1837 and the end of the successful invasion of Mexico by the U.S. Throughout this ten-year stretch, the abolition movement continued to factionalize, as various groups chose different political, religious, and personal responses to the crisis. Meanwhile, the United States government dug in its heels over slavery. Sentimental fiction and rhetoric to some extent looks for an alternative to what Walker and Hildreth establish as obvious—the Revolution that established the country would have to be continued to throw the yoke off the Southern slaves. Salvation would come to the

While the United States saw growing instability and potential violence from the late 1830s to the late 1840s, the rest of European civilization erupted in revolution during the same ten years. Michael Rogin calls the culmination of this moment “the American 1848,” a period of global political upheaval.¹ Leslie Fiedler also notes the importance of this historical moment to the American response to the institution of chattel slavery. In *The Inadvertent Epic*, Fiedler calls the mid-19th century

a Revolutionary Age, in which the oppressed everywhere were turning against their masters. That movement, which peaked in 1848, inspired almost simultaneously two literary responses, one profoundly European, the other peculiarly American: Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* and [Stowe's] *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. If according to the first, the spectre haunting Europe was Communism, according to the second, the spectre haunting America was Black Revolt.²

Stowe herself saw this moment in history as “an age of the world when nations are trembling and convulsed;” she claims, in the concluding remarks of 1852's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that a “mighty influence is abroad, surging and heaving the world, as with an earthquake,” and wonders if America can avoid “this last convulsion” in store for any nation “that carries in its bosom great and unredressed injustice.” But, true to the comment of a British paper that while Europeans “appeal to history[,] an American appeals to prophecy,”³ for Stowe, “this mighty influence thus rousing in all nations and languages those groanings that cannot be uttered, for

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man's freedom and equality” is not the inexorable machine of history but “the spirit of Him whose kingdom is yet to come, and whose will to be done on earth as it is in heaven[.]” She begs the Christian churches of America to “read the signs of the times,” for, she asks, “

who may abide the day of his appearing? "for that day shall burn as an oven: and he shall appear as a swift witness against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, and that *turn aside the stranger in his right*: and he shall break in pieces the oppressor."

Are not these dread words for a nation bearing in her bosom so mighty an injustice?⁴

In this chapter I'll describe the articulation of various threads of abolitionist arguments, all of them ultimately converging in Brown's plans for guerilla warfare conducted by escaping slaves and aided by white and free black allies. Many of these threads come from northern New England, and represent the evolution of, or responses to, positions I've discussed already. I'll argue here that it was Harriet Beecher Stowe who represented an evangelical millenarianism, not John Brown, and that Brown synthesized the efforts of both religious and political intellectuals—even the Transcendentalists—in his effort to organize and initiate a slave-driven effort to drive the Southern economy to ruin. While the abolitionist movement began to factionalize as it grew, by the early 1840s a number of different paths were running toward a convergence at the road to Harpers Ferry.

Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and her later novel, *Dred*, both attempt to turn aside black rebellion through a plea for white intervention. But both suggest that only divine intervention will save the United States from disaster. The conclusion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* desperately tries to turn aside apocalypse, and its attendant “*day of vengeance*,” with the earnestness of her entreaty:

A day of grace is yet held out to us. Both North and South have been guilty before God; and the *Christian church* has a heavy account to answer. Not by combining together, to protect injustice and cruelty, and making a common capital of sin, is this Union to be saved,—but by repentance, justice and mercy; for, not surer is the eternal law by which the millstone sinks in the ocean, than that stronger law, by which injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God!⁵

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The conservative, pacifist Stowe hopes both to inspire an apathetic American population to act to end slavery, and turn aside the militancy of radical black and white abolitionists and the confrontational intransigence of the South. So in both of Stowe's anti-slavery novels, only divine intervention can save the wretched of the earth; no help from white interventionists seems forthcoming, and she cannot face the possibility of black rebellion. Death and exile are the only routes to freedom for blacks and absolution for whites. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, her mirrored slave heroes, the fiery, half-white George Harris and the dark, maternal Tom, take alternate routes to freedom—George through Canada (and baptism) to Europe, and Tom through the darkest trials of bondage into death and paradise. In her later novel, the death in battle of the black visionary “enthusiast” Dred forces her other slave protagonists to choose flight rather than revolt, and she describes this alternate path to freedom as the South's great salvation:

. . . *the underground railroad* . . . has removed many a danger from their dwellings. One has only to become well acquainted with some of those fearless and energetic men who have found their way to freedom by its means, to feel certain that such minds and hearts would have proved, in time, an incendiary magazine under the scorching reign of slavery. But, by means of this, men of that class who cannot be kept in slavery have found a road to liberty which endangered the shedding of no blood but their own⁶

Stowe puts this forward as stern warning to the South, and indeed, there were abolitionists who were more sanguine about the seeming inevitability of violent confrontation, and they often used images similar to the ones Stowe used, but to different ends. Stanley Harrold points to three addresses that signal what he calls “the rise of aggressive abolitionism,” all presented in 1842 and '43, one by Garrison, one by Gerrit Smith, and one by Reverend Henry Highland Garnet, a prominent black abolitionist who would also become friends with Brown. Each address carefully finesses the issue of violent resistance and white responsibility, declaring a preference for non-violence but laying the ultimate responsibility for the consequences of slavery at the South's, and to a lesser extent the United States', door. Harrold points out that the addresses were meant to actually reach the slaves; in a change of tactics, many abolitionists now believed it was necessary to involve the slaves in the process of actively seeking to end the system. But the literacy rate among slaves was common knowledge in the movement, as was the strength of Southern censorship, so these addresses must also be read as addressing the slaveholders in as

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confrontational a style conceivable, as well as attempting to deepen Northern resistance. Specifically, each address seems to infer a sort of code of behavior in supporting escaping slaves in their efforts to reach Canada, and each holds out the potential of slave resistance as a promise to the North as well as a threat to the South, a promise that would finally be realized during the war itself, when slaves escapes *en masse* and black soldiers, many former slaves, marched into battle.

Stowe and other popular female novelists of the mid-19th century are often described now as sentimental or domestic writers, employing an emotional vocabulary that reflected the values of their bourgeois, often female readership.⁷ Stowe's call to arms was a call to change individual attitudes not only toward slavery, but toward slaves themselves. As she sums up,

There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who feels strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter! Are they in harmony with the sympathies of Christ? or are they swayed and perverted by the sophistries of worldly policy?⁸

In his 1985 *Hard Facts*, Philip Fisher describes Stowe's famous novel as the sentimental novel *par excellence*. To explain the power of sentimental rhetoric, Fisher uses an image from Rousseau that “contains the primary psychology of sentimental narrative itself”:

the tragic image of an imprisoned man who sees, through his window, a wild beast tearing a child from its mother's arms, breaking its frail limbs with murderous teeth, and clawing its quivering entrails. What horrible agitation seizes him as he watches the scene which does not concern him personally! What anguish he suffers from being powerless to help the fainting mother and the dying child.⁹

Fisher explains that “in the scene, where there once was a family, there remains only an individual who has lost everything. The compassion of the imprisoned man is a model of that of the reader,” who is unable to act to save the characters in the novel; but because their concern is disinterested, it “is the best evidence of humanity itself.”¹⁰ He argues that, by assuming that

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“feeling and empathy are deepest where the capacity to act has been suspended,” the sentimental writer advances a “cautious and questionable politics.”

By limiting the goal of art to the revision of images rather than to the incitement to action, sentimentality assumes a healthy and modest account of the limited and interior consequences of art.¹¹

But drastic social change *is* the obvious ambition of Stowe’s novel, and her deliberate engagement in the public debate over slavery so stirred the popular imagination that folklore has Lincoln crediting her with starting the Civil War. “But,” she asks, “what can any individual do?” Much has been made of Stowe’s admonition to her readers to “see to it that *they feel right*,” as though that is all she is asking; in fact, it is the *least* a Christian and an American can do.

An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter! Are they in harmony with the sympathies of Christ? or are they swayed and perverted by the sophistries of worldly policy?¹²

There is an implicit call to action here; *feeling right*, in the case of any number of characters in the book, from the Northern senator who is cajoled by his wife into providing Eliza a ride during her flight, to the doomed Augustine St. Claire, have to *act* on their feelings. Even Tom’s self-sacrificing death is an act of resistance, not simply an expression of passivity. Though her call, for Christians to pray and teach the miserable fugitives Christianity, avoids confronting both the South and the abolitionists, she is as clear as Jefferson on the consequence of inaction: “the country will have reason to tremble, when it remembers that the fate of nations is in the hands of One who is very pitiful, and of tender compassion.”¹³

Stowe’s perception of the language of sentiment is considerably different than that of decades of literary scholars who took Hawthorne’s angry dismissal of the herd of “damned scribbling women” to heart.¹⁴ For Stowe, “he who is destitute of the element of moral indignation is effeminate and tame”; it’s a writer like Hawthorne himself, more concerned with the diminished role of the literary artist in a commercial society than he is with the brutal suffering around him, whose writing is “tame.” What Stowe finds in Christian imagery is a tension between mercy, “a pleading, interceding element,” and justice, and by the time she writes *Dred*, what she finds in

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the sentimental image of maternal love is not the helplessness that Fisher points out in Rousseau, but a grim threat of retribution.

As a spotless and high-toned mother bears in her bosom the anguish of the impurity and vileness of her child, so the eternally suffering, eternally interceding love of Christ bears the sins of our race. But the Scriptures tell us that the mysterious *person*, who thus stands before all worlds as the image and impersonation of divine tenderness, has yet in reserve this awful energy of wrath. The oppressors, in the last dread day, are represented as calling to the mountains and rocks to fall on them, and hide them from the wrath of the LAMB.¹⁵

Stowe represents, and struggles to untangle, this paradox through the tension between Dred, her version of Nat Turner, and Milly, a female version of Uncle Tom, the long-suffering, pacifist Christian slave. The Christ Milly preaches to Dred is “the eternal principle of intercession and atonement,” who comes to bear Dred’s “habitual and overmastering sense of oppression and wrong.” Dred believes that “the Lamb was bearing the yoke of the sins of men,” and that the day would come when he would throw off the yoke.¹⁶

Ironically, that coming day of wrath had already been characterized in terms remarkably like Rousseau’s image prior to Stowe; John Randolph—“that wayward statesman,” in Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s phrase—described the alarm that Gabriel’s conspiracy had raised in Richmond: “The night-bell is never heard to toll in the city of Richmond, but the anxious mother presses her infant more closely to her bosom.”¹⁷ Stowe’s dilemma is that the white and black versions of this image cancel each other out—either one is the flipside of the the stern-piece of the mysterious, “hearse-like” *San Dominick* in Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, a grim parody of Virginia’s Great Seal, “a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked.”¹⁸ Like Virginia, the ship secretly houses a hive of rebel slaves.

Like Stowe, Melville leaves the crisis of slavery in stasis at the end of his story, unable to see a way past the inevitable bloodshed. Both writers are as ambivalent about action as they are about inaction, but other, more militant attitudes competed for attention. Neither the millenarianism of Stowe nor the grim agnosticism of Melville, the kind of anti-slavery radicalism that culminated in John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 transformed the language of sentiment and moral suasion.

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For some anti-slavery activists, Stowe's dilemma—that slave uprisings could lead to violence as horrible as the practice of slavery—was no longer an issue by mid-century. In his unfinished novel *Blake*, at least partly inspired by his work with Brown, Martin Delany inverts Rousseau's image of the helpless voyeur. The Cuban slaves and free blacks in the second half of the novel are forced to watch hounds being released on slaves as public sport and spectacle. As plans for insurrection proceed, however, free blacks "determined that for the last time they had looked with passiveness upon the sad scene of training bloodhounds upon the living flesh of their kindred."¹⁹ Fear of insurrection arises in part when they begin to respond to this savagery with anger rather than accept it passively, and the ruling class grows uneasy. In a crucial reversal, it's not sympathetic Northerners who are stuck in helpless pity and horror in this configuration; it's slaveholders who pass their lives in "a living death" and "a waking sleep," a "dreamy existence of the most fearful apprehensions, of dread, horror, and dismay." Their society, haunted by "suspicion and distrust, jealousy and envy," can be "thrown into consternation by an idle expression of the most trifling or ordinary ignorant black."²⁰

For them there is no safety. A criminal in the midst of a powder bin with a red-hot pigot of iron in his hand, which he is compelled to hold and scar the living flesh to save his life, or let it fall to relieve him from torture, and thereby incur instantaneous destruction, nor the inhabitants of a house on the brow of a volcano could not exist in greater torment than these most unhappy people.²¹

And deservedly so, Delany argues. Further complicating the sentimental, and passive, image that Fisher describes as the essence of sentimental fiction, Delany insists on black self-determination, turning stereotypically sentimental images into gestures of insurgency. Conspirator Gofer Gondolier tells his associates "an old truth my grandmammy taught me [when I was] a child sitting in a chimbley corner," that "Self-preservation is nature's first law." The time for "discretion" is past. By this point,

it's useless to talk to me about 'policy' and nonsense when a bloodhound is tearing out my vitals. . . . Give me a revolver, knife, club, or anything with which to defend myself, and I'll put the varmint to flight. If a tiger, hyena, or any other wild beast should attack you, ought you not to take its life immediately, or stop to argue the best method of getting rid of the danger?"²²

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Eric Sundquist cites the “waking sleep” Delany describes as “enshroud[ing] the planters in a limitless nightmare,”²³ just as Randolph had said. Rousseau’s image of passive horror and Melville’s image of the shrouded executioner are two sides of a coin, just like another recurring motif in *Benito Cereno*, “Follow Your Leader.” The phrase is not only the warcry of the American sailors attacking the slaves, but the threat used by the insurgent leader Babo, who uses it as a caption under the bleached skeleton of his murdered owner when he puts it in place of the figurehead of Christopher Columbus on the *San Dominick*.

The two motifs suggest a choice: between the surrogate/ally role that John Brown chose in the war against slavery, fighting with and for the slaves, or the inevitable doom of the project of New World conquest represented by the desiccated remains of the heirs of Columbus—the walking death of a doomed culture. Fisher attempts to correct the obvious, unsolved contradiction of his interpretation of Stowe’s “humble” ambitions later in *The Vehement Passions*, claiming now that the sentimental spectacle serves not to paralyze but to catalyze:

It is by means of the relations between fear and pity that a civic component enters into the highly self-centered and self-defining vehement states, and does so most clearly in the aesthetic experience of a spectator at a play or film, or a reader of a novel. An important parallel experience occurs in law courts where, as jurors, we are placed as observers and judges of opposed stories told by the prosecution and the defense about a set of events.²⁴

Fisher’s “civic component,” then, is the radicalizing effect of the spectacle of injustice. Russell Banks seems to illustrate this argument in his 1998 novel *Cloudsplitter* when John Brown, moved by a family reading of Theodore Dwight Weld’s *Slavery As It Is*, swears an oath against slavery and calls for his family to do the same. Brown and his family, more than almost any other white Americans on record, *felt right* about slavery and about black people. His statements in court after the raid made slavery a very clear violation of fairly simple Christian principles: sympathy for the poor and outrage toward hypocrisy and injustice. Nodding toward the New Testament in the courtroom, he claimed that the book

teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me, further, to “remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.” I endeavored to act up to that instruction.²⁵

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Brown's interpretation of the text was that "to have interfered as I have done" in the political economy of Virginia "in behalf of His despised poor was not wrong, but right." That Brown found justification for violence in the Bible hardly makes him unique in the annals of American history, but his position directly confronted the hypocrisy he perceived in a society that favored the wealthy; he argued that "had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great[,] every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment."²⁶ Prior to his trial he told Senator George Mason, who led the Congressional investigation into the raid and interviewed Brown in prison, that he "did right" in attacking the slave system, and "that others will do right who interfere with you at any time and at all times." He explained: "I hold that the Golden Rule, 'Do unto others as ye would that others should do unto you,' applies to all who would help others to gain their liberty,"²⁷ turning the language of moral suasion from an expression of pity into a call to militant action. Brown took the two halves of the language of abolitionist addresses like Garrison's, the pity for the slave and the threat to the slaveholder, and made them one.

During the 1850s both John Brown and his father Owen recounted stories of their conversion to abolitionism. The narratives conform to the sentimental model; both Brown and his father, to use Stowe's terms, *felt* right. Brown's autobiographical letter to a friend's twelve-year-old son claimed that an event during the War of 1812 "made him a most *determined Abolitionist*: & led him to declare, or *Swear: Eternal war* with slavery." Employed in driving cattle to supply U.S. troops, Brown stayed with a man who owned a young slave, a boy about John's age.

The master made a great pet of John: brought him to table with his first company; & friends; called their attention to every little smart thing he said or did: & to the fact of his being more than a hundred miles from home with a company of cattle along; while the negro boy (who was fully if not more than his equal) was badly clothed, poorly fed; & lodged in cold weather, & beaten before his eyes with Iron Shovels or any other thing that came first to hand. This brought John to reflect on the wretched, hopeless condition, of Fatherless & Motherless slave children: for such children have neither Fathers or Mothers to protect, & provide for them. He sometimes would raise the question is God their Father?²⁸

The fact that Brown was twelve years old himself when this occurred suggests his deliberateness in telling the story to inspire the boy he wrote to; it is far more likely that Brown

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had been taught to detest slavery practically from birth, as he would teach his own children. When speaking to adults, Brown explicitly rejected the language of sentiment. Self-assertion and masculinity will be more effective in winning white allies than appeals to pity, he insists in his “words of advice” to the League of Gileadites, a group of black men and women in Springfield whom he helped organize after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. “Nothing so charms the American people as personal bravery,” Brown thinks; “The trial for life of one bold and to some extent successful man, for defending his rights in good earnest, would arouse more sympathy throughout the nation than the accumulated wrongs and sufferings of more than three millions of our submissive colored population.”²⁹

His father Owen’s story of conversion, written in 1850, was similarly sentimental, focusing on the suffering of the slave and his own emotional response as a powerless observer. Louis DeCaro claims that Owen’s conversion to abolition probably predates his conversion to evangelical Christianity.

When [I was] a child four or five years old, one of our nearest neighbors had a slave that was brought from Guinea I used to go out in the field with this slave—called Sam—and he used to carry me on his back, and I fell in love with him. He worked but a few days, and went home sick with the pleurisy, and died very suddenly this was the first funeral I ever attended in the days of my youth.³⁰

Coincidentally, perhaps, Owen’s story also takes place during war with England, this time in 1776, while his father, the first John Brown in the family, was away fighting. Both stories place youthful empathy and love in the foreground, against a backdrop of violence and revolutionary fervor. Both stories suggest the deep roots, and the sources, of the Brown family’s commitment to the abolition of slavery, and suggest that slavery cannot, by definition, be part of a stable, peaceful society.

In either case, whether an American citizen responds to slavery with pity or outrage, the fact that both demand private action is a symptom of the makeup of public institutions, which, in a slave society, are by definition compromised and illegitimate. Fisher is wrong to draw a parallel between the spectacle of art and the reasoned argument of the courtroom. Here is precisely where anti-slavery literature and activism breaks with civic discourse, seeking to replace the corrupt sophistry of the courts and the legislature, where evasion, erasure, and obfuscation preclude a

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vehement response to injustice (at the cost of accuracy and consistency, the hallmarks of official language and record-keeping; this is what Melville shows us with the court record at the end of *Benito Cereno*), with a cathartic aesthetic experience—polemic art attempts to present a reality stripped of the disingenuous civility of self-serving political discourse. Fisher elaborates on Rousseau’s imagery, noting the “close connection” between slavery and sentimental language in *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. “One of the surprising claims that Rousseau makes about the state of nature,” Fisher decides, “is that the condition of unthinking and unfeeling equanimity is the norm.”

There are few passions, few thoughts, no families, no love, no property. Once the state of nature is abandoned by the first act of possession, the creation of property which launches men into society[,] Rousseau claims that there will be growth in two opposite . . . directions. . . . With the development of interdependence and human comparisons, inequality arises, and the final outcome of inequality is slavery. But at the same time, by means of property and the family, love and leisure, there occurs the growth of sensibility, refinement in inner feeling, and a more active inner life. In Rousseau’s argument, the historical moment at which society reached the maximum of slavery it would reach the maximum of sensibility or sentimentality, the maximum of complex sympathetic relations between people.³¹

But anti-slavery writers point out over and over the ways in which “refinement” perpetuates slavery; the refinement and leisure of American society comes at the expense of labor exploitation, especially African-American slavery, and the inner feelings of family life become the lie of Southern paternalism. It is refinement, reason, and civil discourse that fuel the slave economy—they are what Audre Lorde would later call “the Master’s Tools,” which “will never dismantle the Master’s House.”³²

We can see this in Jefferson’s ultimate conclusion about the possibility of ending slavery. Bemoaning his impression that “it is impossible to be temperate and to pursue this subject through the various considerations of policy, of morals, of history natural and civil,” he abandons the debate, deciding that Americans “must be contented to hope they will force their way into every one’s mind.” Perhaps frustrated by his own failures and limitations, Jefferson abandons reason *and* politics in his discussion of race and the solution to slavery, and collapses onto the hope of moral suasion and a utopian future:

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I think a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way I hope preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation, and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation.³³

Jefferson's conclusion abandons revolutionary logic, opting for a sentimentalism that would foreshadow Stowe's conclusions more than half a century later. Like Stowe, Jefferson hoped for a day of grace. The force of Stowe's novel, though, is against this final appeal; like Jefferson, Stowe knows that violent revolution has been set up from the start, and no matter how much she sees him as one of the prime architects of the coming crisis, she seems to follow Jefferson in a dithering indecision about how to face it or turn it aside.

In contrast, militant abolitionists developed a vocabulary and a set of arguments that began to normalize the logic of slave rebellion in terms that combined the revolutionary rhetoric of the previous century with the language of the Christian family that appealed to an American populace after the great revivals (often closely associated with abolitionism in the first place) of the 1820s and '30s. This was a part of broader movements that applied democratic and religious rhetoric to emerging issues of social justice like the shift to wage labor. Growing class militancy and the kind of religious radicalism common in the abolition movement combined in Orestes Brownson's 1840 attack on capitalism, *The Laboring Classes*, which articulated a religious ground for radical social activism similar to that often voiced by Brown and his sons. To Brownson, a man "who seeks merely to perfect his own individual nature, can be a good Christian;" true Christianity demanded opposition to a purely economic view of human fate:³⁴

The Christian forgets himself, buckles on his armor, and goes forth to war against principalities and powers, and against spiritual wickedness in high places. No man can be a Christian who does not begin his career by making war on the mischievous social arrangements from which his brethren suffer.³⁵

Though Brownson is concerned with the laboring classes of the North, the implicit connection between Northern workers and slaves, often described as a "class" rather than a "race," is clear enough. Brown saw the connection clearly, and spoke often of class justice as well as emancipation. His final statement at his sentencing after the Harpers Ferry raid

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demonstrates a clear vision of class war in which the upper classes prey on the lower as an accepted mode of operation. He sardonically observes that “had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, or the so-called great . . . and suffered and sacrificed, what I have in this interference, it would have been all right. Every man in this Court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.” And like Brownson, Brown cites Christian principle as the basis for class consciousness:

I see a book kissed which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament, which teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do unto me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me further to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them. I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I say that I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong, but right.³⁶

Brownson would later disavow his nascent socialism and opt for a conservative Catholicism, but Brown’s vision of an alliance between black and white Northerners and black and white Southerners against what was coming to be known as the Slave Power was the wave of the future. In the late 1830’s, abolitionists began to return to a vision of the South that had emerged in the power struggles of the Federalist era, which saw the South as an insatiable, conspiratorial force—the Slave Power.³⁷ An emerging labor consciousness briefly converged with a resentment of the powerful and affluent planter class, allowing Gerrit Smith, for one, to characterize Northern Democrats complicit in the violent anti-abolition movement as “tools for ‘gentlemen of standing and property,’” who would ultimately “brutalize and enslave the poor white man” as they had the blacks.³⁸ For most white men, this did not necessarily translate into anti-racism or even abolitionism. Regional and class hatred were enough; the night of Lovejoy’s murder, an Illinois farmer raged to Alton’s mayor, “How would you like a damned nigger going home with your daughter?”, and almost twenty years later, most Free Soilers in Kansas wanted to keep Kansas free of slavery *and* blacks.³⁹ But class resentment against the Slave Power also helps explain the shift in the perspective of a man like Brown, already virulently anti-slavery and anti-racist, his own attempts at affluence and respectability ruined by an unstable economy fueled by forced labor and agribusiness.

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The Crash had ruined thousands of middle-class would-be entrepreneurs like Brown; the long, severe depression that followed brought instability, but it also brought renewed efforts to re-imagine American Society. A number of the utopian movements of the 19th century arose in the wake of the Panic, responding to widespread disenchantment with the possibilities for freedom and growth that conventional society offered. The invasion of Mexico—which, as we will see, was part of a ten-year process—opened vast new stretches of land that now had to be fought over by the North and South in the struggle to maintain regional balance, and therefore political stasis regarding slavery. Attempts to achieve the continued balance established by the 1820 Missouri Compromise ultimately failed, and the seizure of the Southwest was a critical step toward the Civil War. As party politicians maneuvered to gain advantage while maintaining—and growing—the slave economy, radical abolitionists began to articulate a compelling case for armed slave insurrection as the most effective way to end slavery. They were ultimately joined by New England intellectuals who were prominent among the group we now refer to as the Transcendentalists, whose ideas were part of widespread challenges to existing religious institutions.

All this change brought a wave of reactionary violence as well, especially against abolitionists. Besides the Crash and the battles over Texas, the mid- to late 1830s saw increasing polarization over anti-slavery activism itself—the 1830's, which began with Nat Turner's rebellion and the first issue of *The Liberator*, continued with brutal reprisals by whites throughout the South as well as pro-slavery violence throughout the North. There were anti-abolition riots in New York and Philadelphia in 1834, and the 1837 murder of Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois, was a galvanizing moment for the anti-slavery movement. Lovejoy's death—more properly, Lovejoy's use of force to defend himself—helped heighten debate over the use of force to end slavery. As we have seen, Lovejoy, having already had to leave Saint Louis, now found his printing press attacked and destroyed repeatedly. Finally resorting to keeping “a loaded musket . . . standing at my bedside, while my two brothers, in an adjoining room, have three others,” Lovejoy fought back against a mob on November 7 and was killed, along with at least one other man. Some prominent abolitionists like the Grimke sisters saw Lovejoy's use of weapons as an unpardonable act, and Garrison was cautious in his praise.⁴⁰ While the Garrisonians seemed to be in retreat—the “*Liberator* expressed quiet contempt” for Lovejoy,⁴¹

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the event incensed other abolitionists, and inspired many to become abolitionists for the first time. Brown's first public declarations against slavery date from this time. He attended a memorial service for the murdered journalist led by Western Reserve College professor Laurens P. Hickok, at which he famously vowed "before God, in the presence of these witnesses, from this time, I consecrate my life to the destruction of slavery." Hickok made the issue one of white as well as black freedom. "The question now before American citizens," he claimed "is no longer alone, 'Can the slaves be made free?' but, 'Are we free or are we slaves under Southern mob law?'"⁴² At this stage, however, Brown still found himself, with few exceptions, without white allies yet.

But his allies were beginning to develop. Wendell Phillips was also radicalized by Lovejoy's killing, and the event marks the beginnings of Ralph Waldo Emerson's anti-slavery activism as well. If the intellectual growth of any major traditional figure in American letters can trace the growing anti-slavery radicalism of the mid-19th century, it is Emerson's. Not emerging from immediatism or any other abolitionist school, in fact expressing apparent bemusement and disdain for political activity in general and abolition in particular in the mid-1830's, Emerson moved farther and farther from these famous positions as time went on, until he was an enthusiastic supporter of John Brown in the late 1850's. Transcendentalist concern with moral accountability and intuition of natural, divine law made this evolution inevitable. Emerson was already struggling to articulate a principled resistance that would have to become political or lapse into escapism. Though there "are always men enough ready to die for the silliest punctilio; to die like dogs," Emerson "sternly rejoice[s]" that "one was bound to die for humanity and the rights of free speech and opinion."⁴³ Emerson's evocation in "Heroism" of "the brave Lovejoy," who "has given his breast to the bullet . . . and has died when it was better not to live" predicts—longs for—the self-immolation of a martyr like Brown.

Prior to the Invasion of Mexico, Emerson could still express hope for the efficacy of the kind of moral suasion that Granville Sharpe had "filled the heads and hearts" of Parliament with when they abolished West Indian slavery in 1834, though he was forced to look abroad for his model.⁴⁴ His August 1, 1844 address commemorating the tenth anniversary of West Indian emancipation uses this "moral revolution"⁴⁵ to demonstrate the ability of powerful men to act out of a sense of

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higher purpose, though he already suggests that solutions may be extra-legal: “I am no lawyer, and cannot indicate the forms applicable to the case, but here is something which transcends all forms.”⁴⁶ He relies on strategic argumentation at times, retreating from appeals to transcendent moral law to tie sensible economics to virtue, but even so, he espoused a radical anti-racism, praising the British merchants who “[i]n every naked negro of those thousands . . . saw a future customer,”⁴⁷ and arguing that “the oldest planters in Jamaica are convinced that it is cheaper to pay wages than to own the slave.” Emerson turns theories of nation and race on their head to contrast the heroic rebelliousness of the enslaved, who “carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new and coming civilization,” to the decadence of their masters: “the arrival in the world of such men as Toussaint,” he says, “outweighs in good omen all the English and American humanity.”⁴⁸

Emerson’s strategic tacks sometimes conflict. The implicit racism of emerging theories of labor and citizenship that differentiated the immigrant working classes from the slaves is evident in his argument that the “Virginian” might trade “the more intelligent but precarious hired service of whites” for “silent obedience” of his “Ethiopian . . . house-servants,” but this contradicts his insistence that “the negro race is, more than any other, susceptible of rapid civilization,” and that it is the nature of the economic relationship that stands between the manhood of master and slave, and that “when their free-papers are made out, it will still be in their interest to remain on his estate.” But they follow the general outline of anti-slavery arguments of the time, in theme and tone, even his harshly funny allusion to Montesquieu with his claim that “it would not do to suppose that Negroes were men, lest it should turn out that whites were not.”⁴⁹

Emerson invokes the Jeffersonian right to revolution as a veiled threat, and suggests another expedient course that might resonate with Southerners—the Jamaican planters, “like other robbers,” prior to emancipation, “could not sleep in security.”⁵⁰ He insists, though, that real expedience evolves from right, and that “[t]he moral sense is always supported by the permanent interest of the parties. Else, I know not how, in our world, any good would ever get done.”⁵¹ But, as in “Heroism,” he contrasts this sense of higher purpose to the petty self-interest of the American nation of shop-keepers, and appeals to Northern expedience as well:

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If there be any man who thinks the ruin of a race of man a small matter, compared with the last decoration and completions of his own comfort, —who would not so much as part with his ice-cream, to save them from rapine and manacles, I think I must not hesitate to satisfy that man that also his cream and his vanilla are safer and cheaper by placing the negro nation on fair footing than by robbing them.⁵²

Here Emerson articulates the Transcendentalists' disillusionment with a crass commercial culture given to petty comforts that can tolerate the barbarity of slavery, challenging American moral sensibilities in a way that recalls Walker; in contrast to Emerson's appeals to "the genius of the Saxon race, friendly to liberty," he also finds the accomplishments of America far inferior to those of past "nations [that were] elevated with great sentiments"; Greek civilization's greatness "lay in an intellect dedicated to beauty[;] Asia Minor in poetry, music and arts; that of Palestine in piety; that of Rome in military arts and virtues[;] that of China and Japan in the last exaggeration of decorum and etiquette." American civilization "is that of a trading nation; it is a shop-keeping civility" that needs to aspire to greater things.⁵³ He ties commercial crassness to legal rationalizations as the sources of American corruption, opposing "the mumbling of the lawyers" to "the God's truth" and "the great heart and soul . . . superior to any man, and making use of each, in turn, and infinitely attractive to every person according to the degree of reason in his own mind" to "the reign of pounds and shillings, and all manner of rage and stupidity."⁵⁴

He argues that the "superstition respecting power and office is going to the ground," while the natural "stream of human affairs flows its own way."⁵⁵ And while he still resists seeing himself as a radical agitator, he already sees that "some degree of despondency is pardonable," both for the slave and for the abolitionist. He is alarmed that "men of conscience and of intellect . . . whose attention should be nailed to the grand objects of this cause" become "so hotly offended by whatever incidental petulances or infirmities of indiscreet defenders of the negro, as to permit themselves to be ranged with the enemies of the human race," so that the great men of American civilization, "names which should be the alarums of liberty and the watchwords of truth, are mixed up with all the rotten rabble of selfishness and tyranny."⁵⁶ But he is able to articulate a version of transcendentalism that anticipates Thoreau in its practical view of his ideas about an Over-Soul, a oneness of humanity. The peace and stability, the culture itself, of any "race" cannot be secure "whilst another race is degraded."

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It is a doctrine alike of the oldest and of the newest philosophy, that man is one, and that you cannot injure any member, without a sympathetic injury to all the members. America is not civil, whilst Africa is barbarous. (145)

The crisis of slavery is already inevitable, regardless of the actions of the state, and the “indiscreet” actions of the anti-slavery forces cannot be compared with the outrages of American political leaders united against them. But now there were “other energies than force, other than political” loose in the world, “which no man in future can allow himself to disregard.” Emerson decides, contrary to the 20th century interpretation of the Transcendentalists as a- or even anti-political, that an informed man must make use of “direct conversation and influence,” and “make himself felt by his proper force.”⁵⁷ As Emerson would learn later, if any man in this period would attempt to “make himself felt by his proper force,” it would be John Brown.

Other future allies of Brown also began their movement toward radical abolitionism—what Stanley Harrold calls “aggressive” or “practical” abolition—with Lovejoy’s death and the spread of mob violence in the late 1830s. New York landowner Gerrit Smith, one of the richest men in the U.S., “formulated his first attack against the conspiratorial designs of the Slave Power,” which “threatened his and other abolitionists’ freedom and manhood,” at New York State’s first anti-slavery convention, in Utica in October 1835. Smith insisted that “we are not willing to be slaves ourselves,”⁵⁸ but the meeting was broken up by “a well-organized group of about a hundred lawyers, bankers, and merchants” led “by Samuel Beardsley, a Democratic congressman from New York and a friend of President Andrew Jackson,”⁵⁹ suggesting to Smith not only the reach of the “slavocrats” but the same class bias that he had found in his previous reform experience with the Temperance Society (which, he wrote to a friend, tolerated “the decanters and demijohns” of the “refined and polite” classes, while condemning the “jugs and bottles” of the poor.⁶⁰

This sort of bias extended to reformers themselves; as always, the charge of “fanaticism” was frequent, and most pro-slavery violence arose not only from racism but from the perception of threats to the status quo. Smith was told by Leonard Baskin, a member of the American Colonization Society, that the more radical positions of the American Anti-Slavery Society, which opposed colonization, would “excite some of the basest and most dangerous elements of

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political malignancy.” This sort of class animus against “instability” (already codified in the criticism of “factions” in the Federalist Papers) would fuel many of the later attacks on Brown.

Bacon continued:

They that take the sword shall perish by the sword; and they that attempt to array the poor against the rich . . . may find, too late, that they have evoked demons whose might and malignity their art cannot control (Stauffer 104)

Smith’s radicalization is emblematic of the kind of social strains present during the decade. In 1826 he joined the new reform organization the American Temperance Society, and the following year he joined the new American Colonization Society. In 1837, after years of increasing discomfort with their hypocritical positions, Smith left both groups (Stauffer 97-98). But like Brown, Smith came to his more militant stand on slavery after personal crisis and financial ruin. He had already come close to anti-slavery violence when confronted with the mob in Utica, where “Our people prepared their fire arms,” and “I was as determined as anyone to employ deadly weapons against the invaders of our rights,”⁶¹ but the Crash of 1837, which wiped out much of his vast wealth (his father had been the first business partner of John Jacob Astor), as well as the deaths of his father and two of his children the same year, shook his faith in his social status and racial privilege and led him in 1838 to claim that he “came to commune with” blacks in spirit—to “make myself a colored man,” and experienced a similar transformation as Brown, who also “emerged from a conservative orientation and began to view slavery from a black perspective, [and] began to recognize that chattel slavery was really a state of war conducted by one people against another.”⁶² For Smith and for Brown, black and white freedom were not simply linked; they were one thing, and Brown would become a symbol of this dangerous identity long after his death.

Gerrit Smith’s address was presented at the 1842 New York Liberty Party Convention. Though Smith’s speech is measured and cautious compared to many of the later statements of leaders like Frederick Douglass, or even Garrison, its implications are threatening, and though the threats are veiled and indirect, they are ominous. He immediately rejects moral suasion as genteel complicity. While the abolitionists’ role in the lives of the slaves is as “advisors, comforters, and helpers,” he asks “Why do abolitionists concede, that their labors for the slave must be expended directly upon his master; and that they are to seek to improve the condition of

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the one, only through favorable changes wrought in the mind of the other?" It is because, he argues, abolitionists are "not yet entirely disabused of the fallacy, that slavery is a legitimate institution."⁶³ As such, of course, it deserves no legal respect or protection; Smith underlines the point by ironically comparing "man-stealing" to "horse-stealing," relying on the abolitionist trope of slavery reducing humans to the status of livestock to undermine legal conceptions of property rights. And though he preaches Christian forbearance that would make Uncle Tom proud, advising slaves to "yield then your unrecompensed toil," he lets them know they are waiting for something, a time when "God's spirit will supply [your masters'] place with his own perfect lessons of truth"; "your redemption," Smith claims, "draweth nigh."⁶⁴ His admonition against immediate, violent insurrection is tortured in its ambivalence; Smith turns to a theoretical third person to express the ins and outs of abolitionists' advocacy of violence:

There are, it is true, some persons in our ranks who are opposed to the taking of human life in any circumstances; and whose doctrine it is, that, however certain might be your success, it would be sinful for you to undertake to fight your way to liberty. But the great majority of abolitionists justify their forefathers' bloody resistance to oppression; and can, therefore, dissuade you from such resistance to a ten thousandfold greater oppression, not on the high ground of absolute morality, but on the comparatively low one of expediency.⁶⁵

Smith almost provides a blueprint for Stowe here in outlining the two paths of redemption for the slave; in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one is taken by Tom, the other by George Harris (modeled on Frederick Douglass): "The slave, who has learned to read a map, has already conquered half the difficulty in getting to Canada; and the slave, who has learned to read the Bible, can learn the way to heaven,"⁶⁶ but in lieu of a political, military, or revolutionary end to slavery, both these destinations would remain ironic in the literature of abolition, and in reality: with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law especially, true freedom lay either in Canada or in death. The further irony was that escape to freedom in Canada put the fugitive slave under the rule of the government that the United States had fought for its own "freedom."

Smith's concrete advice is to "Have no conscience against violating the inexpressibly wicked law which forbids you to read [the Bible];—nor indeed against violating any other slaveholding law,"⁶⁷ but this is, again, at best ambivalent; laws against escape and resistance are "slaveholding laws". In fact, according to Harrold, the outcry against the address was directed mainly at

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Smith's assertion that slaves were justified in stealing whatever they needed to escape, in the North as well as the South, and it was a series of articles on the "Rights of a Fugitive Slave" in the *New-York Evangelist* in February, 1842, by Nathaniel E. Johnson that articulated a defense of that position by teasing out Smith's inferences. Since slavery was "in all its principles directly against the law of nature, and of God," and that this legal precedent was clearly established "by Blackstone, and all the most profound writers on law," the slave is under "no moral obligation" to any of them, but instead "bound by the law of Nature to protect his wife and children."⁶⁸ By "the law of nature and of God" the slave is automatically "necessarily at war" with the slaveholding states, and "[s]o long as he is within the bounds of Virginia, he is in an enemy's land." But since the North is tied politically to the South, the slave "is not . . . free from the reach of the slave law, until he is entirely beyond the bounds of the United States. Hence he is in an enemy's country 'all along his route.'"⁶⁹ So, while the abolitionists "do not advise them to insurrection nor to plunder," the logic of such action is established. Johnson deplors the "redress for any wrongs, however great, by violence, so long as it can possibly be obtained by peaceful means." But "the right of self-defense, which Blackstone declares can never be taken away by the laws of society, remains and justifies just so much use of force as is absolutely necessary."⁷⁰

Harrold argues that Smith's address marks a turning point in the movement:

In a sense, the abolitionist reaction to Smith's Address established two lines of development, one leading to Abraham Lincoln and the other to John Brown. The first relied on peaceful agitation and conventional party politics in the North to achieve anti-slavery goals. The second concentrated on direct action against slavery in the South and against those who pursued escaping slaves in the North.⁷¹

In reality, though, both lines of development lead to Brown anyway, since by invading the South and finally declaring the purpose of the war as the end of slavery, Lincoln, however reluctantly, institutionalized Brown's strategy and put real muscle behind it. Reliance on conventional party politics proved disastrous by the 1850's, leading to the collapse of the Whigs and the formation of a new coalition that would elect Lincoln in 1860. The South, mistakenly, saw Lincoln's election as a development just as threatening to the *status quo* as the Harper's Ferry raid. Even secession didn't convince Lincoln to attack slavery until men like Seward and Douglass convinced him to use the strategy that John Quincy Adams had foreseen almost forty years before.⁷²

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HARROLD also presents a Garrison speech, from the annual New England Anti-Slavery Convention at Boston's Faneuil Hall in 1843, as a step closer to abolitionist advocacy of rebellion. Blunter than Smith, Garrison also works hard to qualify his statements, always leaving himself a way out of the charge of inciting violence. This is sensible from a man who had already done jailtime, received death threats, and been mobbed, so it should be seen as skillful rather than cowardly, but often the division that Harrold suggests, between the adherents of Brown and of Lincoln, here, as in Smith's speech, seems more like one between Brown and Harriet Beecher Stowe—for every incendiary incitement there is a heart-wrenching passage of sentimental imagery, and the tension between the Right of Revolution and the tenets of Christian non-resistance pulls at his arguments. Though slaveholders have no “rightful authority over you,” Garrison admonishes the slaves, if they *do* “submit unresistingly to their commands,” to “do it for Christ's sake.”⁷³

The abolitionists' weapons are “not bowie knives, pistols, swords, guns, or any other deadly implements,” but words—“appeals, warnings, rebukes, arguments and facts, addressed to the understandings, consciences and hearts of the people.”⁷⁴ But, like Smith, Garrison walks a line between acceptable discourse and threat. When he points out that many abolitionists advocate non-violence, Garrison's wording distinguishes between his own feelings and theirs; Christian forbearance is encouraged mainly because insurrection would end in failure. “Many of your friends believe that not even those who are oppressed, whether their skins are white or black, can shed the blood of their oppressors in accordance with the will of God,” he says, though others disagree; “the oppressed have a right “to rise and take their liberty by violence, if they can secure it in no other manner.” But *all* the slaves' friends currently agree that “every attempt at insurrection would be attended with disaster and defeat, on your part, because you are not strong enough to contend with the military power of the nation,” and so they must be “patient, long-suffering, and sub-missive, yet awhile longer,” and trust that “you will yet be emancipated without shedding a drop of your masters' blood, or losing a drop of your own.”⁷⁵

Garrison sets out to define abolitionists, and though he insists that they hope to “effect your emancipation without delay, in a peaceable manner, without the shedding of blood,” the implication is that abolitionists are an alien society, also within enemy lines, closer not only in

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spirit but in daily life to the slaves, whom they “regard . . . as brethren and countrymen,” than to the free white population. Garrison assembles a litany of wrongs that rival the literature of slave abuse. Abolitionists “have already suffered much, in various parts of the country, for rebuking” a “corrupt” society that does nothing to free those held in “the great southern prison-house of bondage.” The abolitionists have themselves “been beaten with stripes” or “stripped, and covered with tar and feathers.” They have “had their property taken from them, and burnt in the streets,” or “been cast into jails and penitentiaries; others have been mobbed and lynched with great violence; others have lost their reputation, and been ruined in their business; others have lost their lives.”⁷⁶

For all of Garrison’s advocacy for nonviolent resistance, his definition of this hated and embattled population within a population is only a short step to Brown conceiving a real resistance force within the southern states—in Garrison’s terms, abolitionists are practically a Maroon colony already. And though he deploys the gothic language of sentiment to describe the suffering of slaves and abolitionists, much of Garrison’s speech is as hard and cold as anything Brown would ever say. While much had been made of the Providential nature of the United States’ history, Garrison again follows Walker in finding Providence set dead against American slavery; “His judgments have been poured out on those nations that have refused to let the oppressed go free,” Garrison claims, and the reckoning is not far off.⁷⁷ Slavers are condemned by their own reliance on the protection of democratic principles, and Garrison uses the standard conceit of quoting Jefferson on the illegitimacy of government without consent and the right, the duty, to reject any form of government that engages in such practices. As always, reference to this key point in the rationale for the existence of the United States is its most damning:

In acknowledging the truths set forth in this Declaration, to be self-evident, your masters, in reducing you to slavery, are condemned as hypocrites and liars, out of their own mouths. By precept and example, they declare that it is both your right and your duty to wage war against them, and wade through their blood, if necessary.⁷⁸

And this grim reality will be brought on by Garrisonian tactics—despite the conventional view of Disunion as a passive withdrawal from political action, his description here reveals its potential for violent results. Were the South an independent nation, they would forfeit the crucial protection of the federal militia and the Northern population. “Your masters are only two

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hundred and fifty thousand in number; you are nearly three millions,” Garrison points out, “and what could they do, if they should be abandoned to their fate by the North?” Disunion “would enable you to obtain your freedom and independence in a single day.”⁷⁹

Like Nathaniel Johnson, Garrison wrings irony from the fact that the escaped slave must “travel on” through the entire United States “until you reach a land of liberty”—real freedom, for the African-American, could only be gained by seeking “safety and freedom under the British flag,”⁸⁰ returning to the dominion of the British empire that Americans had fought against. The spirit of revolution and democracy is alive among the Greeks and the Poles, but it is dead in America, where “the whole military power of the nation is pledged to suppress all insurrections,” and where (in a passage that foreshadows Thoreau’s admonition in *Civil Disobedience* for resisters to throw their bodies on the gears of the economic machine):

Your blood is the cement which binds the American Union together; your bodies are crushed beneath the massy weight of this Union; and its repeal or dissolution would ensure the downfall of slavery.⁸¹

GARRISON AND SMITH are both extremely careful to walk a line in order to garner popular support and resist the label of fanatic. But it’s this tension that reveals the logic by which Brown pursued his course, as American legislation and party politics closed off more and more avenues to peaceful resolution. Regardless of their fear of being labeled fanatics or traitors, radical abolitionists couldn’t help but articulate the revolutionary logic of American democracy, which could only be circumvented through racist pseudo-science, careful parsing of selected Biblical texts, or tortured arguments linking property rights and natural law. The radical abolitionist address that comes closest to Brown’s own thinking, probably helping him form his thoughts in the ‘40’s as he became more and more militant, is, characteristically, the one made at a convention of black abolitionists in 1843 by Henry Highland Garnet, who would become a friend of Brown’s. Garnet’s speech ups the ante in the struggle against slavery; though the movement has “advanced so far,” it is static, and “apparently waits for a more effectual door to be thrown open than has been yet.” Garnet claims that he is “about to point out that more effectual door.”⁸²

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It's this document more than any other that seems to resonate in Brown's own statements. Garnet's praise of the slaves' strength and courage could be applied as easily to Brown himself: "Your sternest energies have been beaten out upon the anvil of severe trial,"⁸³ and it's likely that Brown drew on this address to expand his own vocabulary; his insistence that God "is no respecter of persons" echoes Garnet (both drawing from the writings of anti-slavery Quaker John Woolman, who said this in 1746,⁸⁴ and it's unlikely that Brown missed the analogy between God and freedom here:

The humblest peasant is as free in the sight of God as the proudest monarch that ever swayed a sceptre. Liberty is a spirit sent out from God, and like its great author, is no respecter of persons.⁸⁵

Even more striking is this passage, which puts what has become one of Brown's most notorious comments, a statement that is quoted to demonstrate his intense fanaticism, into a very different perspective; not a rabid declaration of religious bloodthirstiness, but an echo of revolutionary rhetoric, urging slaves forward to freedom in the same way that Revolutionary leaders cajoled their followers into battle against England: "However much you and all of us may desire it," Garnet says, "there is not much hope of redemption without the shedding of blood. If you must bleed, let it all come at once—rather die freemen, than live to be slaves."⁸⁶ This is the kind of brilliant marriage of the Christian imagery of sacrifice and Revolutionary militancy that Eric Sundquist finds in Nat Turner's statements,⁸⁷ and Brown's reference to it also suggests, again, that he conceived of his raid at least in part as a dramatic sacrifice of himself and his men rather than a vicious slaughter of innocent citizens.

Garnet seems more fully in command even than Garrison of a controlled vocabulary combining astute historical analysis, revolutionary militancy, and the language of sentiment. Able to turn the traditional, sentimental, images of voyeurism and suffering into incendiary calls to arms, he directs the slaves—he addresses the men, not women or children—to resist a life in which "your dearest rights [are] crushed to the earth" and "your sons murdered," while "your wives, mothers and sisters [are] doomed to prostitution."⁸⁸

Look around you, and behold the bosoms of your loving wives heaving with untold agonies! Hear the cries of your poor children! Remember the stripes your fathers bore. Think of the torture and disgrace of your noble mothers. Think of

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your wretched sisters, loving virtue and purity, as they are driven into concubinage and are exposed to the unbridled lusts of incarnate devils.⁸⁹

Garnet addresses the slaves not simply as “brethren and fellow citizens,” but as “parents, wives, husbands, children, brothers, and sisters.”⁹⁰ He is a member of this oppressed community, and “write[s] to you as being bound with you.” He portrays the Convention’s attendees as fellow sufferers who “weep over your unhappy condition,” but issues an implicit challenge to the inactivity of Northern abolitionists, who have “have been contented in sitting still and mourning over your sorrows, earnestly hoping that before this day your sacred liberty would have been restored. But we have hoped in vain.” In the meantime, “tens of thousands have been borne on streams of blood and tears, to the shores of eternity.”⁹¹ But as a member of this embattled community, Garnet is in a position to challenge the slaves (and the ideas of both slaveholders and Northerners), turning the racialist theory of African passivity into a taunt. The slaves “you are a patient people,” he says. “You act as though, you were made for the special use of these devils,” and “as though your daughters were born to pamper the lusts of your masters and overseers.” Slave men “tamely submit while your lords tear your wives from your embraces and defile them before your eyes.” Garnet’s challenge is direct and brutal: “In the name of God,” he asks, “are you men? Where is the blood of your fathers? Has it all run out of your veins? Awake, awake,” he cries; foreshadowing Melville, “millions of voices are calling you! Your dead fathers speak to you from their graves. Heaven, as with a voice of thunder, calls on you to arise from the dust.”⁹²

It is perhaps this easy assumption of intimacy that adds particular poignancy to his controlled assault. Garnet manages to balance the outrage of Walker and the intellectual weight of Hildreth, sometimes invoking both in the same passage, which lacks some of the poetry of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, but perhaps explains more clearly what would happen on that battlefield:

Two hundred and twenty-seven years ago, the first of our injured race were brought to the shores of America. They came not with glad spirits to select their homes in the New World. They came not with their own consent, to find an unmolested enjoyment of the blessings of this fruitful soil. The first dealings they had with men calling themselves Christians exhibited to them the worst features of corrupt and sordid hearts; and convinced them that no cruelty is too great, no villainy and no robbery too abhorrent for even enlightened men to perform, when influenced by avarice and lust.

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Neither did they come flying upon the wings of liberty, to a land of freedom. But they came with broken hearts, from their beloved native land, and were doomed to unrequited toil and deep degradation. Nor did the evil of their bondage end at their emancipation by death. Succeeding generations inherited their chains, and millions have come from eternity into time, and have returned again to the world of spirits, cursed and ruined by American slavery⁹³

Garnet draws a conclusion similar to those that Richard Hildreth would in his great anti-slavery writing, though stated in more Biblical terms—the United States has established not a democratic Utopia but a wasteland, where the revolutionaries “have become weak, sensual, and rapacious” while “they have cursed you—they have cursed themselves—they have cursed the earth which they have trod.” The bloody history of the New World leads to the American Revolution, but Garnet is as capable as any abolitionist to wring bitter, damning irony from it. He describes the North as well as the South as the land of the enemy, leaving slaves nowhere to turn within the United States—“The pharaohs are on both sides of the blood-red waters,”⁹⁴ so escape “en masse” is impossible. African-Americans cannot *all* flee “to the dominions of the British queen—nor can you pass through Florida and overrun Texas, and at last find peace in Mexico;” Garnet sees Texas as doomed to fall to the “propagators of American slavery,” who “are spending their blood and treasure, that they may plant the black flag in the heart of Mexico.”⁹⁵ While the colonists created “a glorious document” to declare their independence, and the “sentiments of their revolutionary orators fell in burning eloquence upon their hearts, and with one voice they cried, *liberty or death*,” they “added new links” to the chains of the slaves:

The colonists threw the blame upon England. They said that the mother country entailed the evil upon them, and that they would rid themselves of it if they could. The world thought they were sincere, and the philanthropic pitied them. But time soon tested their sincerity.⁹⁶

But the “electric fire” of the Founders’ speeches “nerved the arm of thousands to fight in the holy cause of freedom,” and the slaves are “native-born American,” fully entitled to the exercise of these inalienable rights, so they “should therefore now use the same manner of resistance, as would have been just in our ancestors when the bloody foot prints of the first remorseless soul-thief was placed upon the shores of our fatherland.”⁹⁷ Like the colonists, the slaves must free themselves; Garnet again uses the culture of the Revolutionary generation against them, quoting Byron: “if hereditary bondmen would be free, they must themselves strike the blow.”⁹⁸ Garnet

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tempers his message here only slightly, more for the effect of laying the inevitable bloodshed at the South's door. He suggests that slaves "go to your lordly enslavers and tell them plainly, that you are determined to be free." Slaves must "Appeal to their sense of justice," and remind them of "the increase of happiness and prosperity in the British West Indies since the Act of Emancipation." Slaveholders must agree to "remunerate you for your labor."

Tell them in language which they cannot misunderstand, of the exceeding sinfulness of slavery, and of a future judgment, and of the righteous retributions of an indignant God. Inform them that all you desire is *freedom*, and that nothing else will suffice. Do this, and for ever after cease to toil for the heartless tyrants, who give you no other reward but stripes and abuse.

If they then commence the work of death, they, and not you, will be responsible for the consequences.⁹⁹

If the 1842 Petersboro Convention marked a split that would lead either to Lincoln or to Brown, Garnet's speech suggests the point at which these branches merge again, and foreshadows Lincoln's adoption of Brown's militancy—it's mercy for the oppressed that must lead to a final reckoning. Garnet captures the logic of Brown's madness; one of the speech's most famous passages, urging slaves to fight, boils down to a simple equation—there is nothing to lose and everything to gain:

Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been -- you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. Rather die freemen than live to be slaves.¹⁰⁰

Like Hildreth's suggestion that limited insurrections, whether successful or not, would prove too costly to the Southern economy, Garnet believes that "It is in your power so to torment the God-cursed slaveholders that they will be glad to let you go free."¹⁰¹ While they should "Labor for the peace of the human race," Garnet's "oppressed brethren" must "remember that you are 4 millions" and can easily overwhelm the white population of the South. "Let your motto be resistance! Resistance! Resistance!" Garnet insisted, claiming that "No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance." He leaves it to the slaves to decide by "the circumstances that surround you, and according to the suggestion of expediency," what form that

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resistance will take, allowing himself a way out of directly inciting rebellion while leaving Nat Turner's threat of ever-present violence hanging in the air.

The Convention narrowly rejected adopting the address as official, mainly due to the objections of Frederick Douglass and Charles Lenox Remond, both of whom would change their opinions of the speech later; the late 1840's also saw Douglass move decisively from association with Garrison to a close friendship with Brown. Douglass' first version of his autobiography, *Narrative Of The Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, was published in 1845, and featured what would become a famous assertion of the slave's right to freedom through the exercise of "manhood," Douglass' confrontation with the "nigger-breaker" Edward Covey, at age sixteen. After fleeing Covey's farm to plead with his master to be removed, and sent back to receive his punishment, Douglass "resolved to fight" his tormentor, though "from whence came the spirit I don't know." But the act of resistance itself, "so entirely unexpected," leads to panic in the white man and ultimately to Covey's defeat. The slave breaker "asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer," and for the remaining six months of Douglass' term with Covey, "he never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger." The experience "rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood" and "recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free." The experiences was "a glorious resurrection" and Douglass claims that he "did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me."¹⁰² Douglass' conclusion is not only "the turningpoint in my career as a slave," but a turning point in the abolition movement.

Armed with this new perspective, Douglass could make even a discussion of the Christmas holidays, "among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection threatening"; were planters to discontinue the holiday celebrations, "I have not the slightest doubt it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves." The slave system, he argues, is a precariously assembled contrivance, doomed at the slightest sign of weakening to be swept away by force. Simple pleasures "serve as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity;" without them, "the slave would be forced

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up to the wildest desperation.” If such a day came, it would be “more to be dreaded than the most appalling earthquake.”¹⁰³

By now, Douglass was ready to take a more militant stand himself, and he was ready to be influenced by the militancy of John Brown. By the end of the decade, it was the spirit of Garnet’s address that had penetrated the discourse of abolition most clearly—Brown himself is reputed to have either published or planned to publish a volume reprinting Garnet’s address and Walker’s *Appeal*, around the time he began to first discuss an incursion into the southern states.¹⁰⁴

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

¹ See Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 102ff.

² Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Inadherent Epic: From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to Roots* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 38.

³ Rogin, p. 107.

⁴ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*, Elizabeth Ammons, editor (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), p. 388.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, volumes I-II. (Grosse Point, MI: Scholarly Press, 1968), p. 302.

⁷ The classic critical text arguing for the value, and laying out the aesthetic, of “sentimental” literature is Jane Tompkins’ *Sentimental Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). Her discussion of Stowe’s critical history is in chapter V, “Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History,” pp. 122-146.

⁸ Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, p. 385.

⁹ Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 105.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹² Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, p. 385.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ The “damned scribbling women” quote, from a letter from Hawthorne to publisher William Ticknor, is as follows:

America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed. What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of the “Lamplight,” and other books neither better nor worse?—worse they could not be, and better they need not be, when they sell by the 100,000.

I took it from John T. Frederick’s article “Hawthorne’s ‘Scribbling Women,’” from *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Jun., 1975.

¹⁵ Stowe, *Dred*, p. 276.

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¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Black Rebellion Five Slave Revolts*, James M. McPherson, ed. (1969; rpt., New York: Da Capo, 1998) p. 98-99.

¹⁸ *Benito Cereno*, p. 39.

¹⁹ Martin R. Delany, *Blake: or, The Huts of America*. Floyd J. Miller, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970). p. 246.

²⁰ Delany, p. 305.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 310.

²³ Sundquist, p. 219.

²⁴ Philip Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2002), p. 3.

²⁵ Brown's speech at his sentencing is his most well-known and frequently printed public statement. It is in Ruchames, *Reader* p. 126.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ruchames, *Reader*, p. 38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³⁰ Sanborn, pp. 10-11.

³¹ *Hard Facts*, 104-105

³² Lorde's essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," is in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2007.

³³ Peterson, *Portable Thomas Jefferson*, p. 215.

³⁴ This position would see its ignoble conclusion in William Jennings Bryant's participation in the Scopes Monkey Trial almost a century later – Bryant attacked Darwin's ideas as a pseudoscientific reduction of man to strictly economic ends

³⁵ Brownson's *The Laboring Classes* can be found here:
<http://www.orestesbrownson.com/158.html>

³⁶ Ruchames, *Reader* p. 126.

³⁷ See Stauffer, among others, as well as Wills, *Negro President*.

³⁸ See Stauffer, p. 117. See also Leonard L. Richards, *Gentlemen of Property and Standing: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970, 1975), and Grimstead, David. *American Mobbing, 1828-1861: Toward Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³⁹ Richards, 109. Also see Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*.

⁴⁰ Again, see Richards and Grimstead.

⁴¹ DeCaro, p. 39.

⁴² Reynolds, pp. 64-65.p.

⁴³ Reynolds, p. 64.

⁴⁴ Emerson p. 106.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

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⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 101

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 122-123

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139

⁵⁸ Stauffer, p. 101.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶² DeCaro, p. 73.

⁶³ Harrold, p. 153

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 165

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83

⁷² Adams saw civil war as opportunity for the executive branch to act with some impunity on slavery. See Lynn H. Parsons, *John Quincy Adams* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), P. 231.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 171

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174-175

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 170

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178

⁸² Harrold, p. 184.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁸⁴ Reynolds, p. 24.

⁸⁵ Harrold, p. 184.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 185-186.

⁸⁷ Sundquist, pp. 68-83.

⁸⁸ Harrold, p. 186.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

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⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹⁰⁰ The first few sentences of this passage are not included in Harrold's book, but in an alternate version archived at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/8>

¹⁰¹ Harrold, p. 188.

¹⁰² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, David W. Blight, ed. (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press 1993), pp. 78-79

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

¹⁰⁴ DeCaro, p. 41.

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CHAPTER FOUR: SONS OF THE REVOLUTION

Richard Hildreth and the Curse of the South

"To perish in the breach in the assault against tyranny and error is not the worst death a man might die."

--Richard Hildreth to Maria Weston Chapman, 1836

Brown's ideas had precedents in American imaginative literature just as they did in the arguments of theologians and political activists. Journalist, historian, lawyer, and novelist Richard Hildreth was one of the first white Americans to offer a sustained argument for a militant attack against the slave economy. Though in an 1840 article he urged men to vote, by then he had already articulated a position from which to view the South as a corrupt, backwards, and violent oligarchy destructive to the aims of democratic government, which would have to be destroyed in order to prevent it from derailing the democratic experiment.

Born in 1807 in Deerfield, Massachusetts, and originally trained as a lawyer, Hildreth abandoned the bar to write for the *Boston Atlas* in 1832, and had a long, prolific, varied career as a writer. He was a respected and well-published author of history, philosophy, journalism, and fiction, and regarded among the great writers of his time. When Oliver Wendell Holmes praised the previous generation of Northern writers who had had the luck to grow up as sons of ministers, Hildreth was named along with Emerson, Bancroft, James Russell Lowell, Edward Everett, and Francis Parkman.¹ His career paralleled Herman Melville's in some ways; over time, Hildreth became frustrated with the increasingly poor reception to his work, and on the eve of the Civil War, Arthur Schlesinger tells us, "he was a tired, discouraged man."² Like Melville, he was accused of being "insane" due to his unconventional positions, and like Melville, he was (at least temporarily) eventually relieved from economic pressure by being appointed to a government position, which his wife secured for him—unbeknownst to him—by soliciting Sumner, Seward, and finally Lincoln.³

Hildreth developed and articulated a complex, unified critique of slavery in a series of texts, both fiction and non-fiction, from the mid-1830s to the mid-50s, and is responsible for some of the first and most forcefully articulated cases that the U.S. was already at war with itself, whether

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seen across a racial divide, as David Walker saw it, or as a struggle between two competing visions of political economy. Motivated not by religion but by politics and a philosophical temperament, Hildreth serves as a foil to Walker, attacking slavery with equal ferocity and without equivocation; Hildreth is uncompromising in his commitment to attacking Southern slavery, and there is probably no such sustained, thorough, and unqualified critique written by a white abolitionist in the 1830s, Garrison included. Hildreth's *political* analysis is truly the other side of the coin to Walker's moral assault in the kind of anti-slavery activism apotheosized by Brown; if Walker's sermon is preached on the text of the Golden Rule, Hildreth's disquisition springs directly from the principles of the Declaration.

Hildreth is now a relatively obscure figure, though he has begun to appear more regularly in discussions of abolition and of antebellum culture.⁴ Interestingly, while Brown was the most reviled of a reviled group—the abolitionists—in the historiography of the 1940s, that decade also reveals a sudden, brief flurry (relatively speaking) of scholarly interest in Hildreth, bookended more or less with Alfred Kelley's essay on him in the 1937 *Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography* and Donald Emerson's full-length 1948 biography, and including an interest taken by Arthur Schlesinger, then a student who "drastically revised"⁵ the perception of Hildreth as a dull, doctrinaire Federalist historian whose long *History of the United States* stood in stark contrast to the romantic sweep of George Bancroft. By this time, Hildreth, an "eminent historian" at the time of his death,⁶ had fallen into obscurity, rarely read, discussed, or understood. One reviewer of Donald Emerson's biography, in fact, calls Hildreth a "typical New Englander," as though they were all fanatics and radicals.⁷ Schlesinger's verdict was that "The obscurity into which Hildreth has fallen is largely a result of his own eccentricities and reserves."⁸ The "problem" of the title was how so passionate a writer—Schlesinger gave Hildreth his due and seems to have read all or most of his published work—could have written a history so dry as to be nearly "unreadable." Hildreth's "remote . . . Olympian" tone in the *History* is far from the "vehemence and moral fervor" of virtually all his other work.⁹ "How was it," the young historian asks, "that this man could write a history of America distinguished chiefly for academic composure?"¹⁰

But the *History* is in some ways of a piece with his other works; Hildreth deserves a place among the most radical of the intellectuals of his day, embracing Bentham and socialism, and

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saving his deepest ire for a sustained two-decade assault on slavery. His dismissal of romantic rhetoric as “gaudy fringes borrowed from the history of Europe”¹¹ draws a line between the “plain English” of democracy and the bloated doubletalk of Old World tyranny. This rejection of the heroic tones that work so well for Bancroft is part of Hildreth’s overall project, not to cheerlead for American exceptionalism, but to argue for the principles of democratic government, which, he warned in much of his work, are at risk, mainly because of the existence of the slave economy. As we will see, Hildreth, like Brown, was willing to see the nation itself crumble rather than see the democratic experiment fail.

Like Melville, and like Brown, Hildreth seemed beyond the pale to many establishment figures. His radicalism put him out of step with a larger audience, apparently, and his combativeness often put him at odds with his peers. Hildreth had “a command of invective and facility at denunciation as a pamphleteer rare even in the brawling forties,” and obituaries noted that “he embraced [his causes] with ardor and enforced [them] with persistent dogmatism;” he “had no morbid love of gaining friends, no cowardly fear of making enemies.” While Bancroft and other historians wrote in the kind of grandiose terms that championed Manifest Destiny and mythologized the American people, Hildreth was hard-boiled and cold-eyed, recording events as dispassionately as possible and only occasionally inserting his own barbed observations, mostly about slavery. Hildreth was “vehement and caustic in controversy, quick and destructive as lightning in the judgment of antagonists”¹²

Already in 1840, the *Boston Post* declared its belief “that this Mr. Hildreth is insane,” presenting as proof the same sort of tenuous evidence used almost twenty years later against Brown at the Old Man’s trial: “members of his family have heretofore suffered with severe mental diseases.” Hildreth’s libel suit against the paper at first prompted the editor to argue that his legal action was further proof of his mental instability.¹³ So Hildreth joined Garrison, and preceded Melville by twelve years,¹⁴ and Brown by close to two decades, in the ranks of madmen and fanatics who operated outside the bounds of acceptable discourse.

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Hildreth's first sustained attack on slavery came in novel form in 1836. Returning from a long trip to the South in 1834, Hildreth wrote what seems to be the first anti-slavery novel, *The Slave: or Memoirs of Archy Moore*. Like Brown, Hildreth relies on a radical interpretation of the American Independence movement as a basis for preparing a response to slavery, grounded in political theory of social justice rather than the sentimental reliance on pity and charity that was a hallmark of later abolitionism. Like Brown, Hildreth was born into a Congregational household, though religion is one of Hildreth's most consistent targets for attack—he seems as suspicious of religion as many thinkers of the Independence movement had been. Though free of any overt religious justifications, his point of view resembles Brown's far more closely than writers of the 1850s like Harriet Beecher Stowe. Hildreth, born seven years after Brown and four before Stowe, seems more a part of Brown's post-revolutionary generation, steeped in republican theory and the logic of resistance to oppression, rather than religious revivalism and the duty of charity. Hildreth's novel, and his later polemic, *Despotism in America*, look more like the radical tradition from which Brown proceeds than it does Garrisonian abolition. Ironically—or perhaps not—Hildreth resembles Brown rhetorically and politically more than Garrison or even Walker, which gives a little more weight to the comments of some of Brown's acquaintances who found him a "skeptic" in religious matters.¹⁵ One way that Hildreth's thinking and writing resembles, and anticipates, Brown's, is its unqualified rejection of racism. Like Brown's "Sambo's Mistakes," which I discuss later, and very few other white texts, there is no "black" dialect in *The Slave*, and no racial characteristics.

For our purposes, an important point to keep in mind about Hildreth's writing is how much earlier it comes in relation to the great anti-slavery novels of the 1850s. In terms of what Wendell Phillips would describe as the "insurrection of thought" that took place between the late 1830s and the Harpers Ferry raid, Hildreth is at the forefront; behind Walker and Garrison by several years, he publishes his novel just prior to the murder of Lovejoy, which would become such a turning point for the abolition movement. Long before the 1850 Compromise or even the Invasion of Mexico, Hildreth makes a case against the economy, politics, and culture of the Southern states as an impediment to the evolution of a successful republican government, and lays out a critique of the South that is central to understanding the radical abolitionist conclusion

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that slavery had to be resisted by force. In *The Slave* and in his other great treatment of slavery, 1840's *Despotism in America*, Hildreth describes the Southern social and economic system as a perversion of every principle of New World republicanism. Its aristocratic pretensions, its social and sexual relations, its economic and agricultural practices, even its environmental condition, make the development of a stable society that produces and nurtures responsible citizens impossible, and the necessity of resistance obvious.

Preceding Stowe's work by more than a decade, and outstripping it in militance, Hildreth's novel is a monumentally important text in abolitionism, a major source text for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other novels.¹⁶ Stowe follows Hildreth in the thoroughness of her social critique, and like Hildreth, she structures her novel episodically, each setpiece illustrating an aspect of the slave system. But there are important differences. Stowe uses a double plot in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the two stories moving in opposing trajectories; as George and Eliza Harris struggle north toward freedom, Tom is sent further and further south and deeper into the slave system. Part of the reason for the two-pronged movement is that Stowe splits the Christian virtue of Tom apart from the hot-headed rebelliousness of George, who is finally converted and pacified.¹⁷ Hildreth, though, does *not* separate virtue and active resistance, and this distinction is crucial in seeing Hildreth's work as setting a cultural precedent for the kind of militance that Brown represented in the 1850s. In contrast to Stowe's narrative structure, Hildreth moves his hero, the slave Archy Moore, in a spiral, further and further South, before he finally breaks the pattern through rebellion, escape, and the promise to return to settle scores. The end of the novel foreshadows the strategies of both Harriet Tubman and her friend John Brown, who both ventured South to aid slaves in escaping their enemies in the Southern states.

While *The Slave* is in many ways a blueprint for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—a dystopian travelogue and gothic polemic against a violent, debauched society's perversion of republicanism and Christianity—the differences illustrate the split between Stowe's evangelizing and Brown's guerilla warfare. Hildreth's story sets a precedent for the discussion of a rebellious black slave as something other than a vicious animal or deluded fanatic; his treatment of Archy's process of radicalization, and his characterization of Thomas, a devout, obedient slave turned Maroon outlaw and insurgent, are shockingly blunt challenges to the cant of the day, and rehearsals for later rhetorical and actual acts of overt resistance to the slave system. While Stowe attempts to

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finesse American racist assumptions by creating a pacifist, maternal, “pure” African in Tom, and explains George’s anger (and resourcefulness) by his half-Anglo temperament, Hildreth makes no such attempts at racial “theory.” Hildreth articulates a radical position staked out only by the most marginal figures at the time of his books’ publication. Only Walker and Garrison reach the pitch of disgust and anger that Hildreth does, but Hildreth presents a hugely important alternative perspective, one that is grounded in republican philosophy and rejects religion as a starting point for an anti-slavery position. The sentimental language of novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Clotel* is notably absent in Hildreth’s work. Stowe’s reliance on sentimental conventions places “feeling right” first and foremost. Hildreth’s narrative describes a social structure in which individuals’ feelings and character hardly matter; the problem is political and requires direct action, political and probably revolutionary.¹⁸

Like many 19th century novels, and most slave narratives, *The Slave* opens with a direct address to the audience in the form of an editor’s commentary on the text that is to follow. Hildreth’s framing device lampoons the slave narrative convention in which a reliable white witness is required to authorize and authenticate the narrative, and like some of Poe’s fiction, and Hawthorne’s later *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Slave* opens with the apparent discovery of a document that is then passed along to the public by its finder. As in Hawthorne’s novel, the “document” in question lies completely outside the genteel boundaries of civil discourse.

But instead of containing and domesticating such a dangerous intrusion into the culture, as Hawthorne does the story of the antinomian Hester Prynne, the guardian of the story, Hildreth’s fictional editor, is transformed, converted by his possession of the manuscript from the conventional, acceptable public position of apathy toward slavery to an embrace of militant abolitionism. The authentication does not simply validate the escaped slave’s story, as Garrison and Wendell Philipps’, but cites it as a turning point. In his first few paragraphs, Hildreth performs a generation’s work, staging the fictional publisher’s conversion and redefining the boundaries of public discourse; what is typically seen as extremism is actually reasonable and convincing.

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The disinterested editor, who has acquired the story in a “somewhat singular manner,” first balks at the “extravagant” feelings and opinions contained in it, and the “force and a freedom” with which they’re stated. He doesn’t want the reader to think that he “implicitly adopt[s] all the author’s feelings and sentiments.” We should read “extravagance” here, perhaps, as “fanaticism,” the forceful expression of unpopular, even dangerous, political ideas. Upon reading the story, though, the editor goes from skepticism to belief; once presented with the evidence, the only logical conclusion is that slavery must be destroyed. Under these circumstances, the editor comes to see the memoir as a model of “moderation” and “magnanimity,” deciding that it is impossible “to be over zealous in a cause so just.” Though “there are several occasions on which it is impossible to approve” the author’s actions, “No man who writes his own life, will gain much credit, by painting himself as faultless; and few have better claims to indulgence than Archy Moore.”¹⁹ Some of this fictional praise sounds remarkably similar to encomiums to Brown after his arrest over thirty years later.

With this deceptively conventional disclaimer in place, Hildreth can paint a picture of the “stern reality of actual woe” suffered by a slave, and in the voice of Archy Moore, he can also depart from the conventions of civil discourse and discuss the sensational realities of the slave economy, describing the hideous practice of incestuous rape by the planters, recounting acts of vengeful murder approvingly, and fomenting both individual and collective resistance to the legal authority of slave states. The fevered pitch of Archy’s voice sometimes recalls David Walker:

YE who would know what evils man can inflict upon his fellow without reluctance, hesitation, or regret; ye who would learn the limit of human endurance, and with what bitter anguish and indignant hate, the heart may swell, and yet not burst, peruse these Memoirs!²⁰

Hildreth, an intellectual and skeptic, uses his invocation of the Christian savior in a way that recalls the passion of Walker and foreshadows the warnings of Garrison and Stowe, and ultimately the actions of Brown’s men—and the Union Army. The call is a threat: “Chosen Instrument of Mercy! Illustrious Deliverer! . . . Come!—lest if thy coming be delayed, there come in thy place, he who will be at once, Deliverer and Avenger!”²¹ There is little time left for

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a peaceful solution, and by the end of the novel, Archy has abandoned this hope, planning the kind of violent intervention that Brown would eventually undertake.

Hildreth also anticipates Brown's Declaration of Liberty by turning Jefferson's words against him; the frontispiece quotes the Virginia Bill of Rights to the effect that

ALL men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain INHERENT RIGHTS, of which, when they enter into society, they cannot by any compact deprive or divest their posterity, viz: the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing happiness and safety.²²

Hildreth even makes Archy a Jeffersonian, believing in the "Rights of man" and other ideas "I heard so often repeated" among the Southern aristocracy,²³ "it was the French republicans with whom I sympathized," he says early in the story, and "it was the Austrian and English tyrants against whom my indignation was roused; it was John Adams and his atrocious gag law."²⁴ But in the world Hildreth's protagonist grows up in, where "one half of a man's children are born masters and the other half slaves," the Virginia gentry have already entered into a compact to divest half their posterity of the Rights of Man. Archy Moore is one of what Eric Sundquist ironically calls "sons of the Revolution"²⁵: his father is his master, a "democrat in politics" (though the term is disparaged by the planters), but "an aristocrat . . . in his feelings."²⁶

Hildreth begins to develop his theme of class solidarity and rejection of racism early. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, Archy displays a racism he must abandon later. He is ashamed of the "trace" of blood in his veins "contaminated" by "an ignoble and degraded race," though he so clearly resembles his father that even men bred to ignore the obvious occasionally comment on it. A better man than his petty, supercilious masters, but trapped in a state of legally sanctioned arrested development, Archy is a Frankenstein's monster—a "learned nigger."²⁷

As he descends in rank through the course of the novel, Archy is forced to reexamine his own complicity in the system that places him above other slaves, and his own acceptance of racist theory. His experience eventually cures him of having "prided myself upon my color, as much as any white Virginian;" how much "African blood" flows in the veins of this or that slave becomes "continually of less consequence," though it had it had once seemed "weighty and important."²⁸ Racist double standards are absurd; the "olive" complexion of mixed race women is more desirable to men than "the sickly, sallow hue" of "the patrician beauties of lower Virginia," and

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Archy's mulatta mother's exotic beauty makes her a commodity. But "a slave, whether white or black, is still a slave; and that the master, heedless of his victim's complexion, handles the whip, with perfect impartiality."²⁹ Archy learns as he goes to regret his early failure to build relationships built on class solidarity, for at first he not only has no friends among the other slaves to help him, but many bear him ill will.

The mulatto figure is often problematic in white abolitionist writing. Half- (or three quarter-) white characters like Stowe's George Harris frequently re-inscribe white supremacist conceptions of the Anglo-Saxon love of, and right to, liberty. But mixed-race characters also highlight the true perversity of a race-based caste system and the violations of logic necessary to maintain it. In his 1854 novel *Clotel*, William Wells Brown discusses the issue free from racializing cant. The obvious problem with these offspring of slave owners, he says, is that they blur the lines in a racial caste system, which would ultimately create the need for such bizarre legal decisions as *Dred Scot* and *Plessy v. Ferguson*; the courts would have to shore up the fiction of race that social practice eroded; the mixing of black and white "blood" led to a confusion that law would have to refute. For Wells Brown, the "insurrectionary feeling" among mixed-race slaves is always present precisely *because* of the awareness of "their blood connection with their owners." The owners are just as aware of the uncomfortable blurring of categories, "and are ever watchful, always fearing an outbreak among the slaves."³⁰ The problem of the mulatto population, he argues, is that they so clearly represent the looming threat of rebellion; they are the heirs of the Independence movement and a virtual standing army potentially ready to confront the enemy population of slaveholders when given the opportunity.

Hildreth pursues this dangerous contradiction carefully to demonstrate the fundamental instability of the Southern social structure. He uses Jefferson's ideas against him again in creating a schism between brothers more ugly and tragic than the "brother against brother" trope of Civil War mythos.³¹ A "young master, almost from the hour of his birth, has allotted to him, some little slave his own age, upon whom he begins, from the time he can go alone, to practice his apprenticeship of tyranny,"³² Archy says, echoing Jefferson's observations on the "unhappy influence [of slavery] on the manners of our people" in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Master-slave interactions are "a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions," Jefferson observes; on one hand, "unremitting despotism," on the other, "degrading submissions." This awful

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relationship is “the germ of all education” for Southern children, who learn to enact it almost before they learn anything else, indoctrinated not into republicanism but an almost medieval sense of impunity. “The parent storms, the child looks on,” Jefferson says, and soon the child “puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves.” Southern boys are “daily exercised in tyranny” and bound to “be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. *The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances* [emphasis mine].”³³

For Hildreth, exposure to the slave system breeds arrogant fools on one hand and determined rebels on the other, and he examines the relative levels of depravity among the slaves and their owners through the rest of the novel. Archy’s masters are a dysfunctional Jeffersonian family; his brothers are his master’s two legitimate sons. James, the youngest, is sickly and sensitive, and the eldest, William, is a violent, stupid, arrogant drunkard and “tyrant, from whose soul custom had long since obliterated what little humanity nature had ever bestowed upon him.”³⁴ Slavery is as “fatal” to virtue as “the baleful poison of the plague or yellow fever,” and though it occasionally “finds, here and there, an iron constitution,”³⁵ its impact on the average person is ruinous. Archy proves more than a Jeffersonian prodigy, though; he is not made a beast by this degrading situation. On the contrary, he begins a process of radicalization that continues throughout the book.

Upon his master James’ untimely death, Archy chooses to work in the fields rather than be given to William (whose death soon follows, in a duel arising from a quarrel at a cockfight—for Hildreth, the Southern gentry is a class of violent children). Archy’s choice is part and parcel of the vicious confusion of American political and domestic economy; the Southern mixture of arbitrary power, unacknowledged blood ties, and business necessity is Old World in its backwardness. Archy trades the capricious feudal tyranny of the mansion for the more predictable back-breaking drudgery of a feudal agricultural economy when he moves from the house to the fields. Here he becomes acquainted with another stock character of gothic abolitionist novels, the estate’s overseer, a “useful and necessary” function of Southern agribusiness, but an occupation that has “never succeeded in becoming respectable.” In the U.S. the overseer is much like “a jailor or a hangman” in “countries uncursed with slavery;” he represents the same kind of Old World fear and violence to the poor population of the New World.

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Hildreth regularly draws this kind of parallel, refusing to draw the distinction between European despotism and oppression in America that U.S. apologists insisted upon.³⁶ In this and other anti-slavery novels, there is a sort of inverted Walter Scott romance that implicitly validates potential slave rebellion and casts the Southern oligarchy as the hated Norman conquerors. Tales of rebel slaves frequently resemble medieval outlaw stories like Robin Hood, in which the social structure arrayed against the heroes is riven with class conflict and violence; the haughty, decadent planters see the overseer as “contemptible and degraded,” yet he is essential to their livelihood. In anti-slavery fiction, the breeding, refinement, and respectability of the ruling class is self-delusion;³⁷ for Archy Moore’s father and master, the delusion is as fragile as that of a “young lady who dines heartily on lamb” but “has a sentimental horror of the butcher who killed it.” Hildreth’s logic already threatens the whole legal system of slavery by challenging the basis of its rationale; “By such contemptible juggle do men deceive not themselves only, but oft-times the world also;”³⁸ Hildreth’s purpose is to destroy this illusion and the slave economy with it.

Hildreth makes the most of the gothic possibilities embedded in the contradictions and conflict bubbling out of the South’s “domestic” institution, and makes a mockery of the “honor” of Virginia gentlemen. Archy’s love interest is also his half-sister, the daughter of Colonel Moore and another slave, and she, like her mother, is now targeted for the master’s harem. Archy recognizes that his father is a “voluptuary . . . to whom, neither the fear of punishment, nor the dread of public scorn and indignation, supplied the place of conscience.”³⁹ The colonel is a “good natured man” to the degree he is capable, his honor “unquestioned” by his peers. But the honor of slaveholders is “honor among thieves,” and while “colonel Moore was a most strict observer” of the code of the Virginia gentry, “he regarded the most atrocious outrage that could be perpetrated upon the person and feelings of a woman . . . a matter of jest.”⁴⁰ Little could be expected of such men, for whom the law was simply a rationalization of their desires, and “any body who might think of calling him to account, before the bar of public opinion, would be denounced by the public voice, as an impertinent intermeddler in the affairs of other people.”⁴¹ Such men will resist reason, and the plunge toward violence between slavery and freedom already seems irreversible.

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Archy and Cassy hope to wed, but the colonel blocks their efforts and they flee. This episode allows Hildreth to discuss other ways in which morality devolves in a slave state. Marriage among the gentry allows room for the rape of slave women, but marriage among the slaves themselves is “of very little moment.”⁴² The fact that either spouse can be sold at any time “holds out but a slight inducement to draw tight the bonds of connubial intercourse,” and the threat of the sale of their children “is enough to strike a damp into the hearts of the fondest couple.”⁴³ In the slave economy, love, friendship, and gratitude are meaningless in the master-slave relationship, and they are also poor incentives to the “good for nothing” poor white man of the South. Archy turns for help in escaping to a man he had once saved from drowning, only to be betrayed for a reward. “Jemmy” Gordon lacks education and land, and so has no future in the rigid class structure of the Southern economy; he is held in contempt not only by Colonel Moore but by Moore’s overseer, Stubb. Plantation overseer is one of the few legitimate sources of income open to a man like Gordon, but he lacks the “regular severity, and systematic cruelty” that make an overseer’s “reputation,” so he survives as a bootlegger and fencer of stolen goods, dealing mostly with slaves. “It is this class of men,” Hildreth tells us, “against whom the legislators of Virginia have exercised all their ingenuity in the construction of penal statutes,”⁴⁴ to little avail. The violation of republican principal and its consequent erosion of character across lines of race and class demand an enormous output of real and ideological resources to control the white population as well as the slaves and free blacks.

Hildreth’s observations about poor Southern whites line up interestingly with those John Brown made after his *first* visit to the Old Dominion, in 1840. Brown scholar and enthusiast Boyd B. Stutler describes this episode in Brown’s life in detail.⁴⁵ Brown went to Tyler County—like Harpers Ferry, now in west Virginia, and not far from Ohio or Pennsylvania—to survey “thousands of acres” of “undeveloped” land that millionaire Gerrit Smith,⁴⁶ important radical abolitionist and Brown’s future ally, had given to Oberlin College. Brown’s close association with the college came through his father Owen, a trustee for almost a decade, and when he heard of the acquisition, he offered to survey it and move his family there to work it, hopefully generating some income for Oberlin. This may have been in connection with an idea he had to create a school for former slaves, or possibly even to get an idea of what the South was like while the seeds of his later plans germinated.

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When he arrived, Brown found a number of squatters on the land already. He had been given power of attorney “to demand and receive and if necessary sue for and collect any and all moneys due for rent or damage due from tenants or former occupants” of the tract. The Board hoped that after such matters were cleared up, Oberlin could “make provision for religious and school privileges, and by proper efforts, with the blessing of God, soon see that wilderness bud and blossom as the rose,” probably not just in terms of husbandry but agitation for freedom as well. They ultimately did nothing with the land, and claims and counterclaims against the tract crawled through Virginia and West Virginia courts for decades in what Stutler calls a “legal classic” that remained a model in classrooms and on Bar exams in the state for decades.

Brown found that he liked the county’s “inhabitants rather better” than he had expected, and that several of the squatters were quite willing to make offers on the land they occupied. But his assessment of their lives sounds like Hildreth’s critiques of Southern agricultural habits and education. In a letter to his wife Brown reports that

Were the inhabitants as resolute and industrious as the Northern people, & did they understand how to manage as well, they would become rich, but they are not generally so. They seem to have no idea of improvement in their Cattle, Sheep or Hogs nor to know the use of enclosed pasture fields for their stock, but spend a large portion of their time in hunting for their Cattle, Sheep & Horses, & the same habit continues from Father to son. They have so little idea of moveing off anything they have to sell, or of going away for anything they kneed to buy, that their Merchants extort uppon them prodigiously. By comparing them with the people of other parts of the country, & world, I can see new and abundant proof that Knowledge is power. I think we might be verry useful to them on many accounts, were we so disposed.⁴⁷

An interesting point here is Brown’s pity for these people, and his musing that he might be able to help them. This episode parallels Brown’s move to Timbuktoo ten years later in a number of coincidental ways—in 1849 Brown contemplated moving to land granted by Gerrit Smith to help a population that lacked the basic skills to be self-sufficient farmers as well as the resources to protect themselves from exploitation. Whatever one might say about Brown’s sense of himself as a man of means, it is clearly not racial condescension but a sense of cross-class solidarity that makes him consider these projects. It is likely that his sense that the white farmers in the mountains would help the Harpers Ferry raiders dates from his observations on this trip.

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Brown observes that “knowledge is power,” but Hildreth has already dissected the social infrastructure of knowledge that allowed the planters to act with impunity in the South. Because of this clear threat from within—the poor white population as well as the slaves—racial solidarity was a crucial means by which the planters maintained dominance. Maintaining this racist solidarity, which blurred the obvious barriers to Virginia’s ruling class, seems to have occupied as much time and energy as controlling the slaves, and planters hit upon ways to instill self-surveillance habits among the broader population. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs notes that after the Turner insurrection in 1831, it became a tradition for Virginia communities “to have a muster every year,” in which “every white man shouldered his musket,” the “gentlemen” in “military uniforms,” the poor in their own clothes, “some without shoes, some without hats.”⁴⁸ The show of military solidarity to support white supremacy illustrates the split that Hildreth recognizes between Archy and Jemmy Gordon; race trumps class as the great divider in what the white population seems to treat as an ongoing state of war. Hildreth’s work attempts to define the war as one between republican principles and the economics of forced labor, but it would not be until Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry that black and white men marched together against slavery. It’s interesting, too, that both Hildreth and Brown express pity for this class, while Walker, in the *Appeal*, castigates betrayals among blacks, like the instance he describes in which a slave woman turns on her friends.⁴⁹ One function of Brown’s “Sambo’s Mistakes” seems to be to suggest that racial and class solidarity against Southern planters and their Northern supporters can be achieved despite any missteps along the way.

Hildreth sees fewer options for Southern whites. In *The Slave*, Jemmy Gordon is caught between principle and survival, and tries to finesse the difference; he rationalizes his betrayal of Archy by insisting that, since the runaway slaves were bound to be caught anyway, his betrayal is the act of a friend, since he convinces himself that he can procure better terms for them after their capture than they would have otherwise received. Instead, he is rewarded with contempt from both master and slave; seeing Archy’s face again, he feels only “shame, remorse and self-contempt,” and skulks away with his money.⁵⁰

Archy sees Gordon’s position as no more shameful than the planter’s; the status of every white man in Virginia is determined in relation to the bondage of African-Americans. “When men of sense and education” live by the “wretched sophistry” by which they rationalize their

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status, “let us learn to have some charity for poor Jemmy Gordon.” Southern “gentleman” see Gordon as beneath contempt, but their own careers are a “continued practice of the very principles on which [Gordon] acted.” Just as Patrick Henry observed, the system, “in the abstract, [is] totally indefensible,” but “he cannot live, *like a gentleman*,” any other way.⁵¹ Meanwhile, a poor white man like Gordon experiences keenly the compromise that economic interest forces on human feeling; so desperate for money that he sells out a friend, so desperate to cling to some scrap of gentility that he impotently objects to the rough treatment Cassy receives upon being captured, and so devoid of any social status that his protests are not simply ignored but mocked, Gordon also represents the potential fate of all white working men in America if slavery spreads—impotent, bitter, obsequious, and humiliated in an economy with no need for them.⁵² Hildreth articulates a critique of labor relations under slavery that foreshadows the arguments of the nascent workers’ movement; planters consider “it no wrong to rob these slaves of their labor,—their sole possession, their only earthly property.” Hildreth defines labor as a commodity in the possession of the worker, not the employer; this is in opposition to the slaveholder’s conception of life as commodity—he “sells for money, he has inherited from his father, and he hopes to transmit to his children, the privilege of continuing this systematic pillage” of a person’s labor.⁵³

Frederick Douglass’ trajectory toward liberty in *Narrative of the Life* affirms Hildreth’s critique. Freedom in a republican society requires the ability to acquire literacy, the ability to assert selfhood through physical struggle (a crucial meeting-point in the thinking of Douglass and his friend John Brown), and the ability to earn a wage, to commodify his labor for his own gain; Douglass’ success in all three steps prove the slave’s right to liberty. This political definition of labor would eventually help the Free Soil Party present wage labor as a measure of freedom rather than of bondage, which it still represented to many Northern workers,⁵⁴ but if Douglass retains all these features, what he argues is that a free man—of course, a man; make no mistake that this is a gendered vision of freedom—is a man who can read, make money, and fight—another black Jeffersonian.

Archy’s capture is the first of numerous misadventures that carry him further into the South, allowing Hildreth to further survey the region’s personal, political, theological, and economic absurdities. Whites as well as blacks are victims of the slave economy; Hildreth’s poor whites

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and southern aristocrats are ruined by the excesses of their system, and by their own greed, dissipation, ignorance, or self-absorption. The slave is constantly subjected to the caprices of the “free” market and its unavoidable, arbitrary inhumanity. Every step of Archy’s journey ends in disaster, and he repeatedly ends up in a slave market to be sold. His frequent trips to auction are not simply scenes of irrevocable losses and tears; they are illustrations of the contradiction between democratic ideals and commerce. Business here can be conducted with petty egoism, guilt, vindictiveness, or with shame and compassion, but business must be conducted. Noble and ignoble feelings are wrapped up in the buying and selling of humans, but emotions are overridden when bidding is due. Planters display “inconsistency” of feeling, but consistent business acumen. Archy witnesses the sale of a man who begs the bidders not to separate him from his family. One buyer “seemed touched by the poor fellow’s entreaties,” while a slave dealer, angry at the slave’s appeal to the crowd, “swore that he would have the ‘boy,’ cost what he might.” The crowd “cried shame, and called upon the slave-trader to leave off bidding, and suffer the poor fellow to remain in the country.”⁵⁵ At another auction, a planter buys a man who is clearly near death, simply to shame the jeering crowd. But

Such temporary fits of humanity and good nature, are occasionally felt by every body; but they are no guarantee whatever, against an habitual disregard of the rights and feelings of those, who are not allowed to protect themselves, and who are protected neither by the laws nor by public opinion.⁵⁶

For Hildreth, discussing feelings is disingenuous; individual feelings are constantly trumped by social structures; no matter the character of the individual, “the authority of masters over their slaves is in general a continual reign of terror.”⁵⁷ The system can’t be mitigated by personal “honor” or individual kindness.

The circular plot of *The Slave* takes Archy Moore, Hildreth’s fictional protagonist, back to the same place—the slave market—regardless of his adventures. Hildreth’s story doubles back on itself over and over as Archy changes hands; the continual interruption of narrative momentum is an illustration of the economic structure Hildreth is attacking. Each shift in the plot comes from an arbitrary reversal of fortune in a dysfunctional system, and like slave families, almost every planter Hildreth presents is ultimately ruined by it; regardless of individual “character,” he is the same man over and over.⁵⁸ In every case, the changing of hands is

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precipitated by the carelessness, extravagance, and foolishness of Southern planters and the whims of a market economy. Both slave and master are subject to “all the calamities of chance and all the caprices of fortune,” but the slave “is denied the consolation of struggling against them”⁵⁹ and must simply accept and endure yet another long march to the slave market; after Archy’s third trip to the auction block, “the thing had lost its interest and its novelty.”⁶⁰ The solution to this endless, meaningless cycle is escape or armed resistance.

Stowe would make this argument in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as well, though she was reluctant to let go of the hope for reform. Though her novel is also a scathing critique of Jefferson’s failures to end slavery, she does not go as far as Hildreth. Stowe’s text frequently evokes Jefferson’s famous observation that

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it. .

. .⁶¹

Stowe uses an illustration of this point to construct an extended critique of Jefferson, pan-Atlantic politics, and the character of slave and master in a scene in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but while critical of Jefferson, she seems to share, to some extent, his paternalism. In what reads as a disquisition on the *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Stowe creates a conversation between two brothers representing opposing positions within the slaveholding hierarchy.⁶² The dialogue between Alfred and Augustine St. Clare—king and saint—puts her own internal debate in clear terms. The two brothers represent the poles of white discourse (just as George Harris and Uncle Tom represent the poles of her idealized black hero, the partly white radical and the pious, maternal African—both prove that blacks are worth freeing, but she has to manage both, killing Tom and taming George). For Stowe the shadow of St. Domingue, the Haitian revolution, is not the inspiration it was to John Brown, but a looming threat to the hypocrisies of American politics. Augustine St. Clare stands in for Jefferson himself—the republican-minded intellectual too enamored of material comfort to act on his principles until, unlike his namesake, he has a conversion experience (too late, in this case—he dies before he can free his slaves). Alfred’s son Henrique, “a noble, dark-eyed, princely boy, full of vivacity and spirit,” illustrates Jefferson’s

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admonitions against teaching tyranny to the children of Virginia, when St. Clare and Eva witness him verbally and physically abusing his personal slave, Dodo, who he beats “till he was out of breath” for failing to rub down his horse.⁶³

Augustine’s daughter Evangeline (Little Eva) scolds Henrique, who grudgingly gives Dodo a coin to make up for the beating, which, if not deserved this time, “may go for some time when he does, and don't get it.”⁶⁴ Stowe works against the values of the slave economy here, too; as Dodo watches the free children ride off together, and reflects that “One had given him money; and one had given him what he wanted far more,—a kind word, kindly spoken.” As she often does throughout the novel, Stowe’s sentimental image here is followed by something tougher, angrier. Dodo had only presently been bought by Alfred St. Clare, Augustine’s twin brother (and doppelganger) “for his handsome face, to be a match to the handsome pony” his son rode, “and he was now getting his breaking in, at the hands of his young master;”⁶⁵ here the slave is reduced not simply to the level of livestock, but to fashion accessory.

The St. Clare brothers watch this scene so that Stowe can pit the intellectual Jefferson against the Virginia grandees; though Augustine is angry and disgusted with his nephew’s behavior, he doesn’t act, but simply comments “with his usual sarcastic carelessness” on the boy’s “republican education.” Alfred is equally nonplussed. “Henrique is a devil of a fellow, when his blood's up,” the father replies; “his mother and I have given him up, long ago.” When Augustine presses Alfred on “teaching Henrique the first verse of a republican's catechism, ‘All men are born free and equal,’” Alfred sneers; this is “one of Tom Jefferson's pieces of French sentiment and humbug. It's perfectly ridiculous to have that going the rounds among us, to this day.” It’s clear to Alfred that “men are *not* born free, nor born equal; they are born anything else,” and that “the canaille” must be “*kept down*, consistently, steadily.” To illustrate his point, he “set[s] his foot hard down as if he were standing on somebody,” evoking, ironically, the Great Seal of Virginia. Augustine notes that this “makes a terrible slip when they get up . . . in St. Domingo, for instance” (Melville would invoke this same ironic image in *Benito Cereno* a few years after Stowe’s novel appeared).

Alfred dismisses the evocation of the terror of slave insurrection with a “Poh!” and the assertion that “we'll take care of that, in this country;” his response echoes Thomas Dew’s dismissal of the Nat Turner insurrection.⁶⁶ He blames “all this educating, elevating talk” for such

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danger; “the lower class,” he insists, “must not be educated.” Augustine notes that the slave economy “is educating them in barbarism and brutality.” He seems to be channeling both Jefferson and Tocqueville at this point, fearing the outcome of what he sees as an inevitable conflict; slaveholders are turning slaves into “brute beasts; and, if they get the upper hand, such we shall find them.” Alfred scoffs, and Stowe now evokes the social machinery of Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*:

“That’s right,” said St. Clare; “put on the steam, fasten down the escape-valve, and sit on it, and see where you’ll land.”

“Well,” said Alfred, “we will see. I’m not afraid to sit on the escape-valve, as long as the boilers are strong, and the machinery works well.”⁶⁷

Augustine puts the issue in a broad context of Western revolution; the “nobles in Louis XVI.’s time” thought the same, just as “Austria and Pius IX” do now; but

“some pleasant morning, you may all be caught up to meet each other in the air, when the boilers burst . . . if there is anything that is revealed with the strength of a divine law in our times, it is that the masses are to rise, and the under class become the upper one.”⁶⁸

To Alfred, this is “one of your red republican humbugs;” he jokes—again with Stowe’s harsh irony—that Augustine would “make a famous stump orator,” once more linking Augustine to the tradition of religious and political dissent from St. Augustine to Jefferson, Brownson, and Thoreau, and linking revolution to the apocalypse, hoping that “I shall be dead before this millennium of your greasy masses comes on.” But Augustine brings the discussion back to the practice of republican government. “Greasy or not greasy, they will govern *you*, when their time comes,” he replies, “and they will be just such rulers as you make them.”⁶⁹

Now it’s Alfred who acknowledges Jefferson. He scoffs at the idea that “this subject race” can rise; they are “down and shall *stay* down! We have energy enough to manage our own powder.” But to Augustine’s point that “sons trained like your Henrique will be grand guardians of your powder-magazines,” Alfred concedes that “there’s no doubt that our system is a difficult one to train children under. It gives too free scope to the passions, altogether, which, in our climate, are hot enough.” His solution is a plan to “send him North for his education, where obedience is more fashionable, and where he will associate more with equals, and less with dependents.” But ultimately Alfred falls back on romantic myths of the Cavaliers; the slave system “makes boys

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manly and courageous; and the very vices of an abject race tend to strengthen in them the opposite virtues. [They have] a keener sense of the beauty of truth, from seeing lying and deception the universal badge of slavery.”⁷⁰

Stowe’s confusion on race and revolution mirrors Jefferson’s; she sees slavery as a bad component in an otherwise good system. She trusts the racial theory of the day that sees republican passion as a characteristic of Northern European settlers, not human beings. In the course of the St. Clare brothers’ argument, Alfred insists that if the rebels of Haiti had been Anglo-Saxons, “there would have been another story. The Anglo Saxon is the dominant race of the world, and *is to be so*.”⁷¹ Augustine replies that there is a “pretty fair infusion of Anglo Saxon blood among our slaves, now,” articulating the problematic racist theories that Stowe relies on throughout the novel. Many American slaves “have only enough of the African to give a sort of tropical warmth and fervor to our calculating firmness and foresight.”

“If ever the San Domingo hour comes, Anglo Saxon blood will lead on the day. Sons of white fathers, with all our haughty feelings burning in their veins, will not always be bought and sold and traded. They will rise, and raise with them their mother’s race.”⁷²

But here Augustine’s intellectualism collapses into inaction; his brother, “with a half-scornful smile,” insists that “if I thought as you do, I should do something . . . elevate your own servants . . .” Augustine sees the weight of “the superincumbent mass of society” on blacks as too much for them; “You might as well set Mount AEtna on them flat, and tell them to stand up under it . . . One man can do nothing, against the whole action of a community,”⁷³ a sentiment with which Stowe seems to, and John Brown would clearly, disagree.

As we will see, Stowe later struggled to escape her own limitations after the publication of her first and most famous novel, but here she is stymied by them. While it would be hard to imagine Stowe denounce the United States with the vitriol of David Walker, neither does she see blacks in the kind of danger that Brown does in “Sambo’s Mistakes,” corrupted by their contact with free white society, not just brutalized by their enslavement. Like Jefferson, she clearly sees a corrosive relationship between republican citizenship and slaveholding in terms of individual character, and considers the slave’s status to be self-evidently destructive to individual character. But the most radical abolitionists argued that the failure to resist slavery, with violence if

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necessary, was a failure of moral character and citizenship. In *The Slave*, Hildreth argues not only that blacks make excellent citizens, but that slaveholders do not.

John Brown wrote and published an essay in 1848 that made more daring claims: that blacks were capable of attaining real freedom to the extent that they abandoned the superficial pursuits of white society and pursued a life of struggle against slavery and racist oppression. Brown's article, "Sambo's Mistakes," appeared in the African-American owned magazine *The Ram*.⁷⁴ Brown saw the complacency of white consumer culture as a fundamental threat to republican citizenship, and his essay, written in the voice of a black man reflecting on his adult life and its failure to affect political change for blacks, criticizes free blacks who adopt these habits of vapidness and waste. Brown refrains from the use of dialect, and his black protagonist has already conquered the character defects prominent in free white society. In fact, the essay finds echoes in Brown's later autobiographical letter to Stearns. "Sambo's Mistakes" criticizes free blacks (he doesn't address slaves, but his potential allies in freeing them) not for falling short of the standards of white citizenship, but for paralleling them—the black narrator's past weaknesses are the aimless, passive, apolitical consumerism and individualism rampant in the United States.

The speaker in the essay "may have committed a few mistakes in the course of a long life like other of my colored brethren yet you will perceive at a glance that I have always been remarkable for a seasonable discovery of my errors & quick perception of the true course." He regrets that as "a boy I learned to read but instead of giving my attention to sacred and profane history . . . I have spent my whole life devouring silly novels & other miserable trash . . . so that I have no relish for sober truth . . . therefore I have passed through life a mere blank on which nothing worth peruseing [*sic*] is written."⁷⁵ He had believed that "chewing and smoking tobacco would make a man of me but little inferior to some of the whites. The money I spent in this way would with the interest of it enabled me to have relieved a great many sufferers supplied {sic} me with a well selected interesting library, & pa[i]d for a good farm . . ."⁷⁶ Brown is interested in describing a society of *black* Jeffersonian yeomen; Brown's "Sambo" has seen "in a twink where I missed it" and is presumably well on his way to accomplishing the very things Brown believes establish a responsible citizen.

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The contrast here is not to any defective free black population, but to the model white culture presents. The speaker goes on to describe his endless efforts to belong to “the Free Masons Odd Fellows Sons of Temperance, & a score of other secret societies instead of seeking the company of inteligent [sic] wise & good men”; such a practice “would have kept me always above board given me character, & influence amongst men or have enabled me to pursue some respectable calling” where he could also employ and improve other black men, “but as it is I have always been poor, in debt, & now obliged to travel about in search of employment as a hostler shoe black & fiddler [sic].”⁷⁷ Sambo’s mistake here forces him to accept the leavings of the free economy; Brown’s call to work, save and invest as a political act borders on the black nationalism of Martin Delany and of many 20th century black activists.

As the essay continues, Sambo’s mistakes become increasingly social and political, and are mistakes insofar as they fail to advance the cause of black freedom. His eagerness “to display my spouting talents” at “any meeting of colored people” has been so great “that I have generally lost sight of the business in hand.” Rather than forming broad alliances and organizing coalitions, “I never would (for the sake of union in the furtherance of the most vital interests of our race) yield any minor point of difference. In this way I have always had to act with but a few, or more frequently alone and could accomplish nothing worth living for.”⁷⁸ What is worth living for, in Brown’s universe, is strong citizen involvement in the workings of power, and a strong network of involved and informed men and women. Brown’s speaker bemoans the fact that “if in anything another man has failed of coming up to my standard . . . I would reject him entirely . . . & even glory in his defeats while his intentions were good, & his plans well laid.”⁷⁹ And “although my theories have been excellent”, Brown’s free black narrator “could never bring myself to practice any self denial”; in attempting to “distinguish myself from the vulgar as some of the better class of whites do”, he has “bought expensive gay clothing, nice Canes, Safety Chains, Finger rings, Breast Pins, & many other things of a like nature . . .” Consumption, Brown argues, makes a poor citizen, a state that free blacks cannot afford; because of his bad habits, all to create himself in the image of white society, “I have been unable to benefit my suffering Brethren, & am now but poorly able to keep my own Soul and boddy [sic] together . . .

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But for Brown, “Sambo’s” greatest mistake, which brings him down to the level of American politicians, is that he acquiesces to the brutal *status quo* rather than resisting:

Another trifling error of my life has been that I have always expected to secure the favour of the whites by tamely submitting to every species of indignity contempt & wrong instead of nobly resisting their brutual [sic] aggressions from principle & taking my place as a man & assuming the responsibilities of a man a citizen, a husband, a father, a brother, a neighbour, a friend as God requires of every one (if his neighbour will allow him to do it:) but I find that I get for all my submission about the same reward that the Southern Slaveocrats render to the Dough faced Statesmen of the North for being bribed & browbeat, & fooled & cheated, as the Whigs and Democrats love to be. & think themselves highly honored if they may be allowed to lick up the spittle of a Southerner. I say I get the same reward. But I am uncomm[only] quick sighted I can see in a minute where I missed it.⁸¹

Brown’s conclusion argues for political unity between free blacks and whites to build broad coalitions across political and religious sectarian lines. Hardly the narrow-minded Calvinist throwback here, he preaches the kind of broad-minded singleness of purpose that he pursued in his own life; the aim of the abolition movement was to abolish slavery, and all secondary questions had to be subsumed into that goal:

Another little blunder which I made *is*, that while I have always been a most zealous Abolitionist I have been constantly at war with my friends about certain religious tenets. I was first a Presbyterian but I could never think of acting with my Quaker friends for they were the rankest heretiks [sic] & the Baptists would be in the water, & the Methodists denied the doctrine of Election. & of later years since becoming enlightened by Garrison Abby Kelly & other really benevolent persons I have been spending all my force on my friends who love the Sabbath & have felt that all was at stake on that point just as it has proved to be of late in France in the abolition of Slavery in their colonies. Now I cannot doubt Mess Editors notwithstanding I have been unsuccessful you will allow me full credit for my *peculiar* quick sightedness. I can see in one second where I missed it.⁸²

The narrator of *Sambo’s Mistakes* has failed to become an effective citizen and rebel by mimicking the ignorant superficiality of white Americans. Hildreth’s novel demonstrates over and over the impossibility of exercising republican virtue in a political economy dominated by race-based slave labor, and his protagonist, Archy Moore, is finally driven not simply to escape but to confront the slave power. While his white characters fail to extricate themselves from the

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slave system and are ruined by it, his black characters maintain their dignity only insofar as they actively resist the dominant culture.

In Hildreth's novel, Archy's movement from one owner to another demonstrates that, in spite of their vast differences of temperament and interests, each of his owners is an irresponsible despot doomed to failure in an unworkable system, but it also moves Archy closer to the radical acceptance of militance that will ultimately free him. Archy's next master is a Major Thornton, a "merciful man"⁸³ who immediately "spoke kindly to me, and ordered my irons to be knocked off."⁸⁴ Thornton is an unorthodox southerner who "chose to call himself a farmer," not a planter, and grew wheat, not tobacco. A "great advocate for the clover system of cultivation," he "kept no overseer,"⁸⁵ and was "an innovator . . . in the management of his slaves." In contrast to the systematic violence of the "born planters," Thornton won't treat his slaves "worse than his horses," and would "rather be whipped myself" than administer such a beating to one of his "servants."⁸⁶

Regardless of Thornton's unorthodoxies, his conceptions of freedom and labor are conventional; "reasonable" and "humane," as he might be, he was what every slaveholder was by necessity: "a tyrant," with "no more thought of relinquishing what he and the laws, called his property in his slaves, than he had of leaving his land to be occupied by the first comer."⁸⁷ A "man of feeling," who hates whipping, he punishes insubordination by selling the offending slave, showing "no scruples at all" in separating him from his family and selling him to a more violent owner.⁸⁸

Nevertheless, Thornton's idiosyncrasies make him unpopular with his neighbors; he rejects the "horse-racing, cock-fights, political meetings, drinking, gambling, and frolicing" they enjoy, and they consider him not only overly cautious financially but also "a bad citizen and a dangerous neighbor" whose "indulgence" of his slaves—not beating them constantly—made his neighbors' chattel "discontented." There had been talk of running him out of the area, but Thornton "understood his own rights." After challenging one of the most aggressive of his critics to a duel and shooting him dead, Thornton is left in relative peace.⁸⁹

Archy's acceptance of his master's victory at a duel foreshadows his acceptance of violence to assert self-rule; if Thornton knows "his own rights," so should the slaves. The implicit

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acceptance of violence as a way to confront a violent culture in this episode becomes explicit later, as Archy's chances for freedom increase and the stakes become higher. As time goes on, violence and risk become the most viable alternative to sinking further into despair and drinking. Hildreth describes what we would now call a long bout of depression; since "Action was forbidden; desire was chained; and hope shut out," Archy is "obliged to find relief in dreams and illusions. Drunkenness, which degrades the freeman to a level with the brutes, raises, or seems to raise the slave, to the dignity of a man."⁹⁰

Hildreth presents this reversal frequently here and in *Despotism in America*; what is taken by whites as evidence of blacks' inferior character is in reality not simply normal behavior under the circumstances, but resistance.⁹¹ In surveying the conditions on the plantations, Archy witnesses all kinds of behavior that would shock the bourgeois North as well as the aristocratic South. While awaiting sale in the pens at the slave market, Archy witnesses an impromptu dance competing with an on-the-spot sermon at the other end of the room. Women "constantly receiv[ed] solicitations to enter into temporary unions, to last while the parties remained together," and most accepted. Hildreth offers some commentary on the dulling effect of popular culture here in a passage that anticipates "Sambo's Mistakes" and Douglass' comments on the origins of African-American music. In a famous passage, Douglass says that the songs he heard in the fields

breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness.⁹²

For Hildreth, this behavior is as much a comment on white behavior as black. The struggle of the slaves to maintain ethical behavior, morality, and character is economic and political here, rather than racial or personal; for Hildreth, the behavior of slaves, whether it's drinking and dancing 'til dawn, casual sex, or petty theft, is an appropriate response to their crushing boredom and lack of agency.

Responsibility for this behavior lies with the planters, who work to keep the slaves infantilized; "Tyranny is ever hostile to every species of mental development, for its great object is to keep its victims in a state of ignorance and degradation, and therefore of helplessness."⁹³

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Faced with the choice between pointless play and pointless work, all people “betake themselves to artificial excitements,” but frequently “sing and dance, not because we are merry, but in the hope to become so.” The revelry that planters pointed to demonstrate their slaves’ contentment is not “evidence of pleasure,” but “the disguise of weariness and pain,—the hollow echo of an aching heart.”⁹⁴ Hildreth here attacks the willful misreading of slave leisure activity as a sign of their poor work ethic, their weak character, or their happiness. Twenty years later, John Brown would make a similar disavowal, curtly and without consideration. When English journalist William Phillips argues with him in Kansas that perhaps “negroes were a peaceful, domestic, inoffensive race” who, in “all their sufferings” were “incapable of resentment or reprisal,” Brown waved his statements aside, saying simply, “You have not studied them right . . . and you have not studied them long enough. Human nature is the same everywhere.”⁹⁵

Next owned by Mr. Carleton, a religious man—“a zealous presbyterian”—Archy imagines that if anyone told the man “that to hold men in slavery was a high-handed offence against religion and morality,” he would probably “have worked himself into a violent passion; talked of the sacred rights of property . . . and declaimed against impertinent interference in the affairs of other people.”⁹⁶ This man, Carleton, is “an odd, incongruous mixture of the bully and the puritan,” a man, like most planters, with “a disposition to settle every disputed point by the pistol.” For all his “piety,” Carleton described such violence with the ease of a “professed assassin.”⁹⁷

And, again like most planters, Carleton “had no knowledge of agriculture, and not the slightest taste for it.” His overseer ran the place, and took a share of the crop rather than regular pay, a typical arrangement that was typically “ruinous to the planter and his plantation.” The overseer has an incentive to increase the yield of his employer’s land, and over a decade or so, if “he could scourge all their value out of them, the gain was his, and the loss would be his employer’s.” Carleton’s plantation was almost there; most fields were already “left uncultivated and unfenced, to grow up with broom-sedge and persimmon bushes,” and left to the livestock. With each new season, “new land had been opened, and exposed to the same exhausting process” until finally “there was no new land left upon the plantation.”⁹⁸

In Hildreth’s descriptions, the Old Dominion has returned to a haunted wilderness under slavery, which makes Virginia desolate and impoverished, not rich and grand, a description

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Brown would echo in his surveying notes. In an argument Hildreth develops further in *Despotism in America*, he claims that slavery is “fast restoring the first seats of Anglo-American population to all their original wildness and solitude. Whole counties” were swallowed back into the “useless and impenetrable thickets”⁹⁹ that William Byrd had traveled through when he surveyed the “Dividing Line” between Virginia and Carolina in 1728, a “Netherlands,” in Byrd’s terms—a “frightful place” that the locals “knew just enough of” to stay away;¹⁰⁰ Byrd did not yet see the region’s future as a hiding place for escaping and rebellious slaves.

Hildreth’s gothic metaphor of the South as a barren, uncivilized wilderness extends to the nation’s capitol itself, which “at that time, seemed only a straggling village . . . interspersed with deserted fields, overgrown with bushes.”¹⁰¹ The city lies between Maryland and Virginia, where the land has “been exhausted by a miserable and inefficient system of cultivation, such as ever prevails where farms are large and the laborers enslaved.” The only profitable area export now is its slave population, no longer needed on useless land. Firms like “Savage, Brothers & Co.” liquidate this population, an essential part of the local economy, for most planters, in a practice known as “eating a negro” can square income and expenses “by selling every year, a slave or two,” and many “have ceased to raise crops with the expectation of profit.”¹⁰²

Archy’s religious owner also gives Hildreth another opportunity to dissect the “benevolence” of the slaveholders. Carleton preaches the usual cant to the slaves “that their only hope of salvation was in patience, obedience, submission, diligence and subordination” and that it was a “great wickedness and folly” to be “discontented with their condition.”¹⁰³ Leaving behind sardonic commentary for the moment, Hildreth includes an impassioned screed that could have come straight from David Walker, and an apt summation of the nexus of a proto-Liberation Theology like that espoused by Douglass, Gerrit Smith, and John Brown.¹⁰⁴ American slavery “out-brav[es] all other tyrannies” in its apparent willingness to espouse a religion that guarantees the damnation of their slaves. The planters claim to believe “that the Bible contains a revelation from God of things essential to man’s eternal welfare,” yet “withhold it from their slaves,—of whom, to use their own hypocritical cant, God has appointed them the natural protectors.” This makes the planters guilty of killing the souls of their slaves as well as their bodies, “voluntarily and knowingly expos[ing them] to the danger of eternal punishment,” in order to protect

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themselves from resistance or rebellion; slaves are kept illiterate and unable to read the Bible so that they will not “learn at the same time, their own rights, and the means of enforcing them.”¹⁰⁵

But “all knowledge is dangerous,” and, whether the slaves read it themselves or have it read to them, “it is impossible to give the slaves any instruction in christianity, without imparting to them some dangerous ideas.” Hildreth anticipates later historians like Eugene Genovese in seeing that slaves use these texts for their own purposes.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, Hildreth believes, slaveholders will have to “prohibit at once, all religious instruction . . . it is impossible to hail the slave as a christian brother, without first acknowledging his rights as a fellow-man.”¹⁰⁷ This is an interesting, and crucial, way of understanding the link between, as Brown said, “the Declaration and the Golden Rule;” both ideas were straightforward and accessible if the power to access them was made available. The crime of the South was political and religious at once. “Can any one,” Archy asks, “calmly consider the cool diabolism of this avowal, and believe it is men who make it?” He is willing to consider them “demons incarnate” engaged in a “grand conspiracy against mankind.”

At this point, Hildreth turns away from Walkeresque condemnation, deciding that this is not demonism but social pathology; “the love of social superiority,” which typically functions as a “source of all human improvement,” will tend “to corrupt man's whole nature” and “drive [men] to acts . . . most horrid and detestable” if not checked “by other more generous emotions.” When men are motivated purely by fear, they become “at once cowardly and cruel;” a sort of insanity ensues that wipes away reason and responsibility: “the maniac can hardly be held accountable for the enormities to which his madness prompts him, even though that madness be self-created.”¹⁰⁸ But like Melville, Hildreth understands that “insanity” is a social and political term. The insanity of the slave system, though, is “well adapted to accomplish the end at which it aims; namely, its own perpetuation.”¹⁰⁹

Just as it is made clear that yet another of Archy’s masters is on the brink of ruin, and that another slave auction is inevitable, Archy, by an unlikely coincidence, finds Cassy, who lives on a plantation nearby, and the two manage to spend time together again and even have a child. Cassy’s new mistress illustrates another of Hildreth’s main arguments, that business and humanity don’t mix. Inheriting a plantation from her husband, the woman treats the

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slaves humanely until her profits disappear. Her brother intervenes, instituting a conventional program of violence and deprivation against the workers. At first she objects; for a time she maintains that “the narrowest poverty would be far better” than wealth under these terms, but as soon as she’s faced with the prospect of “giving up the luxury to which she had been accustomed from her infancy,” she relents, and spends her days thereafter trying “to banish the recollection of injustice and cruelty” that she had sanctioned.¹¹⁰ Again, the point is that intentions and character don’t matter under such a system. The “malignant nature and disastrous operation” of the slave economy guarantees that the “best intended efforts in the slave’s behalf” will only “plung[e] him into deeper miseries.” Like Garrison, who condemned the Constitution’s implicit belief in doing “evil so that good may come,”¹¹¹ Hildreth believes it “impossible to build any edifice of good on so evil a foundation.” The slaveholder’s “benevolence” will “avail as little as the benevolence of the bandit, who generously clothes the stripped and naked traveler in a garment plundered from his own portmanteau.”¹¹²

By now the stakes have been raised in Archy’s struggle for freedom, and his commitment to real resistance is tested. Having a son with Cassy, Archy considers the implications of his responsibilities. He weighs his “duty” to care for his child against his “right” to do so, which doesn’t exist. His family, like “every thing that gives his life a value,” are only held “at his master’s pleasure.”¹¹³ Archy is barely able, imagining his son’s hatred for a father who would bring a child into the life of a slave, to keep from killing the infant. Here are the beginnings of the revolutionary consciousness that later makes him a capable and trustworthy rebel—Hildreth imagines the circumstances that would lead a slave to become a conspirator, an outlaw, and an ally to someone like John Brown, and those circumstances are simply the everyday occurrences of any human life under the whip. Archy is separated from his family, not “by some fixed, inevitable, natural necessity” which would have brought on “simple grief, unmixed with any more bitter emotion,” but by “caprice,” inspiring “a burning indignation against the laws and the people that tolerate such things; fierce and deadly passions which tore my heart”¹¹⁴ With this change Archy’s hardwon rejection of racism, “that silly prejudice and foolish pride, which at an earlier period, had kept me aloof from my fellow servants, and had justly earned me, their hatred and dislike,” becomes consciousness of class solidarity. Archy “no longer took sides with our oppressors by joining them in the false notion of their own natural superiority,” a barbaric

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and backward idea that “is still the orthodox creed of all America,” and possibly the sole foundation [of] the iniquitous superstructure of American slavery.”¹¹⁵

Hildreth also signals the acceptance, not simply of violent rebellion, but of reprisal, in his later chapters. Here he anticipates the criticism that would be leveled at Stowe for the passivity and devoutness of Uncle Tom. In fact, he seems to beat Stowe to the figures of Tom, the pious, steadfast innocent, and Dred, the dangerous visionary. But Hildreth finds both characters in one body. Archy’s friend Thomas, a slave he spends several years with under different owners, seems a blueprint for both of Stowe’s later “black” heroes, the meek and pious Tom and the wild-eyed rebel Dred; at first “the humble and obedient slave, contented with his lot, and zealously devoted to his master’s service,” the traumas of slavery change Thomas. Thomas is a “remarkable man,” warm and kind, ready to go to any lengths, even sharing his food and doing extra work, to help “a fellow creature in distress.”¹¹⁶

Unlike Archy, Thomas is “of unmixed African blood,” and his “capacity for enduring privation and fatigue, were very uncommon; but the character of his mind was still more so.” Thomas’ “passions were strong and even violent,” but “he had them completely under his control,” and due to the influence of Methodist missionaries, “he was as gentle as a lamb”; in fact, “it seemed as if several of the most powerful principles of human nature had been eradicated from his bosom” Though he was “naturally proud and high-spirited,” he had been “thoroughly inculcated” into “that creed of passive obedience and patient long-suffering, which under the sacred name of religion, has been often found more potent than whips or fetters, in upholding tyranny and subduing the resistance of the superstitious and trembling slave.” Thomas now believed that “if his master smote him on one cheek, he was to turn to him the other also.” For Hildreth, fifteen years before Stowe published *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, this Christlike passivity is not the saving grace of the slave, but an impediment; Thomas was meant to be “one of those lofty spirits who are the terror of tyrants,”¹¹⁷ and Southern religion had robbed him of this destiny.

The author quickly invents the circumstances that will turn Thomas from the prototype for Uncle Tom—“he was the spiritual guide of the plantation, and could preach and pray almost as well as his master”¹¹⁸—to an echo of Nat Turner. Unlike Stowe’s Tom, whose piety is undisturbed by the crises he faces, Thomas is driven from his former passivity by the brutality of

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the slave system. When he and Archy change hands again, after Carleton's ineptitude as a planter ruins him, they become the property of a General Carter in the wilderness of South Carolina.

The parallels—and contrasts—with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are again striking; Archy has now descended into the furthest depths of the gothic South, descending into the grim, mysterious Pine Barrens, “one of the most barren, miserable, uninviting countries in the universe,”¹¹⁹ the pines stretching in a “tedious sameness” broken only “impenetrable swamp” where “rivers . . . frequently overflow their low and marshy banks, and help to increase the . . . poisonous vapors and febrile exhalations” of the swamps. The land is not only a wilderness but a wasteland, the sterility of the landscape a symbol of the bankruptcy of the slave system; “the enterprising spirit of free labor” could bring most of it “into profitable cultivation,” but “there are only some small tracts, principally along the water courses, which the costly and thriftless system of slave labor has found capable of improvement.” Everything else “remains a primitive wilderness, with scarcely any thing to interrupt its desolate and dreary monotony.”¹²⁰ Hildreth's descriptions of the landscape return it to the devil-haunted primitiveness of Byrd's travel narrative and of Hawthorne's later Puritan myths—the land remains as the European conquerors found it, only now cursed by their violence, greed, and ineptitude. Here again conventional wisdom is reversed; the dismal swamps are not the dwelling places of outlaws and fugitive slaves but of wealthy slaveholders,¹²¹ and Carter “was one of the richest of these American grandees”¹²² who have carved luxurious plantations out of the swamps, living there in the winter but leaving the “unhealthiness of the climate” in the summers, becoming an “absentee aristocracy” that “dazzles and astonishes the cities and watering places of the north by its profuse extravagance and reckless dissipation,” while their holdings “are left to the sole management of overseers, who, with their families, form almost the only permanent free population of these districts.”

The slaves are ten times as numerous as the free. The whole of this rich and beautiful country is devoted to the support of a few hundred families in a lordly, luxurious, dissipated indolence, which renders them useless to the world and a burden to themselves; and to contribute towards this same great end, more than an hundred thousand human beings are sunk into the very lowest depths of degradation and misery.¹²³

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Carter, a temperamental brute who considers anything but complete passivity a sign that his slaves soon “will be cutting our throats,”¹²⁴ and who is incensed by the “impertinence” Archy shows in having a last name, is typical of

the South Carolinians, who of all the Americans, seem to have carried the theory and practice of tyranny to the highest perfection, [and] are jealous of every thing that may seem in any respect, to raise their slaves above the level of their dogs and horses.¹²⁵

As a character, Carter contains the seeds of Simon Legree (though Stowe complicates her narrative, and perhaps tried to modulate her attack on the South, by making Legree a Yankee by birth). With Carter’s tacit approval, his overseer murders Thomas’ wife, and Thomas is an “altered man,” for whom “it seemed now to be his study and his aim to do as much mischief as possible,”¹²⁶ and “had secretly returned to the practice of certain wild rites” he had learned from his African mother.

He would sometimes talk wildly and incoherently about having seen the spirit of his departed wife, and of some promise he had made to the apparition; and I was led to believe that he suffered under occasional fits of partial insanity.¹²⁷

Archy sees that Thomas has completely abandoned his slave religion; rather than the idealized maternal Christian that Stowe created, Thomas is the kind of man that Brown and his allies in the Harpers Ferry plot sought, “bold and prudent, and what was more, trusty and magnanimous.” Thomas now becomes the leader of a ring of thieves formed among the local fieldhands, and demonstrates his boldness and leadership. “[N]o ordinary man,” Thomas, through “the steady firmness of his mind, and the masculine vigor of his constitution [and] “the native nobleness of his soul,” was even able to “shield his companions by a voluntary confession” to crimes his men had committed, and “brave even the torture of the lash” to protect them. Hildreth creates the South’s greatest nightmare, a slave—of direct African descent—with all the virtues of the Founding Fathers or a hero from a Walter Scott romance.

This seems a particularly bold narrative and polemical move; in a novel set in Virginia and the Carolinas, written not many years after Turner’s rebellion, to depict a character like this throws the fear of murderous slaves in the South’s face. But Thomas is probably Hildreth’s most carefully modulated character; while he becomes increasingly haunted by his wife’s death and his need for justice—and vengeance—he is driven to extremes but not to madness. Thomas’ first

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sign of abandonment of his faith appears at his wife's burial, when his friends wait for him to lead them in prayer. The bereaved slave "attempted once or twice to begin; but his voice rattled in his throat, and died away in an inarticulate murmur. He shook his head, and bade us place the body in the grave." When Archy tries to lead him away, Thomas refuses, muttering "in a low whisper, 'murdered, murdered . . .'"¹²⁸ Looking into his friend's eyes, Archy sees "passionate and indignant grief;" Thomas' true nature was overcoming the "system of artificial constraint" imposed by slave religion. As the two men stand at the edge of the grave together, Thomas murmurs "blood for blood; is it not so, Archy?" Unable to answer, Archy realizes that Thomas' "question seemed intended only for himself" anyway.¹²⁹

Thomas occupies a unique place in American antebellum fiction—a black man who murders a white man without incurring punishment (at least, as we'll see, not for almost two decades). In fact, his actions are described with qualified approval; Archy's response to the increasing violence and capriciousness of the slave system as he experiences it is to grow increasingly accepting of violence, and to struggle with his own passivity. Present when the overseer, Martin, administers the beating that kills Thomas' wife, just a few weeks postpartum, Archy "longed to seize the monster by the throat," but recognizes that it is the effects of his life as a slave that prevents him from doing so; "nothing but the base and dastard spirit of a slave could have endured that scene of female torture and distress, and not have interfered."¹³⁰

For a time after her death, Archy is given the job of driver in the fields, a slave who actually holds the whip against the other workers (Stowe later uses these men as Legree's henchmen, who end up beating Tom to death before their Calvary-like repentance), and recognizes the erosion of his own character in the position: "no man," he believes, "ever exercised an unlimited authority who did not abuse it," and he begins to lose his sense of class solidarity, turning his rage against his fellow slaves: "with all my hatred, my hearty, experimental hatred of tyranny, the whip had not long been placed in my hands, before I caught myself in the act of playing the tyrant."¹³¹

It's interesting to consider, based on such commentary, whether the incident, so notorious among John Brown's biographers, in which Brown had his errant son administer rather than receive a whipping,¹³² was inspired simply by what twentieth century historians take as some sign of aberrant religiosity, and not at least in part by a lifelong hatred of slavery. Brown himself denounced the sort of strict parenting he had practiced with his oldest children as he grew older,

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and it is certainly possible that this was partly due to his rejection of authoritarianism in any form.

The violence on the Carter plantation only intensifies during Archy's stay there, culminating in his witnessing of another murder, this time a semi-official lynching. Hildreth's description of this event, if based in reality, undercuts the kind of later commentary done by historians like Eugene Genovese, who catalogs the laws in place protecting slaves in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Thomas, now engaged in a regular operation plundering the area plantations—a precursor to Brown's plan—is sighted and followed back to Loosahachee, Carter's plantation, but escapes capture; the men hunting him turn instead on another slave and hang him in front of all the other hands, and they are perfectly within their rights to do so. Thomas' righteous and justifiable guerilla campaign contrasts sharply with the "law" of the planters, where any three "freeholders, selected at hap-hazard,"—often men who "would hardly be trusted [to judge] any matter above the value of forty shillings" —can stand as extemporaneous judge, jury, and executioner. They can then determine "what the Carolinians doubtless consider a much graver matter—the right of saddling the state treasury with the estimated value of the culprit." Hildreth describes the law, on its face a shocking example of private selfishness and public stupidity, is just a small facet of an edifice of "the grossest wrong," a system that reveals "an admirable consistency" in its commitment to vice.

This law for refunding to the masters, nominally a part, but what by over-valuation, usually amounts to the entire value, of condemned slaves, deprives the poor wretches of that protection against an unjust sentence, which otherwise they might find in the pecuniary interest of their masters; and leaves them without any sort of shield against the prejudice, carelessness or stupidity of their judges.¹³³

Now fearing for their own lives, Archy, Thomas, and the other members of their gang decide to escape. Followed by men and dogs, they make their way deep into the swamps. Hildreth seems to pick up the contrast between the romance of mountain outlaws (and the practicality of Caribbean Maroons) and the swamps the slaves are forced to flee through; "There were no mountains to receive and shelter us. But still we fled through the swamps and barrens of Carolina"¹³⁴ Though the "wild life of the woods has its privations and its sufferings," it also has "its charms and its pleasures," and is "ten thousand times to be preferred to that miscalled civilization which degrades the noble savage into a cringing and broken spirited slave." Just as Brown later

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claimed that a few men were worth a hundred, Hildreth claims that “there is more of true manhood in the bold bosom of a single outlaw than in a whole nation of cowardly tyrants and crouching slaves!”¹³⁵

The use of the term “noble savage” is interesting here, and perhaps reflects Hildreth’s knowledge of European philosophy; he contrasts the presumed “savagery” of Africans with the verifiable savagery of civilized white Christians. As Thomas and Archy flee, their partners are found and killed in what Hildreth claims is common practice in the region. Slave-hunters, when approaching a group too large to apprehend, split up to surround the fugitives, then leave the scene separately after firing on them. Though “probably” rarely enforced, killing a slave was technically murder under Carolina law, and hunters made certain not to witness each other’s actions or check the condition of those shot.¹³⁶ This savagery is answered by Thomas’ cold resolve; finally overtaken by Martin and his bloodhound, Archy and Thomas kill the dog and capture the man by main force. When discussing what to do next, Thomas tells his friend simply: “Archy, I tell you that man dies tonight.” Again, Archy recoils from violence, but wonders if this is the instinct of a slave. He knows that Martin is a murderer “and I could not but acknowledge that his death would be an act of righteous retribution.” Perhaps the “instinctive horror at the idea of shedding blood” Archy feels is really the “remains of that slavish fear and servile timidity, which the bolder spirit of Thomas had wholly shaken off.”¹³⁷

Thomas carries out the execution quickly and remorselessly, and Hildreth turns the frequent analogy between slaves and animals on its head; it is not the slaves who are reduced to the status of livestock or wild beasts here. The escaping slaves “scraped a shallow grave, in which we placed the body of the overseer. We dragged the dead hound to the same spot, and laid him with his master. They were fit companions.”¹³⁸ Hildreth’s description here is bold; with the memory of Southampton still fresh in Virginians’ minds, he creates characters who escape slavery, flee to the swamps, murder the overseer who pursues them, and continue on their journey, not “with the frightened and conscience-stricken haste of murderers, but with that lofty feeling of manhood vindicated, and tyranny visited with a just retribution,” a feeling that “animated the soul” of other wilderness outlaws like “Wallace [and] Tell” and “of the Israelitish hero whilst he fled for refuge into the country of the Midianites.”¹³⁹

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Shortly after this episode, Archy and Thomas are captured—again by poor whites hoping for reward. The couple’s young daughter releases them, and here Hildreth’s novel strangely prefigures Stowe’s Little Eva, the young daughter of Augustine St. Clare who literally sickens and dies from exposure to slavery; in Hildreth’s version, the girl lacks the otherworldly passivity of Eva. Archy and Thomas find themselves stared at by the child, “her soft blue eyes filled with tears.” She fetches bread and water for the prisoners, and since they are bound, “the little girl broke the bread and fed us with her own hand.” In an interesting take on sentimentalism, Hildreth describes the loss of humanity necessitated by the slave system. The feelings of “Avarice” and “blind lust of domination” are unnatural perversions of human nature, and destroy a person’s innate inclination toward compassion. Human pity “then seeks refuge in the woman’s heart; and when the progress of oppression drives it even thence, . . . still it lurks and lingers in the bosom of the child!”¹⁴⁰

Free again, the two friends part, Thomas insisting that Archy continue without him. The narrator heads north and Thomas returns south to take to the swamps as an outlaw. Archy hesitates; a “nobler spirit never breathed” than Thomas, and Archy considers it “a base desertion, which not even the love of liberty could excuse,” to leave him there.¹⁴¹ Hildreth suggests here that individual escape is worth nothing without joining the larger struggle for universal freedom. Thomas becomes a role model to Archy, who, after successfully escaping and engaging in vengeful violence himself, will finally vow at the end of the novel to take the war to the slaveholders; “It is not in vain that I have read the history of the Romans;—I know a way to disappoint the tyrants; the guilt be on their heads!”¹⁴² Archy will ultimately prove himself worthy of Thomas’ revolutionary spirit through violent resistance of his own, and will vow to return South.

His escape into the North is abortive; As in Douglass’ later account of his own real-life journey, the contrast between the modern, prosperous North and the feudal South is striking. The “nicely cultivated fields, the numerous small enclosures, the neat and substantial farm-houses, thickly scattered along the way, the pretty villages and busy towns,” all “signs of universal thrift and comfort” in a land “where labor was honorable and where every one labored for himself”¹⁴³ is seemingly a world apart the “vast monotonous extent of unprofitable woods [and] deserted fields” of the South, a landscape scarred by “negligent, unwilling and unthrifty cultivation” and

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dotted here and there with “a decaying, poverty-stricken village” populated mainly by “idlers collected about a tavern door; but without one single sign of industry or improvement.”¹⁴⁴

But the North is no refuge, and Hildreth is unwilling to accept Douglass’ clear geographical division between slavery and freedom; Northerners “hold no slaves themselves; they only act as bum-bailiffs and tip-staves to the slave-holders.”¹⁴⁵ While “the northern States of the union dare to assert that they are undefiled by the stain of slavery,” Hildreth doesn’t spare the North from criticism as “partners in the wrong. The blood of the slave is on their hands, and is dripping, in red and gory drops, from the skirts of their garments.” In Hildreth’s South, “the ties that bind man to man” are never uncomplicated by the realities of economic pressure, and so, regardless of Hildreth’s seeming devotion to classical economics, his story frequently implicates the basic assumptions of the capitalist economy that North and South share. “While the African slave trade was permitted, their merchants carried it on,” he tells us, “and these same merchants do not always refuse to employ their vessels in the domestic slave trade,—a traffic not one iota less base and detestable.”¹⁴⁶ His attacks rest on the hypocrisy of the nation’s legal framework. While the 1850 version of the Fugitive Slave Law drove many Americans to radical action, Hildreth rails against the law, already present in the Constitution, in 1836.

Northern statesmen have permitted slavery where no constitutional objections prevented them from abolishing it; the courts and lawyers of the North scrupulously fulfil to the utmost letter, the constitutional obligation to restore to the Southern master, the victim who has escaped his grasp, and fled to the 'free States,' in the vain hope of protection; whilst the whole North looks calmly on and tamely suffers the Southern slave-holders to violate all the provisions of that same constitution, and to imprison, torture, and put to death, the citizens of the North without judge or jury, whenever they imagine that such severities can contribute, in the slightest degree, to the security of their slave-holding tyranny. Nay more,—many of the Northern aristocrats, in the energy of their hatred for democratical equality, seem almost ready to envy, while they affect to deplore, the condition of their Southern brethren.¹⁴⁷

He dramatizes the point by having Archy seized in New York; right in front of a symbol of Northern civilization and power, “a fine building of white marble, which one of the passers-by told me was the City Hall,” he is “rudely seized” by Carter, one of his old masters.¹⁴⁸ He escapes again through the help of a mob that gathers, anticipating not only scenes that played out in

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Boston and other Northern cities in the 1850s, but Higher Law arguments that stressed the self-evident nature of human rights:

For this escape I return my thanks, not to the laws of New York, but to the good will of her citizens. The secret bias and selfish interest of the law-makers, often leads them wrong; the unprompted and disinterested impulses of the people, are almost always right.¹⁴⁹

Archy doesn't slow down in Boston, which would eventually become a center of gravity for Abolitionism and home to many of Brown's closest allies; but Archy reasons that "a New York mob had set me free; a Boston mob might perhaps delight in the opportunity of restoring me to servitude."¹⁵⁰ Archy heads immediately for the docks and, like Ishmael in Melville's later *Moby-Dick*—with every man's hand against him—ships out as a sailor.

Here Hildreth incorporates one of the major themes of anti-slavery literature: in order to be free, he must leave American soil—"Farewell my country! Much is the gratitude and thanks I owe thee! Land of the tyrant and the slave, Farewell!" It is only when he has left port that he dares consider his journey ended, seeing the waves as "the emblems and the children of liberty—I hail ye as my brothers!—for, at last, I too am free!—free!—free!"¹⁵¹ Douglass would also deal in fiction with slavery and the sea, and Melville would treat the relationship between freedom and slavery, land and sea, and the American ship of state, at length. And as in the kind of adventure yarns complicated by slavery that Douglass and Melville would write in the 1850s, Archy now comes into his own at sea, proving himself not only a capable hand but a courageous leader. In fact, in a move that was once a great fear in the United States, he joins an army fighting the U.S.; he is apparently at sea during the War of 1812, and, captured by a British ship, Archy, unlike his mates, joins them. Hildreth's knowledge of recent history serves him well here, and he recalls a central controversy of that War and the Revolution; the presence of the British threatened the stability of New World society by encouraging the enslaved population to join the fight against the new country, their natural enemies. Archy admits that

I felt no patriotic scruples. I had renounced my country; if indeed that place can be fitly called one's country, which while it gives him birth, cuts him off, by its wicked and unjust laws, from every thing that makes life worth having. Despite the murmurs and hisses of my companions, I stepped forward and put my name to the shipping paper. Had they known my history, they would not have blamed me.¹⁵²

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His adventures soon lead him into conflict with an American ship, commanded (in another coincidence that can only be contrived in fiction) by the captain who had transported him as a slave from the prison in D.C. to the Charleston slave market. Archy kills him, and the violent act “felt thrilling to the very elbow-joint, the pleasurable sense of doing justice on a tyrant!” and while he later feels that “there was far too much of savage fury and passionate revenge” in his action, “I can well understand the fierce spirit and ferocious energy of the slave, who vindicates his liberty at the sword's point, and who looks upon the slaughter of his oppressors almost as a debt due to humanity.”¹⁵³ He even considers enacting the kind of raid Brown envisioned: while cruising the Virginia coast, he ponders sending “a boat's crew ashore, and to kidnap from their beds, such of the nearest planters as I could lay my hands upon. But I did not think it prudent to attempt the carrying into execution, this piece of experimental instruction, of which the Virginians stand so much in need.”¹⁵⁴

Hildreth also includes his hero's self-education, which takes place only after his freedom—unlike Douglass, Archy's knowledge is acquired as a luxury, suggesting that, against the qualms of many a Northern abolitionist, that freedom should come *first*; education could wait until later. Archy is surprised to find that the innate and “ardent love of knowledge” he had had as a child, which had been buried by “the accursed discipline of servitude,” had not been “totally extinguished,” and he drinks in “information, as the thirsty earth imbibes the rain.”¹⁵⁵ Though he insists that American slaves are beaten by the completeness of the slave system, “the hateful empire of aristocratic usurpation,” too cowed and ignorant to throw it off, his own story contradicts him. And by imagining this story, piecing it together from his observations of the South while living there, from news accounts, and from imaginative analysis—or wishful thinking—Hildreth tells the kind of story that Northern radical abolitionists would accumulate as fact over the next twenty years, stories of the resistance and resourcefulness of Southern slaves.¹⁵⁶

Archy searches for his wife and son, but Mrs. Montgomery's brother lost her estate to his gambling debts, and they have disappeared. His protagonist's travels allow Hildreth to place American slavery in a global context. All over the New World, Archy sees the ruling classes “lording it with a high hand, over the lives, the liberty and the happiness of men.” But in all these

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places, “I have seen the bondsmen beginning to forget the base lore of traditionary subserviency, and already feeling the impulses and lispings in the language of freedom;” everywhere, that is, “except in my native America.” It is only in the United States, Hildreth argues, that racist ideology aims “to blot out the intellects of half the population, and to extinguish at once and forever, both the capacity and the hope of freedom.” It’s only in the United States that “oppression riots unchecked by fear of God or sympathy for man.” Throughout the current and former Spanish and Portugese colonies of South and Central America and the Caribbean—in “catholic Brazil,” where Americans assume the Old World barbarism of the papists has created a backwards society “where one might expect to find tyranny aggravated by ignorance and superstition,” slaves have legal recourse to purchase or petition for their freedom, and are granted the rights of citizens if they gain it, “a real and practical equality, at the mere mention of which, the prating and prejudiced Americans are filled with creeping horror, and passionate indignation.” In short, “the slave is still regarded as a man, and as entitled to something of human sympathies.” Archy worries that “already the spirit of manhood is extinguished within” his son, and that “the frost of servitude has nipped thy budding soul, and left it blasted,” and, in a move unlike any other antebellum anti-slavery novel, Hildreth’s protagonist decides to “revisit America” and “snatch him from the oppressor's grasp, or perish in the attempt.” The novel ends with a brooding threat: “It is not in vain that I have read the history of the Romans;—I know a way to disappoint the tyrants; the guilt be on their heads! I cannot be a slave the second time.”¹⁵⁷ Hildreth leaves the U.S. on the brink of apocalypse.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

¹ Donald E. Emerson, *Richard Hildreth*, The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science Series LXIV, Number 2 (Baltimore The Johns Hopkins Press) 1946, p. 15.

² Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “The Problem of Richard Hildreth.” *New England Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (Jun., 1940), p. 224.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See, for instance, Albert Von Frank’s *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson’s Boston* (Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 148-160, which I will reference below.

⁵ See Eric F. Goldman’s review of Donald Emerson in *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Jun., 1948), pp. 104-105.

⁶ “Death of Richard Hildreth.; Sketch of his Life and Literary Labors,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1865, p.5.

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⁷ See C. P. Higby's review of Emerson's biography in *American Literature*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Mar., 1948), p. 74

⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. "The Problem of Richard Hildreth," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (Jun., 1940), p. 223.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 229.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 231.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 228.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 225.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 229n.

¹⁴ Melville's 1852 novel *Pierre* (a book that struggled for decades for acceptance, but which carries faint, ominous foreshadowings of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*) led to the assertion "HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY" in the *New York Day Book*. See, among others, Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (Knopf, 2005), pp. 179ff, and Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

¹⁵ See introduction, note 61, above.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Charles Nichols, "The Origins of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *The Phylon Quarterly* 19 (Fall 1958): 328-34.

¹⁷ The episodic novel form works well for both Hildreth and Stowe, moving characters through the Southern landscape and surveying the failings of the American political economy, and Hildreth's formula proves useful to later novelists writing about slavery and rebellion. *The Slave* foreshadows other later anti-slavery novels as well as Stowe's; it features the dark, murderous heroes, the apparently fruitless flight to the sea, and the conflicted view of American religion seen in Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*, Stowe's *Dred*, and Martin Delany's *Blake*. William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or, The President's Daughter*, reputedly the first novel published by an African-American (though published in London, not in the United States), also uses the episodic form, illustrating the descent into the Southern Inferno with one grotesque scene after another. Mark Twain would also follow this formula in his post-Reconstruction pseudo-parodic anti-slavery novel, *Huck Finn*, taking Huck deeper and deeper into a topsy-turvy universe until Huck's journey leads him to a farcical reenactment of a slave rescue, parodying the Harpers Ferry raid along with the childish, Walter Scott-inspired fantasies of the Southern gentry.

¹⁸ In the 20th century, the episodic social novel eventually fell out of favor with many critics and scholars for several decades (even *The Grapes of Wrath* was dismissed for a time), but the character-driven fiction that would develop after Twain (Hemingway cited *Huck Finn* as the first "modern" American novel) was simply inappropriate to the story of the slave economy; for Hildreth and Stowe, and for Frederick Douglass and numerous other writers of slave narratives, character hardly matters in such an arbitrary system. Good character cannot survive its corrosive effects, and the best slaveholder is necessarily a petty tyrant.

Working in a much more unstable social setting than Hildreth was faced with, Stowe's plotting is more careful, more strategic. With many in the North inflamed at the intrusion into their lives of the Fugitive Slave Law, Stowe is careful to make her black characters as sympathetic as possible. Her double plot—George and Eliza Harris struggling north toward freedom while Tom descends further and further south and deeper into the slave system—moves the action in opposite directions so that Stowe can remove the hot-headed rebel George from danger in the South—and have him domesticated through his relationship with Eliza—and send the

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pacifist, maternal, “pure” African Tom to suffer his fate like Christ. Her strategy attempts to finesse American racist assumptions. George’s anger and resourcefulness are explained by the Anglo half of his temperament, while Tom’s languid benevolence reassures white readers that freed slaves will be peaceful. Writing in the early 1850’s, Stowe is working very hard to consolidate the growing strength of anti-slavery sentiment in the aftermath of the 1850 Compromise, without scaring off potential white allies; George’s anger has to be contained, and Tom’s martyrdom has to be unqualified. Working without a potential base of public support in the first place, Hildreth makes no such attempts at, or even gestures toward, negotiating racial theory. He is assailing the monolith of the Slave Power almost single-handedly, without the religious fervor of Garrison, and without the tools of sentimental narrative that developed after the revivals of the Burned-Over District.

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¹⁹ Hildreth, *The Slave*, vol. I, p. i.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁵ See Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*.

²⁶ *The Slave*, p. 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ William Wells Brown, p. 211.

³¹ William Faulkner would combine and invert these tropes to devastating effect in *Absalom, Absalom!* The brothers in question embody the same divided family—the white and legitimate heir, his—possibly—part black brother who goes off to fight anyway, and the circumscribed incest theme—it is not the straightforward rape of slave women that represents incest, but the threat of a marriage between the “black” son and his unsuspecting white sister, which seems to be an amalgam of, among other texts, Melville’s *Pierre* and Poe’s *Fall of the House of Usher*.

³² *The Slave*, vol. I, p. 8.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28-9.

³⁷ This theme recurs in most anti-slavery fiction, and targets both North and South; in Melville’s *Benito Cereno*, which we will discuss at length later, Captain Amasa Delano is terrified of Don Benito’s Old World Catholicism, but oblivious to the real threat of the slaves, and to his own despotic position of power as an American businessman.

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³⁸ *The Slave*, vol. I, p. 29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 43).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64-65.

⁴⁵ Boyd B. Stutler, "John Brown and the Oberlin Lands," *West Virginia History* Volume 12, Number 3 (April 1951), pp. 183-99, recovered from http://www.wvculture.org/history/journal_wvh/wvh12-3.html, May 8, 2008.

⁴⁶ Smith was the son of Peter Smith, John Jacob Astor's business partner, and one of the wealthiest men in the United States, much of his income from land holdings. Smith is the true subject of John Stauffer's *The Black Hearts of Men*. Stutler details at great length the hands through which the land passed before arriving in Smith's enormous portfolio. Interestingly, when Peter Smith first acquired the land from a debtor in 1815, he co-owned it with Elizabeth Cady Stanton's father Daniel Cady.

⁴⁷ See Stutler.

⁴⁸ See Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 63.

⁴⁹ In Walker, *Appeal*, p. 24: "Here my brethren, I want you to notice particularly in the above article, the *ignorant and deceitful actions* of this coloured woman Here a *notorious wretch*, with two other confederates had SIXTY [slaves] in a gang, driving them like brutes . . . and by the help of God they got their chains and hand-cuffs thrown off, and caught two of the wretches and put them to death, and beat the other until they thought he was dead however . . . this *servile woman* helped him upon his horse, and he made his escape. Brethren, what do you think of this?"

⁵⁰ *The Slave*, vol. I, p. 81-83.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵² See Stutler. There was much debate over the relative status of slaves and industrial wage workers, in, for instance, James Henry Hammond's *Letter to an English Abolitionist*, but by 1858, Dickens could refer to this segment of the population as "surplus" in *A Christmas Carol*.

⁵³ *The Slave*, vol. I, p. 66.

⁵⁴ Orestes Brownson discussed this issue at length in the 1840s, and historians David Roedigger, in works like *The Wages of Whiteness*, and Eric Foner, in works like *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, have also discussed it both in terms of emerging labor and capitalist consciousness as well as race.

⁵⁵ *The Slave*, vol. I, p. 98.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106. Stowe would use a similar scene to make a similar argument in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. At the slave market, a woman pleads with her new owner to buy her daughter too, and save her from being purchased as essentially a sex slave. The man, "of benevolent countenance," promises to "do anything in reason," but soon can't afford the level of bidding. The girl's hideous fate "can't be helped;" the "benevolent gentleman is sorry; but, then, the thing happens every day" (290). Personal morality is useless within the infrastructure of slavery, and in fact, one of Stowe's character's argues, it's the "considerate, humane men, that are responsible for all the brutality and outrage," if there were no "good" slaveholders to lend

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“respectability and humanity” to the institution, “the whole thing would go down like a millstone” (295).

⁵⁸ William Faulkner’s novels of the 1930s and early 1940’s seem to follow this same plot—his great patriarchs, Henry Sutpen and Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, destroy themselves and/or their families through their participation in the economic and moral conventions of the slave system, while the descendents of slaveholders, like Ike McCaslin and Quentin Compson, commit social, or ral, suicide to escape the legacy of the slave economy.

⁵⁹ *The Slave* vol. I, p. 123.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁶¹ Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

⁶² One of the many strengths of Stowe’s novel is its encyclopedic scope in relation to the history of American slavery. In this conversation she takes the reader on a surveying tour of the Southern debate on slavery, from Jefferson to the debates held by the Virginia legislature after Nat Turner’s rebellion, debates instigated by Jefferson’s grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph. The scope of the argument takes us as far as a Southern discussion can, up to the beginning of Phillips’ “insurrection of thought,” when Southern rhetoric became increasingly monolithic in its defense of slavery. Stowe herself would not move far beyond the limits of this debate until she composed her next novel, *Dred*, a few years later.

⁶³ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*, Ann Douglas, ed. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 388.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 389.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 390.

⁶⁶ While Walker’s *Appeal* and the launch of *The Liberator* signaled a new life in the anti-slavery movement, a new era of anti-democratic, racist intellectualizing was inaugurated by Thomas Roderick Dew’s response to the abolition debates in Virginia’s legislature that followed Nat Turner’s rebellion (during which the abolition of slavery in Virginia was seriously considered); see Kenneth S. Greenberg, editor, *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996), p. 114ff. If the *Appeal*’s attack on reason seems misplaced, Dew’s work makes it clear why Walker viewed white intellectualism with bitterness and horror. Dew’s *Abolition of Negro Slavery* is a model of the sort of cultured rationalism and use of science to, in Orwell’s phrase, defend the indefensible, that became common in the antebellum South. Dew curtly dismisses the “impropriety” of the abolitionists’ “misguided philanthropy,” an “intrusion, in this matter, of those who have no interest at stake.” With Olympian disdain for “wanton agitation” and “the too ardent and confident pursuit of imaginary good,” Dew attempts to set right an absurd situation—clearly, slavery is a “truly momentous” question that calls for “the most complete and profound knowledge of the nature and sources of national wealth and political aggrandizement” should be left to statesmen:

It requires a clear perception of the varying rights of man amid all the changing circumstances by which he may be surrounded, and a profound knowledge of all the principles, passions, and susceptibilities, which make up the moral nature of our species [and] so strongly marks and characterizes the human family.

Dew’s response to Nat Turner is simply that the business of slavery should continue as before. The rebel leader was a “fanatic” suffering a “mental aberration,” whose handful of followers “paid the price for their crimes,” and the continuing fear of such incidents was baseless (while Dew sees no reason for the terror and alarm of the white population, he doesn’t address the

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terror of the black population at ongoing, brutal reprisals). Dew harbors none of Jefferson's ambivalence here—he sees the problem as a business matter, never considering blacks as a population of human beings with implicit natural rights. Such arguments, “founded on the maxim that ‘all men are born equal,’ that ‘slavery in the abstract is wrong’, that ‘the slave has a natural right to regain his liberty’” are not merely “wild and intemperate,” but “inapplicable and mischievous,” based on “assumptions of the most vicious and alarming kind, subversive of the rights of property and the order and tranquility of society.” “The great object of government,” in fact, “is the protection of property:—from the days of the patriarchs down to the present time;” life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are not at issue here, except, implicitly, for the property holder.

The institution of slavery itself, meanwhile, has the sanction of antiquity, and “that which is the growth of *ages* may require *ages* to remove.” None of the reasoning here is actually explained—Dew claims that while he is a student of “the origin of slavery in ancient and modern times,” and wishes to present work elucidating the historical and political reasons why abolition would be “*totally* impracticable,” he has “been obliged to set it aside for the present.” His argument rests on an insistence that the wealth and security of the Virginia planters could not be maintained without slavery. Further, since slavery will no doubt continue in the other states, a further source of wealth—the sale of slaves—would be closed to Virginia, since “as long as the demand to the south exists, the supply will be furnished in some way or other”—there is no trace here of any possible model on which to create a society beyond that which exists already. Dew simply shrugs off the issue as “Quixotic philanthropy” rationalized by “school boy logic” and dismisses the subject; attempts to devise a plan to abolish slavery are “*vain juggling legislative conceits*,” not worthy of serious consideration. Other writers would work much harder than Dew to justify slavery on moral and even Biblical grounds; Dew, the Virginia statesman and gentleman, sees his position as self-evident. Clearly, in the case of Dew and later apologists for slavery and white supremacy like George Fitzhugh, Garrison's moral suasion meant less than nothing; the appeal to their better natures and to the logic of democratic principles was dangerous nonsense, and the threat of the inevitability of violence simply meant that control had to be maintained at all costs. Despite Garrison's best rhetorical efforts, he would not reach the hearts of the slaveholders, and the approach that Brown took, to engage them more directly, became less and less avoidable as the decades between Walker's *Appeal* and the Dred Scot case passed.

⁶⁷ Stowe, *UTC*, p. 391.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 392

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

⁷⁴ Brown's essay is almost always mentioned by his biographers, but rarely discussed in depth. It is reprinted in numerous collections.

⁷⁵ “Sambo's Mistakes”. Ruchames, *Revolutionary*, 69.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69-70.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

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⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

⁸³ *The Slave*, vol. I, p. 105.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 102-103.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁹¹ This also anticipates arguments like those made by Eugene Genovese *et al* that Elkins was wrong in claiming that slavery infantilized its victims.

⁹² Douglass, *Narrative*, p. 47.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁹⁵ Phillips, *Three Interviews*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 154-155.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164-165.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133-134.

¹⁰⁰ William Byrd, *A History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* can be found here: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/byrd/byrd.html>

¹⁰¹ *The Slave*, vol. I, p. 130.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁰⁴ Stauffer describes Smith's belief in "Bible Politics" at length in *The Black Hearts of Men*, though, as I've made clear in my discussion of the New Lights, I don't agree with him in describing Douglass' or Brown's views as millennial.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159

¹⁰⁶ See Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*.

¹⁰⁷ *The Slave*, vol. I, p. 161.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹¹⁰ *The Slave*, vol. II, p. 44.

¹¹¹ See William Lloyd Garrison, "On the Constitution and the Union," published in the December 29, 1832, issue of *The Liberator*. Text recovered online May 8, 2008, at <http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=570>.

¹¹² *The Slave*, vol. II, p. 46.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 48-49.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61-62.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71-72.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73-74.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

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¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹²¹ Again, Faulkner seems to echo this in his description of Thomas Sutpen's mansion in *Absalom! Absalom!*

¹²² *The Slave*, vol. II, p. 68.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94-95.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83-84.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹³² See Oates' description in *To Purge This Land*, pp. 23-24.

¹³³ *The Slave*, vol. II, pp. 102-103.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 117-118.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140-141.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁵⁶ Most of the great slave narratives were published after the publication of *The Slave*, between 1845 and 1860.

¹⁵⁷ *The Slave*, vol. II, pp. 161-163.

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CHAPTER FIVE: TWO NATIONS AT WAR

Hildreth's *Despotism in America*

That apocalypse seemed to be coming. In between Hildreth's novel and his polemic, *Despotism in America*, the anti-slavery movement began to find a difficult new life in the crises of free white men—the devastating Crash of 1837, the increasingly violent mob attacks on abolitionists,¹ and the move to annex Texas as slave territory that began the same year and took a decade to resolve, drove more Northerners to an opposition to the slave economy. In *Despotism in America* Hildreth refuses to acknowledge the failures of industrial capitalism in causing the crash, insisting that economic instability was the fault of the South. But many agreed; the severity of the 1837 Crash shook the faith of many Americans, and the suffering of Northern workers and would-be entrepreneurs like Brown was easy to link to the push for territory and political power by a Southern elite. The period was truly a state of war, not merely of planters against slaves but seemingly of the Southern slave economy against the workers of the North. The decade framed by the petition of Texas for entry into the Union in 1837 and the United States' invasion of Mexico in 1846 saw an enormous leap forward toward sectional confrontation. The 1840's brought more aggressive action on the part of many abolitionists, challenged by the growing activity and militancy of black leaders, alarmed by pro-slavery violence and inspired in part by slave insurrections at sea. The 1839 *Amistad* rebellion provided Americans with “examples of black manhood” to counter racist assumptions about African docility, and the 1841 case of the *Creole* proved that “American slaves could be brave and successful” in staging insurrections, bringing widespread attention to the issues of slavery and resistance. John Quincy Adams famously defended the *Amistad* rebels in an American court, and abolitionists themselves began to consider the possibility of rebellion a potential good. The South's fear of outside agitation began to come true as abolitionists ventured into slave states, and institutional conflicts grew. In 1839, New York Governor William H. Seward “refus[ed] to extradite” to Virginia “three black sailors accused of helping a slave escape,” and in 1841, Charles T. Torrey was arrested and imprisoned in Maryland for venturing south to assist fugitives; he died in prison in 1844.² Hildreth's work was instrumental in formulating a way to

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understand the conflict between North and South as one that had to be resolved by freedom for the slaves by any means necessary.

Indeed, a short text of Hildreth's, *Tract No. 8: What Can I Do For The Abolition Of Slavery?*, which addresses the role Northern whites can take in abolitionism, can serve as a sort of companion to "Sambo's Mistakes." It is in fact a bit conventional, even timid, compared to his novel and *Despotism*. But it's a masterful display of tactical rhetoric and strategic bridge-building long before the crises of the early 1850s, or even of the mid-1840s. Opening the movement to every free adult—and closing Northern society to complicity with the South—Hildreth guesses that there is not a single "thoughtful, intelligent man" who doesn't consider slavery "a frightful evil" destroying "the morals, the progress, the happiness" of the North as well as the South. Anyone "who makes any pretensions to the character of a good man" has at some point had "an ardent desire" to end the ruinous practice, and "looked upon it as his imperative duty" to lift "an evil pressing with intolerable weight on the enslaved, but pressing too, and that not lightly, on us all."

Hildreth is offering Northerners the kind of transformative moment of clarity that Brown's Sambo will claim to have had, a moment in which they can abandon their vapid selfishness and join a broader cause. There are "few hearts," he sees, "in which such good wishes" haven't "budded and blossomed; but," he charges, "in how few have they ripened and borne fruit! Excuses for not acting are various and plausible. This, one says, is too great a business for me." But even such daunted men, Hildreth claims, can act—by voting. In what seems a retreat from the militancy of his writing in the 1830s, Hildreth puts some faith in the machinery of government. Slavery "is a creature of the law," and whereas the people of other nations must resort to armed revolt to regain the levers of power, the United States legal system can conceivably crush the system if the weight of Northern opinion is thrown behind it. But even here, Hildreth's advice is more direct and concrete than Stowe's would be almost a decade later; rather than "feeling right," Hildreth insists that the *least* a moral, intelligent man can do is *vote* right.

There are a number of rhetorical twists here that should interest us, and many that, given the tone of much of Hildreth's writing, should make us question whether this should be read more

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like a funhouse mirror version of *A Modest Proposal*—the reasonableness of his call for men to vote defies reason .

Comparing the slaveholders to Shylock in their brutal reliance on the law, he calls the Grimke sisters and Lydia Maria Child “Portias” “who, in default of grave and learned men to do it, assum[e] the guise of doctors of law” and “have taught us how such bonds ought to be expounded.”³ If everyone follows them, the Supreme Court will follow, too. Hildreth makes a case for massive civil resistance through the machinery of the democratic process, and assures his readers that “Slavery will be abolished so soon as the slave-holders see and believe that we are at all likely to gain a majority.” In reality, the South seceded when the threat of this became feasible in 1861, and it seems unlikely that Hildreth would not see this; nevertheless, he claims that each vote for slavery will melt the hardened hearts of the South.. This is his version of a “last hope” that “lies before us.”

When our New England fathers heard of the march of British regiments upon Lexington, did they wait to see if the people of other states, other counties, other towns, would come to the rescue? Did they wait for general orders, or for any body? Not they. Each man seized his musket, and hastened to the field. . . . Our fathers were subjected to the necessity of fighting; we need only vote; we need only to muster, to show ourselves . . . and the enemy will surrender at discretion.⁴

But the hypothetical conditions by which slavery can be peacefully ended here don’t exist. A majority of Americans don’t demonstrate their resistance to slavery through voting, and so the words of Shylock’s—“My deeds upon my head”—become ominous, and Hildreth’s comparison to the voting public and the fighters at Lexington become more literally true—since Americans don’t exercise their right to vote slavery into oblivion, it would become necessary to take up arms.

The apocalypse that the ending of *The Slave* seems to predict would not come, and in 1852, more or less concurrent with the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Hildreth revised, added to, and reissued his novel. *The White Slave; or, Memoirs of a Fugitive* includes Archy Moore’s return to the South to search for his family, and his reunion with Thomas, who has now inhabited the swamps for almost twenty years. Near his old neighborhood of the Loosahatchie plantation, Archy encounters a party of white men, heavily

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armed, exhausted and dirty, with a pack of hounds, the “apparently lifeless body” of another white man, and a black prisoner, “wounded and bleeding” and “verging on old age,” but “of most powerful and athletic frame” and “a certain haughty and dogged aspect of defiance, the look of one who had been long accustomed to liberty.” This was “Wild Tom,” bane of the local plantations.⁵ Not merely a petty thief and mischief-maker, Thomas was John Brown’s dream, “a general instructor in mischief and insubordination, an aider and abetter of runaways, and harborer of fugitives.”⁶

Hildreth takes the opportunity to further his observations of the slave economy and drawing parallels in the behavior of master and slave. At the height of the season, he notes, many of the most “incorrigible” field hands simply disappear for long periods, enjoying a “summer vacation.” In this they resemble their masters, who also “abandon their plantations, and to figure away for a few weeks, as grand as runaway Cuffee himself, at Philadelphia, New York, or Saratoga,” where they mix with the “admiring and curious Yankees.” They go out into the world posing as “millionaires and nabobs,” and spend the rest of the year “pinching at home . . . and living in almost as much terror of duns, writs, and executions, as their unhappy slaves do of the lash.”⁷ The slave economy may not be as brutal to its beneficiaries as it is to the slaves, but it is, in some ways, just as humiliating.

When a recent runaway is caught in what is thought to be Thomas’ hideout, he, in classic form, remains silent, “affect[ing] the most stolid ignorance of the existence of any such island, or the swamp either.”⁸ Beaten and actually hung, he finally admits knowing Thomas’ whereabouts, and the legendary outlaw is surrounded, captured, and tried almost on the spot. Archy risks speaking to him and is seized on suspicion of being an accomplice. The improvised court first asks Thomas who he belongs to. The answer is “to the God who made us all,” and after a little more such sparring, Thomas is condemned. His defiance earns him not a hanging but a burning, “to make an example of him.”⁹ Thomas dies “unsubdued[;] he looked round on his shouting tormentors with a smile of contemptuous defiance.”¹⁰ Here, as in Stowe’s work, the successful overthrow of slavery is still not an option, and a deliverer is not yet in sight. Death or escape are the only possible outcomes of resistance to enslavement. Archy looks forward to “a new generation, to whom justice will be something more than a mere empty sound,” and a “darkness which precedes the dawn; for what greater darkness than this is possible!”¹¹ Archy appeals to the

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“uncontaminated children” of this generation to listen to “the voice of love and mercy,” which is hidden from “the wise and the prudent,” who rely on the self-serving comfort of reasoned discourse. “The white slaves in America are far more numerous than the black ones,” he says—not legally defined slaves like him, they are slaves by choice, “made such by a base hereditary servility, which, methinks, it is time to shake off.” Hildreth ends his revision with a call to collective arms; the new generation must answer the call of “destiny”; “Upon you,” Archy says, “the decision of this question—no longer to be staved off by any political temporizing—is devolved,” and Americans “who would be free themselves” can’t “safely” participate in “any scheme of oppression. The dead and the living cannot be chained together.” Chains now bind slave and freeman so tightly together that “even your hearts are no longer to beat freely.”

Take courage, then, and do as I did. Throw off the chains! And stop not there; others are also to be freed. It seems a doubtful thing; but courage, trust, and perseverance, proof against delay and disappointment, faith and hope, will do it. I am old, and may not live to see it; but my five grandchildren, born, thank God, in free England, surely will.¹²

In 1840 Hildreth followed his novel with an answer to Tocqueville, *Despotism in America, or An Inquiry into the Nature and Results of the Slave-Holding System in the United States*. Hildreth takes up Thomas Dew’s challenge to analyze the economic situation, and harnesses the logic of political economy against the South. While not as fervent as Walker, Hildreth articulates an effective vision of the South as the site of perpetual war and mayhem, an unstable dystopia locked in “a protracted state of war,” ripe for internal economic collapse, insurrection, foreign invasion, and environmental catastrophe; while Dew claims that abolition would make Virginia “a desert,”¹³ Hildreth argues that it is slavery that is already doing so. In his analysis, the South is what 21st century commentators might call a “failed state.” There is no aspect of the slave economy that can compare to the North, not “wealth, . . . education, . . . the useful and ornamental arts, . . . public institutions, . . . facility of intercourse”¹⁴ By any measure “that constitutes civilization,” there is no element of Southern society that actually functions under the assumptions of Western humanist philosophy or classic economic theory,¹⁵ and there is nothing that actually works—every aspect of Southern society is backward and corrupt—a bankrupt failure. One can *see* the superiority of the Northern economy “in the splendor of cities, the

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neatness of towns, the comforts and conveniency of individual dwellings.” A visitor to a slave state “is puzzled and shocked, by what appears to him a series of distressing incongruities”¹⁶—everything is upside down. While “[t]he great objects aimed at” by a nation’s constitution must be security, freedom, and equality, political and social equality and equality of property, “constitutions of the southern states . . . make a deliberate sacrifice of them all.”¹⁷

The South is one of the least successful civilizations in history; like Walker, Hildreth finds that comparing American forced labor to other systems of slavery in other times is “not favorable to us.”¹⁸ Hildreth claims that the South violates the Western drive for progress and improvement, and its respect for industry and thrift; “indolence” and “incapacity” are the results of Southern culture, because “the love of idleness is in fact, the real foundation of slavery.”¹⁹ Even the cherished ideals of property rights are violated. Hildreth argues that “Property is better secured in proportion as a greater part of the population is made to feel a direct interest in its security.”²⁰ But “under a constitution authorizing slavery,” the “very nature” of slave property, “its total want of any foundation of mutual benefit, is peculiarly insecure.”²¹ By this logic, Brown’s plan to destabilize the region’s economy by running off “property,” with the possible help of at least some of the white population, was based on a reasonable economic assumption—that the economy was already unstable by definition.

One of the crucial differences between an anti-slavery politician like Abraham Lincoln, who saw no Constitutional grounds to attack slavery in the states, and radicals like Hildreth, Garrison, and Brown, is perhaps a belief in the United States for its own sake—patriotism and nationalism at least on some level divorced from its function as an engine of increasing liberty and equality. Hildreth articulates, in the terms of political theory and not simply visceral moral outrage, a position from which an extra-legal attack on economic and political institutions that support inequality and exploitation can be mounted. Hildreth not only attacks the South as a danger to democratic forms of government, but also expresses some doubt about the United States itself as a site of progress and human achievement. In the opening to *Despotism in America*, he acknowledges the grandiose claims already forming about the U.S, but does not put much stock in them. “It has been said, and often repeated,” he begins, “that the United States of America are trying a great social experiment, upon the result of which hangs the future fate not of America only, but to a certain extent, of all mankind.” Hildreth deflates the portentousness of the

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statement immediately: “The consequences likely to flow from the success or failure of this experiment, are doubtless exaggerated”²² Hildreth believes that the “universal laws” involved in the pursuit of human liberty will survive and find ways to flourish “in spite of narrow systems of policy and morals,” or the fate of one nation. For Hildreth, democracy is a nascent, still-unformed and unrealized concept. The existence of the United States as a sovereign nation in no way implies the end of the democratic experiment.

But he questions the definition of the experiment as well; it is not “purely an experiment in democracy,” one that “we are assured by every writer, native, or foreign, who has touched upon the subject . . . is carried on to the greatest possible advantage” (in what seems a pointed dismissal of Tocqueville), but also, “in certain other parts of the country . . . [an] *experiment of Despotism*.” The Southern States, he claims, “though certain democratic principles are to be found in their constitutions,” are “aristocracies of the sternest and most odious kind.”²³

Hildreth tersely dismisses American exceptionalism: “The men who formed the Union were neither better nor wiser than ourselves,” and is unmoved by sentiment: “excellent a thing as the Union is, the people, ignorant and short-sighted, may sometimes take it into their hands to think otherwise,” so “a *prejudice* in favor of the Union” has been manufactured, “a sort of feeling for it like that feeling of loyalty, which had often upheld a throne in spite of the vices and the tyranny” of the occupant. In a democracy, such sentiments are “not only useless, they are highly mischievous . . . fetters put into the hands of the artful . . . by . . . which the people are bound;” the Union is “in itself, neither good nor bad.” Hildreth points out that “sixty years ago, we had a Union with Britain . . . a cherished Union . . . What curses, eighty years ago, would have blighted the parricide, who would have gone about to sever that connection”²⁴ If the current Union were “the pretext for a violent interference with our dearest rights,” he asks,

Suppose that under pretence of preserving the Union, we are to be deprived of the liberty of the press, the liberty of discussion, the liberty of thought,—nay, the liberty of feeling, the right of sympathy with those who suffer?²⁵

All these rights are being derailed by the Southern experiment, and the results should be obvious. Using a trope that would be used over and over by abolitionists, Hildreth questions the very causes of the Revolution, all minor in comparison to what the North suffers under the influence of Southern oligarchs. Would the Revolutionaries give up “all the advantages of our

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Union with Britain . . . merely to avoid the payment of a paltry tax on tea?” If so, then how should Americans in the 19th century respond “when it is undertaken to deprive us not of our money,—which, for the sake of peace, we might be willing to part with,—but of that whose value money cannot estimate . . . the essential life-breath of liberty”? Like Garrison, Hildreth sees the answer in disunion; a union on Southern terms is “a mockery.” Hildreth’s position is unequivocal: “Perish the Union; let it ten times perish, from the moment it becomes inconsistent with humanity and with freedom!”²⁶

Hildreth critiques the South on every level, and his economic analyses are some of his most forward-looking. Though he clearly favors the industrial economy of the North, Hildreth’s description of Southern agribusiness sounds like one of the first critiques of monopoly capitalism: “slaves are a sort of property much less valuable when held in small portions, than when possessed in masses”; the owner of hundreds of slaves can absorb losses fairly easily, and the “average loss and gain” will be predictable, where the owner of a few slaves might be devastated by illness, death, or escape—this kind of property, to the small farmer, is “peculiarly unstable.”

But when a man is enabled to possess himself of the labor of a large number of individuals to whom he is not obliged to make any compensation beyond a bare support, his wealth tends to increase in a vast and disproportionate ratio, over the wealth of that individual who relies solely upon his own labor.²⁷

So the southern economy is a failure, and dragging the rest of the nation with it; “the commercial fluctuations of the United States generally take their origin in the South,” where the cotton monoculture ensures instability.* as its price fluctuations produce alternating giddiness and panic.²⁸

More chilling is what amounts to an environmental critique of a mismanaged, monoculture agribusiness that literally “kills land” and forces the endless pursuit of new territory. The “single prop of the cultivation of cotton” not only “forms a most slender, fragile, and uncertain support, on which to rest the prosperity of an extensive and increasing population,”²⁹ but just as slavery “murders the soul,” the practice of slave-based agriculture is the practice of “killing land.”³⁰ In what is almost a brief, deadly parody of Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Hildreth

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describes the history of the tobacco business in North America and the apocalyptic dystopia it is creating, a paradise laid waste. Virginia had once been “the richest and most desirable country any where to be found along the Atlantic coast of the union”:

Washed on one side by a spacious bay, into which poured numerous rivers, broad, deep and navigable [and filled] with such an abundance of fish, fowl and oysters as might alone suffice to support a numerous population.³¹

But with the introduction of slave labor and subsequent spread of a “thrifless system of cultivation” of tobacco, eventually “the entire surface of the older portions of the state had been cleared, planted and exhausted,”³² destroying the land, so that its main export was now the slaves it no longer needed. So new territory must be opened, and “the new states are aggrandized at the expense of the old ones.”³³ But the new states “are treading in [Virginia’s] footsteps. From her unfortunate condition at the present moment it is easy to pretend what theirs must presently become.”³⁴

Implicit in Hildreth’s account is an indictment of imperial pretension (not yet called Manifest Destiny) and the drive for new territory, leaving devastation behind, that would lead to the Mexican War and Bleeding Kansas as well as to environmental disaster and economic collapse. In a process he calls the “progress of pauperism,” the exhaustion of arable land leads to the uselessness of the slave population, which needs to be sold off, depriving the land of the cultivators who could do the work of recovering the land through responsible farming practices. Those who actually work the land are an enemy population to be watched with fear and suspicion, a fifth column ever ready to revolt, as in the War of 1812, when the “hardy cultivators of the earth [were] regarded with more dread and terror than the invaders themselves.”³⁵ Hildreth anticipates arguments linking Manifest Destiny and slavery; his observation that “the new republic of Texas will presently be entering the market as a rival”³⁶ is a prescient sign of the lengths to which the slave economy would have to go in the next decade to sustain itself.³⁷ But Hildreth sees no future in imperialism. The slaveholders are not up to the challenge of global power; “The weight of empire presses too heavily upon their effeminate and feeble necks.”³⁸

Regardless of the cool of his analysis, Hildreth’s avenues of approach to the problem of slavery frequently resemble David Walker’s. As a foil to Walker, Hildreth helps create a matrix of ideas and observations that normalize the later radicalism of late-era abolitionists who chose,

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like Brown, to fight the U.S. government. Like Walker, Hildreth singles out for blame for the intractability of the slave system the Founding Fathers, “Henry and Washington, and those other great men whose devoted patriotism and many virtues would make us willingly forget that on their own estates they were tyrants.”³⁹ These men believed in “democracy among the aristocrats”:

. . . the perfect equality of all the members of the privileged order, has ever been a popular doctrine in all aristocracies Each individual is always the ardent and zealous champion of his own liberty Hence it is that we find kings and emperors among the champions of liberty and equal rights, by which *they* understand, the liberty of governing their own realms Who more zealous, more earnest, more sincere in liberty’s case? . . .

This passion for personal liberty burns . . . nowhere fiercer [sic] than in the hearts of an aristocracy . . . who have learned to estimate its value having constantly before their eyes the terrible contrast of servitude.⁴⁰

But the two-faced equivocations of Henry and Washington (or the oligarchies of lawyers and clergy in New England, and of the land-owners in the mid-Atlantic states, which he discusses at length) were not the greatest threat to democracy—it was the presence of “traitors to the cause” among the Revolutionary generation, men brought up with “a horror of democracy [as] the concentration of all possible evil.”⁴¹ These men’s fears had to be assuaged. The New England upper class, resistant to the progress of democratic concepts, accused the “clerical allies” of the democrats, “the Baptists and other dissenters from the established creed,” of being “wild enthusiasts” who “sought to destroy the foundations of society.” This is a point worth noting—Hildreth sheds light here on the practice, already well established, of labeling political dissidents “wild political fanatics, the disciples of Robespierre, desirous to . . . sprinkle the land in fire and blood.” This practice was essential to resisting ant-slavery activism over the next two decades.⁴²

Like Walker, Hildreth holds up Jefferson for special scorn, contrasting the self-serving “love of liberty” he finds in the American ruling class to

a passion not for individual freedom, but for the freedom of all men . . . the extension to others of that which we find best and most desirable for ourselves . . . not only for those to whom we are bound by familiar ties . . . or those whom we . . . assimilate to ourselves by some real or fanciful analogies; but absolutely, its extension to all men,—the love of freedom . . . as an abstract good.⁴³

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“To this . . . feeling, noble and refined,” Hildreth claims, Jefferson “did not dare to appeal,” acting instead as “champion for equality among aristocrats,” while he “labor[ed] to forget that the unprivileged class—some of whom, to believe the voice of common report, were his own children,—had any greater capacities or rights than beasts of burden,” and editing his own declaration of American rights until “the mantle of liberty” protected “within its torn and mutilated folds only the privileged order.”⁴⁴ Jefferson chose to avoid the “storm of hatred and reproach, not rashly to have been encountered, nor easily to have been withstood” that he would have brought on himself had he tried to “preach the full extent of his doctrines in his native state,”⁴⁵ Hildreth notes ironically; clearly Jefferson’s equivocations, hypocrisies, and failures make him as great a villain to Hildreth as he was to Walker. But equally ironically, Hildreth credits Jefferson’s ideals (which, the writer points out, Jefferson pursued with “an almost *fanatical* zeal” [emphasis mine]) in spite of his failure to implement or live up to them, as they embody an implicit rebuke to the racist theories of black passivity, North and South, that John Brown found so repulsive:

Jefferson based his political opinions upon general principles of human nature. Men were supposed, in other systems of politics, to be helpless, blind, incapable children, unfit to take care of themselves Jefferson argued, that however weak and blind men might be, yet their own strength and eye-sight were their surest hope If aid were sought elsewhere, whence would it come? These guides, these guardians, these governors Are they not men, weak and blind . . . ready to betray the confidence placed in them . . . ?⁴⁶

Hildreth’s entire text, in fact, might be seen as an answer to Jefferson as much as to Tocqueville and Dew. He repeatedly throws the arguments in *Notes on the State of Virginia* back in the planters’ faces, such as Jefferson’s observation, discussed above, that children learn “the lineaments of wrath” from their slaveholding parents, ultimately unsuited for democratic citizenship. But while Jefferson vacillates between a tentative racism and condemnation of the conditions which allow “one half of the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other,”⁴⁷ Hildreth’s description of the division of master and slave ignores any distinctions based on race, simply viewing the victims and victors of the system as men, and countrymen; the laws of property and privilege, he claims, favor “certain families and their descendants,” while “other families and their offspring” are utterly deprived of all rights.⁴⁸

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Just as he does in *The Slave*, Hildreth is able to provide reams of anecdotal evidence pointing to a sociopathic culture that upends logic and morality. Hildreth dismisses southern claims of benign paternalism in his portrait of the “domestic economy of the south” in a section considering “the treatment of American slaves considered as animals.”⁴⁹ In a formulation that would become common in anti-slavery literature, he argues that “the claims and rights of horses and of slaves, are confined within the same limits.”⁵⁰ In the upside-down world of a slave system, this has consequences for livestock as well as human property; though it is “often argued that self-interest alone is enough to make the master attentive to the lives and health of his slaves” as he would any other valuable property.⁵¹ Not so, he claims, relating a story, “perhaps a little exaggerated,” of a Virginia planter who fired his overseer because not enough cattle had died over the winter to provide enough leather for shoes for the slaves. In this Faulknerian tale, the slave economy upends all traditional values—even the husbandry of animals is a brutal farce. In the same section, Hildreth compares the treatment of slaves unfavorable to the “sort of discipline which we have fixed upon as the most terrible and exemplary punishment for crime,” but these are neither animals nor criminals but “our fellow countrymen in the south,”⁵² an ironic but not entirely inaccurate term, given that slaves technically counted in the representation of the southern states. The Southern population found itself “in the unhappy predicament of a savage tribe in which one half, in order to sustain itself, are driven to kill and devour the other half.” In this discussion, slaves are seen as *political* beings; the “political results of slavery are most disastrous. Slaves suffer at one and the same time, all the worst evils of tyranny and of anarchy,”⁵³ existing under an entirely punitive and penal legal system, a multitude of obligations with no rights of any kind.

For Hildreth, though, the greatest inversion of value is in the value of labor. Again, Hildreth follows Jefferson, who claims in the *Notes on the State of Virginia* that “in a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him” (Jefferson conveniently attributes the tyranny of the South to the weather), and that Southerners’ “industry also is destroyed” with “their morals.”⁵⁴ In the southern economy, labor is degradation and idleness is freedom. For Hildreth the domestic economy of the south is built on an inverse ratio of wealth and suffering: “with the progress of wealth and luxury among the masters, the misery, the degradation of the slaves, have been steadily aggravated.”⁵⁵ There is no escaping the

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dysfunction; the lowest levels of free white society do not function either (though Hildreth reads the pathology top-down). The “laboring classes” are “paralyzed by a fatal prejudice which regards manual labor as the badge of a servile condition,”⁵⁶ condemning the Southern economy to stagnation. “The small planter . . . has been bred up in poverty and ignorance” and though he proves a “mild and indulgent master,” he is given to “fits of drunkenness,” and “beats and abuses his slaves. But he does the same thing to his wife and children.”⁵⁷ As his wealth increases, he becomes more corrupt, and his slaves, too, become more corrupted, suffering a “regular and systematic discipline, resembling the despotic precision of a well-trained army.”⁵⁸

So, Hildreth argues, the “amelioration in the treatment of the Virginia slaves” over the previous twenty years has been due mainly to the failing economy; “As the masters have grown poor . . . they have grown comparatively humane.”⁵⁹ But for the most part slaveholders cling to a brutal, militarized culture, in which every citizen must be a soldier, and “[t]he soldier nursed in blood and robbery, however mildly and gently he conducts himself, is at best a tame tiger, not rashly to be trusted.”⁶⁰ And the cancer spreads. Free whites, “impoverished and degraded by the influence of the slave system,” are typically pushed west, so that “the poisonous influence of slavery is almost in as full operation in the new states as in the old.”⁶¹ While Kentucky and Tennessee still enjoy some of the vestiges of democracy, the Deep South is “totally stript of that patriarchal character with which it is sometimes more or less invested in some of the older states.”⁶² Hildreth is essentially describing the Deep South as what would later be called a banana republic, steaming with misery and ripe for revolution. The logic of violent insurrection follows from the logic of owning slaves; Hildreth asks if the planter would

hesitate one moment to stab, shoot, hang, or burn the best beloved of his servants, if he supposed that servant’s life inconsistent with his safety, or with the security of that tyrannical empire, upon which depends his condition of master?⁶³

That the planter cannot recognize that they are in a state of war is mystifying: “Do they not know the stake for which they play?” Hildreth asks, “Do they entertain the puerile notion, that an eternal war can be waged, and all the blows . . . be only on one side?”⁶⁴

Hildreth paints a picture of a ruling class riven with fear and hair-trigger violence, a culture of paranoia and persecution, particularly in the Deep South: “the probability of dying a violent death is far greater in the states of Mississippi and Arkansas, than in any other part of the known

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world, not even Texas excepted.”⁶⁵ Mark Twain would popularize this picture of Southern culture on the skids almost fifty years later in writing about this period in *Huckleberry Finn*, Hildreth’s description is cogent and damning. “Every little village in the south has its race-course, its billiard room, its faro table, and its gambling house,” while drunkenness is rampant among the rich and poor whites as well as slaves, all of whom share an intense need to kill time. The entire society is trapped in a debilitating charade, “palsied, and made stagnant by the poison of slavery.”⁶⁶ The “virtue” of free women depends on the “luxurious indulgence” of white men’s freedom to rape slaves,⁶⁷ while stable marriage and sexual fidelity for a slave is made impossible, and “to persons so situated, we cannot justly apply ideas founded upon totally different circumstances.”⁶⁸ The culture consists of addictive vices: gambling, lynching, dueling, concealed weapons, delusions of grandeur. “Persons guilty of homicide are to be met in the best society” throughout the south, and though “the alarm is less” of violence among the wealthy, but “the danger more real;” meanwhile “the gallows is reserved for abolitionists, negro-stealers, and *poor* white folks.” Southern aristocrats pride themselves on their refinement, but manners “are far from being any certain index of character,” and manners are no replacement for “the virtues,” which “are lamentably deficient.”⁶⁹

The “frantic fear” of slave violence, though, is always present:

A single Negro seen in the woods with a gun upon his shoulder, suffices to put a whole village to flight. Half-a-dozen unintelligible words overheard and treasured up . . . are enough to throw all the southern states into commotion, and to bring nights of agony and sleeplessness to hundreds of thousands.⁷⁰

It’s only logical to believe that the slaves will attempt it if they can, “and emulate their masters in bloody cruelties and barbarous revenge,” enacting a “lesson they have been all their lives learning” (this is a layer of his discussion of Southern education that Jefferson neglects). Southern planters, “men of violence and blood, accustomed to go their daily rounds with the pistol in one hand and the whip in the other,” and who enjoy “every advantage on their side with the single exception of justice,” would “stagger and turn pale” at the idea of insurrection only “because a guilty conscience disturbs their reason, and frights away their courage.”⁷¹ The “antics” that the periodic insurrection scares inspire would be “farcical, did they not generally terminate in bloody tragedies.” In these cases, “terror levels all distinctions,”⁷² and violent

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reprisal can strike anyone: “Blood ! blood !—nothing else can appease the general alarm.”⁷³ And the paranoia is a fear of forces without as well as within (in the 20th century, the Cold War era anti-civil rights South, and the FBI, would have similar fears of “outside agitators”). The ever-present “alarm” that “the slaves themselves may reclaim their liberty by force” is exacerbated

when it is known that there are other persons, over whom the slave-masters have no control, who sympathize with the slaves, and who profess the intention of using every moral means to bring about their emancipation. Moral means is a phrase which slave-masters find it difficult to understand. Force, violence, is the only means with which they are familiar; and this means which they themselves so constantly employ, they naturally apprehend, will be used against them.⁷⁴

So the masters, in their constant readiness for violence, also suffer a bizarre state of militarized anarchy—it is “mean” to “appeal to the law,” and since men must be armed at all times, what use is the law in the first place?⁷⁵ “For the sake of brutalizing others,” Hildreth claims, “they have sought to barbarize themselves.”⁷⁶ There is more freedom, Hildreth argues—of speech, of opinion, of behavior—in Old World locales like Rome and Moscow than Richmond or Charleston, cities that fall far behind the urban model presented by the capitals of Europe and the North.

Intelligence among the privileged class is no more valued. Even for men of “reflection and discernment,” to express their recognition of the “monstrous and extravagant absurdity” of the assumptions of the slave system would be “high treason.”⁷⁷ Southern political leaders “puzzle and lose themselves in vain attempts to reconcile the metaphysical system of rights acknowledged in their own state constitutions” with slavery, becoming mere “sophists” who “reason like a book” from arguments that “are utterly false.”⁷⁸ Meanwhile, intelligence is feared in the slave, once again demonstrating the catastrophic insanity of the system; “a civilized man, possessed of a certain portion of knowledge” is “capable of producing for his master a greater revenue” than a man reduced to “a mere, two-legged animal,” but in the slave economy, such a piece of property is “far more dangerous” and an uneasy peace, risky and unstable, has to be reached in order to continue to extort value; while they may generate great revenue, “they have ever been ready to burst into rebellion,” or at least escape or suicide, simply to destroy their own market value to their owner.⁷⁹

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Hildreth repeatedly points out that those who *do* understand the logic implicit in this social system are the slaves themselves, and they act accordingly, selling their labor and freedom dearly and extracting a price when they can, engaging in all sorts of low level resistance and petty theft. While a planter may rail against theft, the assumptions of property have been turned on their heads; the slaves “surely have a better title than the masters” to the things they appropriate.⁸⁰ A planter may rage at the stupidity of his slaves, but he “cannot force his slave to reason, to remember, or . . . to hear or see” the master’s own insane logic.⁸¹ In a state that overturns reason and nature, all values are reversed. Slaves, “we are told, are arrant liars” who consider successful deceit “praiseworthy.” But “Falsehood has ever been considered a lawful art of war,” so “why not?” Unlike their masters, slaves recognize that they “are not connected by any ties of social duty” to “their enemies who have seized them, and who keep them by force.” They live in a “condition of open war” and all their actions should be understood in that context; “overmatched” physically, “stratagem and falsehood are their only resource;” in a “silent and quiet way [they] retort upon their masters the aggressions and the robbery that are perpetrated on themselves.”⁸²

What demonstrates the moral flattening of a violent economic system more than anything here is the shared traits of master and slave; the system “operates almost exactly alike” on them both—their vices, their character flaws, their habits—“Ferocity of temper, idleness, improvidence, drunkenness, gambling.”⁸³ Their lives are similarly structured, and “both masters and slaves are equally miserable;”⁸⁴ both suffer a “weariness of soul.”⁸⁵ The difference is that the slaves are often more conscious and deliberate, and their vices are often conscious acts of resistance that serve the purpose of undermining the slave system. Hildreth anticipates the work of historians like Eugene Genovese by more than a century, describing slaves’ day-to-day resistance to their masters.⁸⁶ He returns again and again to the theme of idleness. For the free white it is a symbol of their freedom, while work is a badge of servitude. But for the slave, “idleness is a means of lessening the value of that stolen labor upon which the master has seized, and so of indulging that indignation and hatred which the slave naturally feels.”⁸⁷ And for Hildreth, the “great defects of character” that master and slave share “all exhibit themselves among the free, in a form more aggravated, and more disgusting, at all events more pregnant with mischief, than among the slaves.”⁸⁸ But for slaves, drinking and gambling are “venal,”

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minor offenses, with no social consequences—there is “no danger” that a slave will “precipitate a whole family into poverty and distress” or “have a pernicious influence upon society at large,” but a slaveholder’s drunkenness risks destroying talents “which might have benefited the community.”⁸⁹ Again Hildreth anticipates *Huck Finn*, painting a southern landscape filled with violence and drunkenness, ripe for reformers and revolutionaries of all stripes.

Just as he does in *The Slave*, Hildreth very deliberately ignores any discussion of race as a legitimate category (the closest he comes is occasional references to “savage” cultures), and is careful to attribute perceived traits of the slaves to their degraded and impoverished condition, mirroring Brown’s comment to William Phillips that whites “have not studied them right.” Hildreth’s Revolution-era rationalism leaves no room for racist pseudo-science or romantic sentimentalism.⁹⁰ With that category removed, there is no justification for slavery in a society committed to progressive human endeavor. Slavery is soul-killing, violating every tenet of Western Enlightenment philosophy; a slave’s mind and soul are killed every day, and, as Henry Highland Garnet would later put it, “killed all day long,” and this is slavery’s greatest crime. It robs humans of faith, one of their most distinctive gifts.

All man of reflection, whether poets or philosophers, have agreed, that life even in the better aspects of it, if we did but see things as they are and as they will be, would be a dreary and a worthless thing. It is hope that cheers, supports, sustains us. It is in the anticipation of future joys, that we are happy. But what hope, what anticipations has the American slave? His hopes are all fears; his anticipations . . . are . . . of suffering. This is a state of mind that could not be endured by cultivated or reflecting minds.⁹¹

The assumption that must follow is that “slaves are like other men”⁹² in their natural response to a state of captivity; it would be no surprise were they to turn to violent insurrection—it would be a surprise if they “would hesitate at any means, no matter how horrible, that seemed necessary or convenient,” toward gaining their freedom: “Prisoners of war, if they can but take their guards at unawares, are accustomed to stab them with their own bayonets . . .”⁹³ Such a “permanent state of war,”⁹⁴ the structural presence of constant violence and instability, is by definition a threat to the experiment of democracy. A plantation is a scene of “constant struggle; idleness, encroachment, a passive resistance upon one side; negligence and yielding first, then

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passion, violence and cruelty on the other.”⁹⁵ “It is true,” Hildreth claims, “that one of the combatants is subdued and bound; but the war is not terminated.”

War is justly regarded . . . as the very greatest of social calamities. The introduction of slavery into a community, amounts to an eternal protraction of that calamity, and a universal diffusion of it through the whole mass of society⁹⁶

This is the logic of the conflict between democratic political theory and despotic economic practice: “To expect, as between masters and slaves the virtues of truth, probity and benevolence, is ridiculous. Slavery removes the very foundation of those virtues.”⁹⁷

Paternalist ideology would be forced to build arguments to counter the kind of assertions Hildreth makes. In a number of instances his observations provide cautionary models for the evolution of Southern ideology. When he evokes the shade of the St. Domingo insurrection to illustrate the “tendency of servitude to produce great inequalities of condition among the free”—the revolt began during a power struggle between the wealthy planters and poor whites (102)—he inadvertently suggests the importance of racial solidarity as protection against such an event. The dissemination of racist ideology would defuse any threat from the disfranchised poor white population. When Hildreth outlines the waste of capital inherent in the slave system, in which labor must be bought for life rather than hired as needed, he foresees no consequence to the vast population of seasonal laborers this would create, the kind of oversight that would allow pro-slavery ideologues like George Fitzhugh to favorably compare slavery to Northern wage labor. Ironically, Hildreth foresees that his arguments could simply encourage planters to maintain ever more brutal control, preventing the discontent that comes from lax discipline. But “no man of common humanity” would conceive of doing so; it simply stands to reason that a civilized, intelligent person would perceive reality. Again, therefore, it is the slave system that does not stand to reason, that is insane. For Hildreth the conclusion to draw is obvious; since “all must be done, or nothing,” he takes a Garrisonian position—the “only cure—freedom!”⁹⁸

And if Hildreth provides clues to the slaveholders to safeguard their system, he also provides clues as to how to destroy it. He predicts “political disturbances and civil war in the slave states themselves,” suggesting that they “are perhaps much nearer and more threatening, than most people imagine.”⁹⁹ He points out that “any unassisted insurrection on the part of the slaves alone,

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is very unlikely ever to be successful,”¹⁰⁰ but offers an observation uncannily like Brown’s later plan to make the slave economy untenable:

To organize a successful insurrection, something more than mere courage is no doubt necessary. But courage alone is sufficient to produce a series of unsuccessful insurrections, and however individually unsuccessful; a series of insurrections would shortly render the masters’ empire not worth preserving.¹⁰¹

Hildreth warns that the South “would do well to consider” the consequences of their already frequent threats to secede, and “break up those constitutional guarantees by which they are now protected” from such an invasion. In Hildreth’s view, war has already been engaged, a political impasse that can only end in violence, a “struggle . . . of a nature to shake the country to the centre, and to end, if we believe the prophesies of our southern friends, in civil commotions, infuriated hostilities, and savage war.”

The balance of justice is stretched across the sky,—and is it not their scale that kicks the beam? Let them look up and read their lot in that celestial sign, and know themselves, how light, how weak, if they resist. Even the arch-fiend cared not to struggle against inevitable fate, and fled a strife in which he could but suffer.¹⁰²

Hildreth’s sustained analysis and thorough assault on the Southern political economy and culture as fundamentally at odds with the North’s interests and principles further codifies the logic of eventual, inevitable conflict. Though he writes for the most part in a voice of detached, Revolutionary-era rationalism, very different from David Walker’s fevered anger, he is no less cynical and bemused. Hildreth’s call to arms, coming as it does from a cold-eyed, non-evangelical analysis of the political situation in the United States, is equally chilling. Like Walker a decade before, Hildreth sees war between the North and South not as simply inevitable, but already underway. “If the system of slavery in the United States be not first extinguished by some peaceable means, it will be sooner or later, come to a forcible termination,” he claims. While Northerners may “cry out that the contest is unseasonable and premature,” that contest “has begun; it must go on,” and to delay will be to pawn off the conflict “upon the days of our children.”

The trumpet has sounded; the bold and unquiet are rushing to the field. We may cry peace, peace,—but there is no peace. Fight we must, upon one side or the other. The contest is begun already, and will soon become general. In such a

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struggle there can be no neutrality, it is time to be choosing under which banner we will stand!¹⁰³

For Hildreth, the choice is clear. Abolitionism is the wave of the future:

It is in vain that southern oppressors console themselves with the ideas of the insignificance of those who make the first assault. They may ridicule them as fools, fanatics, women. What of that? Does the result of an attack depend upon the prudence, or the wisdom of those who have volunteered for the forlorn hope? What matter who or what they are, those who rush blindly and devotedly upon the open-mouthed cannon, the leveled bayonets of the enemy? They are but food for powder, and they know it. In every great cause it is necessary that some should perish. But if the cause be great, for one that falls, ten will be found ambitious so to suffer!¹⁰⁴

Hildreth's *The Slave* and *Despotism in America* represent an approach to abolition that is uncompromising with Southern, and Northern, rationalizations for the system. In such terms, continued complicity in the slave system is an untenable situation that threatens the "great social experiment" of democracy. As literature, Hildreth's texts stand as the beginning of a series of works by Northern writers considering a radical interpretation of abolitionism—a direct confrontation with the Slave Power, with potentially violent consequences. In the following chapters I will argue that these texts do two things. They point a way for us to understand a broad cultural context for the violent resistance to slavery that John Brown decided to participate in and instigate; they also broaden the context in which we can understand more widely recognized "classics" of the period F.O. Matthiessen called the American Renaissance, roughly the decade or so prior to the Civil War.

Walker's *Appeal* and Hildreth's *Despotism in America* frame anti-slavery arguments in the generation immediately preceding the Civil War as, on the one hand, expressions of moral outrage and, on the other, institutional analyses of a dysfunctional system at odds with the "great social experiment" of democracy. In either case, much anti-slavery writing presents the underlying assumptions of American public discourse as ludicrous and deranged; the idea that a democracy can rest on a foundation of slavery is an unfathomable absurdity. This becomes most evident in a sub-genre in the nascent field of imaginative literature in North America—the novel of slave revolt. The rebel slave fit in easily among the dark gothic characters of early American

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fiction, and by 1859, a substantial body of work by a number of wildly different writers had trickled out.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

¹ See Richards, *Gentlemen*, and Grimstead, *American Mobbing*.

² Harrold, p. 38.

³ Hildreth, *Tract #8*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Hildreth, *White Slave* p. 293.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 406-408.

¹³ Greenberg, p. 131.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁵ Hildreth, *Despotism*, p. 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 7-8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27-28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

³⁷ It also complicates the explanation of the Mexican War as a simple land-grab, and even as a way to extend slavery—if Hildreth was right, then Texas had to be annexed not simply for its territory but to capture and neutralize its market power; again, Hildreth constructs a critique

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of what sounds like a nascent blueprint of the monopoly capitalism the United States would pursue after the Civil War, with the slave economy as its model. It's worth noting, too, that the United States' other rivals in the cotton industry that Hildreth cites are imperial holdings—India, Egypt, and Brazil—which further suggest that current efforts by historians to see the history of the U.S. as empire-building are well-founded; the U.S. was already engaged in imperial struggles for market dominance with the great European powers.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49-50.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

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⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63-64.

⁸⁰ 56. At the same time, Hildreth points out that the United States is almost alone in considering ownership of humans legally valid. Human property "is not a kind of property generally acknowledged. There are whole nations who deny that any such kind of property ought to exist."

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 54-55.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁸⁶ See Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*.

⁸⁷ *Despotism*, p. 160.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁹⁰ It seems that the Sentimental view of blacks presented not only in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but to some degree in pro-slavery ideology comes into being with the Second Great Awakening, and the passing of the Revolutionary generation. This turn toward a Christianized imagery and understanding is also reflected in the difference between Gabriel, the urban revolutionary counting on white working class support in his rebellion plot, and Nat Turner, the black visionary whose momentarily successful rebellion drew distinct racial lines. Several of Hildreth's arguments, however, almost invite the codification of racist ideology to counter them. Hildreth's view of the slaves is similar to Brown's, but if Brown is the throwback so many commentators make him out to be, he is probably less so because of his supposed "Puritanism," which on closer inspection looks decidedly unorthodox, than because of his Revolutionary-era view of blacks as oppressed men, not happy darkies. see Dillon 77

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36-37.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 9. Hildreth's apparent allusion to Milton is interesting, again suggesting the cultural links in the sensibilities of Hildreth and Brown, an admirer of Cromwell.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

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CHAPTER SIX: THE MOUNTAINS, THE SWAMPS, AND THE SEA

Anti-Slavery Fiction and the Geography of Rebellion

We've now looked at the beginnings of an intellectual tradition in the antebellum United States that was, if not widespread, certainly well-grounded in mainstream political discourse. I'll suggest in the following chapters that a body of ant-slavery fiction, closely related to various non-fiction texts, create a physical, geographical representation of the boundaries between slavery and freedom, a landscape in which certain territories stand in opposition to the Southern piedmont and the plantations. These oppositional landscapes embody possibilities for resistance to both the economic landscape of the cash crop fields, the Big Houses, the slave quarters, and the auction block, as well as the legal landscape of state's rights and Constitutional jurisdictions. These oppositional landscapes—the Dismal Swamps of the escaped outlaw slaves, the mountain strongholds of the Maroon freedom fighters, and the seas on which slave cargo is carried but on which the legal powers of the slave economies are often contested—create an imaginative ground on which slave rebellion could be debated and even normalized, ultimately bearing a striking resemblance to the landscape of resistance imagined by John Brown and his allies in their plans for largescale slave rebellion.

In fiction and non-fiction, Hildreth attacked the terms of American civil discourse as inherently hypocritical, violent and depraved, and his work marks a turning point in the battle against slavery, beginning a new sub-genre of American imaginative fiction that competed with accepted clichés. Idyllic novels of plantation life like John Pendleton Kennedy's 1832 *Swallow Barn* were countered with anti-slavery novels, until the enormous success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* twenty years later signaled a mainstream acceptance of a point of no return in the sectional conflict. The escalation of barely-contained violence between the 1829 appearance of David Walker's *Appeal* and the Harper's Ferry raid became as clear in fiction as it was in public speech, pamphlets, and other sources of polemical non-fiction.

Hildreth established the conventions and parameters of anti-slavery fiction, and the volatile political situation it detailed, and in doing so, established terms under which a debate that included a normalized image of slave rebelliousness and resistance could proceed. Sacttered voices throughout the 1840's advocated the end of slavery in similarly bold terms, and

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throughout the 1850's, the willingness to openly discuss black rebellion increased until, by the time of John Brown's foray into Virginia, a novel by an African-American ally of Brown, Martin Delany's *Blake*, outlined coordinated hemispheric revolution. These stories and the way they echo and support each other help illustrate the matrix of debate that John Brown operated in. Many fictional treatments of American slavery prefigure not only John Brown's actions but the ways in which Americans interpreted and understood them.

As we saw in Hildreth's *The Slave*, the Dismal Swamps along the Virginia and Carolina coasts represented to the planters of the piedmont a kind of lawless wilderness, a manifestation of their own fears of insurrection and slaughter. In his plan to use the mountains as a stronghold for resistance, John Brown offered a radically different view of slave rebellion; the romantic view of mountain guerillas, based on the success of the Maroons of Jamaica and Haiti, rejected the assumed savagery that the outlaw-in-the-swamp imagery implied—mountains are for freedom fighters, swamps for terrorists. The Haitian revolution is the back story for discussions of slave rebellion in the United States, and ultimately for the Harper's Ferry raid and the Civil War. The forces that many of the American "Founding Fathers" hoped to hold in check in their own bid for self-determination triangulated through the trans-Atlantic slave trade and wound up back on North American shores to flare up throughout the South at various points until finally re-appearing in Jefferson's own backyard, so to speak. He had described Harper's Ferry as so beautiful that it was "worth a voyage across the Atlantic" to see it, but he could not have predicted that it would be just at that point that, in Melville's ironic words, "a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguering in against it with Negroes,"¹ would lead a bi-racial force against the State of Virginia and the United States government.

Brown, who "read everything he could find" on the subject,² was probably familiar with his associate James McCune Smith's account of the insurrection. Delivered in 1841, some years before Brown first laid out the details of his plan for a "Great Black Way" through the Alleghenies, Smith's "Lecture on the Haitian Revolutions" explicitly makes the "mountainous regions of the island" of San Domingo "an elementary cause of the revolution," the key to its geographic logic. The three causes of the revolt were the island's "peculiar domestic institutions [by which he means not simply slavery but its confused racial caste system], the topographical structure of the island [emphasis mine], and the French Revolution."³ Haiti is "nearly intersected

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by a lofty range of mountains thickly serried with primeval forests, amid which are many strongholds only approachable by narrow and easily defended passes.”⁴

Though Oswald Garrison Villard and other biographers claimed that Brown toured European battlefields in an effort to learn military tactics, there is no evidence that he did so. Brown draws not from European warfare but from Maroon insurgency—his plans are based on mountain guerilla warfare, connecting African- Americans to Maroon tradition of rebellion. Smith argued that the landscape “is nearly intersected by a lofty range of mountains, thickly serried with primeval forests, amid which are many strongholds only approachable by narrow and easily defended passages.” In the mountains, “slaves had learned that there was such a thing as successful resistance against their masters.”

To these lofty recesses, these altars which nature in all ages has consecrated to liberty, the more daring among the slaves . . . fled for refuge [and] frequently descended upon the plains . . . in marauding expeditions, carrying on a maroon war during eighty-five years. And at length, in 1777, after many vain attempts to conquer them, the French and Spanish colonists made a treaty with these maroons, granting to them liberty and a portion of the territory . . .⁵

This arrangement actually accelerated the coming of the revolution; part of the treaty was an agreement to return runaway slaves “at a rate of twelve dollars per head.” So “during the thirteen years which immediately preceded the revolution,” would-be runaways “were pent up in the plains, eager, restless and panting for liberty and for access to those lofty heights on which experience had taught them she made her dwelling.”⁶ Likewise recognizing the benefits of the North American landscape, Brown saw the “far-reaching Alleghanies [sic]” as a gift to the slaves. Frederick Douglass said in 1892 that Brown had told him that the mountain range was

"the basis of my plan. God has given the strength of the hills to freedom, they were placed here for the emancipation of the negro race; they are full of natural forts, where one man for defense will be equal to a hundred for attack; they are full also of good hiding places, where large numbers of brave men could be concealed, and baffle and elude pursuit for a long time. I know these mountains well, and could take a body of men into them and keep them there despite of all the efforts of Virginia to dislodge them.”⁷

In this, Brown was inspired by rebel slaves in the United States as well. The Harper’s Ferry raid was very similar in conception to Gabriel’s conspiracy, planned the year Brown was born, and meant to overwhelm Richmond, the capital of the Old Dominion. If the slaves managed to take

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the city, Higginson argues, “the penitentiary held several thousand stand of arms; the powder-house was well stocked; the Capitol contained the State treasury; the mills would give them bread; the control of the bridge across James River would keep off enemies from beyond.” This was also meant to be a bi-racial struggle; Gabriel’s men planned to issue a call to “their fellow-negroes and the friends of humanity” to join their cause. However, “in case of final failure, the project included a retreat to the mountains,” so Brown was “anticipated by Gabriel, sixty years before, in believing the Virginia mountains to have been ‘created, from the foundation of the world, as a place of refuge for fugitive slaves.’”⁸

The Dismal Swamp, while it represents slave rebellion, in some sense also represents the impossibility of success. Brown sought to reverse the direction of the flow of runaways, from the swamps and lowlands, where they could be hunted down, to the mountains, where they could defend themselves. The advantages of the mountains would bring out the inherent bravery and skill of the rebels, just as they had the Maroons.

“But they would employ bloodhounds to hunt you out of the mountains.” “That they might attempt,” said he, “but the chances are, we should whip them, and when we should have whipt one squad, they would be careful how they pursued.” “But you might be surrounded and cut off from your provisions or means of subsistence.” He thought that could not be done so they could not cut their way out, but even if the worst came, he could but be killed, and he had no better use for his life than to lay it down in the cause of the slave.⁹

Part of Brown’s commitment to black freedom came from his admiration for the freedom fighters of the Caribbean, and what he hoped to do was bring that inspiration to North America, linking the anti-colonial struggles of the Maroons to the battle against slavery in the United States. In this regard, Brown is a crucial link in the struggle against the drive for white empire that abolitionists saw in the invasion of Mexico, annexation of Texas, and the formulation of Manifest Destiny as a doctrine turned policy. Higginson may well have picked up an interest in this strain of history from Brown or Smith, and his description of the Jamaican Maroons who remained undefeated by Spanish and British colonial armies is similar. “The rebels had every topographical advantage,” he explains, “for they held possession of the ‘Cockpits,’” a network of “gaps or ravines [that] vary from two hundred yards to a mile in length” with which the “highlands are furrowed through and through;” the cliffs are “often absolutely inaccessible,

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while the passes at each end admit but one man at a time.” The Cockpits formed a haven for the rebels and “a series of traps for an invading force.” Higginson paints a picture of British defeat that Brown must have imagined replicating for American slaves in the Alleghenies:

Tired and thirsty with climbing, the weary soldiers toil on, in single file, without seeing or hearing an enemy, up the steep and winding path they traverse one "cockpit," then enter another. Suddenly a shot is fired from the dense and sloping forest on the right, then another and another, each dropping its man; the startled troops face hastily in that direction, when a more murderous volley is poured from the other side; the heights above flash with musketry, while the precipitous path by which they came seems to close in fire behind them. By the time the troops have formed in some attempt at military order, the woods around them are empty, and their agile and noiseless foes have settled themselves into ambush again, farther up the defile, ready for a second attack, if needed. But one is usually sufficient; disordered, exhausted, bearing their wounded with them, the soldiers retreat in panic, if permitted to escape at all, and carry fresh dismay to the barracks, the plantations, and the Government House.¹⁰

So besides the American Revolution itself, a major inspiration for the entry of these ideas into discourse in the United States was the successful slave revolt and establishment of a free black republic in Haiti at the turn of the 19th century. In his 1841 lecture, McCune Smith acknowledged that “there was something startling in the nature, and fearful in the details of that revolution” that “cannot be denied.” However, he argues, these shocking details, “far from being reasons for mere exclamations of abhorrence, in reality form the strongest inducements to a calm and careful examination into the causes which gave rise to the revolution, and of their adequacy to produce such a result. . . .” Smith believed that “the more extraordinary the revolution, the greater should be [our] care in dispassionately analyzing the events which constitute its history.”

¹¹ So, too, with the Harper’s Ferry raid, a foray into the land of Jefferson himself. As we’ve seen, most of the ideas that mid-20th century historians considered insane in Brown were widespread and frequently debated among activists, politicians, and citizens. The efficacy of violence, the betrayal of the revolutionary heritage, the role of the enslaved in their own emancipation, the tension between the industry and wage labor of the North and the agribusiness and forced labor of the South, were only a few of the issues that figured in the escalation of hostilities between the regions after the Invasion of Mexico, and were brought into focus by the Harper’s Ferry raid and played out during the Civil War.

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Anti-slavery literature makes the agitation and violence that culminated in Brown's plan to create a network of Maroon communities in the Southern mountains seem both reasonable and predictable. In works of fiction like Hildreth's *The Slave*, Lydia Maria Child's *The Black Saxons*, Frederick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*, Stowe's *Dred*, Martin Delany's *Blake*, and even Melville's *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, the struggle against the Southern political economy becomes a continuation of the struggle against the Old World tyranny that the Revolution supposedly conquered. The South is a decaying, backwards and domineering empire, and threatens not simply the freedom of Africans and their descendents, but the very idea of freedom itself.

The social and physical landscape of the slave states provided as much opportunity for the mid-19th century American writer of popular fiction as the exotic South Seas or the Puritan past for reimagining American society. Harriet Beecher Stowe explained the appeal of using "scenes and incidents of the slaveholding states" as fictional subjects was that

there is no ground, ancient or modern, whose vivid lights, gloomy shadows, and grotesque groupings, afford to the novelist so wide a scope for the exercise of his powers. In the near vicinity of modern civilization of the most matter-of-fact kind, exist institutions which carry us back to the twilight of the feudal ages, with all their exciting possibilities of incident. Two nations, the types of two exactly opposite styles of existence, are here struggling; and from the intermingling of these two a third race has arisen, and the three are interlocked in wild and singular relations, that evolve every possible combination of romance.¹²

For novelists like Stowe, anti-slavery fiction also provides the ground to explore the same themes of freedom and justice, hypocrisy and violence, that other authors of the "American Renaissance" found in other subject matter. The North American landscape has always seemed to represent some abstract ideal or other in the traditions of European imperialism that served as the basis for U.S. culture.¹³ In the anti-slavery fiction I'll discuss here, the fundamental ideals of Constitutional government and democratic theory seemed to be embodied in the landscape, and so the Southern plantation landscape came to be viewed in terms of the "Fathers of the Revolution" who came from Virginia soil, the Old Dominion.

Antebellum novels that directly address the possibility of slave revolt must by necessity consider the very nature of republicanism and the violent legacy of the Revolutionary War. The

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success of the American Revolution ironically produced the threat of, and potential need for, slave rebellion, and rebellious slaves came to be identified with the heroes of the Revolution. Meanwhile, the erstwhile revolutionary democracy came to be seen as an oppressive, bloated Goliath. In 1859, Transcendentalist and radical abolitionist, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a close ally of John Brown, described the success of the Maroon population of the Jamaican mountains in winning and maintaining their freedom. His logic links their passion for freedom and their guerilla tactics as two sides of a coin; the Maroons were “fighting for their liberty, [so] no form of warfare seemed to them unjustifiable;” Higginson quotes Lafayette’s description of the American Revolution as apropos of the Jamaican revolt as well: “the grandest of causes, won by contests of sentinels and outposts.” Their passion and tactics made the Maroons nearly invincible; British “high military authorities,” Higginson claims, “pronounced the subjugation of the Maroons a thing more difficult than to obtain a victory over any army in Europe.”¹⁴

The failure of the Revolution to create true freedom is most clear in the ironic parallels drawn between American revolutionary heroes and notorious black rebels like Toussaint L’Ouverture, Nat Turner, and Denmark Vesey, and in the ironic distance between American revolutionary rhetoric and the realpolitick of the slave economy; as Stowe’s rebel character Dred says, evoking both Thomas Jefferson and David Walker, “Let the God of their fathers judge between us! If they had the right to rise up for their oppressions, shall they condemn us? . . . forgive them not, saith the Lord.”¹⁵ In Hildreth’s *The Slave*, Archy first sees the nation’s capitol when he is brought to the District of Columbia slave market.

The Capitol, though unfinished, was rearing its spacious walls in the moon-light, and gave promise of a magnificent edifice. Lights gleamed from the windows. The Congress perhaps was in session. I gazed at the building with no little emotion. “This,” said I to myself, “is the head-quarters of a great nation,—the spot in which its concentrated wisdom is collected, to devise laws for the benefit of the whole community,—the just and equal laws of a free people and a great democracy!”—I was going on with this mental soliloquy, when the iron collar about my neck touched a place from which it had rubbed the skin, and as I started with the pain, the rattling of chains reminded me, that “these just and equal laws of a free people and a great democracy” did not avail to rescue a million.¹⁶

The center of this violent hypocrisy, even moreso than Washington, D.C. , is Virginia, which had “the dubious distinction of having the largest slave population in the republic.”¹⁷ The hypocrisy

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of Jefferson, the vengeance of Nat Turner, the Olympian disdain of Thomas Dew, helped make the Old Dominion the best ground on which to focus the ironies of the relationship between American republicanism and the realities of slavery. Beyond its geographical convenience and location of an arsenal and rifle factory, Harper's Ferry, Virginia,¹⁸ was for John Brown both a strategic and symbolic location from which to launch the attack on slavery. Harper's Ferry was in Jefferson County, and one of Brown's first orders once the town was secure was for a few men to go to the nearby farm of Colonel Lewis Washington, great grand-nephew of the first president, to take the old man hostage and bring Brown a sword of the president's that his kinsman now owned.

Higginson links Brown to the history of slave rebellion in Virginia in his essay on Gabriel's Rebellion for the *Atlantic Monthly*:

Three times, at intervals of thirty years, did a wave of unutterable terror sweep across the Old Dominion, bringing thoughts of agony to every Virginian master, and of vague hope to every Virginian slave. Each time did one man's name become a spell of dismay and a symbol of deliverance. Each time did that name eclipse its predecessor, while recalling it for a moment to fresher memory: John Brown revived the story of Nat Turner, as in his day Nat Turner recalled the vaster schemes of Gabriel.¹⁹

In making these connections, Higginson draws an historical line that turns Harper's Ferry from a localized outbreak of misguided abolitionist fanaticism to a part of a long tradition of slave resistance that points back through the Old Dominion and the Dismal Swamp to the origins of democratic movements in the Atlantic region, from the Continental Congress to the French Revolution to the formation of the black republic of Haiti. "Nat Turner, whatever else he might have been," Eugene Genovese reminds us, "was a Virginian," and he "spoke in the accents of the Declaration of Independence and the Rights of Man." Denmark Vesey, purported rebel leader in Charleston, South Carolina in 1822, "looked to Haiti as a model," and "combined the language of the age of Revolution . . . with the biblical language of the God of Wrath." The major slave rebellions in the United States between the Revolution and the Civil War "reflected the world as it was emerging in the era of the great revolution in Saint-Domingue and the revolutionary struggles in Europe and America."²⁰

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Gabriel's rebellion, like Brown's raid, was intended to be a bi-racial movement striking at the heart of the economy of forced labor that rose in tandem with the conquest of the Americas and the subsequent revolutionary movements in England, North America, France, and the Caribbean. Theories of equality and evidence of oppression were everywhere; as Higginson writes, "Liberty was the creed or the cant of the day." The nation John Brown was born into in May of 1800 was a nation arguing incessantly over the nature of freedom, to which, Higginson says, "a slave insurrection was a mere corollary. With so much electricity in the air, a single flash of lightning foreboded all the terrors of the tempest."²¹

As Eric Sundquist notes, it is in Virginia that the "rise of liberty [and] rise of slavery" coincide most visibly; Theodore Parker called the state "Mother of presidents" and the "Great Slave Breeder."²² When Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative appeared in 1859, it included vivid, horrific recollections of the carnage white Virginians visited on the black population after the Turner insurrection, answering the brief panic that the attack on whites caused with a long period of terror against the black population—"Strange," she remarks, "that they should be alarmed, when their slaves were so 'contented and happy.'"²³ The main character of Hildreth's *The Slave* is the son of a Virginia slave woman and her master. In Hildreth's novel, Virginia is already being abandoned by Jefferson's yeoman farmers, a process he'd describe in more detail in *Despotism in America*; because of the "well deserved" impact of the "curse" of slavery, "impenetrable thickets had commenced to cover plantations, which, had the soil been cultivated by freemen, might still have produced a rich and abundant harvest."²⁴ The landscape had already passed through the stages of civilization from pristine "wilderness" through advanced cultivation to decline and decay. Lydia Maria Child's 1841 *The Black Saxons* illustrates the use made of American Revolutionary language and imagery by a group of slaves debating an insurrectionary plan, and draws a clear parallel between the black insurgents and the peasants of the English Revolution. William Wells Brown's *Clotel* follows the fate of a beautiful young slave, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, as she descends through the class structure from pampered mistress to hounded runaway; her death in the Potomac—like the Ohio River in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a physical barrier between freedom and slavery—fleeing a mob coincides with the trial of an accomplice of Nat Turner.

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Even works that place the struggle against slavery in the broader setting of the Western Hemisphere, and take the battle over slavery to sea (a no-man's land that allows the slave to exploit the ambiguity of borderlessness), return to or evoke the Old Dominion. Frederick Douglass' only work of fiction, *The Heroic Slave*, a fictionalized account of the 1841 rebellion on the ship *Creole*, exploits the serendipitous name of the actual rebel leader, to comment on the role of Virginai in the establishment of democracy and slavery. Madison Washington, who "loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry[,] deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson[, and] fought for it with a valor as high, an arm as strong, and against odds as great" as Washington, "holds now no higher place in the records of that grand old Commonwealth than is held by a horse or an ox."²⁵

Other works from the 1850s tie the plantations to the sea as well. In Blake, Martin Delany links the American Maroons of the Dismal Swamp to the cosmopolitan rebels in Cuba in a plan of hemispheric revolt. In Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, the ruined slave ship *San Dominick* is compared to "the charred ruin of some summer-house in a grand garden long running to waste," while both Captains, Amasa Delano and Benito Cereno, at various points resemble lords of a feudal manor. The 1855 novella even refers indirectly (it is a masterpiece of indirection) to the struggle over Bleeding Kansas, the prelude to Civil War in which John Brown first entered into armed conflict. Melville's "protagonist," Delano, confused after boarding the drifting hulk of the *San Dominick*, feels a "rising a dreamy inquietude, like that of one who alone on the prairie feels unrest from the repose of the noon."²⁶ This inquietude is well-founded. *Benito Cereno*, like Melville's earlier *Moby-Dick*, links truth with destruction; only the immense effort at denial and obfuscation in the story masks the inevitable carnage awaiting the slave system. "Both house and ship," Melville says, "hoard from view their interiors till the last moment, the one by its walls and blinds, the other by its high bulwarks like ramparts," but "sudden and complete disclosure" of the contents of the ship, which "seems unreal," reveals only "a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave."²⁷

In 1841, the year that John Quincy Adams predicted that only military confrontation could now end slavery, and ten years after the Turner rebellion, Lydia Maria Child published "The Black Saxons," set in Charleston, South Carolina, site of Denmark Vesey's 1822

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conspiracy trial. In the short story, a planned slave rebellion is thwarted by the far-sightedness of a white master who overhears the plot. The deflection of the threat allows Child to explore various rhetorical stands without committing herself to the demands of violent resistance. Child mocks the kind of Walter Scott fantasy of a romantic, persecuted South; as her tale opens, the slave-owner Duncan imagines the heroic exploits of his Saxon forebears under Norman rule:

That they did not relinquish freedom without a struggle, is proved by Robin Hood and his bold followers, floating in dim and shadowy glory on the outskirts of history; brave outlaws of the free forest, and the wild mountain-passes, taking back, in the very teeth of danger, a precarious subsistence from the rich possessions that were once their own; and therefore styled thieves by the robbers who had beggared them.²⁸

In contrast to the wind-swept “wild mountain-passes” of the Saxon rebels and the gothic imagination, the black rebels of the South haunt the swamps in a different sort of gothic romance. The Dismal Swamp serves as a sort of mirror image of the State of Virginia; it is another constant presence in anti-slavery fiction, representing the underside of the Old Dominion’s self-image. “The Dismal Swamps,” Child tells us, “cover many thousands of acres of wild land, and a dense forest, with wild animals and insects, such as are unknown in any other part of Virginia.” This is the vaguely threatening wilderland of William Byrd’s *Secret History of the Line*, but with new inhabitants; escaping slaves “usually seek a hiding-place,” there, “and some have been known to reside here for years.”²⁹

In part the fascination with the Dismal Swamp, where Nat Turner was captured, is a reflection of white attitudes; the swamp represents the supposed atavism of the savage rebel slave. In her 1857 novel *Dred; A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, Harriet Beecher Stowe describes the swamps:

. . . the whole eastern shore of the Southern States, with slight interruptions, is belted by an immense chain of swamps, regions of hopeless disorder, where the abundant growth and vegetation of nature, sucking up its forces from the humid soil, seems to rejoice in a savage exuberance, and bid defiance to all human efforts either to penetrate or subdue. These wild regions are the homes of the alligator, the moccasin, and the rattle-snake. Evergreen trees, mingling freely with the deciduous children of the forest, form here dense jungles, verdant all the year round, and which afford shelter to numberless birds, with whose warbling the leafy desolation perpetually resounds. Climbing vines, and parasitic plants, of untold splendor and boundless exuberance of growth, twine and interlace, and

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hang from the heights of the highest trees pennons of gold and purple,—triumphant banners, which attest the solitary majesty of nature. A species of parasitic moss wreaths its abundant draperies from tree to tree, and hangs in pearly festoons, through which shine the scarlet berry and green leaves of the American holly.³⁰

Child's original title for "The Black Saxons" was "The Meeting in the Swamp," which directly confronted Southern white dread of a Nat Turner in every household; her change suggests both a more serious view of rebellious slaves and a veering away from an inflammatory reference to the Southampton uprising. "The Black Saxons" suggests this same reversal of meaning. Child's decision to change the story's title moves the context of the rebellion plot in the story from the Swamp to the romantic Highland legendry of Walter Scott's Saxon rebels; Child co-opts the mythology of the Old Dominion to attack the self-serving rhetoric of the American Revolution. By making the slaves the "Saxons," she implicitly makes the slaveholders the Norman conquerors, reversing their own self-image as romantic cavaliers out of Scott's historical romances.

Child's conception of religion in the story also debunks charges that abolitionists were deranged zealots. She ignores claims of Nat Turner's religious "fanaticism"; the slaves in her story use religion as a ruse, and proceed from the same logic of democracy that inspired the founders. "The Black Saxons" is a fantasy of logic—the "self-evident" logic of the Revolution and the Declaration, the same logic that Brown would follow for decades toward war. Child focuses on the ironies of Southern Republican sympathies and the Jeffersonian legacy. Mr. Duncan, a successful planter outside Charleston in 1812 who as a child had "deeply imbibed" revolutionary ideals and "democratic theories," relaxes in his "elegantly furnished parlor;" when reading about the Norman Conquest of England, he imagined his ancestral home "prostrated and kept in base subjection by the strong arm of violence" wielded by conquerors "who seized their rich possessions, and haughtily trampled on their dearest rights." The "bold and beautiful race" of Saxons, "strong of heart and strong of arm," and their women, "noble in soul as well as ancestry," were now "slaves!" His heroic predecessors "tamely submitted to their lot, till their free, bright beauty passed under the heavy cloud of animal dullness" ³¹ But Child complicates the premise with Duncan's racializing of the conflict—his romantic image of the Saxon and with his sympathy for armed resistance. All his thoughts condemn him; as he dreams

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of the exploits of Robin Hood, he realizes how “Troubled must be the sleep of those who rule a conquered nation.”³²

Lost in thought, Duncan, “a proverbially indulgent master,” writes a series of passes to his obsequious slaves to attend an evening revival meeting. Before he realizes it, he has dismissed his entire house staff, and can find no one to fetch him a drink of water. “What a curse it is to be waited upon by slaves!” Duncan thinks. “My neighbors tell me it is because I never flog them. I believe they are in the right. It is a hard case, too, to force a man to be a tyrant, whether he will or no.” The easy parody continues as Duncan recalls that a neighboring planter has lost “Big-boned Dick” into the swamps, where he was suspected of leading a gang of runaways on raids into local corncribs and hog pens. He recalls his own “admiration of the bold outlaws” of the Saxons, and realizes that his “republican sympathies, and the ‘system entailed upon him by his ancestors,’ were obviously out of joint with each other; and the skilfullest soldering of casuistry could by no means make them adhere together.” The “voice of Reason” drowned out the “pretexts of selfishness, and the apologies of sophistry” temporarily, telling him that “his sympathies were right, and his practice wrong.” If only “some honest John Woolman, or fearless Elias Hicks” been present to convince him, Duncan might have freed his “serfs” that night.

But he was alone; and the prejudices of education, and the habits of his whole life, conjured up a fearful array of lions in his path; and he wist not that they were phantoms. The admonitions of awakened conscience gradually gave place to considerations of personal safety, and plans for ascertaining the real extent of his danger.³³

Duncan decides to follow his slaves the next time they go to meeting, and finds himself in a clearing deep in the swamp, “enclosed by majestic trees, uniting their boughs over it, in richly fantastic resemblance to some Gothic cathedral,” where, “in this lone sanctuary of Nature’s primeval majesty, were assembled many hundreds of swart figures,” who “seemed to his excited imagination like demons from the pit come to claim guilty souls.”³⁴ A man steps into the center of the group and begins to speak, reminding his fellows that they are there to decide whether to accept the offer of freedom the British had made during the war, and whether to slaughter their masters should the British land.

Duncan then witnesses a ferocious debate; a “tall, sinewy mulatto” demands that the slaves rape the planters’ women, set dogs after them, shoot them down “as they have done to us,”

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showing no mercy. He's challenged by an old man who insists that "Jesus said, Do good to them that do evil to you, and pray for them that spite you," precipitating a loud debate among the assembly which Child uses to cover the bases of perceived slave sentiment. While the old man sings a hymn looking forward to the day "when we get to Heaven [where] we'll all be alike," where the "Lord's got a pardon" for the slaver and the "poor nigger," another displays his whip-scarred back and demands blood vengeance; others, including a slave of Duncan's, insist that masters who don't "cruellize their slaves" be spared, and that they will fight any who try to harm them. The scarred speaker answers: "The white men tell us God made them our masters; I say it was the Devil . . . Down on your knees, if ye like, and thank them that ye are not flogged and shot. Of me they'll learn another lesson!"³⁵

Duncan knows this speaker as "the reputed son" of one of his neighbors. This is the figure of the tragic, angry mulatto, "one of that numerous class, which southern vice is thoughtlessly raising up to be its future scourge and terror," and whose rebelliousness can be attributed to his white blood:

The high, bold forehead, and flashing eye, indicated an intellect too active and daring for servitude; while his fluent speech and appropriate language betrayed the fact that his highly educated parent, from some remains of instinctive feeling, had kept him near his own person, during his lifetime, and thus formed his conversation on another model than the rude jargon of slaves.³⁶

The mulatto rebel almost wins over the "poor, ignorant listeners," who "stood spell-bound by the magic of superior mind" before the old man again "mildly spoke of the meek and blessed Jesus; and the docility of African temperament responded to his gentle words." Child counters these two slave literature stereotypes with another, the black trickster, "short of stature, with a quick, roguish eye, and a spirit of knowing drollery lurking about his mouth"—a figure who clearly anticipates Melville's Babo—who, after his speech, "clapped his hands, kicked up his heels, and turned somersets like a harlequin" to "shouts of merriment."³⁷ The trickster, Jack, having "axed myself how pon arth it was . . . de white man sure to git he foot on de black man," describes a middle path between destruction and acquiescence: literacy, which will lead directly to equality.

"I say nigger can conjure buckra. How he do it? Get de knowledge! Dat de way. We make de sleeve wide, and fill full of de tea and de sugar, ebery time we get in missis'

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closet. If we take half so much pains to get de knowledge, de white man take he foot off de black man."³⁸

Child then follows with a remarkable scene straight from the slave narratives. Like Douglass, Jack steals his literacy from children, little by little. "Den, after great long time, I can read de newspaper. And what you tink I find dere? I read British going to land!" With this knowledge, the slave proves his humanity and his power; he warns a childhood friend, the governor's son, of the imminent invasion:

Jim, massa Gubernor's . . . lib ten mile off, and old boss no let me go. Well, massa Gubernor he come dine my massa's house; and I bring he horse to de gate . . . I gib him de backy, done up in de bery bit o' newspaper dat tell British going to land! And massa Gubernor himself carry it!"³⁹

After much debate and some dissent, the slaves decide "that in case the British landed, they would take their freedom without murdering their masters." After they disband, Duncan stands "alone with the stars," and their "glorious beauty seemed to him, that night, clothed in new and awful power." As so often happens in American literature, the landscape itself speaks to him:

Groups of shrubbery took to themselves startling forms; and the sound of the wind among the trees was like the unsheathing of swords. Again he recurred to Saxon history, and remembered how he had thought that troubled must be the sleep of those who rule a conquered people.⁴⁰

Duncan finds "new significance" in the words of 1381's Peasant Revolt leader Wat Tyler, and a "most unwelcome application of his indignant question, why serfs should toil unpaid in wind and sun, that lords might sleep on down" Though Duncan keeps his slaves, he also keeps their secret; "he contented himself with advising the magistrates to forbid all meetings whatsoever among the colored people, until the war was ended." He is left to wonder, in a question that could be applied later to the Harper's Ferry raid:

"Who shall so balance effects and causes, as to decide what portion of my present freedom sprung from their seemingly defeated efforts? Was the place I saw to-night, in such wild and fearful beauty, like the haunts of the Saxon Robin Hoods? Was not the spirit that gleamed forth there as brave as theirs? And who shall calculate what even such hopeless endeavors may do for the future freedom of their race?"⁴¹

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Early in the story, Duncan wonders what forgotten minstrels, “unknown in princely halls, untrumpeted by fame,” performed for the struggling Saxons, “singing of their exploits in spirit-stirring tones, to hearts burning with a sense of wrong,” for “Troubadours rarely sing of the defeated, and conquerors write their own History.”⁴²

The question in these stories is how Americans can write the history they have written; the precedent set for violent resistance to hypocritical oppression by the American Revolution allows the abolitionist to see that to evoke George Washington is to evoke Nat Turner. In William Wells Brown’s 1855 *Clotel, or, The President’s Daughter*, cited as the first published African-American novel (though it was only published in its entirety in Great Britain—it was heavily edited in the U.S.), a mostly white rebel is put on trial for participating in Turner’s rebellion. The novel picks up many strands of both Stowe’s recent success (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* preceded *Clotel* by a few years) and Hildreth’s earlier story; the descent into the dystopian South, the tragic mulatto (the title character is the daughter of Thomas Jefferson; cast aside by her white lover/keeper, she is finally chased through Washington, D.C. by a mob and throws herself to her death in the Potomac), the choices of death or escape to Canada. But, like Hildreth, William Wells Brown is bolder than Stowe in confronting the South with the militancy of its bastard children. While *Clotel* is first imprisoned and then chased to her doom, the slave, George (of course), speaks in his own defense. Like *Clotel*, George’s status underlines the absurd racial fiction the U.S. legal system was built on. The last of the rebels awaiting punishment, George “too, could boast that his father was an American statesman,” an unnamed Congressman (Brown’s “slander” against Jefferson was enough to outlaw the book as it was written in the U.S.).

No one would suppose that any African blood coursed through [George’s] veins. His hair was straight, soft, fine, and light; his eyes blue, nose prominent, lips thin, his head well formed, forehead high and prominent; and he was often taken for a free white person

George, like Archy Moore, is stuck between worlds; “one so white seldom ever receives fair treatment at the hands of his fellow slaves,” while “whites usually regard such slaves as persons who [need to be] flogged [frequently] to remind them” not to consider themselves “as good as

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white folks.” But he also managed to acquire an education of sorts inside the house, hearing whites “speak of the down-trodden and oppressed Poles . . . of going to Greece to fight for Grecian liberty. . . .” “So, fired with the love of freedom, and zeal for the cause of his enslaved countrymen,” George joins Turner’s group.⁴³

During his imprisonment, the courthouse burns, but rather than fleeing in the confusion, George re-enters the burning building to rescue a box of “valuable deeds,” and this “meritorious act” buys him an extra year of life; his trial is put off, delayed by his willingness to save a set of documents that assign and confirm the rights of property. When finally “convicted of high treason” and sentenced to death, the slave is asked for a final statement. Like Turner and Denmark Vesey, George refuses: “As I cannot speak as I should wish, I will say nothing.” The judge insists that he can speak freely, though he notes in disgust that George “had a good master . . . and still you were dissatisfied; you left your master and joined the negroes who were burning our houses and killing our wives.”⁴⁴ George’s responses are pointed; having “heard my master read in the Declaration of Independence ‘that all men are created free and equal,’” and “talking with some of his visitors about the war with England, and he said, all wars and fightings for freedom were just and right.”

"If so, in what am I wrong? The grievances of which your fathers complained, and which caused the Revolutionary War, were trifling in comparison with the wrongs and sufferings of those who were engaged in the late revolt. . . . your fathers were never bought and sold like cattle, never shut out from the light of knowledge and religion, never subjected to the lash of brutal task-masters. . . . You say your fathers fought for freedom—so did we. You tell me that I am to be put to death for violating the laws of the land. Did not the American revolutionists violate the laws when they struck for liberty? They were revolters, but their success made them patriots—we were revolters, and our failure makes us rebels. . . . Success makes all the difference.”⁴⁵

The project of a work of fiction like this is, in part, to put words into the mouths of slave rebels who, in real life, refused to speak in court. The writer draws ironic parallels between the words of the fictional slaves and the words of historical revolutionaries, and they also draw from the body of abolitionist polemic like Douglass’ “Fifth of July” speech. In *Clotel*, George points out that while patriots “make merry on the 4th of July . . . one-sixth of the people of this land are in chains and slavery. . . .”

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You boast that this is the 'Land of the Free;' but a traditional freedom will not save you. It will not do to praise your fathers and build their sepulchres. Worse for you that you have such an inheritance, if you spend it foolishly.⁴⁶

Like Hildreth, William Wells Brown presents slave violence unapologetically; “a full-blooded negro,” Turner “was a preacher amongst the negroes, and distinguished for his eloquence, respected by the whites, and loved and venerated by the negroes.”⁴⁷ But with his character Picquilo, another insurrection leader, Brown incorporates the African culture that Melville and Delany would also use as one of the greatest threats to the stability and security of slave economy. Picquilo, “a large, tall, full-blooded negro,” had a “stern,” tattooed face—he was a trained and experienced African tribal warrior, “a bold, turbulent spirit” at home in the wilderness; “neither the thickness of the trees, nor the depth of the water could stop him,” and “imbrued his hands in the blood of all the whites he could meet” when he had the chance to rebel.⁴⁸

With the subplot of the insurrection, Brown pits the conventional, sentimental tragedy of *Clotel* against the bloody struggle for collective freedom. The plight of *Clotel*, the fugitive slave, the daughter of “the author of the Declaration of American Independence,” is overlooked by the locals, who “were too much engaged in putting down the revolt among the slaves.”⁴⁹

Every day brought news of fresh outbreaks. Without scruple and without pity, the whites massacred all blacks found beyond their owners' plantations: the negroes, in return, set fire to houses, and put those to death who attempted to escape from the flames. Thus carnage was added to carnage, and the blood of the whites flowed to avenge the blood of the blacks . . . [black corpses] became food for dogs and vultures, and their bones, partly calcined by the sun, remained scattered about, as if to mark the mournful fury of servitude and lust of power. When the slaves were subdued, except a few in the swamps, bloodhounds were put in this dismal place to hunt out the remaining revolters.⁵⁰

With this endless, fruitless violence as backdrop, *Clotel* escapes from a prison “within plain sight of the President's house” and is pursued across the Long Bridge over the Potomac and headed off by three men, who, “true to their Virginian instincts,” block her path. Surrounded, she throws herself off the bridge, raising her hands “towards heaven, and begged for that mercy and compassion there, which had been denied her on earth.”⁵¹ As we will see in Stowe's novels as well, there is freedom only in escape from the continent, or death, but the ironic celebration of

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the spirit of 1848 hangs over her death. Had she “escaped from oppression in any other land,” Brown insists, “and reached the United States, no honour within the gift of the American people would have been too good to have been heaped upon the heroic woman.” Though the United States is the reputed “cradle of liberty” in the Western world, “I fear they have rocked the child to death.”⁵²

Washington, D.C. itself is not a safe refuge for those seeking freedom, and those seeking it must exist in an uncharted landscape. In *The Heroic Slave*, Frederick Douglass signals his hero’s position beyond the pale by placing him in the Dismal Swamp. This way he is able to use the character Madison Washington to contrast the two Virginias—the Old Dominion of Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, and the Dismal Swamp of Nat Turner—in one body; his name and revolutionary rhetoric evoke the Founding Fathers, while his status as escaped property and his willingness to use force place him outside the law. While anti-slavery literature frequently draws the parallel between slave rebels and American Revolutionaries, the parallel is often inverse; the urgency of this language is due in part to the sub-human status slaves were assigned by the law. In order for Americans to respect slaves as rebels fighting for freedom, they first had to see them as people, and abolitionists were adamant that the hideous absurdity of the slaves’ status as livestock be challenged. Madison Washington’s life in the swamp demonstrates the difference between man and beast, a distinction, anti-slavery writers frequently point out, that slaveholders often fail to make. Having “wandered about at night with the wolf and the bear” in “the dismal swamps” for five years, a wild animal like Nat Turner, Madison Washington is finally forced to flee when “the wilderness that sheltered me thus long took fire, and refused longer to be my hiding-place.”:

“Bears and wolves scorched from their mysterious hiding-places in the earth, and all the wild inhabitants of the untrodden forest, filled with a common dismay, ran forth, yelling, howling, bewildered amidst the smoke and flame. . . . nothing was spared,—cattle, tame and wild, herds of swine and of deer, wild beasts of every name and kind,—huge night-birds, bats, and owls, that had retired to their homes in lofty tree-tops to rest, perished in that fiery storm. . . .”⁵³

The animals of the swamp are destroyed in the fire, not able to escape; Washington, the human, moves with purpose and gains his freedom. He sees his hiding place and his enslavement go up

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in flames together, the fire, “horribly and indescribably grand . . . awful, thrilling, solemn, beyond compare,” serving as a prefiguring of the Southern apocalypse to come.

“Many a poor wandering fugitive, who, like myself, had sought among wild beasts the mercy denied by our fellow men, saw, in helpless consternation, his dwelling-place and city of refuge reduced to ashes forever. It was this grand conflagration that drove me hither; I ran alike from fire and from slavery.”⁵⁴

Douglass would later reverse the common analogy between men and beasts when he wrote that one “might as well hunt bears with ethics and political economy for weapons” as use moral suasion against slaveholders. The failure to recognize natural rights, in this formulation, is what separates man and beast.⁵⁵

In the Southern view, slaves’ status as property makes them equal to livestock and even dry goods; some accounts even make it more economical to use slaves than cattle in land cultivation. For abolitionist David L. Child (husband of Lydia Maria Child), the degradation of agricultural land in Virginia and Maryland is tied to the treatment of human labor; the landscape embodies the society’s political squalor. Like Hildreth, Child makes a case that is both moral and economic, in such a way that it becomes clear, in the anti-slavery argument, that the economics of Southern agribusiness cannot support morality. “In the free States, the older the settlement, the more valuable the land; in the slave States it is the reverse,” Child points out, making the same case that the havoc the slave system wreaks environmentally demands expansion, which in turn demands militarization. Washington himself, Child claims, discussed the relative value of real estate in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland in terms of slavery; land in Pennsylvania was more valuable due to “laws for the abolition of slavery,—‘Laws,[’ he added,[’]which there is nothing more certain than that Maryland and Virginia must have, and that at a period not remote.” Since Washington’s time, Child notes, land values in the two slave states have dropped, “notwithstanding the proximity of the capital, the erection of vast national establishments, and the execution of extensive works of internal improvement. The reason of this gloomy result is, that slave cultivation exhausts in a hopeless manner the most productive soil.”⁵⁶

In explaining this, Child sheds interesting light on the parallel between slaves and livestock. “In slave regions,” he says, “slaves do the work over immense tracts, which freemen execute with cattle over small ones.” The production of cash crops requires human labor, therefore, due

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to “the great comparative expense of feeding working cattle,” two to six times the cost of feeding and clothing a slave. In this horrifying accounting, livestock is more valuable than human life.

But at the same time,

a more decisive reason is that, in all the planting regions, a prodigious amount of hand and headwork is indispensable in taking in the crops, and preparing them for market; therefore although a greater proportion of animal labor might be advantageous at seedtime, it would be of no value at harvest. On the contrary the large number of men necessary for the harvest would have but half employment at other seasons, if animals were much used. Men can do the work of animals, but not animals of men.⁵⁷

So the category of race, however pseudo-science tries to explain it, is economic in function, and becomes a political category only due to the needs of the dominant industry in North America; laws have to codify the control of a population that must be created between man and animal—slaves must have the capacity to perform the work of both.

This problematizes David Reynolds’ reliance on Transcendentalist clichés about John Brown as an Old Testament prophet who raised sheep because animal husbandry was the pursuit of the patriarchs.⁵⁸ It is far more likely that to Brown, husbandry was the pursuit of free men. Child explains that the amount “of hay made in the free States is 15,000,000 tons a year; in the slave States, which contain two-fifths more territory, 1,000,000 tons! Slave States have not therefore, and they never can have the means of fertilizing and improving land. They can never have good husbandry.”⁵⁹ The nature of Southern mass farming created a cycle of abuse of people and land that was impossible to break without removing the system entirely.

Most anti-slavery novelists include a number of references to the parallel between the status of man and animal in the slave system. William Wells Brown’s description of the slave market in *Clotel* shows aging slaves being prepared to be sold as workers in their prime by a trader’s slave, Pompey, who darkens grey hair, oils skin, and coaches slaves at auction to lie about their age. Pompey is “of real negro blood” and “like most of his race, had a set of teeth, which for whiteness and beauty could not be surpassed;” he calls himself “de genewine artekil,”⁶⁰ and the parallel between examining slaves and horses is plain. Meanwhile, slaves who flee into the swamps to escape sale are hunted by dogs, who “will attack a negro at their master’s bidding and cling to him as the bull-dog will cling to a beast.”⁶¹

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For these writers, the parallel legal status of slaves and livestock is an explicit illustration of the insanity of the slave system; Hildreth points out that in Virginia the business of trafficking slaves is more profitable than planting itself; “the southern market . . . is as regularly supplied with slaves from Virginia, as with mules and cattle from Kentucky.”⁶² Here, again, good business and racist philosophy go hand in hand; “many thrifty managers and good disciplinarians. . . pen up their slaves, when not at work, as they pen up their cattle, to keep them, as they say, out of mischief.”⁶³ Masters’ paternalist love of their slaves amounts to nothing more serious than their feelings for their house pets. The average person “cannot have any thing much about them, be it a dog, a cat, or even a slave, without insensibly contracting some interest in it and regard for it.”⁶⁴

Unfortunately, the racist theorizing of pro-slavery ideologues, and the business practices of planters, often backs up Hildreth’s claims. John Stauffer claims that “using chains, collars, branding irons, whips, and other forms of control and punishment, masters sought to ‘tame’ both wild animals and slaves, and make them childlike, submissive, and less aggressive.”⁶⁵ Southern ideologue and novelist Beverly Tucker, author of the 1836 secessionist fantasy *The Partisan Leader*, rejects the notion that “difference of character” is “produced by peculiar training,”⁶⁶ claiming, through his characters, that instead “there must be something, by nature, in the moral constitution of the negro, intrinsically different from the white man.” The idea that humans “all are of one race” is met with the observation that all dogs are as well, but that “the wolf” cannot understand “the motives of the Newfoundland dog.” Tucker’s mouthpiece then goes on to rationalize the different social standing of “races” as a “choice,” as well as Holy decree.⁶⁷

Herman Melville lampoons this very comparison in *Benito Cereno*; in the eyes of Captain Amasa Delano, shaded as they are by the benign contempt of his sense of place in the world, slaves are animals, whether domesticated or not, and sentimentalizing them was a sign of weakness and effeminacy. Between “the docility arising from the unaspiring contentment of a limited mind, and that susceptibility of blind attachment sometimes inhering in indisputable inferiors,” it was no surprise that “those hypochondriacs, Johnson and Byron . . . took to their hearts, almost to the exclusion of the entire white race, their serving men, the Negroes, Barber and Fletcher.” Delano himself “took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs.” The Captain

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had often taken rare satisfaction in sitting in his door, watching some free man of colour at his work or play. If on a voyage he chanced to have a black sailor, invariably he was on chatty, and half-gamesome terms with him. In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano.⁶⁸

For Delano, no mask drops when the slaves drop their charade. They do not become men fighting for their freedom, but merely change from dogs to wolves; in his eyes, the slaves act out the swamp outlaw/savage cliché; “red tongues lolled, wolf-like, from their black mouths,” while “the pale sailors' teeth were set” in keeping with their dignity.⁶⁹ Where Tucker works to dissociate the paternal love for the slaves of the Southern gentry from the crass materialism of the Northern capitalist elite, Melville recognizes them as of a piece—the thrift and good-natured industriousness of the North, embodied in Delano, enlisted in the imperial project of military control and subjugation that allows Southern agribusiness to flourish. Thomas Wentworth Higginson makes a similar observation when he notes that in the report on the Denmark Vesey conspiracy,

So thoroughly, in the whole report, are the ideas of person and chattel intermingled, that when Gov. Bennett petitions for mitigation of sentence in the case of his slave Batteau, and closes, "I ask this, gentlemen, as an individual incurring a severe and distressing loss," it is really impossible to decide whether the predominant emotion be affectional or financial.⁷⁰

In the European colonies south of the United States, this confusion of human status existed at the level of language itself. British politician and abolitionist David Turnbull notes in 1840 that “when a horse is spoken of the phrase *un caballo Bozal* means merely that he has not been sufficiently broken in,” but “the poor African . . . is spoken of as a *Bozal* long after he has lost all his natural spirit.” Likewise, the term *Creole* “is applied in Cuba, as in the other islands of the West Indies, not to men and women merely, white, black, or brown, but to domestic animals in general, and even to plants and trees, natives of the soil.”⁷¹ Higginson rivals Melville’s sense of sinister irony when, in his essay on the Maroons of Jamaica, he lists the possible sources of the term “Maroon.” One possibility is the Spanish word “*Cimarron*, a word meaning untamable, and used alike for apes and runaway slaves. But whether these rebel marauders were regarded as monkeys or men, they made themselves equally formidable.”⁷² Stowe complicates the connection between slaves and animals in *Dred* when *Dred* refers to his swamp hideout as a

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“den”: “‘Foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests,’ and in the habitation of dragons the Lord hath opened a way for his outcasts.”⁷³ Stowe’s equation of the white population with monsters of the deep is in keeping with the slavery-as-Leviathan imagery (which we will discuss at more length below) that Melville drew from David Child and Theodore Parker.

In Ahab, Melville brought to life an insane marriage of despotism and will to freedom. Delano is the anti-Ahab, complacent and content with the rewards of American capitalism and confused by deeper questions of its meaning. At the end of the story proper he acts decisively for the first time, killing and suppressing unrest. Here the Americans are business-like, filled with filial comraderie, and skillful in their approach to violence. These are the tools of empire; Delano never imagines that this sort of resolve is possible among the crew of hijackers on the San Dominick.

This, again, seems to be what distinguishes John Brown’s vision of black revolt from most others, either condescending or paranoid. In Frederick Douglass’ account of Brown’s plan for a black guerilla force in the mountains of the Southern states, the white man believed that “with care and enterprise . . . he could soon gather a force of one hundred hardy men,” and “they would begin work in earnest.”⁷⁴ Brown’s plan was predicated not only on the assumption that he would find such men in the quarters, but that he could trust them not to behave like bloodthirsty savages. According to Douglass, Brown’s plans

did not, as some suppose, contemplate a general rising among the slaves, and a general slaughter of the slave masters. An insurrection he thought would only defeat the object, but his plan did contemplate the creating of an armed force which should act in the very heart of the south. He was not averse to the shedding of blood, and thought the practice of carrying arms would be a good one for the colored people to adopt, as it would give them a sense of their manhood. No people he said could have self respect, or be respected, who would not fight for their freedom.⁷⁵

Though Douglass’ *Narrative* implicitly expressed a belief that violent self-assertion was crucial to black freedom, when Brown first described his own ideas “he seemed to apprehend opposition to his views.” Brown’s conviction in 1847 that “moral suasion would [never] liberate the slave, [nor would] political action . . . abolish the system” was shared by many radical abolitionists, as well as mainstream politicians like John Quincy Adams, but Brown went further than many: “that slaveholders had forfeited their right to live, that the slaves had the right to gain

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their liberty in any way they could.”⁷⁶ The slave system, Brown insisted, “was a state of war, and the slave had a right to anything necessary to his freedom.”⁷⁷ Brown already “felt that he had delayed already too long and had no room to boast either his zeal or his self denial” in devoting himself to physical resistance to slavery. Elijah Lovejoy had been dead ten years, David Walker almost twenty. In Douglass’s account, Brown lays out his plans carefully: first the rebellion would “destroy the money value of slave property” by “rendering [it] insecure.”

“My plan then is to take at first about twenty-five picked men, and begin on a small scale; supply them arms and ammunition, post them in squads of fives on a line of twenty-five miles, the most persuasive and judicious of whom shall go down to the fields from time to time, as opportunity offers, and induce the slaves to join them, seeking and selecting the most restless and daring.”⁷⁸

As their conversation continued, Douglass “suggested that we might convert the slaveholders,” but Brown “said that could never be, ‘he knew their proud hearts and that they would never be induced to give up their slaves, until they felt a big stick about their heads.’”⁷⁹

Meeting Brown had such a profound affect on Douglass that, he says, he became “less hopeful of [slavery’s] peaceful abolition.”

My utterances became more and more tinged by the color of this man's strong impressions. Speaking at an anti-slavery convention in Salem, Ohio, I expressed this apprehension that slavery could only be destroyed by blood-shed, when I was suddenly and sharply interrupted by my good old friend Sojourner Truth with the question, "Frederick, is God dead?" "No." I answered, and "because God is not dead slavery can only end in blood." My quaint old sister was of the Garrison school of non-resistants, and was shocked at my sanguinary doctrine, but she too became an advocate of the sword, when the war for the maintenance of the Union was declared.⁸⁰

Douglass’ account inverts a classic African-American autobiographical trope. William Andrews describes the “import of the autobiographies of black people during the first century of the genre’s existence in the United States is that they ‘tell a free story’ as well as talk about freedom as a theme and goal of life.”⁸¹ Here Douglass tells the story of a white man telling him a free story. Eric Sundquist repeatedly points out that in Douglass’ novella, Madison Washington “converts” Listwell, the good listener, with his story and his voice.⁸² But Douglass tells the same story of Brown; his story of black insurrection, a plan he seems to have carried for years, “converts” Douglass from a Garrisonian pacifist to an advocate of violent revolution who would

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soon break with Garrison. Coming as it does toward the end of his life, long after the Civil War itself, Douglass' tale of his first meeting with Brown also fits Andrews' description of the continuing evolution of African-American autobiography, which increasingly emphasized "those aspects of the self outside the margins of the normal, the acceptable, and the definable, as conceived by the dominant culture,"⁸³ in that Douglass has now placed himself with Brown, beyond the pale of acceptable antebellum discourse, a black man and a white man discussing organized armed rebellion against the South.

Douglass opens his tale of Madison Washington in 1835, tying a number of strands of recent history together, and moving his protagonist from the site of thwarted rebellion, the Dismal Swamp, to the freedom and possibility of the high seas. Just before Douglass' own real life escape, just before the Crash of 1837, just before the beginning of the Texas annexation crisis that would signal the United States' military commitment to Southern economic expansion, a Northern traveler overhears the "rich and mellow accents" of a man's voice deep in the forests of Virginia, a voice filled with "high aspirations" and bitterness.⁸⁴ The speaker compares himself to the simplest creatures of the woods: the "accursed and crawling snake" responds to the threat of the approaching human by preparing to strike; "I dare not do as much as that." Even the birds in the trees "are still my superiors. They live free," and "fly where they list by day, and retire in freedom at night." The listener's name, aptly, is Listwell, and the use of the word list here suggests another meaning for Douglass' white character's name—he not only listens well to the fugitive slave; he chooses well in allying himself with the speaker, a slave who deplors "living under the constant dread and apprehension of being sold and transferred, like a mere brute," and finally resolves, "I shall be free."⁸⁵ Listwell represents perhaps an ideal Northern white man, devoted to liberty as a principle, and willing to act on that feeling, even if it means following a black man.

Though Douglass was central to establishing a literature that speaks for African-Americans in their own voice, here, in his only attempt at fiction, he puts his hero's rebellion entirely in the mouths of white observers, and unlike Melville's white characters in *Benito Cereno*, they understand what they see. Like Douglass' friend John Brown, they are capable of studying the slaves right. Listwell is fascinated with the sound of the voice he hears, and more so when he

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sees the speaker, a tall, “symmetrical, round, and strong” African-American “dark and . . . glossy as the raven's wing” but “of manly form” and “Herculean strength,” but with “nothing savage or forbidding in his aspect.” Douglass’ hero “was one to be sought as a friend, but to be dreaded as an enemy.”⁸⁶ The slave is “black, but comely,” a phrase Douglass takes from the Song of Solomon and leaves in the quotation marks to draw attention to its source, and it speaks to the complicated, vaguely eroticized role of the heroic slave Douglass is trying to create. The singer of the Song is “black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon,”

Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked
upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the
vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept.
Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where
thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the
flocks of thy companions?⁸⁷

The beloved here is not a daughter of Jerusalem, but a son of the North, and the homosocial, self-sacrificing love necessary for the defeat of slavery is embodied in the slave’s audience. In Listwell, Douglass creates what slaves need—a good listener, and someone willing to choose risking his privilege to aid the slaves. For like the birds of the forest, white men can go “where they list by day, and retire in freedom at night.” Though he is not yet ready to put into fiction the ideal white ally he found in John Brown, who admittedly may have seemed too good to be true, Douglass creates a passive version—a man willing to house fugitive slaves, travel south, and aid and abet insurrectionary action. Upon hearing the story of Madison Washington, “a man . . . of rare endowments, a child of God,—guilty of no crime but the color of his skin,” Listwell immediately vows “From this hour I am an abolitionist. I have seen enough and heard enough.” And again, here are echoes of Nat Turner, a “sable preacher” in a “solitary temple.” Washington, without seeing Listwell, “shuns the church, the altar, and the great congregation of Christian worshippers, and wanders away to the gloomy forest, to utter in the vacant air complaints and griefs” unacceptable in conventional religious discourse. The slave is moved “almost to madness by the sense of the injustice done him,” and retreats to the forest “to debate with himself the feasibility of plans, plans of his own invention, for his own deliverance.”⁸⁸

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Five years later, incredibly, Washington appears at Listwell's door, having escaped slavery. Though he was at one point nearly captured—and, reversing the racist equation of blacks and animals here, Douglass' hero "dreaded more these human voices" that approached his hiding place in the woods "than I should have done those of wild beasts"⁸⁹—he travels safely. Douglass now reveals more of his own more radical position in abolitionist debate; while he doesn't specifically reference Brown, he does their close ally, Gerrit Smith. Washington informs Listwell that he has "suffered little for want of food" on his journey north, but that "I need not tell you how I got it." Traveling through "an enemy's land," Washington, "guided by my own necessities, and in contempt of their conventionalities, I did not scruple to take bread where I could get it."⁹⁰

Listwell agrees with Washington's methods: "I once had doubts on this point myself, but a conversation with Gerrit Smith . . . put an end to all my doubts on this point;"⁹¹ Smith took this position, as I describe elsewhere, at the 1842 New York Liberty Party Convention (so Douglass is condensing his timeline here). Listwell again demonstrates the willing to sacrifice his own privilege in the pursuit of black freedom by promising that "if it cost my farm, I shall see you safely out of the States."⁹² Washington safely crosses Lake Erie with Listwell's help, allowing Douglass to remind his readers that it is in Canada, still subject of the British Crown, that "persons [of] color are protected in all the rights of men."⁹³ Blacks in the United States must look beyond their borders to find "a land of liberty. Thank God that there is such a land so near us."⁹⁴

The story then picks up years later, when Listwell again travels to Virginia, arriving at a tavern, formerly "notorious" as a refuge for gamblers, slavers, and other ne'er-do-wells. The "old rookery, the nucleus of all sorts of birds, mostly those of ill omen," had become a more squalid place over the years, "like everything else peculiar to Virginia."⁹⁵ Like Hildreth, Douglass paints the Old Dominion as a decaying den of thieves, owned by a childish, irresponsible aristocracy. The white men who frequent the tavern "have no regular employment," but hang around gossiping; they are "as good as the newspaper for the events of the day, and they sell their knowledge almost as cheap."⁹⁶ One of the "loafers" tells Listwell when he arrives that he admires his care for his horse; "A man that don't care about his beast . . . aint much in my eye anyhow."⁹⁷ This is clearly the set-up for the next scene, in which slaves, "children of a common Creator" and "guilty of no crime," are driven to market nearby, "all to fill the pockets of men too lazy to work for an honest living." Seeing this, Listwell "almost doubted the existence of a God

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of justice! And he stood wondering that the earth did not open and swallow up such wickedness.”⁹⁸

Douglass himself believed in a God of justice, as his assertion to Sojourner Truth that “because God is not dead slavery can only end in blood” suggests. As if to illustrate, *The Heroic Slave* presents Northern readers the opportunity to hear about (not see) a slave rising up against his oppressors. Douglass contrives another incredible meeting between Listwell and Washington, who is among the slaves being marched to auction. He had returned south to free his wife, and was recaptured in their escape attempt, in which she was killed. Seeking to “do his friend Madison one last service,” Listwell hurries into a hardware and buys “three strong files,” which he manages to slip to Washington before the slave boards the ship to New Orleans.⁹⁹

From here we never see Listwell again; he has served to provide his friend the material means by which to secure his own freedom, but takes no part in the rest of the story. Washington never returns except through the narration of the first mate of the New Orleans bound slaver, the Creole, who is accosted back at the tavern after surviving the onboard revolt that Washington led. Told that “the whole disaster was the result of ignorance of the real character of darkies in general,” and that “All that is needed in dealing with a set of rebellious darkies, is to show that yer not afraid of 'em,”¹⁰⁰ the mate differentiates the dividing lines in the geography of rebellion. He replies that it's

“ . . . quite easy to talk of flogging niggers here on land, where you have the sympathy of the community, and the whole physical force of the government, State and national, at your command, and where, if a negro shall lift his hand against a white man, the whole community, with one accord, are ready to unite in shooting him down but, sir, I deny that the negro is, naturally, a coward It is one thing to manage a company of slaves on a Virginia plantation, and quite another thing to quell an insurrection on the lonely billows of the Atlantic, where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty. For the negro to act cowardly on shore, may be to act wisely; and I've some doubts whether you, Mr. Williams, would find it very convenient were you a slave in Algiers, to raise your hand against the bayonets of a whole government.”¹⁰¹

Though the mate responds with anger and indignance when his accoster compares him to Garrison, the speech presents some of Douglass' basic arguments: that slavery is an imposed condition, not a state of being determined by nature, and that the slave economy cannot survive without massive social, political, judicial, and military investment. The mate then describes the

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rebel leader, the “murderous villain” who led the “fiends from the pit” who took the ship, whose name is “ominous of greatness,”¹⁰² and who was “as shrewd a fellow as ever I met in my life, and was as well fitted to lead in a dangerous enterprise as any one white man in ten thousand,”¹⁰³ who tells him that “you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows” and that the slaves “have won their liberty, with no other weapons but their OWN BROKEN FETTERS.”¹⁰⁴ The mate “forgot his blackness in the dignity of his manner, and the eloquence of his speech. It seemed as if the souls of both the great dead (whose names he bore) had entered him.”¹⁰⁵ The rebel leader tells the mate that he is not a “black murderer,” and that he has

done no more to those dead men yonder, than they would have done to me in like circumstances. We have struck for our freedom, and if a true man's heart be in you, you will honor us for the deed. We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, so were they.”¹⁰⁶

The mate is clearly confused by his experience; his and his foe’s “difference of color” seemed to be “the only ground for difference of action.” The mate recognizes that the rebel was acting on the “principles of 1776. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior.”¹⁰⁷ The mad contradiction between “the principles of 1776” and racist theory, and between the stated ideals of the United States and the fact that Great Britain has realized them more completely, are further hammered home when the ship, at the rebels’ command, lands in Nassau and “a company of black soldiers came on board, for the purpose, as they said, of protecting the property.” The “impudent rascals” refused to help the mate recapture the rebels because “they did not recognize persons as property.” When the mate insists that “by the laws of Virginia and the laws of the United States,” the rebels are “as much property as the barrels of flour in the hold,” the “stupid” soldiers recoiled and “showed their ivory, rolled up their white eyes in horror, as if the idea of putting men on a footing with merchandise were revolting to their humanity.”¹⁰⁸

It’s interesting here that the black soldiers display their white teeth and eyes here, in their ridicule of the white sailor’s legal argument. The reference to ivory, of course, reduces these men to animals in the sailor’s account (it’s interesting, too, that, like Melville’s tale of the Town-Ho mutiny in *Moby-Dick*, we only see this rebellion second hand, the more, perhaps, to consider the abstract principles). But the absurdity of the legal claim, which flies in the face of all observable

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reality, underlines the abolitionist mission to prove the laws of the United States not simply wrong, but inconceivably absurd. There was simply not an argument to construct around the issue; it was self-evidently false. In 1845, radical abolitionist Lysander Spooner issued “The Unconstitutionality of Slavery,” dismantling legal arguments for the protection of slavery, in which he makes a simple and definitive distinction between slaves—humans—and livestock, and in so doing, asserts that no child born into slavery can be legally held:

It is a principle of natural law in regard to property, that a calf belongs to the owner of the cow that bore it But the principle of natural law, which makes a calf belong to the owner of the cow, does not make the child of a slave belong to the owner of the slave both cow and calf are naturally subjects of property; while neither men nor children are naturally subjects of property. The law of nature gives no aid to anything inconsistent with itself. It therefore gives no aid to the transmission of property in man

Brute animals and things being naturally subjects of property, there are obvious reasons why the natural increase should belong to the owner of the original stock. But men, not being naturally subjects of property, the law of nature will not transmit any right of property acquired in violation of her own authority. . . she cannot perpetuate or transmit such rights—if rights they can called.¹⁰⁹

For Spooner, the entire slave system is a house of cards, a legal fiction, not simply morally reprehensible but Constitutionally indefensible. In contrast to the spurious claims of slavery advocates, there are simply no meaningful categories by which humans can become chattel. The revolutionary implications of this claim are as clear as they are in the Declaration of Independence. Though “Natural law may be overborne by arbitrary institutions . . . she will never aid or perpetuate them,” Spooner argues; “Instead of this, she asserts her own authority on the first opportunity.”¹¹⁰ The arbitrary authority by which the United States illegally enslaves one person cannot be carried over to that person’s offspring; regardless of any codification of the first person’s status as slave, their children has the right under natural law to reject any such status as bogus. Natural law “will assert her own authority in favor of the child of A, to whom the letter of the law enslaving A, does not apply.” Spooner’s position is that the U.S. Constitution does not and cannot legally support slavery, since it

recognizes the principle that all men are born free; for it recognizes the principle that natural birth in the country gives citizenship—which of course . . . implies freedom. And no exception is made to the rule. Of course all born in the country

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since the adoption of the constitution of the United States, have been born free, whether there were, or were not any legal slaves in the country before that time.¹¹¹

The pretense that slavery can be defended legally in a nation whose independence is based on an appeal to natural law is patently false. Spooner bases his claim on the legal status of the Declaration. Here the Declaration is a legal document, the one from which all other legal documents must spring, since it establishes the legal right of the colonies to reject British rule. All its other claims, therefore, must be legally binding as well, including “This law of nature, that all men are born free,” a principle that predates Justinian.

Justinian says, "Captivity and servitude are both contrary to the law of nature; for by that law all men are born free." But the principle was not new with Justinian; it exists in the nature of man, and is as old as man — and the race of man generally, has acknowledged it. The exceptions have been special; the rule general.¹¹²

John Brown consistently cited the Declaration of Independence, and the Golden Rule, as the moral basis for slave rebellion, rather than the more commonly cited documents in 19th century American politics, the Constitution and the Old Testament; Brown follows the spirit, not the letter, of the Law. But if Spooner’s argument is correct, that the Declaration has legal standing, then the Constitution, which Garrison called a pact with hell (seeing the rot from the beginning in one of his few moments of greater insight than Brown), is irrelevant insofar as it contradicts the precedent of the Declaration. Spooner’s argument remains controversial, however; Supreme Court precedent does not recognize the Declaration, which Abraham Lincoln would describe as an "apple of gold" that was “subsequently framed” by the Constitution,¹¹³ as a document with any legal standing. The document by which the Revolutionary generation claimed their own right to rebel against unjust rule has no legal standing as law in the nation it founded. In such an irrational situation, abolition advocates sought to create an imaginative ground on which the rebel slave could stand and the sympathetic citizen could stand with him. Before long, Brown would attempt to create this ground in reality as well.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

¹ Melville, *Benito Cereno*, p. 67.

² See Reynolds, 106-110.

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³ McCune Smith, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Douglass, *Life and Times*, 1892, p. 340. text available at

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/doug192/doug192.html>. Accessed February 28, 2008.

⁸ Higginson, *Black Rebellion*, p. 80.

⁹ *Life and Times* p. 341-342.

¹⁰ *Black Rebellion*, p. 7-8.

¹¹ McCune Smith, p. 3.

¹² Stowe, *Dred*, I, p. III

¹³ Literary and textual examples abound, from Columbus' diaries to the closing of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

¹⁴ *Black Rebellion*, p. 9.

¹⁵ *Dred* II, p. 229.

¹⁶ *Dred* I, pp. 130-131.

¹⁷ Kemp Davis, p. 16.

¹⁸ Now in West Virginia, an irony I will discuss below.

¹⁹ Higginson, *Black Rebellion*, p. 71-72.

²⁰ Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University, 1979), p. 49.

²¹ *Rebellion*, p. 72-73,

²² Sundquist, p. 41.

²³ Jacobs, p. 47.

²⁴ Hildreth, *Despotism*, pp. 57-8.

²⁵ Three great af am 90

²⁶ *Benito Cereno*, p. 64.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Child, pp. 182-183.

²⁹ Byrd

³⁰ Stowe, *Dred*, p. 255.

³¹ Child, p. 182.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴³ William Wells Brown, "Clotel," in *Three Classic African-American Novels*, p. 201.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202-203.

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⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 191-192.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁵³ Douglass, "Heroic Slave," p. 38

⁵⁴ "Heroic," p. 39.

⁵⁵ Stauffer, p. 250.

⁵⁶ D.L. Child, *Naboth*, p. 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Reynolds says that Brown's interest in the tanning business, which he learned from his father, "was the opportunity it gave him to live around animals and have the sense of being a shaphard like the prophets of old." See p. 45. Again, Reynolds tends to accept the Transcendentalists' romantic image of Brown as an almost storybook figure.

⁵⁹ D.L. Child, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Wells Brown, p. 56.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁶² Hildreth, *The Slave*, I p. 133.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 45.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 153.

⁶⁵ Stauffer, p. 206

⁶⁶ Tucker, p. 123

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁶⁸ *Benito*, p. 73.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁷⁰ *Rebellion*, p. 139.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁷³ Stowe, *Dred II*, p. 329.

⁷⁴ Douglass, *Life and Times*, p. 341.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 340-341.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Andrews, p. xi.

⁸² Sundquist,

⁸³ Andrews, p. 1,

⁸⁴ "Heroic," p. 26.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸⁷ Song of Solomon 1:6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53-54.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61-62.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁰⁹ Spooner.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Lincoln, Fragment on the Constitution, c. January, 1861—widely available on the web.

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CHAPTER SEVEN: A GHOST AND A MISSION Melville, John Brown, and the Ship of State

“Woe to him who seeks to pour oil upon the waters
when God has brewed them into a gale!”

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

If any writer of fiction articulated the absurdity of the United States’ legal fictions as convincingly as Spooner, it is Herman Melville. Melville’s stories are layered with pointed but veiled attacks on the supposed reasonableness of U.S. policy and social norms, and his two sailing tales of the 1850s, *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, are confrontations with the slave-holding United States. If for Frederick Douglass, “every [ocean] breeze speaks of courage and liberty,”¹ Melville’s work demonstrates that man drags his categories and institutions with him to sea. In a 2005 essay titled “Wilderness,” Marilynne Robinson refers to “the permission apparently implied by empty spaces,” assumed by empires from Russia to Australia to Nevada. “And then there is the sea,” Robinson observes; “We have all behaved as if there is a place where actions would not have consequences.”² Melville’s work seems to be preoccupied with disproving this assumption of permission.

Alan Heimert tells us that in the United States, “When the citizen of the United States pictured his nation’s development and situation, he imagined the Republic as a ship, its history as a voyage.”³ In *Moby-Dick* that ship is piloted to its doom by a “monomaniac”; in *Benito Cereno* it is a slave ship swamped by its own ambivalence and passivity, while its cargo seethes with violent rebellion. Michael Rogin reminds us that a member of Congress pushing the 1850 Compromise predicted that the “Ship of State . . . approaches the awful maelstrom of disunion.”⁴ Theodore Parker, later a member of John Brown’s conspiracy, scoffed:

when Mr. Webster was telling us the ship of State was going to pieces . . . he was calling on us to throw over to Texas—that monster of the deep which threatened to devour the ship of State—fifty thousand square miles of territory, and ten millions of dollars, and to the other monster of secession to cast over the trial by jury⁵

Tocqueville too, notes Rogin, “showed his disturbance at the breakdown of political forms with images . . . of water.”⁶ Melville uses the sea as the void into which the United States seemed to

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be hurling itself by the 1850s, and these texts, layered with Biblical references, political puns, and metaphysical puzzles, effectively prophesy the career of John Brown and describe the America he rose up against.

In *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, Melville conducts a veiled exploration of the New World drive for empire, the violent force and exploitation that fuel it, the “semi-science” and legal constructs that rationalize it, the delusions necessary to maintain it, and the apocalyptic outbursts of violence that are its most reliable byproduct. In both stories the nation’s violent history is enshrined on the very hulls of the ships. *Moby-Dick*’s Ship of State, the Pequod, reminds us of the history of imperial genocide in its allusion to a tribe virtually exterminated by the English settlers, and the mysterious San Dominick in Melville’s later novella displays the bleached skeleton of the rebel slaves’ murdered owner at its prow, in place of the discarded original figurehead of New World conqueror Christopher Columbus. America’s Manifest Destiny is the continuation of the Old World despotism that Richard Hildreth considered the basis of the agricultural economy. Eqbal Ahmad points out that

imperial powers—especially democratic ones—cannot justify their uses of power only on the basis of greed. No one will buy it. They have needed two things: a ghost and a mission. The British carried the White Man’s Burden. That was their mission. The French carried la mission civilisatrice, the civilising mission. The Americans had, first, Manifest Destiny

Each of them had the Black, the Yellow, and finally the Red Peril to fight against. There was a ghost. There was a mission.⁷

Ronald Sanders traces this mission—the drive for land and wealth cast as a divine calling—back to the beginnings of the settlements; English settlers at Plymouth in the 1630’s “were drawn no less by generous terms for land allotment there than by religious aspirations.” Justification for self-interest when these land allotments brought settlers into conflict with native tribes already existed in no less an authority than Thomas More’s *Utopia*, which argued that war was just “if it [was] waged to oust a people who refuse to allow vacant land to be used according to the very law of nature.” Echoing More, Reverend Francis Higginson would say in 1630 that the local tribes “like well of our coming” because “there is an abundance of ground that they cannot possess or make use of.”⁸

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In *Moby-Dick* the “ghost,” as Ahmad describes the diabolic foe whose presence justifies the violence of the mission, is the White Whale, a terrifying spectral presence always on the horizon, leading the ship to its doom:

This midnight-spout . . . at the same silent hour . . . was descried by all; but upon making sail to overtake it, once more it disappeared as if it had never been. And so it served us night after night . . . disappearing again. . . . this solitary jet seemed for ever alluring us on.⁹

The spectre the Ship of State pursues is Manifest Destiny, a mission that placed “duty and profit hand in hand.”¹⁰ The punning title of *Moby-Dick* is a challenge to the vision of the American future John O’Sullivan offered in his 1845 speech from which the concept of Manifest Destiny seems to have been derived. *Moby-Dick* presents the spectre of a murderous metaphysical presence on the horizon—Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine were not harbingers of the glory of what O’Sullivan called “the great nation of futurity,” but a siren song, a ghost—the “spirit-spout” the ship chases—drawing the American ship of state to its doom (the shipwreck of the *Essex*, on which the story is partly based, took place in 1820, the year of the Missouri Compromise). *Moby-Dick* is a long treatise disproving O’Sullivan’s claim that equality “presides in all the operations of the physical world, and [is] the conscious law of the soul.” O’Sullivan’s optimistic assertion that the U.S. is based on “the duty of man to man” is flippantly dismissed on the *Pequod*: “though man loved his fellow, yet man is a money-making animal, which propensity too often interferes with his benevolence.”¹¹

Early in *Moby-Dick* Melville presents an image of the unfathomable futility of the situation facing America’s “Ship of State.” Entering Nantucket’s Spouter-Inn, Ishmael sees a large oil painting “so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced” as to be unreadable. After gazing at it repeatedly and considering it at length, Ishmael develops the “theory” that it depicts a “half-foundered ship weltering” in a hideous storm, while “an exasperated whale, purposing to spring clean over the craft, is in the enormous act of impaling himself upon the three mast-heads.”¹²

The image is as seemingly ambiguous, and as deliberately pointed, in its portent of doom as the stern-piece of the mysterious, “hearse-like” San Dominick in *Benito Cereno*, “a dark satyr in a mask, holding his foot on the prostrate neck of a writhing figure, likewise masked,”¹³ a grim parody of the Great Seal of Virginia, on which Athena stands on the prostrate warrior, crown

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knocked off his head, above the now infamous motto, “sic simper tyrannis.” Melville’s texts have been described as inscrutable, but they speak to anti-slavery texts in surprising ways. A scene in Martin Delany’s *Blake*, echoing Bentio Cereno in its depiction of a global crisis brought on by modern slavery, the slave ship “Vulture,” loaded with human freight, heads for Cuba to unload its cargo in U.S. markets. As the morning sun rises, the mixed crew is on deck; “On the quarterdeck were standing the Americans, on the poop the Spaniards, the blacks occupying the forecabin.” As they look on, “a huge monster appeared in the water off the port bow of the vessel . . . Garcia at once pronounced it a ‘sign of trouble.’”¹⁴

Melville’s mid-50’s tale of slave revolt, *Benito Cereno*, ties New World slavery to Old World despotism; the names of the two ships’ captains, Amasa Delano and Benito Cereno, signal the merely cosmetic differences between the organized exploitation of resources by the European empires—the old guard, “B.C.,” backwards and barbaric—and by the United States, the new world order, “A.D.,” enlightened and benign. The break in eras and civilizations that Melville puns on here is meaningless; in both worlds, violence is conducted by what Johann Hari would call “armies of business.”¹⁵ Melville gives the lie to O’Sullivan’s claim that the United States has “but little connection with the past history of any [other nation], and still less with all antiquity, its glories, or its crimes” but is connected “with the future only.”¹⁶ Melville seems to present an answer to O’Sullivan’s question asking “How many nations have had their decline and fall, because the equal rights of the minority were trampled on by the despotism of the majority,” and suggests that, though O’Sullivan is right in claiming that “the principle upon which a nation is organized fixes its destiny,” that destiny, for the U.S., is dark. In these two great works of the 1850’s, Melville creates a fiction embodying the conflict and chaos of a civilization imploding around its contradictions.

For Melville, the extermination of the Pequots brings together the entire history of the imperial project embodied in Ahab’s ship, captained by a “grey-headed, ungodly old man, chasing with curses a Job’s whale round the world [with] a crew [that was] chiefly made up of mongrel renegades, and castaways, and cannibals.”¹⁷ Though John O’Sullivan absurdly claims that America’s “annals describe no scenes of horrid carnage,” Melville grafts the history of that carnage onto the ship that stands in for the nation.

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The story of the Pequots erases the distinctions O'Sullivan tries to make between the bloody Old World and the free and peaceful New; the Englishmen who slaughtered the tribe was originally incensed that the Indians saw no difference between the competing conquerors of their continent. Questioned about the killing of an Englishman, the Pequot ambassador dismissed the accusation but admitted that the tribe had recently taken revenge on whites for Dutch crimes against them. When pressed, he admitted to making no distinctions between English and Dutch settlers, taking them to be "one nation."¹⁸ The English used the killing as an excuse to massacre the tribe, and though some present were appalled at their own participation in the atrocity, it was later called a "sweet sacrifice." Captain John Underhill, troubled by his actions, finally came to compare the situation to "David's war," in which Joab and Amasa figure. John Winthrop records the end of the Pequot in a voyage to the West Indies, where "the remnant of New England's dreaded enemy had been bartered for, among other things, some Negro slaves."¹⁹

Underhill, Sanders tells us, "finally sees fit to quiet his conscience with the kind of Old Testament consolations to which the Puritans notoriously were prone." Invoking David's War, Underhill writes

When a people is grown to such a height of blood and sin against God and man, and all confederates in the action, there he hath no respect to persons, but harrows them, and saws them, and puts them to the sword, and the most terriblest death that may be. Sometimes the scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents.²⁰

The irony in Underhill's words is that Roger Williams used the same point, that God "is no respecter of persons," to defend the tribes against the English, and that John Brown used the phrase frequently in dismissing the right of white supremacy in his battle against the slaveholders. What seems unique about Brown is not his "fanaticism," but his rejection of racism; he is unique in turning such a phrase against whites, "apostasizing," in words Melville puts in Delano's mouth, "against his own species." Similarly to Brown, Melville is unusual in portraying, in both *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, men pursuing their fortunes in ways sanctioned by western commerce, only to meet "the most terriblest death that may be."

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Though seemingly not explicitly an anti-slavery novel, *Moby-Dick* is an epic of blackness and failed escape. William Wells Brown's cynicism in noting that America is called a "cradle of liberty" seems to echo in much of the classic literature of the American Renaissance, and *Moby-Dick*, like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Walden*, opens with a meditation on confinement and escape. In Ishmael's eyes, all of Manhattan is populated by Thoreau's mass of men leading lives of quiet desperation; everyone, while "tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks," gazes toward a dim, hazy dream of freedom—"thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries;" yet they also serve as their own guards, "[p]osted like silent sentinels all around the town."²¹

Embedded in the first line of Melville's great novel is the fratricide of the slave system. The narrator's invitation to "Call me Ishmael" establishes his status as a slave and an outcast whose "hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him."²² The Biblical Ishmael is the castoff firstborn of the patriarch of a new nation and his slave concubine—Abraham as Thomas Jefferson. Had Abraham not "cast out thy bondswoman and her son," an article in the *Southern Literary Messenger* claimed in 1851, "his progeny would have reproduced the story of Cain and Abel."²³ That Ishmael is "a wild ass" links the character to the human-as-livestock imagery in slave narratives and anti-slavery novels. When Melville's narrator gets "grim about the mouth . . . I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball." So for Ishmael, like fugitive slaves after the 1850 Compromise, freedom means two things: leaving North America or dying.

The reference to Ishmael also brings Melville fairly close to Brown's theology. Lemuel Haynes' anti-racist revisions of New Divinity thought insisted on a "pro-black notion of the biblical covenant" that was mirrored in American republican society. The covenant that God presented to Abraham "mandat[ed] the acceptance of foreigners, servants, and slaves into the body of the faithful—that acceptance was the very test of faith." Casting out Ishmael "was, according to Haynes, the act by which the covenant was broken."²⁴ Melville's naming of Ishmael at the beginning of his story sets the scene in an America riven by this broken covenant.

In *Moby-Dick*, the status of the "simple sailor," being ordered to "jump from spar to spar, like a grasshopper in a May meadow," is "unpleasant enough. It touches one's sense of honor" (and here Melville evokes, among the grandees of North America, the Randolphs, one of the

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great families of Virginia, and one of its richest slaveholders), “and requires a strong decoction of Seneca and the Stoics to enable you to grin and bear it.” And if Ishmael’s rather defensive question, “Who aint a slave?” sounds glib, and his observation that “however they may thump and punch me about, I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or other served in much the same way” sounds complacent, it will be clear by the end of his voyage that, whether “in a physical or metaphysical point of view,” there is a great deal more weight to his observation that “the universal thump is passed round”²⁵ than he knows at the time, and that Melville’s words echo in Lincoln’s grim equation that “every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword” in his second inaugural address, itself a grudging acceptance of Brown’s last “prophecy” that “the crimes of this guilty land” would “never be purged away; but with Blood.”

Moby-Dick and *Benito Cereno* are littered with allusions to pro- and anti-slavery literature. He even seems to make joking reference to Tucker’s *The Partisan Leader*. Arriving in Nantucket, Ishmael accidentally intrudes on an African-American worship service where “the preacher’s text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there.”²⁶ Ishmael’s vision of the “blackness of darkness” has often been commented on as an embodiment of Melville’s bleak metaphysics. But in Tucker’s novel, the phrase appears as a group of slaves dupes and captures the Yankee troops cynically trying to lure them away from their benevolent masters for resale. One of the befuddled Yankees drops his torch, “and in an instant the blackness of impenetrable darkness shrouded every eye.”²⁷

In *Moby-Dick*, both blackness and whiteness are impenetrable; “the front of the Sperm Whale’s head,” if one reads phrenologically, “is a dead, blind wall,”²⁸ while the “visible surface” of its body is

obliquely crossed and re-crossed with numberless straight marks in thick array . . .
. These are hieroglyphical By my . . . memory of the hieroglyphics upon one
Sperm Whale in particular, I was much struck with a plate representing the old
Indian characters chiselled on the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of
the Upper Mississippi. Like those mystic rocks, too, the mystic-marked whale
remains undecipherable.²⁹

Eric Sundquist mentions the “hieroglyphic texts and map left behind by [Nat] Turner and confiscated from his wife before his capture.” Gray’s *Confession* itself, Sundquist suggests,

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“must be pondered like the hieroglyphic manifestations of the Spirit in nature.”³⁰ In *Moby-Dick* the bodies of both whales and men are written on with insoluble mysteries, and the most banal and innocuous objects are fraught with meaning and dread—whiteness itself is a “vague, nameless horror . . . that above all things appalled” Ishmael (Melville seemingly drawing on Poe’s nightmarish *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* here). Though often “whiteness . . . impart[s] some special virtue of its own,” its terror is “mystical and well nigh ineffable,” and “in its profoundest idealized significance it calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul.”³¹

With Ishmael’s casual treatises on cetology, a body of knowledge in an “uncertain, unsettled condition,” Melville parodies the racist assertions of mid-19th century “science.” Categories of white and black are suspect in *Moby-Dick*; clear definitions of race, and even species, are constantly called into question. The white man is only “a whitewashed negro,”³² and Ishmael’s “scientific” descriptions of whales carry echoes of racial typing; he objects to “any name” for a whale that “happens to be vague or inexpressive;” the Black Fish, for instance, “because blackness is the rule among almost all whales.” Ishmael’s attempts to categorize and delineate the family of cetacea mock the pseudo-science that helped rationalize race-based slavery; of the many great minds that have weighed in over the centuries on the science of whales,

The Authors of the Bible; Aristotle; Pliny; Aldrovandi; Sir Thomas Browne; Gesner; Ray; Linnaeus; Rondeletius; Willoughby; Green; Artedi; Sibbald; Brisson; Marten; Lacepede; Bonneterre; Desmarest; Baron Cuvier; Frederick Cuvier; John Hunter; Owen; Scoresby; Beale; Bennett; J. Ross Browne; the Author of Miriam Coffin; Olmstead; and the Rev. T. Cheever . . .³³

only a few actually saw a real whale. Yet Ishmael, a professional whaler, refuses to allow his own first-hand knowledge to shake his simplistic assumptions. His insistence on seeing things through a narrow enough lens that his assumptions won’t be challenged, while sounding rational and authoritative, sound like the racist cant of Tucker’s *The Partisan Leader*, in which the wise Douglas observes that if he must “choose between rejecting the evidence of my own senses, or the evidence of God’s word” that blacks are inferior, “or the philosophy which teaches that man is to be considered as a unit, because all of one race, philosophy must go by the board.”³⁴ As we saw in the previous chapter, Melville even uses Tucker’s comparison between wolves and Newfoundland dogs to demonstrate the consistency of Delano’s narrow-minded, imperialistic naivete and complacency. In *Moby-Dick*, though “in some quarters it still remains a moot point

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whether a whale be a fish,” Ishmael ignores all evidence to the contrary: since they swim, whales must be fish; he cites scripture to back up his scientific claims. For Ishmael, it’s simple: “a whale is a spouting fish with a horizontal tail. There you have him.”³⁵

In his *System of Nature*, A. D. 1776, Linnaeus declares, "I hereby separate the whales from the fish." . . . The grounds upon which Linnaeus would fain have banished the whales from the waters, he states as follows: "On account of their warm bilocular heart, their lungs, their movable eyelids, their hollow ears, penem intrantem feminam mammis lactantem," and finally, "ex lege naturae jure meritoque." I submitted all this to my friends Simeon Macey and Charley Coffin, of Nantucket, both messmates of mine in a certain voyage, and they united in the opinion that the reasons set forth were altogether insufficient. Charley profanely hinted they were humbug.

Be it known that, waiving all argument, I take the good old fashioned ground that the whale is a fish, and call upon holy Jonah to back me.³⁶

The breakdown of easy categories goes further, blurring the line not only between human and animal but between animate and inanimate, in a kind of grim deism. Cataloging the “monstrous pictures of whales” throughout time, Ishmael says that even “the most conscientious compilations of Natural History” are not “free from the same heinousness of mistake” as ancient depictions. He marvels “that in this nineteenth century” such nonsense “could be palmed for genuine upon any intelligent public of schoolboys.”³⁷ The mistakes in the observation of whales come from the fact that the most study is given to beached whales, which is similar to studying a “wrecked ship, with broken back,” rather than “the noble animal itself in all its undashed pride of hull and spars,”³⁸ which might also be as correct as drawing inferences about a “category” of people while they are enslaved.

A chapter called “The Prairie” suggests a link between the sea the Pequod sails and the vast western plains that were already becoming the scene of the next battlefield over slavery when the book was published. Here Melville challenges the “Physiognomist or Phrenologist” to “feel the bumps on the head of this Leviathan,”³⁹ scanning for signs of the future. The great genius” of the Whale is “in his pyramidal silence;” he has not “written a book” or “spoken a speech.”⁴⁰ This dismissal of the “passing fable” of the “semi-sciences” recalls arguments over slave literacy as well as the stoic, threatening silence of the rebel slave, the image with which Melville would end *Benito Cereno*. Ahab himself plays the slave rebel as well as the despot, quoting Milton’s failed rebel, Satan, who strikes at his oppressor “from hell’s heart.”⁴¹ And like a rebel slave, he dies

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“voicelessly,”⁴² hung by his own rope (though the irony may be intentional—Ahab doesn’t choose silence, nor is he railroaded to execution). The Milton reference is particularly interesting given the Transcendentalists’ standard interpretation of John Brown as a Cromwellian figure. Melville’s reference to *Paradise Lost* is implicitly a reference to the English Civil War—a reference as troubled and conflicted as Milton’s post-revolutionary epic, and much more than the stock Roundhead figure the Boston intelligentsia grafted onto Brown.

Further erasing the distinction between man and thing—the crucial distinction between freedom and slavery that Stowe repeatedly uses in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—Melville discusses the “manufactured man,” whose “constitutional condition,” Ahab believes, in a comment that anticipates Thoreau, “is sordidness.”⁴³ Ahab’s later muttered comment that his men are “mechanical” (as the crew is about to face down the White Whale) echoes this, but suggests the ultimate source of Melville’s central metaphor, Hobbes: Man’s arrogance in challenging the art of Nature with his art of making “artificial animal[s].” Reading the ending of *Moby-Dick* against the opening of *Leviathan* is a chilling indication of Melville’s prescience and social engagement:

Art goes yet further, imitating that rational and most excellent work of Nature, man. For by art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE (in Latin, CIVITAS), which is but an artificial man, though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which the sovereignty is an artificial soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; the magistrates and other officers of judicature and execution, artificial joints; reward and punishment (by which fastened to the seat of the sovereignty, every joint and member is moved to perform his duty) are the nerves, that do the same in the body natural; the wealth and riches of all the particular members are the strength; *salus populi* (the people’s safety) its business; counsellors, by whom all things needful for it to know are suggested unto it, are the memory; equity and laws, an artificial reason and will; concord, health; sedition, sickness; and civil war, death.⁴⁴

The voyage of the *Pequod* is a betrayal of this mission, to protect and defend the welfare of its citizens, and at the center of that betrayal are “the magistrates and other officers of judicature and execution,” as Melville would make more clear in *Benito Cereno*. The puzzle of Ahab’s fate, that “like a hawk’s beak . . . pecks my brain,” is “a riddle [that] might baffle all the lawyers backed by the ghosts of the whole line of judges.” His determination that “I’ll solve it, though!”

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⁴⁵ leads to his final catastrophic encounter with the whale, though it also suggests the inadequacy of lawyers and judges to formulate an answer to pressing questions.

In the context of the nature of American political economy and its dependence on slave labor, the Hobbesian Artificial Man that Melville describes, and that Ahab derides, might be more accurately be seen not as the State but as the Corporation, and perhaps this image points to the fundamental conflict between democratic values and American business that lead to the Civil war. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville puts forward a version of American history that incorporates radical abolitionist ideas into a sort of corporate critique. The *Pequod*, a business named after an exterminated tribe, is hijacked by a self-destructive rebel-tyrant driven mad by a violent confrontation with a whale, the resource he is in the business of mining. The ship and its crew, thirty individuals banded together by contract, pursue his vision while they pursue their income. The American Revolution masks the fact that the U.S. is the apotheosis of the European drive for global empire, but that in North America the colonized and enslaved “other” was imported, not indigenous. The function of the *Pequod* as a source of revenue controlled by a corporate entity mirrors the original function of the colonies themselves. David Korten describes the North American colonies as the first corporations, originally set up to reassert monarchical power. Charters for the British East India Company and other early corporations were “grant[s] of privilege extended by the state to a group of investors to serve a public purpose;” they were “bestowed at the pleasure of the crown and could be withdrawn at any time.” The United States were “born of a revolution against the abusive power” of the crown, and the “corporate charter was an institutional instrument of that abuse.”

In addition to such well-known corporations as the East India Company and the Hudson's Bay Company, many American colonies were themselves chartered as corporations. The corporations of that day were chartered by the king and functioned as extensions of the power of the crown. Generally, these corporations were granted monopoly powers over territories and industries that were considered critical to the interests of the English state.⁴⁶

Adam Smith “strongly condemned” corporations, and Korten finds it “noteworthy that the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* and the signing of the U.S. Declaration of Independence both occurred in 1776.”

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Each was, in its way, a revolutionary manifesto challenging the abusive alliance of state and corporate power to establish monopolistic control of markets and thereby capture unearned profits and inhibit local enterprise. . . . The nineteenth century emerged as a time of active and open legal struggle between corporations and civil society regarding the right of the people, through their state governments, to revoke or amend corporate charters.⁴⁷

If the colonies were originally corporations, then the revolution, staged by privileged businessmen, amounts in a sense to a corporate takeover, just as Ahab stages a corporate takeover of the *Pequod*, installing himself as a despot free from the ship's obligations, and using a combination of cajoling and coercion ala the Federalist papers to convince his crew to support him. He seals their agreement with a paganish ritual that looks like a parody of American paranoid fantasies about Catholics, Jews, or rebel slaves, a ceremony worthy of the Freemasons, Know-Nothings, or any other clique of elite, paranoid men in America. Ahab is Jefferson, turning the takeover into a radical quest for individual freedom, but he is unwilling to relinquish his power over his subjects. Starbuck, shocked by Ahab's betrayal of his contract, cringes at the sight of the "Horrible old man! Who's over him, he cries;- aye, he would be a democrat to all above; look, how he lords it over all below!" Starbuck sees his own "miserable office" as slavery—"to obey, rebelling."⁴⁸ James Duban describes Starbuck as "a study not merely of one individual's anguished indecision but . . . the impotent and valor-ruined response of the Whig Party to President Polk's so-called war of indemnity against Mexico."⁴⁹

Ahab's rebellion echoes the strangeness of the American Revolution itself. David Walker had found America unique in its commitment to ruthless exploitation several years before Tocqueville advanced the concept of American exceptionalism, and Melville seems to recognize another sort of American exceptionalism, which lies in its bizarre enactment of post-colonial rebellion. The typical colonial scene, which Melville explores in *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *White Jacket*, is that of the exploitation of an indigenous population and the seizing of its resources. In the U.S., the native population is effectively exterminated and replaced by an imported "race" to exploit, as originally suggested by Las Casas (another of the links between Spain and New World slavery that Melville plays with in *Benito Cereno*). While this population eventually becomes self-sustaining, the colonists themselves rebel against their empire, creating a fantasy of oppression out of the desire to alleviate their tax burden, the cost of the imperial project incurred

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by the French and Indian wars. Rightly fearing that their “indigenous” laborers will follow their lead, the successful rebels then construct a metaphysics of race and rebellion to rationalize their position, and a militarized culture that will avoid the risk of a colonial standing army but hold the population of potential rebels in place.

This bizarrely self-contradictory process almost demands the kind of “apostasy” against one’s own “race” that Melville half-jokingly describes in *Benito Cereno*. Melville evokes Brown as “meteor of the war” at the opening of his 1866 poetry collection *Battle-Pieces*, but if Melville approached the carnage of the Civil War with some of his most conventional work (and thinking—he ends with an encomium to Robert E. Lee), he maps out its inevitability and the myriad paths leading to it in the experimental and difficult *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*. Both works shed light on the barely-contained, nation-wide violence in which Brown’s plans took shape, and begin to organize imagery that would eventually constellate around Brown himself. It almost seems, in fact, that in *Moby-Dick* Melville creates a character with an uncanny resemblance to the popular image of Brown, long before the abolitionist became a public figure. It also seems that the two men shared a sense of the world that few other Americans conceived of. The two native New Englanders certainly moved in very similar trajectories through the economy of the early 19th century. Similarly outcasts, similarly fallen from middle class grace in the pursuit of a calling, Melville and Brown share a categorical rejection of the limits of acceptable discourse as self-evidently absurd—insane—and a refusal to be bound by it; Melville seems in this sense to understand more than most the forces in American culture that would call Brown to action. In 1851, Melville wrote of Nathaniel Hawthorne that

There is a grand truth about Nathaniel Hawthorne. He says “NO!” in thunder; but the Devil himself cannot make him say yes. For all men who say yes, lie; and all men who say no,—why, they are in the happy condition of judicious, unincumbered travellers [sic] in Europe; they cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet-bag,—that is to say, the Ego.⁵⁰

But it’s John Brown who says “‘NO!’ in thunder,” not the conservative Democrat Hawthorne, hagiographer of the pro-slavery Franklin Pierce. Both Brown and Melville see quite clearly the radical implications of American discourse and the ways that official, legislative discourse was designed to dodge these implications. And it’s Melville who sees the irony in

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Captain Amasa Delano asking himself in *Benito Cereno*, “who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguering in against it with Negroes.”⁵¹

Brown has often come down to us as the obsessive Puritan Melville imagined in Ahab, who is first referred to as “Old Thunder.”⁵² Thomas Wentworth Higginson described Brown as exhibiting internal “signs of a fire which might wear him out.”⁵³ It has been easy for observers to pervert Brown’s thinking into something resembling the penetrating monomania of Ahab; Russell Banks’ 1998 novel *Cloudsplitter* is structured as a re-write of *Moby-Dick*, with Brown as Ahab and Brown’s son Owen, the narrator, as Ishmael. In a scene that recalls one of Ahab’s first appearances, Brown has decided to dedicate himself to the end of slavery, and seeks the same commitment from his children:

He turned to us and now crossed his arms over his chest. His face was like a mask carved of wood by an Indian sachem. He eyes gazed sadly down at us through holes in the mask. It was the face of a man who had been gazing at fires, who had roused the attendants of the fires, serpents and demons hissing back at the man who had dared to swing open the iron door and peer inside. We had seen it, too. But he, due to his nature and characteristic desire, had gazed overlong and with too great a directness, and his gray eyes had been scorched by the sight.⁵⁴

Banks models this scene on this description of the *Pequod’s* captain in *Moby-Dick* to make the parallel:

He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness. His whole high, broad form, seemed made of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini's cast Perseus. Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish. It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded. Whether that mark was born with him, or whether it was the scar left by some desperate wound, no one could certainly say. . . . once Tashtego's senior, an old Gay-Head Indian among the crew, superstitiously asserted that not till he was full forty years old did Ahab become that way branded. . . .⁵⁵

Owen later relates that “the Old Man” marked “his thirty-ninth year, to the period of what he called his ‘extreme calamity.’”⁵⁶

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The ease with which Banks draws the parallels is a testament to the power of Melville's conception in imagining the kind of man that antebellum American culture might produce, but also to an insistence on the part of the New England cultural elite, as well as the Southern gentry, on reading Brown through the lens of their own romantic image of the dour Puritan. Higginson, one of Brown's closest associates among the Boston Brahmins, describes Brown as

a man whose mere appearance and bearing refuted in advance some of the strange perversions which have found their way into many books, and which often wholly missed the type to which he belonged. In his thin, worn, resolute face there were the signs of a fire which might wear him out, and practically did so, but nothing of pettiness or baseness; and his talk was calm, persuasive, and coherent. He was simply a high-minded, unselfish, belated Covenanter; a man whom Sir Walter Scott might have drawn⁵⁷

Melville's familiarity with Milton and Cromwell allowed him to cast the struggle against slavery into prose that would evoke a conception of Brown that spoke to the Transcendentalists who championed Brown in the struggle over Kansas. But the links between American revolutionary rhetoric and the English Civil War had already made Milton and Cromwell available to the struggle against slavery—Olaudah Equiano quoted Milton in his autobiography, one of the first major slave narratives—and reading Brown as a Roundhead has been easier than struggling to understand what would make a white Christian American reject not only white supremacy but middle class comforts, to “apostatize against his own species.”

In Benito Cereno, Delano partakes of the common racist discourse comparing slaves to animals both wild and domesticated, but struggles to understand what link there would be between the Negroes and the Spanish captain of the *San Dominick*. What Delano can't see is a new category, one beyond race. Later critics of Brown had similar difficulties. Why, if John Brown is a violent revolutionary allied in spirit with Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey, is he not the same vicious animal? Because he is white, and therefore the subhuman category available to characterize slaves—livestock, predators, etc.—is not available (though Melville plays endlessly with the category, making Ahab “the Last of the Grisly [sic] Bears,”⁵⁸ and, through Delano's eyes, making the slaves on the *San Dominick* dogs and deer while they seem docile, wolves and lionesses when they attack). Brown's cognizance must be accounted for, and therefore he becomes a fanatic (it's worth noting that Thomas Gray was forced to apply the category to Nat

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Turner, having had to confront Turner personally and no longer able to dismiss his intelligence). The analogy of the categories “nigger” and “animal,” which allows the easy dismissal of the slave as an agent, became difficult to apply to Brown, and therefore more pseudo-categories, like “monomaniac,” “terrorist,” and “fanatic” have to be applied.

If John Brown, a white man, can't be placed in the subhuman categories that Turner was, there were already categories existing by which to understand him—the revolutionary Cromwellian, the Puritan prophet. Part of the reason Melville seems to anticipate Brown in Ahab, or in Gabriel, the “long-togged Scaramouch” of the *Jeraboam*, or the “noble animal” Steelkilt, is that Melville is drawing on existing cultural stereotypes. By the time Melville published *Moby-Dick*, the crazed prophet was a stock character. The gothic fanaticism Thomas Gray created in Nat Turner echoes through works by Poe, Hawthorne, and Charles Brockton Brown, and is an easy way to marginalize political, religious, and intellectual positions not supported by mainstream civil discourse. Melville continually calls this discourse into question; Ahab recognizes Gabriel as a legitimate prophet—they both speak a language outside conventional discourse—and it's a reminder of Ishmael's unreliability as a narrator that he doesn't see this.⁵⁹

Melville seems interested in exploring the falseness of the division between sanity and insanity. Accused of being “crazy” in some reviews of his work, he was capable of seeing the uselessness of such categories. Writing marginalia in his Shakespeare editions, he sees in the mad Lear “the sane madness of ‘vital truth,’” believing that “Madness is undefinable—It & right reason extremes of one.”⁶⁰ Throughout *Moby-Dick*, insanity and intelligence are confused; Ahab's “subtle insanity” was most apparent “in his superlative sense and shrewdness.”⁶¹ At his trial in 1859, Brown dismissed accusations of insanity by noting that “Insane persons, so as my experience goes, have but little ability to judge of their own sanity.”⁶² Melville conflates madness with second sight in Ahab, in “prophets” like Gabriel and Elijah, and in the black cabin-boy Pip, who

saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.⁶³

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Melville justifies his own course here as well as Brown's bloodier path, and suggests his own position toward the kind of divine intervention that pacifist abolitionists like Stowe hoped for—divine thought entered the world through madmen, through what Emerson called “enthusiasts.” Melville parodies the kind of desperate hope for deliverance from inevitable doom that Stowe expresses at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by using the white whale himself as the *deus ex machina* that saves the mutineer Steelkilt from committing treason and murder; the whale swallows the oppressive first mate Radney, himself “doomed and made mad” and driven to the same fate that awaited Ahab.⁶⁴

To many commentators over the decades, Ahab has represented purely metaphysical conundrums, but the Biblical story of Ahab, and a number of Melville's other “Biblical” allusions, have clear, definite links to the abolition and anti-imperial movements of the 1840s. Though both his captains' biblical names, Ahab and Amasa, come from the Old Testament, they also come from David Lee Child's 1845 pamphlet against the “Texas Conspiracy,” *The Taking of Naboth's Vineyard*, in which Child attacks “the dismemberment and robbery of the republic of Mexico.” Child claims that a “conspiracy” formed to annex Texas through whatever means were available, a “whole series of tortuous diplomacy, double dealing and piratical depravity,” that the plot “extended throughout the South,” that “the object of annexation is the security and aggrandizement of human slavery . . . and its jealous and capricious policy in respect to all the great interests of the country,”⁶⁵ and that “Andrew Jackson, then President of the United States, was the soul of it.”⁶⁶ Jackson is a hypocrite and a tyrant, devoted to the “aggrandizement of slavery,”⁶⁷ and “long in the habit of repudiating, with impunity and with applause, the restraints of decency.”⁶⁸ Quoting from Jackson's correspondence with the Mexican government, Child sneers that the former president's public statements “are very good words, and so were Joab's to Amasa—‘Art thou in health, my brother?’”⁶⁹

Child makes Mexico the hapless Amasa by comparing Jackson to the efficient, treacherous, and bloodthirsty Joab, a soldier of David in the Book of Samuel, who “took Amasa by the beard with the right hand to kiss him,” while with his left he stabbed him “in the fifth rib, and shed out his bowels to the ground,” leaving Amasa “wallow[ing] in blood in the midst of the highway.”⁷⁰ Melville's use of anti-slavery literature reverses and complicates the uses of these images,

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suggesting even more strongly the delusion of innocence that America clings to in carrying out its program of hemispheric domination and enormously profitable agribusiness; Amasa Delano sees himself as the potential victim of treachery throughout *Benito Cereno*. Joab's treatment of Amasa is identical to his murder of Abner, another of Saul's men, who asks, "Shall the sword devour for ever? knowest thou not that it will be bitterness in the latter end?" before he, too, is killed. Because it was Joab's hand that delivered the blow, David is able to claim that "I and my kingdom are guiltless before the LORD for ever from the blood of Abner the son of Ner."⁷¹

That Melville refers to the resistance to the Invasion of Mexico so extensively makes sense; U.S. efforts to seize Texas as slave territory radicalized the abolition movement and reinforced every accusation of imperial pretensions that critics of U.S. policy made.⁷² According to Frederick Douglass, John Brown's first detailed plan for a southern incursion dates from the period of the Invasion, and marks the beginning of Douglass' turn away from Garrisonian separatism and toward an acceptance of inevitable violence. Even newly elected Illinois congressman Abraham Lincoln wrote to his friend and law partner William Herndon in 1846, appalled by the show of naked aggression and the sociopathic lawlessness of the recently formulated theory of Manifest Destiny:

Allow the President to invade a neighboring nation whenever he shall deem it necessary to repel an invasion... and you allow him to make war at pleasure ... [I]f today he should choose to say that he thinks it necessary to invade Canada to prevent the British from invading us, how could you stop him? You may say to him, 'I see no probability of the British invading us,' but he would say to you, 'Be silent: I see it if you don't.'⁷³

Melville draws on this portrait of driven imperiousness to create Ahab. The story of Ahab and Naboth is one of arrogance, abuse of power, and divine retribution. In Chapter 1 of *Kings*, Ahab, king of Samaria, covets a vineyard owned by the Jezreelite Naboth. He offers Naboth money or a "better" vineyard, but Naboth refuses, saying that "the LORD forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee"—some things, in other words, are not for sale, and commerce is not the only value by which society functions.⁷⁴ Ahab's wife Jezebel schemes against Naboth, ordering the "sons of Belial" to "bear witness against him, saying, Thou didst blaspheme God and the king. And then carry him out, and stone him, that he may die."⁷⁵ The prophet Elijah confronts Ahab, telling him that "because thou hast sold thyself to work evil

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in the sight of the LORD . . . I will bring evil upon thee, and will take away thy posterity,”⁷⁶ and that the bodies of Ahab and Jezebel will be left to the dogs just as Naboth’s had.

Melville’s Ahab has been linked to both Jackson and Calhoun (David Potter calls Calhoun “the most majestic champion of error since Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost*”⁷⁷ by literary critics,⁷⁸ but for Child, Ahab signifies the entire American population:

The people of the United States cannot be said to have contrived and premeditated this great crime, yet by accepting the booty, they are partakers of the iniquity, and obnoxious to the punishment. King Ahab did not contrive nor execute the murder of Naboth, but he coveted, he had sought to buy, and after the murder, seized his inheritance, and although the punishment was deferred, yet the avenging prophecy was at length fulfilled, and “the dogs licked up the blood of Ahab, where they had licked the blood of Naboth.”⁷⁹

Like Melville’s description of the “universal thump,” Child’s evocation of Ahab’s fate foreshadows Brown’s last “prophecy,” and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural—the blood of the slaves would be answered by the blood of American citizens—the inertia of universal justice demanded it. For Child, the Texas conspiracy drags the United States inevitably toward disaster, and for Melville, Ahab embodies and pursues this doom. Though Theodore Parker believed that Northern industry was opposed to Southern exploitation, Melville shows with both Ahab and Delano that the entire nation’s complicity will destroy it. “Far from separating the exploitation of nature (in the West) from control over men (in the South), as Parker imagined was possible,” Michael Rogin tells us, “Ahab showed how the one facilitated the other.”⁸⁰

The drive for resource exploitation codified as natural law runs straight from Massachusetts Bay to Texas. In both *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, the sea and the prairie are interchangeable, and the prairie is the West: Kansas and Nebraska, a continuation of the Texas conflict and the spread of slavery out of the “Golden Circle” that linked the future Confederacy, what remained of Mexico, and the Caribbean into a slave empire in the fevered dreams of Southern conspirators. “The Nantucketer,” Melville tells us in *Moby-Dick*, “lives on the sea, as prairie cocks in the prairie.”⁸¹ He compares “the Antarctic seas” to “an unbounded prairie sheeted with driven snow, no shadow of tree or twig to break the fixed trance of whiteness”⁸²—a continent covered in a white blanket. Ishmeal also tells us that the whaler sometimes “feels a certain filial, confident, land-like feeling towards the sea”: he travels “not through high rolling waves, but through the tall

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grass of a rolling prairie.”⁸³ The analogy is frequently a dark one, signaling the impending doom to come from the growing conflict over territory; Delano’s growing unease on the *San Dominick* is “like that of one who alone on the prairie feels unrest from the repose of the noon.”⁸⁴ When Ahab swears his harpooners to an oath to hunt the White Whale, they look at him with “wild eyes . . . as the bloodshot eyes of the prairie wolves meet the eye of their leader, ere he rushes on at their head in the trail of the bison . . . only to fall into the hidden snare of the Indian.”⁸⁵

Both the sea and the prairie are the wilderness, the “Virgin Land” destroyed by slavery and the quest for empire. If the sea represents a borderlessness that is becoming impossible as the United States spreads across the continent, it also represents chaos, a free-for-all in which all run rampant, every man's hand against every other. Child, like Hildreth, sees the process of taming the wilderness as a self-sustaining one that snowballs out of control. Slavery has turned the Old Dominion, the “seat” of the “Slave Cabal,”⁸⁶ into a wasteland, its main export the descendents of Africans. The pressing need of the “Texas land-jobbers” in Congress and the White House is the “necessity of opening a new field of slave cultivation, and a market for slaves.”⁸⁷ For Child, as for Hildreth, the effort to conquer and annex Texas was made

so that old slave States, exhausted by planting, and no longer capable of producing anything more than meager crops of provisions, may still be sustained as slave states in population and power, by continuing to be nurseries of slaves for planting States.⁸⁸

For Child, the lands of the Old Dominion have become “nurseries of slaves,” exposing sex, birth, and motherhood to the destructive grind of American commerce. Melville illustrates the hideousness of this process with his whale nursery scene in *Moby-Dick*, linking pseudo-science, empire, and Old World despotism. Melville describes the “enchanted calm” of a whale nursery and the havoc wrought by Starbuck’s whaleboat, a tool of “the all-grasping western world.”⁸⁹ The boat intrudes on an idyll of fertility where, “suspended in those watery vaults, floated the forms of the nursing mothers of the whales, and those that by their enormous girth seemed shortly to become mothers,” as well as whale couples that, “though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights . . . serenely revelled in dalliance and delight.” With the boat’s intrusion comes gruesome entrapment and indiscriminate death. In some cases the “long coils of the umbilical cord of Madame Leviathan, by which the young cub seemed still tethered

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to its dam” become “entangled with the hempen one” during a whale hunt, “so that the cub is thereby trapped.”⁹⁰ The spell of the nursery is broken when the enormous school of whales becomes increasingly agitated as one the Pequod’s victims escapes and flees into the midst of the breeding grounds.

. . . by one of the unimaginable accidents of the fishery, this whale had become entangled in the harpoon-line that he towed; he had also run away with the cutting-spade in him; and while the free end of the rope attached to that weapon, had permanently caught in the coils of the harpoon-line round his tail, the cutting-spade itself had worked loose from his flesh. So that tormented to madness, he was now churning through the water, violently flailing with his flexible tail, and tossing the keen spade about him, wounding and murdering his own comrades.⁹¹

This is the invasion of Africa, of the Pacific, of Texas. The chapter’s title, “The Grand Armada,” evokes the defeated Spanish empire, kept out of North America by the Monroe Doctrine (which would ultimately allow the U.S. to seize not only Cuba but Melville’s beloved South Pacific islands), and further suggests Melville’s debt to Child. One bogus rationale for war with Mexico that Child cites is Calhoun’s argument that England hoped to influence Mexico to emancipate its slaves. What may have attracted Melville to this text is apparent in this section of Child’s argument, for it deals with the uses of language itself. Child sneers at Calhoun’s logic, claiming that the U.S.’s “business . . . was not to seek for truth, but for pretexts.” This is accomplished through Calhoun’s literal reading of what seems to be a figure of speech. Britain’s Lord Aberdeen had written that their government “desires, and is exerting herself constantly to procure, the general abolition of Slavery throughout the world.” To Calhoun’s demand for an explanation, England replied that it “had long been pledged” to encouraging abolition “in every proper way.”⁹²

Calhoun asserts that “Great Britain has no right to use her influence in favor of the abolition of slavery out of her own limits,” and to do so places a “duty” on other nations “whose safety or prosperity may be endangered by her policy, to adopt such measures as they may deem necessary for their protection.” Child scoffs, comparing Calhoun’s argument to the owner of a brothel having “a right of action” against a “benevolent neighbor” who wishes to reform the women who work there.⁹³

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Calhoun's argument seems to foreshadow the Domino Theory of the Cold War as well as the so-called Bush Doctrine, a rationalization for empire matched only by the expansionism of the antebellum period. Child says his

argument would have given the United States the right to interfere to prevent emancipation in the British West Indies, inasmuch as that act caused and is causing in the United States the same kind of injury and danger to slavery, as would result from abolition in Texas. If we are to go to war with Mexico to avert that danger, we may annex Cuba, and it would be our duty to do so, if Spain, in pursuance of advice often given by Great Britain, should abolish slavery in that Island.⁹⁴

But Calhoun's formulation is slippery. Both in Calhoun's time and during the Cold War, the Monroe Doctrine established that the position of the United States was that the protection of capital investments amounted to "safety or prosperity." Though the slave's right to his own labor was an abstraction not yet legally established, the right of a slaveholder to a potential return on his investment is equally abstract. By inference, the argument adds fuel to the revolutionary logic of the Radical Abolitionists. By analogy, if slaves are a separate population, a "race" or "nation," then the political organizations of the North have not simply a right but a duty to "to adopt such measures as they may deem necessary" to aid the slaves' fight for emancipation.

Child finds the conspiratorial efforts to deceive, inveigle, and obfuscate not only in the words of self-serving officials, but in certified public documents. Citing an article in the June 1843 *Southern Literary Messenger* "touching the effect of freedom upon the health, senses, and sanity of the colored race" as recorded by the 1840 Census—that free blacks suffered disproportionately from illness, blindness, and even madness—Child records the findings of doctors investigating the claims, finding the census "a false, self-contradictory, and self-condemnatory document." "Such is the main foundation," Child says,

upon which the Premier of this Republic places before Great Britain and the world, our defence [sic] of annexation and slavery. A conclusion so wretched and ignoble, so fatal to the principles of our government, so defamatory of its founders, and so blasphemous to the Most High, should have made a democrat, and would have made a man, (if slavery had not taken away more than "half his worth,") revolt, and distrust the fidelity, or the care of the official servants—
"Who brought us back that message of despair."⁹⁵

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The perversion of the census, Child says, has been a standard feature of the conspiracy of the Slave Cabal and the Northern “white slaves” in Congress who assist them, going back to the Constitution itself, and the South has managed to maintain an inordinate number of seats in the House in spite of declining slave populations, far more seats “than she is entitled to by any honest application even of the dishonest and diabolical three-fifths rule.” Over and over, Child makes official documentation and basic legal proceedings absurd and inherently deceitful, while he makes the Declaration a legally binding document, outlining America’s “sacred obligations before earth and Heaven.”⁹⁶

Calhoun in particular “has contributed more than any man living” to the insane corruption of the “negro feudality.”⁹⁷ Calhoun at various points “appealed for help” from the “patriotic freemen, whose false friend or open enemy he has ever been,” to combat his political rivals among “the slave tyrants and their mercenaries.” In decrying federal corruption, Calhoun is “a very competent, though we cannot say . . . credible witness.”⁹⁸ Alan Heimert has linked Ahab to Calhoun, a “cast-iron man” with “eyes like coals,”⁹⁹ and Melville seems to draw on Child here as well. To turn the mission of the *Pequod* from enriching its owners to hunting the White Whale, Ahab “must use tools; and of all tools used in the shadow of the moon, men are most apt to get out of order.” So he must feed “their more common, daily appetites.” Like Calhoun, Ahab pretends to pursue their interests while betraying them for his own ends:

I will not strip these men, thought Ahab, of all hopes of cash - aye, cash. They may scorn cash now; but let some months go by, and no perspective promise of it to them, and then this same quiescent cash all at once mutinying in them, this same cash would soon cashier Ahab.¹⁰⁰

The catastrophe that these insane policies would precipitate was eventually disavowed by Texas ambassador James Hamilton, who turned on Calhoun in 1842, calling Jackson’s administration “sixteen years of folly and mismanagement” unprecedented “since the creation of the world.” For Child, Hamilton’s words link the drive to annex Texas, the slave economy, and Jackson’s fiscal policies, to the Crash of 1837, in which “thousands and tens of thousands of families . . . have been ruined” and drove the country “from a period of expansion to one of severe and arid restriction.”

But my good sir, the day of reckoning must come. The account must be adjusted now or by posterity hereafter. One of the first items will be to settle what the

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victory of New Orleans has cost us! . . . You will say hold! “You and I are greatly responsible for this hero’s getting into power[“]. Yes it is true. Willingly would I expiate this sin with my blood, if it could recal [sic] the fatal past. But this is impossible.”¹⁰¹

Hamilton sounds like Melville’s Starbuck here—horrified that his own actions have brought him to this pass—though Starbuck and his shipmates all paid with their blood. Again, the vision of a day of reckoning conjures loomings of Brown and of Lincoln, and it also suggests that this historical moment, far from the moment of endless promise that John O’Sullivan saw in Manifest Destiny, was the end of faith for many Americans, certainly for some radical abolitionists. “There is something in . . . the conquest of Texas,” Child says, “that may be likened to poisoning through the sacramental host! . . . even in corrupt and degraded Italy the cross is never made a handle to the dagger.”¹⁰² For Child, “Annexation is Dissolution,” making the Civil War inevitable. By attacking Mexico, the U.S. sets up a hemispheric, and potentially trans-Atlantic, crisis. For abolitionists, the battle over Texas was the Leviathan that would devour the American ship of state.

The dénouement of *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael’s rescue after the destruction of the *Pequod*, represents not only a metaphysical rebirth but a convoluted sort of redemption from slavery; Melville seems to grasp for the same straws of hope that Stowe does in her final pleas in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Picked up by the Rachel, “weeping for her children, because they were not,” Ishmael replaces the son the ship is searching for; Rachel’s only son was Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers. Melville again draws an easy parallel, one that Theodore Parker had already made; Rogin tells us that Parker claimed that at the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, “Negro mothers of Boston ‘wept like Rachel for her first born, refusing to be comforted.’”¹⁰³ Melville’s is a dim hope, though; it is only after the earth-shaking violence of complete destruction of the *Pequod*, the Ship of State, that Ishmael is plucked back out of the sea by the *Rachel*, “that in her retracing search after her missing children, only found another orphan,” who, like Job, “only am escaped alone to tell”¹⁰⁴ the story. Ishmael’s miraculous rescue, and subsequent opportunity to tell his tale, is in counterpoint to the appalling silence of Babo in *Benito Cereno*; history would close like the surface of the ocean over the stories of slave rebels.

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Melville is clearly not finished puzzling out these themes, and there are many ideas left over to spill into *Benito Cereno*, a sort of nightmare sequel to *Moby-Dick*. Where the Pequod had sighted the Bachelor just before its own doom, now the *Bachelor's Delight* finds the San Dominick, emerging from the fog of decades of aggressive complacency into a mysterious confrontation with its ghosts. Melville sees even more clearly here that by now any legal or political "solutions" to the sectional conflict (like the Kansas-Nebraska Act) are a fruitless charade. In the colorless mist, black and white, the becalmed ship of state lies, a ghost of the wreck Ahab drove into the heart of darkness.

If any anti-slavery fiction matches Walker's *Appeal* in its assault on the assumptions of the language and logic of the American Republic, it's *Benito Cereno*, which appeared in the anti-slavery magazine Putnam's in 1855. Like John Brown, Melville challenges the self-satisfaction of white assumptions over and over in his fiction, finally creating one of the great characterizations of "benign" white superciliousness in Captain Amasa Delano, eminently sane and reasonable, and utterly without sense—Delano's stalwartness and cool head are matched by his shocking stupidity, complacency, and passivity, and his ignorance and privilege shield him blissfully from the danger around him as he unwittingly participates in the charade acted out on the San Dominick by the slaves who have taken her over. In *Benito Cereno*, Melville's two captains are anti-Ahabs. Don Benito's European orthodoxy and Delano's can-do American obliviousness are in contrast to Ahab's heresy, his willingness to confront the void—the meaninglessness at the center of Western spirituality and rationalism, both of which lead to self-satisfied, businesslike slaughter, to which Delano and don Benito are perfectly suited.

Eric Sundquist demonstrates that *Benito Cereno* reflects the transcontinental nature of the slave economy, its inextricable relationship with the adventurism of the Age of Discovery and empire-building.¹⁰⁵ The story also embodies the tense, dangerous connection between the Age of Discovery, with its bold sailors and noble leaders, and the Age of Revolution that followed, as the conquered turned on their masters. But Melville also conflates the supposed triumph of the Age of Revolution with the brutal Age, not of Discovery, but Conquest. Despite their differences in outlook—Don Benito's haunted knowledge of doom contrasting Delano's breezy confidence—the captains inhabit the same world; as in Walker's *Appeal*, the New World is an even more vicious version of the Old; Don Benito's Castillian coat-of-arms is a more realistic

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variation on the Great Seal of Virginia. Melville's Delano sees himself as a paternalistic friend, who "took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs."¹⁰⁶ In *Benito Cereno*, this genial racism masks the casual brutality of the slave system, while the disinterested racism of the courts obscure the voices of the surviving rebels. Melville evokes memories of Turner, Vesey, and Gabriel in Babo's refusal to speak after his capture. The courts need a tale that will allow them to maintain control of the limits of acceptable discourse, and Babo refuses to give it to them. His silence is his last weapon, and after "his voiceless end," he leaves behind a talisman of dread: "The body was burned to ashes; but for many days, the head, that hive of subtlety, fixed on a pole in the Plaza, met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites."¹⁰⁷ It's only with great unease or self-deluded denial that white society can call the threat of rebellion dead, John Brown insane, and "Herman Melville Crazy."¹⁰⁸

With *Moby-Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, Melville attacks the project of defining and policing acceptable discourse that was part of his own family's legacy. Massachusetts Supreme Court Justice Lemuel Shaw is central to Melville's picture of the legal discourse of slavery. In 1844's *Commonwealth v. Rogers*, Shaw sought to codify the legal definition of "a newly recognized form of insanity." Michael Rogin explains that "Monomania," a disorder under which men who "knew the difference between right and wrong" were "possessed by a power which drove [them] to violence." The "disease," Rogin says, "began attracting notice early in the nineteenth century; it was the disease specific to a society of uprooted and driven men," the society created by westward expansion and the periodic economic collapses that culminated in the 1837 Crash. Shaw claimed that the monomaniac's "mind broods over one idea, and cannot be reasoned out of it," and Melville is certainly toying with this conception with the character of Ahab, "That before living agent, now became the living instrument."¹⁰⁹ Shaw reasoned that a monomaniac's "conduct may be in some respects regular, the mind acute, and the conduct apparently governed by the rules of propriety, and at the same time there may be insane delusion, by which the mind is perverted." In attempting this new definition, Shaw was refining earlier legal conceptions of insanity, which rested on the ability to distinguish right and wrong.

Modifying the Enlightenment belief in the autonomy of the will, Shaw acknowledged powers that overwhelmed moral judgment. He was making law for individuals less governed by reason and contract, more driven by forces beyond

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their control. He was responding to what Henry Adams would later characterize as the shift from eighteenth-century will to nineteenth-century force.¹¹⁰

In an interesting turn, “Shaw did not permit monomania as an insanity defense, however, unless the criminal thought he was called by God. . . . Shaw rescued only the madmen who still felt themselves possessed by the voice of legitimate authority.” Shaw’s logic cut both ways—it maintained patriarchal control over the limits of action while acknowledging the legitimacy of the appeal to Higher Law. But in his decisions against fugitive slaves, Shaw favored the former implication of his thinking; “Claims to freedom, by slaves against masters and monomaniacs against God, cost them the paternal protection of the law.”¹¹¹

Brown would be called a monomaniac by friend and foe for over a century, regardless of the shaky clinical grounds for defining such a “disease.” Shaw, in his way, as Melville in his, finds that the true definition of monomania is a legal and political one, one that defines sanity as an acquiescence to institutional power. Interestingly, Shaw’s definition pre-empts and cordons off appeals to Higher Law by placing it firmly in the realm of madness, and it’s this judicial attempt to reduce moral reason to the workings of a diseased mind that Melville plays with in creating Ahab. But it demonstrates, beyond the “forces” at work in “a society of uprooted and driven men,” the institutional attempts to foreclose the possibilities of upheaval that these rootless men might seek. Interestingly, Brown could probably have availed himself of this reasoning in his trial, and though he refused to pretend madness in court, he had already toyed, in a way Melville might have appreciated, with the idea of divine madness when he assumed the alias “Shubel Morgan”—Louis DeCaro tells us that “Shubel” means “captive of God.”¹¹²

Melville’s assessment of his father-in-law’s logic, and his faith in legislative channels to deal productively with the problem of slavery, might be gleaned from the Gordian Knot episode in *Benito Cereno*, where the confused, bemused Delano, wandering the deck of the *San Dominick*, observes an old sailor working a handful of ropes into a huge knot; a few “slaves” are gathered about him “obligingly” offering their help. Delano’s thoughts move “from [their] own entanglements to those of the hemp.”

For intricacy such a knot he had never seen in an American ship, or indeed any other. The old man looked like an Egyptian priest, making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon. . . .

"What are you knotting there, my man?"

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"The knot," was the brief reply, without looking up.

"So it seems; but what is it for?"

"For some one else to undo," muttered back the old man, plying his fingers harder than ever, the knot being now nearly completed.

While Captain Delano stood watching him, suddenly the old man threw the knot toward him, and said in broken English,- the first heard in the ship,- something to this effect- "Undo it, cut it, quick." . . .

An elderly Negro, in a clout like an infant's . . . and a kind of attorney air, now approached Captain Delano. In tolerable Spanish, and with a good-natured, knowing wink, he informed him that the old knoter was simple-witted, but harmless The Negro concluded by begging the knot, for of course the stranger would not care to be troubled with it. Unconsciously, it was handed to him. With a sort of conge, the Negro received it, and . . . with some African word, equivalent to *pshaw*, he tossed the knot overboard [emphasis mine].¹¹³

The Northern courts, the infantile sophistry of lawyers, and a specific Massachusetts Supreme Court Justice, are dismissed in the snort of the slave—"Pshaw!"—as he tosses the Gordian Knot of slavery into the sea. The Spanish sailor working the knot, subject of a faded empire, is wise enough to know that it can't be undone—it has to be cut. For Melville, the formalities of civilized discourse and intercourse are a charade. In a state of war, legal proceedings, social stations, labor and enterprise are rendered absurd, and the threat of reprisal must be put down not only by state's military strength but by the power of the courts to conceal.

One reason John Brown's raid appears such a break with reason is that the logic of antebellum America itself is so obfuscatory. It's *Benito Cereno* that presents—and viciously satires—the conditions under which Brown can appear insane—the refusal of Delano to recognize the reality of the situation is codified in the court's insistence on evasion and erasure. So many post-bellum historians have been able to pretend that the Civil War was not about slavery is that so much of the Congressional record deals with the issue only in code—pro-Confederate history can argue endlessly that the War was about tariffs, trade, and states' rights because the conflict over slavery was couched in these arguments in order to maintain party discipline and sectional cooperation, especially during the years that the South successfully imposed the gag rule.¹¹⁴ Similarly, the Constitution's simultaneous erasure and codification of slavery, and the refusal of those debating its wording from referring to the institution through anything but euphemism, are evidence of an insoluble problem of articulation. Though Garrison

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described the Constitution as a “pact with Hell,” this is not immediately clear because of the document’s purposely evasive language.

Melville parodies this function of Western legal discourse by providing a court transcript at the end of the novella, supposedly revealing the true story of the plot and mutiny. After we read what is provided of the document, the narrator (as compromised and unreliable a voice as any other in the story) tells us that “If the deposition of Benito Cereno has served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which preceded it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the San Dominick's hull lies open to-day.”¹¹⁵

The problem with this conditional statement is that its conditions have not been met—Don Benito’s testimony is rife with erasure and contradiction; so the hull of the rebel ghost ship lies closed to us, a Pandora’s Box waiting to be split open like the sailor’s Gordian knot. The deposition is given, not in Cereno’s voice, but in the disembodied, third person voice of the court. Some edits omit “events . . . which can only serve uselessly to recall past misfortunes and conflicts;”¹¹⁶ others remove “various random disclosures referring to various periods of time.”¹¹⁷ The testimony has been heavily censored with numerous ellipses and edits; even the narration leading into the transcript qualifies the completeness of the story by “Omitting the incidents and arrangements ensuing,” and dismissing further curiosity with phrases like “suffice it that . . .”¹¹⁸ (this simply continues Melville’s strategy of destabilizing language throughout the tale—demonstrating the function of language as a tool of obfuscation and uncertainty—with, among other tactics, his consistent use of double-negative modifiers: “as if not unwilling,” “seemed not uncharacteristic,” “not unknown,” “not ungratefully,” and so on). The narrator begins to interpret the court’s findings before the reader is even allowed to read them; he “finds it well to preface [the extracts] with a remark” before providing them, and his explanation is filled with ambiguities—the deposition offers only a partial account, and has been translated. But the limits of the court’s credulity demands that Cereno’s madness is a more plausible explanation for his story than the intelligence of the slave conspirators:

The document selected, from among many others, for partial translation, contains the deposition of Benito Cereno; the first taken in the case. Some disclosures therein were, at the time, held dubious for both learned and natural reasons. The tribunal inclined to the opinion that the deponent, not undisturbed in his mind by recent events, raved of some things which could never have happened. But

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subsequent depositions of the surviving sailors, bearing out the revelations of their captain in several of the strangest particulars, gave credence to the rest. So that the tribunal, in its final decision, rested its capital sentences upon statements which, had they lacked confirmation, it would have deemed it but duty to reject.¹¹⁹

Whatever else these techniques are, they are historically appropriate. The rebellion plots of Gabriel, in 1800, and Denmark Vesey, in 1822, were rebellions of thought, not deed; both were betrayed before they could be carried out. In a hotly debated assertion, in fact, historian Michael Johnson has recently claimed that the Vesey rebellion was an invention of the white leaders of Charleston, who

falsified court procedures and testimony, turned a deaf ear to what witnesses really said (at least what was recorded in the manuscript court records), and certainly did not reflect the views of the alleged conspirators—the men convicted, executed, and exiled—almost all of whom either entered not guilty pleas or, like Vesey, said nothing whatever.¹²⁰

Johnson claims that the Vesey conspiracy records don't reveal a rebellion plan, but instead "witnesses' testimony discloses glimpses of ways that reading and rumors transmuted white orthodoxies into black heresies."¹²¹ Were this true, it would further illustrate that at many levels, in North America black rebellion was a feature of the white imagination. If at one end of this imaginative construct is the cynicism of the Charleston elite, at the other is John Brown, imagining a way to make black freedom possible through violent direct action involving the slaves themselves.

But if black rebellion haunts the white imagination, black silence fuels that fear. Like Vesey, Gabriel and Turner, and their close associates, are all notable in part for the determined silence with which they faced white retribution. Melville's Babo, the rebel leader, does the same. Once he is subdued after a last desperate attempt to kill Cereno, Babo

at once yielded to the superior muscular strength of his captor, in the boat. Seeing all was over, he uttered no sound, and could not be forced to. His aspect seemed to say: since I cannot do deeds, I will not speak words.¹²²

For Babo, as for the condemned slaves in Charleston in 1822, refusal to participate in the charade of American jurisprudence, which can do nothing but condemn them, is almost as powerful as successfully rebelling, because it stymies the court's power to fulfill its primary function, to resolve conflict. Johnson points to Vesey and his co-defendants'

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near silence in the court records, to their refusal to name names in order to save themselves. These men were heroes not because they were about to launch an insurrection but because they risked and accepted death rather than collaborate with the conspiratorial court and its cooperative witnesses. Surely it is time to read the court's Official Report and the witnesses' testimony with the skepticism they richly deserve¹²³

In *Benito Cereno*, the deposition also resembles the Constitution in its contradictory treatment of blacks as people and as non-people. The “thirty-nine women and children of all ages” that are part of don Aranda’s original shipment of slaves are “catalogued” in the document¹²⁴ (of the Africans picked up with Babo, don Benito “does not remember the names of the others”): “a partial reenumeration of the Negroes, making record of their individual part in the past events, with a view to furnishing, according to command of the court, the data whereon to found the criminal sentences to be pronounced.”¹²⁵ The testimony of the slaves is legally inadmissible, but the court nevertheless makes use of their knowledge of the course of events; on the one hand, they cannot legally be relied upon to speak the truth, while on the other, some facts are “known and believed, because the Negroes have said it.”¹²⁶ At the same time, their status must be demarcated throughout the document—their leader is referred to as “the Negro Babo” whenever he is mentioned. The deposition is a fiction within a fiction,

circumstantially recounting the fictitious story dictated to the deponent by Babo, and through the deponent imposed upon Captain Delano; and also recounting the friendly offers of Captain Delano, with other things, but all of which is here omitted¹²⁷

Whether Johnson is right or wrong about the Vesey conspiracy, the idea of slave insurrection as a fiction in the white mind stretches back farther, and originates in Melville’s own Manhattan. New York Supreme Court Justice Daniel Horsmanden may have authored the first work of gothic fiction published in North America with his account of the “Great Negro Plot” of 1741, a rebellion that existed mainly in the testimony of one white “witness” and the confessions wrung from blacks by force.

The presence of the 1741 case as a sort of deep background to *Benito Cereno* is established early. The first sighting of the derelict San Dominick evokes the dread and suspicion with which Catholics and foreigners were viewed, particularly in New England. This dread colors Delano’s perception of the hulk, which appears

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like a whitewashed monastery after a thunder-storm, seen perched upon some dun cliff among the Pyrenees. But it was no purely fanciful resemblance which now, for a moment, almost led Captain Delano to think that nothing less than a ship-load of monks was before him. Peering over the bulwarks were what really seemed, in the hazy distance, throngs of dark cowls; while, fitfully revealed through the open port-holes, other dark moving figures were dimly descried, as of Black Friars pacing the cloisters.¹²⁸

In Delano's nagging fear that the Spaniard don Benito has some sinister purpose, Melville signals the Captain's know-nothingness, or Know-Nothingness, not simply in that he knows nothing about what's really happening, like Dylan's Mister Jones, but that his vague xenophobic uneasiness calls the Know-Nothing Party to the reader's mind—that Americans, in the midst of an escalating crisis over slavery, had become briefly sidetracked; David Potter claims that after the 1854 elections, it seemed possible that “the Catholic or immigrant question might replace the slavery question as the focal point in American political life.” The nativist Know-Nothings “gained some stunning victories” that year, especially in Massachusetts, where they elected “all of the state senators and all but two of the 378 representatives,” and by the following year it “seemed entirely plausible for the New York Herald to predict that the Know-Nothings would win the presidency in 1856.” Stephen Douglas, “although still bleeding politically from the wounds inflicted by the anti-slavery men during the Kansas-Nebraska debate,” considered the party “the principal danger to the Democratic Party.”¹²⁹

Melville's use in *Benito Cereno* of Spain as a shadowy bugbear in the mind of Delano is as ironic, complicated, and double-edged as anything else in the story. Having gained its independence in 1821, the fledgling republic of Mexico was “beset on every side by the elements of an inveterate, civil and ecclesiastical tyranny” based in Spain, which was trying to recapture its colony, and “a powerful party, whose pivot was priests and monks, were at work . . . to effect the restoration of despotism.”¹³⁰ In the face of this pressure, Child argues, the United States responded to its neighbor's plight with a treacherous conspiracy to seize a third of its territory.

But anti-Catholicism and nativism also drove the “Bonfires of the Negros,” the panic over the imagined slave rebellion in 1741. Russell Shorto points out that to white New Yorkers, “the whole black-on-white uprising was really orchestrated from Rome. It was a papist plot on white

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Protestant civilization, with blacks acting as the pope's minions and a disguised Catholic priest . . . as their field captain."¹³¹

Horsmanden's description of the method of deposition could be a model for Melville's court document; it too finds the testimony of black defendants useful only insofar as it confirms the court's assumptions. If not, it is simply disregarded.

The examinations . . . taken by the judges, were soon after laid before the grand jury, who interrogated the parties therefrom in such manner, as generally produced from them the substance of the same matter, and often something more, by which means there accrued no small advantage; for though were the last examination brought to light new discover, yet it will be seldom found, there is any thing in such further examinations contradictory to the former, but generally a confirmation of them; and in such case, the setting forth the same at large, may not be thought a useless tautology; not that this will happen often, and where it does, it will be chiefly found in the examinations and confessions of negroes, who, in ordinary cases, are seldom found to hold twice in the same story; which, for its rarity therefore, if it carried not with it the additional weight of the greater appearance of truth, may make this particular the more excusable; and further, this is a diary of the proceedings, that is to be exhibited, therefore, in conformity to that plan, nothing should be omitted, which may be of use.¹³²

Likewise, acquiring the proper story in the first place requires, for Horsmanden, a degree of creativity, and these methods suggest a blueprint for Gray's approach to Turner almost a century later. Horsmanden complains of the "trouble of examining criminals in general," but finds the "fatigue" and "drudgery" of interrogating black witnesses and suspects particularly tiresome. One must exercise "the closest attention" while making any attempt at "bringing and holding them to the truth." He claims that "many of them have a great deal of craft," and that "their unintelligible jargon stands them in great stead" in their diabolical efforts to convey the truth from their upright white interviewer. Horsmanden sees the process as a sort of mirror image of the uncovering of historical truth that we saw Frederick Douglass describe above. "[A]n examiner," Horsmanden tells us,

must expect to encounter with much perplexity, grope through a maze of obscurity, be obliged to lay hold of broken hints, lay them carefully together, and thoroughly weigh and compare them with each other, before he can be able to see the light, or fix those creatures to any certain determinate meaning.¹³³

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The vast conspiracy imagined by New York's law enforcement in 1741 is the same many would imagine they saw at Harper's Ferry in 1859, one that reached all the way from the madman Brown to the halls of Congress and the soon-to-be elected Abraham Lincoln. Three-time New York mayor Fernando Wood, an "ultra [friend] of the South," wrote to Virginia governor Henry Wise after Brown's capture that "Brown is looked upon here as a mere crazy or foolhardy emissary of other men Brown should not be hung, though Seward should be if I could catch him."¹³⁴

But Brown, seasoned by years of legal wrangling due to the tangle of unpaid loans and disputed property that was the legacy of the 1837 Crash, met his opponents on their own terms, and displayed an exceptional skill in his confrontations with the Southern authorities after his capture. David Potter observes that after his arrest, Brown "surpassed himself as few men have ever done,"¹³⁵ recovering from his failure with shocking indomitability and unshakeable poise. To return to my argument above that Brown represented an extremely dangerous "apostate" to his "species" and therefore had to be defined as a madman or a "prophet," his role as a white man still allowed him his greatest victory, not in the silence of his rebel models but in his words. James Redpath tells us that in his self-lacerating anger at his failure to get his men, supplies, and new slave allies out of Harpers Ferry when he had the chance, Brown recognized that his unlikely survival afforded him the opportunity to recover the project rhetorically, and it is his performance in court and his letters from jail (as well, I think, as his brutal rebuttals to Wise and Vallindingham at his first interview) for which he is remembered as an abolitionist hero.

Shrugging off the attempts to label him both insane—by his own attorneys, who looked for any angle to defend him—and treasonous—by a state he didn't live in—Brown matches the ridiculous charges with his own silence and obfuscation in court—inspired by Gabriel and Denmark Vesey, he covers his accomplices to the degree he is able after the blunder of allowing his papers to be captured. But more, he cuts through the cant of American legal and religious hypocrisy by citing the Bible as the source of his motivation, a clear admonition to "remember those in bonds as bound with them." His opening statement shrugs off the possibility of due process. Though assured by Wise that he would receive fair treatment, he was convinced that he and his co-defendants would be given "mere form—a trial for execution," and insisted that "I did not ask for any quarter at the time I was taken. I did not ask to have my life spared If you

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seek my blood, you can have it at any moment, without this mockery of a trial.” Since it seemed the trial would be held, he asked, with contemptuous flippancy, for a delay to recover from his wounds “merely . . . that, as the saying is ‘the devil may have his dues [sic],’ no more.” He sneered at the charge of insanity, seeing it as “a miserable artifice and pretext of those who ought to take a different course,” namely, his attorneys. Again, he meets the cant of the legal system with blunt humor:

Insane persons, so as my experience goes, have but little ability to judge of their own sanity; and if I am insane, of course I should think I know more than all the rest of the world. But I do not think so. I am perfectly unconscious of insanity, and I reject, so far as I am capable, any attempt to interfere in my behalf on that score.¹³⁶

Brown was also charged with treason, another legal myth. Brown’s lawyer states the obvious, that “no man is guilty of treason, unless he be a citizen of the State or Government against which the treason so alleged has been committed.” Likewise, “rebellion” is legally meaningless here; “Rebellion means the throwing off allegiance to some constituted authority. But we maintain that this prisoner was not bound by any allegiance to this State, and could not, therefore, be guilty of rebellion against it.”¹³⁷ Interestingly, Henry Griswold’s argument makes the distinction between a legal and a military matter that would become so important to the United States’ “war on terror,” another battle against a vast, invisible conspiracy, at the beginning of the 21st century.

Now, with regard to treason, several things are said reconstitute treason, one of which is levying war against the State; and that is one of the charges laid in the indictment, But, gentlemen, there is a great difference between levying war and resisting authority, and this is a matter I particularly wish you to bear in mind. A man may resist authority with ever so much violence, and bloodshed may ensue from such resistance, but that is not treason. It may happen, and it does happen, where men congregate together for the purpose of perpetrating a crime. They associate for that purpose, and they have their rules and regulations, and all the elements of an organization, and yet if assailed in the commission of crime, and they defend themselves to the utmost, and with great sacrifice to the lives of themselves and their fellow-citizens whom they resist, that is resistance, but that is not levying war.¹³⁸

The conflation of treason and implied slave rebellion goes back to the composition of the Constitution itself, and, had some Southern delegates had their way, charging Brown with treason to a state could have been Constitutional. Lawrence Goldstone links the issue of treason

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with the struggle between Northern and Southern factions. Led by South Carolina representative to the Constitutional Convention “Dictator” John Rutledge, some Southerners at the convention thought that “each state [should] be left free to define treason and that each definition had to then be accepted by the other states.” Goldstone argues that Rutledge “had in mind another provision of the committee’s report, Article XV, adapted from the fugitive slave provision in the Articles of Confederation,” which stated that

“Any person charged with treason, felony or high misdemeanor in any State, who shall flee from justice, and shall be found in any other State, shall, on demand of the Executive power of the State from which he fled, be delivered up and removed to the State having jurisdiction of the offence.”

This would allow the courts to not only define escaping slaves as treasonous, but also any white citizen who was “seen to incite slaves, or who allowed them privileges contrary to the Negro Act of 1740.”

As a result, according to this statute, the national government would be forced to respect an indictment for treason in, say, South Carolina, which might consist of nothing more than opposing slavery. By incorporating a state definition of treason into the Constitution, Rutledge was seeking a guarantee that the central government would become party to maintaining order within the slave states.¹³⁹

That this provision was not adopted proved irrelevant; Wise was able to try and execute Brown in a Virginia court. Historians and other critics of Brown who take him to task for his unwillingness to admit his real plans in court—“I never did intend murder or treason,” he claimed, “or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite the slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection”—miss the fact that Brown has no reason to be forthcoming, since by his actions he has demonstrated a clear contempt for the functioning of the court, in that its authority is bogus, not only in that its support of slavery clearly violates the higher authority it appeals to—Brown infers that the court “acknowledges . . . the validity of the law of God” because he sees “a book kissed, which I suppose to be the Bible, or at least the New Testament, which teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them”—but in its hypocritical preferentiality:

I have another objection, and that is that it is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. Had I interfered in the manner which I admit, and which I admit has been fairly proved—for I admire the truthfulness and candor of the greater portion of

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the witnesses who have testified in this case—had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends, either father, mother, brother, sister, wife, or children, or any of that class, and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right, and every man in this Court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than punishment.¹⁴⁰

Melville articulates the reward for legal fictions like this in the coda to *Benito Cereno*; the closure the court supposedly brings to the rebellion is a social fiction: resolution. After Babo is sentenced, Captain Delano visits his friend don Benito, whose health is failing, and tries to reassure him that all is well.

". . . the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves."

"Because they have no memory," he dejectedly replied; "because they are not human."

"But these mild trades that now fan your cheek, Don Benito, do they not come with a human-like healing to you? Warm friends, steadfast friends are the trades."

"With their steadfastness they but waft me to my tomb, Senor," was the foreboding response.

"You are saved, Don Benito," cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; "you are saved; what has cast such a shadow upon you?"

"The Negro."¹⁴¹

Don Benito, like Stowe's Little Eva, suffers not from a legal, but a metaphysical illness, which, as with Little Eva, proves fatal—a brutal awareness of consequence and complicity, beyond Delano's supreme self-confidence and convenient naivety, but not reaching the fury of Ahab's megalomania. Ahab's madness destroys him, but the inability of the characters in *Benito Cereno* to confront the implications of their experience closes off the potential for the violent regeneration that Melville seems to already see as inevitable in 1852. Only a few years later, the potential for the destruction to be regenerative is no longer implicit in the story. Just as Brown saw the coming bloodbath that he hoped to avert through his partly tactical, partly symbolic plan, Melville leaves us in a world with no more options. Though Babo himself is executed, his "body . . . burned to ashes," his head is mounted on a pole in the Plaza where it "met, unabashed, the gaze of the whites," looking over the church where the slaveowner Aranda's body lays and the monastery where don Benito dies of his knowledge. The disembodied head, "that hive of

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subtlety” holding the plans, ideas, and confessions it refused to relinquish,¹⁴² is as great a threat in death as in life. In *Moby-Dick*, the behemoth of white supremacy will wreck the American Ship of State. In *Benito Cereno*, the legislative stalemate of the becalmed seas can’t prevent the outbreak of revolutionary violence and judicial whitewash can’t wipe away the threat. Melville’s stories make a mockery of John O’Sullivan’s justification of the United States’ Manifest Destiny, that the nation was advancing on the “untrodden space” of the future, “with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past.”¹⁴³

Benito Cereno also predicts the future, anticipating much of the brutal logic of the 20th century, as well as many of early modernism’s great texts. Melville prefigures the Dred Scot decision and Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn* in rendering the vicious farce of black freedom in American courts. Tom’s brutal charade at the end of *Huck Finn* is a parody of Huck’s backwards attempt to accompany Jim to freedom (and perhaps a parody of Brown’s raid as well), the transcript at the end of *Benito Cereno* is a parody of events, and the events in the story are a parody of what we later learn. In its articulation of the aggressive complacency and “contrived innocence” of the status quo, *Benito Cereno* anticipates not only Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* but Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; for Eichmann, it was not simply that following orders was reason enough to participate in genocide, but that a legal code made these actions not only acceptable, but imperative. In “Politics and the English Language,” Orwell attacks “banal statements” that are “given an appearance of profundity by means of the not un-formation,”¹⁴⁴ used frequently in *Benito Cereno* to suggest the confused complacency of Delano’s thought. In Melville’s anti-slavery fictions of the 1850’s, the madness of the United States, an economy built on slavery, genocide, and empire, can’t be normalized by legal structures or linguistic constructs, and the choice between salvation and destruction no longer exists.

In such madness, “insanity” is “heaven’s sense,” and such a shocking act as Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry is sound counsel. Ahab’s “glimpse” into his own soul, acknowledging that “all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad,”¹⁴⁵ is a foreshadowing and a mirror image of Brown, whose cause was seen as just but whose plan struck many as a foolhardy risk. Melville suggests that this kind of thinking was all that could have an impact on the “Loom of Time.” As Ishmael serves as “the attendant or page of Queequeg” while the harpooner weaves a mat, he imagines that the interlocking movements of the two men’s hands and tools are

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chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course—its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events.¹⁴⁶

Melville's fiction suggests, more than any other writing of the American Renaissance, a strange foreshadowing of "Weird John Brown," the "meteor of the war," who was already considering ways to insert himself into the weave of history.

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NOTES TO CHAPTER SEVEN

¹ Douglass, "The Heroic Slave," p. 62.

² Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam*, p. 247.

³ Heimert 499

⁴ Rogin, p. 136.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147

⁷ Barsamian, David. Interview with Eqbal Ahmad. *The Progressive*, November 1998

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 327-328

⁹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 238.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 224

¹¹ O'Sullivan, "The Great Nation of Futurity."

¹² *Moby-Dick*, p. 13.

¹³ *Benito Cereno*, p. 39.

¹⁴ Delany, p. 231.

¹⁵ Goodman, Amy. "The War The World Ignores" Interview with Johann Hari. August 7, 2006.
http://www.democracynow.org/2006/8/7/the_war_the_world_ignores_a

¹⁶ O'Sullivan

¹⁷ *Moby-Dick*, p. 189

¹⁸ Sanders, p. 332.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 340

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 338

²¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 3.

²² Gen 16: 12.

²³ Rogin, p. 141.

²⁴ Saillant, p. 6.

²⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p.6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.11.

²⁷ Tucker, p. 122.

²⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 347.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80-81.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁴ Tucker, p. 124.

³⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 136.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 574.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 575.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁴⁴ Hobbes, p. 3.

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⁴⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 563-564.

⁴⁶ Korten, p. 62.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 173.

⁴⁹ ??, p. 433

⁵⁰ Melville's "Hawthorne and His Mosses," first appeared in *The Literary World*, August 1850 and is widely reprinted on the web.

⁵¹ *Benito Cereno*, p. 64.

⁵² *Moby-Dick*, p. 96.

⁵³ Meyer, p. 118.

⁵⁴ Banks, p. 75.

⁵⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 125.

⁵⁶ Banks, p. 78.

⁵⁷ Meyer, p. 118.

⁵⁸ *Moby-Dick*, p. 156.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 321-327.

⁶⁰ Henry Nash Smith, p. 130.

⁶¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 215.

⁶² Redpath, *Public Life*, p. 309.

⁶³ *Moby-Dick*, p. 425.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁶⁵ D.L. Child, p. 9.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁷⁰ 2 Samuel 20:10

⁷¹ 2 Samuel 3:28

⁷² An excellent recent account in Joel Silbey's *Storm Over Texas*.

⁷³ Stone, p. 123.

⁷⁴ 1 Kings 21:3

⁷⁵ 1 Kings 21:9-10

⁷⁶ 21: 20-21

⁷⁷ Potter, p. 98.

⁷⁸ Rogin, p. 108.

⁷⁹ D.L. Child, p. 29.

⁸⁰ Rogin, p. 137.

⁸¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 65.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 498.

⁸⁴ *Benito Cereno*, p. 64.

⁸⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 169.

⁸⁶ D.L. Child, p. 25.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 389.

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⁹⁰ *Moby-Dick*, pp. 398-399.

⁹¹ *Moby-Dick*, p. 400.

⁹² D.L. Child, p. 18.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 18

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28. This line of reasoning again throws the entire issue back in the lap of Jefferson, not only through the allusion of the Declaration, but also of the 3/5 clause, by which Northern legislators claimed Jefferson won the presidency. Garry Wills' *"Negro President": Jefferson and the Slave Power* explores these issues powerfully.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24

⁹⁹ Rogin, pp. 134-135.

¹⁰⁰ *Moby-Dick*, p. 215.

¹⁰¹ D.L. Child, p. 24.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Rogin, p. 140.

¹⁰⁴ *Moby-Dick*, p. 577.

¹⁰⁵ See Sundquist, pp. 135-181.

¹⁰⁶ *Benito Cereno*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁷ *Benito Cereno*, p.100..

¹⁰⁸ This *New York Book Day* headline is a chapter title in Delbanco; reference to the story is on p. 179.

¹⁰⁹ Rogin, p. 118.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹¹² DeCaro, p. 254.

¹¹³ *Benito Cereno*, p. 66.

¹¹⁴ See, among others, William Lee Miller's *Arguing About Slavery*, and Daniel Walker Howe's *Political Culture of the American Whigs*.

¹¹⁵ *Benito Cereno*, p, 101.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹²⁰ See Johnson.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Benito Cereno*, p. 103.

¹²³ Johnson

¹²⁴ *Benito Cereno*, p. 93.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹²⁹ Potter, p. 250.

¹³⁰ D.L. Child, p. 4.

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¹³¹ Shorto?

¹³² Zabin, p. 44.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Villard, p. 502.

¹³⁵ Potter, p. 375.

¹³⁶ Redpath, *Public Life*, p. 309.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Redpath, *Public Life*, p. 329.

¹³⁹ Goldstone, pp. 154-155.

¹⁴⁰ Redpath, *Public Life*, p. 341.

¹⁴¹ *Benito Cereno*, p. 103.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁴³ O'Sullivan.

¹⁴⁴ Orwell, p. 160.

¹⁴⁵ *Moby-Dick*, p. 188.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

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CHAPTER EIGHT: UNCLE TOM AND NAT TURNER

The End of the Legal Struggle Against Slavery

Though few would see Melville and Harriet Beecher Stowe as writers who had much, if anything, in common, their work in the 1850s share some common themes. One is perhaps coincidental, but *Moby-Dick* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were published within a year of each other, and both novels are big, ambitious, eclectic texts with almost all-encompassing social scope and vision. Another, though, is their concern with the disastrous course of United States political economy under the Leviathan of the Slave Power. And like Melville, Stowe seems to envision and even call for a figure like John Brown to emerge in the struggle. In response to Southern criticism that she had invented the kind of situations she described in the story out of whole cloth, in 1852 Stowe published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a sourcebook of sorts for her novel. In it she too picks up on the same kind of imagery Parker used, calling American slavery a "leviathan in the reeds," which at an earlier time "might have been 'drawn out with a hook.'" Now, though, "Leviathan is full-grown," and "None is so fierce that dare stir him up . . . His heart is as firm as a stone, yea, as hard as a nether millstone. The sword of him that layeth at him cannot hold."¹ Regardless of her admonitions at the end of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that Americans have a peaceful change of heart, Stowe seems convinced already that a peaceful solution is no longer possible. Here she is at her sharpest, belying her reputation as a mild, genteel sentimentalist:

There are those who yet retain the delusion that, somehow or other, without any very particular effort or opposition, by a soft, genteel, rather apologetic style of operation, Leviathan is to be converted, baptised, and Christianised. They can try it. Such a style answers admirably as long as it is understood to mean nothing. But just the moment that Leviathan finds they are in earnest, then they will see the consequences.²

Stowe is interested here in what, or whom, it might take to actually combat the slave system, and her advice predicts the kind of man who would ultimately emerge from the bloodshed in Kansas: "Let no one, either North or South, undertake this warfare, to whom fame, or ease, or

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wealth, or anything that this world has to give, are too dear to be sacrificed. Let no one undertake it who is not prepared to hate his own good name, and, if need be, his life also.”³

She goes on to recount the fate of Elijah Lovejoy, murdered by an anti-abolitionist mob in Alton, Illinois, in 1837. Her father, Henry Ward Beecher, was president of Illinois College at the time, and appeared in public with Lovejoy at a series of meetings held to defend the editor’s rights and dispel the threat of violence. Lovejoy had come from St. Louis, where his offices had been burned after he wrote articles protesting a case in which a black man was burned alive for fighting arrest. The judge in the case, “Judge Lawless,” ruled against reparations “because, being the act of an infuriated multitude, [the murder] was above the law,” a unique reading of Higher Law principles. Though her intent is to praise Lovejoy’s “martyrdom,” her criticism of the “wavering and pusillanimous” behavior of the “timid, prudent, peace-loving majority,” who “care not what principles prevail, so long as they promote their interest,”⁴ suggests that she has already been rethinking the efficacy of peaceful means of abolition. She also quotes her father quoting Lovejoy that “It has been said that my hand is against everyone, and every man’s hand against me,” linking not just slaves, but every member of a slave society, to Ishmael. Lovejoy argued that his hand was raised against no one, which further suggests a reconsideration on Stowe’s part of pacifist martyrdom.

Stowe develops a sophisticated picture of the escalation toward violence of the slave economy in her second anti-slavery novel, 1857’s *Dred: A Tale of the Dismal Swamp*. Written quickly and seemingly less sweeping in scope, *Dred* is usually disparaged as much less successful artistically and polemically than *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but I don’t think this kind of criticism holds up; *Dred* is a very interesting and worthwhile piece of writing, and reflects both Stowe’s growth as a thinker and the country’s move toward violent confrontation over slavery. Taking to heart criticism of the racial politics of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—her black martyr, Tom, is passive and maternal, while her rebel firebrand, George Harris, is half-white and draws from his “Saxon” heritage for his intelligence and drive—Stowe creates a different dynamic here—her “black” character is a visionary, almost mystic leader named Dred, who is clearly modeled after a kind of popular white conception of Nat Turner as an almost Ahab-like character, touched by divine madness. Her part-white character here is also interesting; the head of the house slaves on the plantation near the swamp where Dred leads a Maroon community, Harry knows that he is

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related to his owners, and is torn between his love for his white sister and his own relative comfort, and his will to freedom.

In *Dred*, Stowe lays out a geography of rebellion and freedom similar to those we discussed in previous chapters; she uses the sea as a metaphoric ground of thwarted freedom and plays with the dichotomy between the repression of the plantations and the risky freedom of the Dismal Swamp. Stowe creates a sophisticated political landscape in *Dred*; even moreso than in the works we discussed prior to this, in this novel the land of the free is problematized. The disputed ground of the swamp and the sea become alternatives to both the geographical enslavement of the piedmont plantations and the legal enslavement of the courts. Stowe makes the same analogy between mountain rebels and the runaways of the swamps that we've seen before; "Usage familiarizes the dwellers of the swamp with the peculiarities of their location," she tells us, "and gives them the advantage in it that a mountaineer has in his own mountains"⁵:

What the mountains of Switzerland were to the persecuted Vaudois, this swampy belt has been to the American slave. The constant effort to recover from thence fugitives has led to the adoption, in these states, of a separate profession, unknown at this time in any other Christian land—hunters, who train and keep dogs for the hunting of men, women, and children. And yet, with all the convenience of this profession, the reclaiming of the fugitives from these fastnesses of nature has been a work of such expense and difficulty, that the near proximity of the swamp has always been a considerable check on the otherwise absolute power of the overseer.⁶

Dred manages a complex social structure; confined to a small area, the explosiveness of the slavery issue is clear in the tense connections between characters, who are intertwined in complex gradations of race and class; the relationships here are more intimate, and more dangerous. In *Dred* Stowe builds a continuum of characters who not only stand for, but challenge, her own understanding of the various facets of the arguments over slavery. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the triangle of Tom, the maternal Christian martyr, and George and Eliza, the escaping mulattos, are the center of the story, other characters constellating around them. In *Dred*, characters double and triple each other as more and more clashing elements are added to the story, but unlike her earlier novel, in *Dred* there is no release, redemption, or escape. Each new incident brings "our national ship," as one character calls it,⁷ closer to ruin.

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Though the action is set in North Carolina, the Old Dominion is the story's real backdrop. The use of the name Dismal Swamp and the clear references to the Nat Turner rebellion make that clear, as do the links between Virginia and the main white characters: "Thomas Gordon, Knight," the original patriarch of the Gordon plantation, was "[a]mong the first emigrants to Virginia, in its colonial days,"⁸ and Frank Russel is "the only son of a once distinguished and wealthy, but now almost decayed family, of Virginia."⁹ Thomas Gordon is an original Cavalier, an archetypal Southern grandee, "a distant offshoot of the noble Gordon family, renowned in Scottish history," a figure out of Walter Scott, and almost a predecessor to Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen.

Being a gentleman of some considerable energy, and impatient of the narrow limits of the Old World, where he found little opportunity to obtain that wealth which was necessary to meet the demands of his family pride, he struck off for himself into Virginia. Naturally of an adventurous turn, he was one of the first to propose the enterprise which afterwards resulted in a settlement on the banks of the Chowan River, in North Carolina. Here he took up for himself a large tract of the finest alluvial land, and set himself to the business of planting, with the energy and skill characteristic of his nation; and, as the soil was new and fertile, he soon received a very munificent return for his enterprise. Inspired with remembrances of old ancestral renown, the Gordon family transmitted in their descent all the traditions, feelings, and habits, which were the growth of the aristocratic caste from which they sprung. The name of Canema, given to the estate, came from an Indian guide and interpreter, who accompanied the first Col. Gordon as confidential servant.¹⁰

Appropriately, Stowe assembles a complex web of Southern relationships that wouldn't be seen again in American fiction until Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* The triangles of love and hate she creates resemble, in a bizarre way, the love triangle that Margaret Mitchell would create in *Gone with the Wind*, but with the racial politics intact and the sexual politics removed. One triangle is Nina Gordon, "a flirt and a coquette,"¹¹ but a woman who attempts to mitigate the harsh living conditions of her brother's slaves, and whose death in a cholera outbreak them without protection; her brother Harry, head slave at the Canema plantation, "the son of his master" and a "beautiful Eboe mulattress," and only one quarter black; and her brother Tom, "Colonel Gordon's lawful son."¹² Harry "had received advantages of education very superior to what commonly fell to the lot of his class," traveling to Europe with his master, and "acquiring very uncommon judgment, firmness, and knowledge of human nature," he does much of the

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work of maintaining the plantation. His legal status is determined by the perverse logic of the slaveholding gentry:

In leaving a man of this character, and his own son, still in the bonds of slavery, Colonel Gordon was influenced by that passionate devotion to his daughter which with him overpowered every consideration. A man so cultivated, he argued to himself, might find many avenues opened to him in freedom; might be tempted to leave the estate to other hands, and seek his own fortune. He therefore resolved to leave him bound by an indissoluble tie for a term of years, trusting to his attachment to Nina to make this service tolerable.¹³

Harry lives, “to all intents and purposes, with the perfect ease of a free man” and “might have . . . forgotten even the existence of the chains whose weight he never felt,”¹⁴ except for his Scottish disposition; Stowe still builds characters through racialized traits, though she struggles to mitigate her own excesses with class analysis throughout the novel. She manages to challenge a number of stereotypes, and proves that she has paid attention to slave narratives. For instance, she explodes the myth of the faithful house servant, a favorite paternalist conceit, in her description of Tom Gordon’s valet, Jim. Douglass, among other writers, noted that the house servants were often the most willing to take serious risks to gain their freedom; as an escape plot is hatched toward the end of the story, Jim, “unexpectedly to all parties,” is “one of the most forward.” Stowe also registers her awareness that the contented behavior among their property that slaveholders boast about is an act:

. . . from that peculiar mixture of boldness, adroitness, cunning, and drollery, which often exists among negroes, [Jim] had stood for years as prime and undisputed favorite with his master; he had never wanted for money, or for anything that money could purchase; and he had had an almost unreprieved liberty of saying, in an odd fashion, what he pleased, with the licensed audacity of a court buffoon.¹⁵

Harry is caught between his love for his sister and his hatred for his brother, who represent the “separate spheres” of female and male influence; Nina is loving and compassionate but legally powerless, while Tom enjoys the codified, sanctioned power of the political structure. Tom Gordon is the villain of the novel, the archetypal dissipated Southern aristocrat. Like Henrique St. Clare in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the tyrant trained from birth that Jefferson warns against, he was raised “among servants to whom his infant will was law” and “indulged . . . in the full expression of every whim,” so that “before his father thought of seizing the reins of

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authority, they had gone out of his hands forever,” and “an early age saw him an adept in every low form of vice.”¹⁶

The romance in the novel is provided by Nina’s relationship with Edward Clayton, who, with his friend Frank Russel, provides the ultimately ineffectual voice of reason in the novel. Clayton is a lawyer, the son of a Supreme Court judge; he is meant to parallel Thomas Gray (though the coincidental similarity to Melville is interesting). Clayton is an odd fictional creature, a Southern abolitionist intellectual, who hopes to train his slaves for freedom and then release them. Like Augustine St. Clare in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Clayton is Stowe’s version of Jefferson in this novel; like St. Clare, he is agnostic; unlike St. Clare, he is motivated to take action in the world anyway.

Clayton’s relationship with Nina is less important than his relationships to her two brothers. In fact, the relative lack of powerful female characters here is an indication of the violence and instability of the social structure; there are only a few central women characters, and they are imperiled by illness, poverty, and violence. Clayton’s relationship to Harry is an alliance across lines of class and race—it’s, in fact, a relationship of equals between a man who has legal standing as a man and a man whose legal standing is as a thing—and through it, Clayton becomes bitter enemies with Tom Gordon. But he and Harry also make two corners of another triangle, with Stowe’s strangest character, Dred, the rebel prophet haunting the Dismal Swamp.

Dred is of direct African descent; he sees himself as a servant of God, “the rod of his wrath, to execute vengeance on his enemies.”¹⁷ We first meet Dred in his role as Harry’s doppelganger. The Dismal Swamp as a presence seems to evoke resistance; it’s at the edge of the swamp that Harry begins to act on his need for freedom. Taunted by Tom Gordon, “one who knows his power, and is determined to use it to the utmost,” Harry barely contains his anger. Communicating “more bitterness and wrath than could have been given by the most violent outburst,” Harry declares that Gordon is “not my master!” Gordon strikes him, and Harry, though it “has been [his] life-long habit . . . to repress every emotion of anger within himself,” assures him that “this mark will *never* be forgotten!” And, though Gordon leaves with a vicious sexual taunt—“I called on your wife before I came away, this morning, and I liked her rather better the second time than I did the first!”—Harry is “majestic” in his self-possession, and Stowe asserts his humanity and suggests his potential for leadership and resistance:

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There are moments of high excitement, when all that is in a human being seems to be roused, and to concentrate itself in the eye and the voice. And, in such moments, *any* man, apparently by virtue of his mere humanity, by the mere awfulness of the human soul that is in him, gains power to over-awe those who in other hours scorn him.¹⁸

Gordon rides off, and Harry rides into the Swamp to regain his composure. It's at this moment that he meets Dred, as though his entry into the swamp and his rage at injustice conjure him. Like Douglass' Heroic Slave, the voice of Dred, "a deep voice from the swampy thicket," precedes his appearance; his voice is a disembodied assertion of freedom untainted by color. Physically, he embodies the tension between Stowe's rejection of, and reliance on, pseudo-scientific explanations of racial attributes:

. . . the speaker emerged . . . He was a tall black man, of magnificent stature and proportions. His skin was intensely black, and polished like marble. [He had] a neck and chest of herculean strength [and] the muscles of a gladiator. The head, which rose with an imperial air from the broad shoulders, was large and massive, and developed with equal force both in the reflective and perceptive department. The perceptive organs jutted like dark ridges over the eyes, while that part of the head which phrenologists attribute to the moral and intellectual sentiments, rose like an ample dome above them. The large eyes had that peculiar and solemn effect of unfathomable blackness and darkness which is often a striking characteristic of the African eye. But there burned in them, like tongues of flame in a black pool of naphtha, a subtle and restless fire, that betokened habitual excitement to the verge of insanity. If any organs were predominant in the head, they were those of ideality, wonder, veneration, and firmness; and the whole combination was such as might have formed one of the wild old warrior prophets of the heroic ages.¹⁹

Dred is a bizarre, gothic figure—the wild-eyed, fiery Old Testament prophet and violent insurgent that both Nat Turner and John Brown would become in legend and history, with the "misty light in his eye which one may often have remarked in the eye of enthusiasts," though he reveals "occasional flashes of practical ability and shrewdness."²⁰ In a strange echo of Melville, Stowe links Dred to Ishmael; he, too, is "a wild man—every man's hand against me," and has "made my bed with the leviathan . . ." Dred links Melville's inscrutable, visionary Biblical imagery and Stowe's unambiguous social purpose throughout the novel. Inverting the standard racist analogy between slaves and animals, Dred says he has been "a companion of the dragons and the owls, this many a year. I have found the alligators and the snakes better neighbors than

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Christians. They let those alone that let them alone; but Christians will hunt for the precious life.”²¹ Here again we see the relativity of human and animal, and in this case the humans are wanting.

Dred is literally a child of revolution; he is not the son of a founding father but of Denmark Vesey. His mother is Mandingo, “one of the finest of African tribes, distinguished for intelligence, beauty of form, and an indomitable pride and energy of nature.” Stowe betrays what is still a very limited and race-based understanding of slavery and human nature in her description of Dred’s early life. The Mandingos, she explains, “are considered particularly valuable by those who have tact enough to govern them, because of their great capability and their proud faithfulness; but they resent a government of brute force, and under such are always fractious and dangerous”²²—Stowe still wavers between condemning slavery outright and splitting hairs; here she suggests that even slaves make distinctions between “good” and “bad” slavery. She also suggests that the drive for freedom must be inspired by personal grievance rather than principle.

Dred’s intellectual growth as a child “was so uncommon as to excite astonishment,” and he learned to read “by an apparent instinctive faculty.” So “perhaps it was the yearning to acquire liberty for the development of such a mind which first led Denmark Vesey to reflect on the nature of slavery, and the terrible weights which it lays on the human intellect, and to conceive the project of liberating a race.” Regardless of her more problematic racial ideas, Stowe still imbues this character with a power of the most iconic figures in the Bible. Like Christ (and like Nat Turner), Dred “would often astonish those around him with things which he had discovered in books. Like other children of a deep and fervent nature, he developed great religious ardor, and often surprised the older negroes by his questions and replies on this subject,” and he “likened his own position of comparative education, competence, and general esteem among the whites, to that of Moses among the Egyptians; and nourished the idea that, like Moses, he was sent as a deliverer.” He participated closely in his father’s conspiracy plans, and “was a witness of the undaunted aspect with which [Vesey] and the other conspirators met their doom.” As an adult he became “an object of dread among overseers . . . and, like a fractious horse, was sold from master to master,” until he finally killed an overseer and fled to the swamps, “never afterwards heard of in civilized life.”²³

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Though Stowe qualifies her admiration for Dred almost with every passage, and a number of her fairly conservative ideas carry over to this text from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, her knowledge of the Bible, like Melville's, suggests that gothic madness is part and parcel of the prophet in the wilderness. However mad they seem to other characters in the novels or in relation to the social status quo of the time, characters like Dred and like Melville's Ahab possess a gravity and far-sightedness at odds with the venal superficiality of American commercial society. Melville's Gabriel, the "long-togged scaramouch" on the *Jeroboam*, perceives the doom of the *Pequod* accurately; in a mad society, only a madman sees things correctly. It's this quality of Biblical *gravitas* that New England abolitionists attributed to John Brown, which helped fuel certain aspects of his myth after his death, as we'll see.

Dred challenges Harry with visions of bloodshed and rebellion; his dialogue is made up of snippets of Walker and Turner, and he presses Harry to choose: freedom and blackness, or whiteness and slavery. "[T]rembling with excitement," Harry listens with "awe and respect" as Dred predicts a day of reckoning:

"How long wilt thou halt between two opinions? Did not Moses refuse to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter? How long wilt thou cast in thy lot with the oppressors of Israel, who say unto thee, 'Bow down that we may walk over thee'? Shall not the Red Sea be divided? 'Yea,' saith the Lord, 'it shall.'"²⁴

Though Dred clearly represents many of the fears of black rebellion and millennial violence that drove Stowe to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (and to render its black hero a non-violent, maternal martyr), he is an interesting addition to the literature of white anti-slavery writers. Stowe manages to fully realize her ambivalence about the character and what he represents in the text, so that Dred literally walks between worlds, occupying the space between land and sea in the South, and Stowe manages a powerful metaphor here: the Dismal Swamp, and the entire coast, are a no-man's land between the ocean's promise of freedom and the enslavement of the Piedmont. Dred is "a traveller through regions generally held inaccessible to human foot and eye," from "vast swamp-girdle of the Atlantic," to the "strange and tropical luxuriance" of the Florida Everglades, to the "dreary and perilous belt of sand which skirts the southern Atlantic shores, full of quicksands and of dangers." He had lived "for weeks" in a wrecked ship—the ruins of the Ship of State, perhaps—where "where he fasted and prayed, and fancied that

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answering voices came to him in the moaning of the wind and the sullen swell of the sea.”²⁵

Stowe describes Dred in terms worthy of Byron²⁶—or Melville. Like Melville, Stowe questions the nature and categories of sanity as defined in relation to public life.

There are but two words in the whole department of modern anthropology—the sane and the insane; the latter dismissed from human reckoning almost with contempt. We should find it difficult to give a suitable name to the strange and abnormal condition in which this singular being, of whom we are speaking, passed the most of his time.²⁷

Dred walked in the “twilight-ground between the boundaries of the sane and insane, which the old Greeks and Romans regarded with a peculiar veneration.” The ancients venerated such a person, who moved “under the awful shadow of a supernatural presence,” and in whom “there was often an awakening of supernatural perceptions” when their more conventional faculties dimmed, just as “the mysterious secrets of the stars only become visible in the night.” In her questioning, in fact, she begins to sound like Emerson. “The hot and positive light of our modern materialism,” she laments, “allows us no such indefinite land” as the visionary geography of Dred’s prophecies of freedom.

Searching for a category outside existing political realities, Stowe turns to the Romantic writers for inspiration. Dred is a kind of Frankenstein’s monster, haunting a gothic landscape “of vegetable monsters stretch[ing] their weird, fantastic forms among its shadows,” and the “dark recesses” of his own mind, “a mind so powerful and active as his, placed under a pressure of ignorance and social disability so tremendous.” The natural processes of his human development are horribly perverted by slavery, but the processes do not halt. Like the “goblin growth” of swamp trees, Dred’s development demonstrates the “mysterious and dread” principle of natural growth, which “develops in forms portentous and astonishing” no matter “what impediment or disadvantage” it is put under.

The wild, dreary belt of swamp-land which girds in those states scathed by the fires of despotism is an apt emblem, in its rampant and we might say delirious exuberance of vegetation, of that darkly struggling, wildly vegetating swamp of human souls, cut off, like it, from the usages and improvements of cultivated life.

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Beneath that fearful pressure, souls whose energy, well-directed, might have blessed mankind, start out in preter-natural and fearful developments, whose strength is only a portent of dread.

At the same time, Dred seems to take his role as prophet for what it is, a role. Just as women in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* modulate and shape their public and private personas for maximum personal and political efficacy in a circumscribed social position, Dred can ramp up his preaching or communicate in less demonstrative, though no less dramatic, ways. Dred casts Harry's acquiescence to the slave system first in Biblical terms—"Hast thou not eaten the fat and drunk the sweet with the oppressor, and hid thine eyes from the oppression of thy people?"—but as he continues to harangue Harry, he "drop[s] from the high tone he at first used to that of common conversation," becoming suddenly not the grandiloquent Jeremiah but a brutal trickster figure, taunting Harry more viciously and explicitly than Gordon had been able to, but in so doing expressing an almost Third World liberation theology far from the tortured patriotism of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* George Harris. Dred implicitly rejects some basic tenets of the Gospels (he also adds the final wrinkle on the frequent analogy between slaves and livestock) in asking "Hath not our cheek been given to the smiter? Have we not been counted as sheep for the slaughter?"²⁹ While George finds a way to control his rage through conversion to Christianity, here Stowe is distinguishing clearly, in almost Marxist terms, between slave religion and the religion of freedom. He asks if Harry found it "sweet to kiss the rod":

"Bend your neck and ask to be struck again! . . . Be meek and lowly; that's the religion for you! You are a *slave*, and you wear broadcloth, and sleep soft. By and by he will give you a fip to buy salve for those cuts! Don't fret about your wife! Women always like the master better than the slave! Why shouldn't they? When a man licks his master's foot, his wife scorns him,—serves him right. Take it meekly, my boy! 'Servants, obey your masters.' Take your master's old coats—take your wife when he's done with her—and bless God that brought you under the light of the Gospel! Go! *you* are a slave! But, as for me," he said, drawing up his head, and throwing back his shoulders with a deep inspiration, "*I* am a free man! Free by this," holding out his rifle. "Free by the Lord of hosts, that numbereth the stars, and calleth them forth by their names. Go home—that's all I have to say to you! You sleep in a curtained bed.—I sleep on the ground, in the swamps! You eat the fat of the land. I have what the ravens bring me! But no man whips me!—no man touches *my* wife!—no man says to me, 'Why do ye so?' Go! *you* are a slave!—I am free!" And, with one athletic bound, he sprang into the thicket, and was gone.³⁰

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Harry swears that he “will not be a slave,” but Dred’s “scornful laugh was the only reply.” As his voice preceded him, it lingers after his disappearance; as when she introduces the character, and as in Douglass’ *The Heroic Slave*, these disembodied voices represent freedom separate from the tone of the speaker’s skin, creating a moment where the white listener is free from prejudice and the black speaker is free from bodily harm. As he fades into the swamp, Dred sings “in a clear, loud voice, one of those peculiar melodies in which vigor and spirit are blended with a wild, inexpressible mournfulness,” the “indescribable” tone of his voice both “velvety” soft and able to “pierce the air with a keen dividing force.” The “wild camp-meeting hymn” about martial trumpets and marching soldiers, ringing with “a wild, exultant fulness of liberty” seems to Harry “a fierce challenge of contempt.” Though he feels “an uprising within him, vague, tumultuous, overpowering; dim instincts, heroic aspirations; the will to do, the soul to dare,” he also sees “all society leagued against him,” and “he cursed the day of his birth.”³¹ Stowe’s haunting description of Dred’s singing recalls Douglass’ evocation of the “wild songs” of the slaves in *Narrative of the Life*, expressing both “the highest joy and the deepest sadness.” Douglass “sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery” than anything else would, though at the time, he claims, he “did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs.” They were “a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.”³²

Stowe mitigates the revolutionary potential in Harry’s meeting by countering Dred with a mammy figure. Harry’s “spasm of . . . emotion” passes as Milly, one of the plantation slaves, appears to challenge him and his faith in the outlaw, to deepen the rift between Harry’s two sides. Milly doesn’t hear Dred’s voice, but the swamp communicates freedom to her as well, “like de voice of de Lord is walking among de trees.” With an odd echo of Melville, Milly warns Harry to stay away from Dred, who is in the “wilderness of Sinai; he is with de blackness, and darkness, and tempest.”³³ Milly is this novel’s Uncle Tom; for her, freedom will come in the next world, and that knowledge is as good as freedom. Though for Harry, who has “good strong arms, and a pair of doubled fists, and a body and soul just as full of fight as they can be; it don’t

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answer to go to telling about a heavenly Jerusalem,” for Milly, her own yearning for freedom proves that it will come.

Stowe works hard to formulate an alternative to violent uprising, though she has become less convinced in the years since she first offered *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a way out of the disaster the U.S. was heading for. Milly “an't a fool”; she knows that no one “has any business to be sitting on der cheers all der life long, and working me, and living on my money,” but she tolerates it “for de Lord's sake,” waiting for His solution. Milly lifts her voice in song too, but she doesn't wipe away Dred's power; Harry is “a little shaken, but not convinced” by her approach. She insists that when the slaves rise, “they won't spare nobody;” Dred's way leads “through seas of blood.”³⁴ Harry agrees that “it's all madness, perfect madness,” but remains on the fence.

Stowe shares her character's ambivalence. Through Milly, in some ways her surrogate here, as Tom was in her earlier novel, Stowe makes a last plea for a peaceful solution, but she prefigures Brown's last insight—that the way to the end of slavery was through seas of blood. The metaphor of the sea takes on another level of meaning here—if Hildreth and Douglass saw the sea as a place of freedom, Melville, Stowe, and Brown see the deluge coming to soak the “guilty land”—the Red Sea burying the armies of the oppressor. Milly, rejecting the white attempt to make “merchandise” of her, turns to the analogy between the slaves and wild animals, but here it is not the slaves that are the animal, the “wolves” that Delano sees in the rebel slaves, but rebellion itself: “Don't you start up dat ar tiger,” Milly warns Harry; “ye can't chain him, if ye do.”³⁵

The fear of this tiger motivates Stowe and Melville, differentiating them from the most radical abolitionists; John Brown's willingness to arm the slaves and trust them to comport themselves sets him apart from almost every other white American of his day. But Stowe seems to push hard against her own fears in this book, allowing Dred a richness of humanity that few whites would have extended to Nat Turner. She furthers the bold, dangerous parallel between her character and Turner by giving Dred a white amanuensis in Edward Clayton, who becomes “interested in Dred, as a psychological study.” Clayton has “the mind of him who strives with the evils of this world,” and, frequently falling into “a mood of weariness and longing,” he recognizes in Dred “the cry of the human soul, tempest-tossed and not comforted.”³⁶ Unlike Thomas Gray, whose function is to control and contain Turner's voice, however ambiguously,

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Clayton functions to some extent as Dred's Listwell, inspired to action by the rebel. Stowe is careful to contain Dred's voice—his “wild jargon of hebraistic phrases, names, and allusions”—too, however; she makes sure that the reader is aware of the danger of Dred's powers, unchecked by civilizing forces he has been denied access to. For Clayton, Dred is like “one of those old rude Gothic doorways, so frequent in European cathedrals,” a bizarre mix of the Bible and older, pagan forces (a little like Melville's *San Dominick*).³⁷

Like Melville, Stowe draws on the imagery of a wrecked ship filled with the ghosts of the Slave Trade in a vision Dred describes to Clayton. In this novel, like Melville's writing, the waves of the sea are not “the emblems and the children of liberty” but the void into which the lives of slaves are poured; “every day is full of labor, but the labor goeth back again into the seas,” Dred tells Clayton, but “it is written that in the new heavens and the new earth there shall be no more sea.” Peace will come only after the fires of judgment. When Clayton asks where this vision came from, Dred explains that “the Lord bade me” to “seek out the desolate places of the sea.” Dred finds a shipwreck “and dwelt there.” In his vision, “the Lord showed unto me that even as a ship which is forsaken of the waters, wherein all flesh have died, so shall it be with the nation of the oppressor.”³⁸

Lynn Veach Sadler argues that “Dred's self-division,” which “results primarily from an inability to encompass . . . Old and New Testament doctrine, the letter and spirit of the Law,”³⁹ paralyzes him, as he waits for a sign that never comes. But his inability to seize the moment is part of a larger paralysis. In puzzling out how to articulate the point of no return that the United States had reached, Stowe weaves the nature of the swamp, the “nature” of the slave, the nature of the scriptures, and the nature of the Founders into a web that must close on the slave system. Dred's “solitary companion” in the swamps, “the Bible of his father,” was not the messenger of peace and good-will, but “the herald of woe and wrath,” and this is the contradiction Stowe struggles to unravel. She argues that just as a person's nature seeks “a reflection of its own internal passions” in the natural world, so that “the fierce and savage soul delights in the roar of torrents, the thunder of avalanches, and the whirl of ocean-storms,” so too does a person's nature find in the Bible that “which sympathizes with itself . . . hence its endless vitality and stimulating force.”

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Dred had heard read, in the secret meetings of conspirators, the wrathful denunciations of ancient prophets against oppression and injustice. He had read of kingdoms convulsed by plagues; of tempest, and pestilence, and locusts; of the sea cleft in twain, that an army of slaves might pass through, and of their pursuers whelmed in the returning waters. He had heard of prophets and deliverers, armed with supernatural powers, raised up for oppressed people . . . and thrilled with fierce joy as he read how Samson, with his two strong arms, pulled down the pillars of the festive temple, and whelmed his triumphant persecutors in one grave with himself.⁴⁰

The “vast solitudes” of the swamp itself amplify the power of these stories, so that “often going weeks without seeing a human face, there was no recurrence of every-day and prosaic ideas to check the current of the enthusiasm thus kindled.” And since “[e]ven in cold and misty England, armies have been made defiant and invincible by the incomparable force and deliberate valor which it breathes into men,” the “exotic” power of “this oriental seed,” “so full of startling symbols and vague images,” grows “in the fiery soil of a tropical heart, it bursts forth with an incalculable ardor of growth.” So Dred’s “life passed in a kind of dream” with “no interpreter” for his readings “but the silent courses of nature,” so that he imagines himself another Elijah or John the Baptist; “Sometimes he would fast and pray for days,” and then, like Nat Turner, “voices would seem to speak to him, and strange hieroglyphics would be written upon the leaves.” Though she struggles with a fear of this apocalyptic aspect of visionary texts—as well as their interpretation in the hands of “unguided” readers—Stowe recognizes the same link between these scriptures and revolutionary politics that radical abolitionists like Garrison and Brown did. Burned in Dred’s memory is “the self-sacrificing ardor with which a father and his associates had met death at the call of freedom,” which had been, however “wild and hopeless” a “scheme,” virtually identical “in kind with the more successful one which purchased for our fathers a national existence.”⁴¹ And here Stowe addresses her reader, pointing out that “none of us may deny” the relationship between the American revolutionaries and the rebel slaves of Charleston.

In creating the relationship between Dred and Clayton, Stowe departs drastically from her real-life models. Rather than the difference between fanaticism and rationalism that Thomas Gray tries to impose on Nat Turner, Stowe dramatizes the tension between the voice of mad prophecy as the realm of higher law, driving the reformation of society, and the voice of the legal system

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as the tool of corrupt sophistry. A lawyer like Gray, Clayton declares early in the novel that “if I practised law according to my conscience, I should be chased out of court in a week.”⁴²

His theory is put to the test later when he faces his own father, a North Carolina Supreme Court judge, to argue for the legal protection of slaves from abuse—Milly, hired out from the plantation, has been severely beaten. Judge Clayton is troubled less by having to rule against his son than he is by “the doctrine that I feel myself forced to announce.” A judge occupies the bench, he thinks, “not to make laws, nor to alter them, but simply to declare what they are,” regardless of the “monstrous injustice” they support. Judge Clayton represents the letter, not the spirit, of the law; to him, “However bad the principle declared, it is not so bad as the proclamation of a falsehood would be.” The Judge’s position, in fact, is anti-revolutionary; “It is useless,” he declares from the bench, “to complain of things inherent in our political state.”⁴³

The question at hand is the essence of the right of revolution—the status of a human’s inalienable rights—and Judge Clayton comes down on the side of property and despotism; he has no choice if he is to act within the law. His ruling also places the law of property over the social fiction of paternalism; though “other domestic relations” have been cited in arguments for greater protections for slaves—“drawn from the well-established principles, which *confer* and *restrain* the authority of the parent over the child, the tutor over the pupil, the master over the apprentice,” these examples are not analogous; “a greater” difference than that “between freedom and slavery . . . cannot be imagined.” In one case, the goal is raising a public citizen, and if the gaurdain finds “moderate force” necessary while instilling an intellectual and ethical education, that is acceptable. But if more force is needed, “it is better to leave the party to his own headstrong passions, and the ultimate correction of the law, than to allow it to be immoderately inflicted by a private person.” On the other hand, the sole end is “the profit of the master,” as well as his and the community’s safety and security. This is not the raising of a public citizen, but the maintenance of private property, and this can only be enforced through a flagrant disregard for rules that apply in all other human intercourse:

Such obedience is the consequence only of uncontrolled authority over the body. There is nothing else which can operate to produce the effect. THE POWER OF THE MASTER MUST BE ABSOLUTE, TO RENDER THE SUBMISSION OF THE SLAVE PERFECT. . . .⁴⁴

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Though the judge feels that “as a principle of moral right, every person in his retirement must repudiate” this ruling, the business of society provides “no remedy.”⁴⁵ The legal and political structure as ordered allows no actual consideration of law or justice. The master’s power cannot be “usurped” if the system is to function, and the slave cannot appeal to reason or common sense, or make a case based on his poor treatment. As Hildreth argues, character has no bearing in this setting. The law is designed to ignore whatever “provocations” the slave is driven to “by his own passions, or the instigation of others”(an odd indication of Stowe’s conservatism; she suggests that it is a slave’s “passions,” or the prodding of outside agitators that drive slaves to rebellion, not simply the state of slavery). It is the tacit right of the master to exact “bloody vengeance upon the turbulent traitor.” The master’s judgment can be exercised “with impunity, *by reason of its privacy.*” Judge Clayton frets that there is no vantage point from which “a court may properly begin” to deal with the question in terms of “right;” if the question of “which power of the master accords with right,” he believes, “the answer” would “sweep away all of them.”⁴⁶ What Stowe articulates here is that the domestic relationship that pro-slavery ideologues described as paternal is institutionalized *in order* to codify the master’s impunity as the ultimate law. The purely commercial relationship between master and slave is redefined as domestic—*private*—in order to put it beyond the reach of the law. Yet the logic of the pretense doesn’t hold up, since the rights of the master must be protected not only by the courts but by the military and legislative strength of the federal government, and John Brown’s plans violated the tacit pretense that slavery was a private affair, and treating it as the public crisis it was.

In the “dead silence” that follows Judge Clayton’s verdict, Edward Clayton makes his choice between the law of his father and the madness of Dred. He rises to address the court, “the law of slavery, and the nature of that institution” finally clear to him “in their true character,” and steps outside the legal system in protest:

"I had before flattered myself with the hope that it might be considered a guardian institution, by which a stronger race might assume the care and instruction of the weaker one; and I had hoped that its laws were capable of being so administered as to protect the defenceless. This illusion is destroyed. I see but too clearly now the purpose and object of the law. I cannot, therefore, as a Christian man, remain in the practice of law in a slave state. I therefore relinquish the profession, into which I have just been inducted, and retire forever from the bar of my native state."⁴⁷

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This is not Brown's address to the court, but its contempt for the charade anticipates the kind of extra-legal action that attacking slavery required, as well as the public response to such action. "As usual," Stowe remarks, "in cases where a person takes an uncommon course from conscientious motives, Clayton was severely criticized"; his actions are "quixotic, absurd, ridiculous," and his beliefs "unsound" and "impracticable." Clayton's friend Frank Russel notes wryly that "Clayton *is* as radical and impracticable as the sermon on the mount, and that 's the most impracticable thing I know of in literature. We all *can* serve God and Mammon. We have discovered that happy medium in our day. Clayton is behind the times."⁴⁸

Harry encounters this same level of insane legal reality when he learns that the manumission papers he holds are legally worthless. After Nina's death he decides nothing on the plantation holds him anymore and presents them. They are signed by Nina and her father. Tom's friend Mr. Jekyl, an investor in slaves, points out that "all the signatures in the world could n't make it a valid contract," since a slave is not a legal agent; to the law he is "*pro nullis, pro mortuis*; which means, Harry, that he's held as nothing—as dead, inert substance."⁴⁹ He responds to Harry's anger by calling slavery "a divine ordering There's no use, my boy, in rebellion. Hath not the potter power over the clay, to make one lump to honor, and another to dishonor?"⁵⁰

Stowe again rests on racial category *and* unpacks its ephemerality. Harry's arguments rouse Tom Gordon, who again strikes him; Harry knocks Tom out and flees, becoming a swamp fugitive with Dred. But in the course of the argument, Jekyl uses a standard Biblical rationale for slavery: "It pleased the Lord . . . to foredoom the race of Ham"—to which Harry replies "I'm no more of the race of Ham than you are! I'm Colonel Gordon's oldest son—as white as my brother, whom you say owns me! Look at my eyes, and my hair, and say if any of the rules about Ham pertain to me!"⁵¹ After his abrupt departure, Jekyl, flustered, "came very near attempting his recovery, by pouring in his face the contents of the large ink-stand,"⁵² and almost blacking Tom's face—an interesting performance of racial othering.

As the novel moves toward its conclusion, cataclysmic violence seems more and more inevitable. At every turn in the novel, reasonable acts of conscience are met with extremism, and these acts of conscience are themselves seen as disturbing and fanatical by Southerners determined to resist change. There can be no discussion of the slavery question, and there is no

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room for measured discourse. Harry's last lesson in the law that upholds slavery turns him to a rebel and inspires the kind of language he has learned from Dred. The Southern gentry are a "generation of vipers," who

" . . . encourage theft, and robbery, and adultery I shall fight it out to the last! I've nothing to hope, and nothing to lose They made sport of Samson,—they put out his eyes,—but he pulled down the temple over their heads, after all. Look out! . . . There will come a day," said Harry, "when all this shall be visited upon you! The measure you have filled to us shall be filled to you *double* — mark my words!"⁵³

Clayton, who is present at the scene, is also driven to further action, but his insistence on working within the law paralyzes him. His actions are in vain as he is consistently warned away from any hope of change. His father warns him about the plutocratic nature of the slaveholders; while the slave economy is "ruinous in the long run to communities," it "is immediately profitable to individuals." The legal system itself is designed to support this; Southern planters "are an aristocracy supported by special constitutional privileges" and they are "united against the spirit of the age," the spirit of liberation and equality. Regardless of Clayton's reasoned arguments, "[n]o logic is so accurate" as the planters' "instinct of self-preservation."⁵⁴

Clayton now realizes that the legal reform he once advocated would result in a revolutionary change; seeking advice from religious leaders, he finds himself arguing with a Northern cleric, Dr. Shubael Packthread (Stowe also sees the irony in calling a man "God's fool"). Packthread is a character out of Melville; his long life of philosophical debate had taught him that reasoned discourse was mainly a strategic tool. Words for him are not "vehicles for conveying ideas" but "mediums for concealment." His specialty was formulating arguments, on any "controverted topic," that "with the appearance of the utmost precision, [would] always be capable of a double interpretation." Packthread is, for Stowe, the ultimate American legislator, "*au fait* also in all compromise measures, in which two parties unite in one form of words, meaning by them exactly opposite ideas, and call the agreement a *union*," and an expert in parliamentary procedures "by which troublesome discussions could be avoided or disposed of," or dragged "interminable *marshes* [emphasis mine] of weariness" until abandoned.⁵⁵ Clayton argues him into a corner, revealing the revolutionary impact of "reform," and convincing himself of the

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depth of his problem at the same time—though refusing to reject the legal system in order to do it:

“. . . when the slave has a legal existence and legal rights, can hold property and defend it, acquire education and protect his family relations, he ceases to be a slave; for, slavery consists in the fact of legal incapacity for any of these things. It consists in making a man a dead, inert substance in the hands of another, holding men *pro nullis, pro mortuis*. What you call reforming abuses, is abolishing slavery. It is in this very way that I wish to seek its abolition”⁵⁶

Packthread argues that because the “apostles entered no public protest against the abuses of slavery,” it is divinely sanctioned. Clayton’s rebuttal comments interestingly on the legitimacy of rebellion. He differentiates between “our position under a republican government,—in which we vote for our legislators, and, in fact, make the laws ourselves” and the apostles, “who were themselves slaves, and could do nothing about the laws.” Republican citizens “have the right to agitate,” and so “are responsible if unjust laws are not repealed.”⁵⁷ But if the apostles were “slaves,” what were they responsible for? The complacent church officials Clayton argues with claim that they were responsible only for delivering the Scriptures and not fighting “about the rights of man.”⁵⁸ Stowe’s own position becomes clear later, when the abolitionist father Dickson regrets that “our preaching does n’t make a conflict. When the apostles came to a place, they said, ‘These men that turn the world upside down are come hither’;”⁵⁹ the phrase links the abolitionists not only to the American Revolution—legend has the tune “The World Turned Upside Down” played by the band during Washington’s defeat of Cornwallis—but also to the 17th Century Revolution in England, when the Bible was said to cause “insurrection and teacheth the people to disobey and to make havoc of other men’s goods.”⁶⁰

For Stowe, this clerical conference that reinterprets the words of a group of radicals, risking their lives by preaching universal brotherhood, into those of cautious sermonizers unwilling to upset the status quo, is the same kind of blasphemy that the slaveholders commit in claiming the American revolution for themselves. These men call Dickson a “monomaniac”⁶¹ for his commitment to anti-slavery as they struggle, like Congress, to maintain unity and order by avoiding the issue. The official church is simply another institution within which there is no room for its principled members. Though the abolitionist Dickson is “gentle and quiet,”⁶² and “regarded by his ministerial brethren with great affection and veneration,”⁶³ his relationship to

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the church is similar to John Brown's, who changed churches repeatedly through his life trying to find anti-racist congregations. A Reverend H.D. King, an acquaintance of Brown's in Iowa, described the Old Man's religion like this to Katherine Mayo:

I tried to get at his theology But I never could force him down to dry sober talk on what he thought of the moral features of things in general. He would not express himself on little diversions from the common right for the accomplishment of the greater good. For him there was only one wrong, and that was slavery. He was rather skeptical, I think. Not an infidel, but not bound by creeds. He was somewhat cranky on the subject of the Bible, as he was on that of killing people. He believed in God and Humanity, but his attitude seemed to be: 'We don't know anything about some things. We do not know about the humanity matter. If any great obstacle stand in the way, you may properly break all the Decalogue to get rid of it'.⁶⁴

Shortly after the clerical conference, Harry articulates a position similar to Brown's when he insists in a letter to Clayton that "Denmark Vesey was a *man*" whose "history is just what George Washington's would have been, if [the Revolution] had failed,"⁶⁵ and it was "The Bible and your Declaration of Independence" that "set him on in his course" of rebellion.⁶⁶

Of course, neither of these documents will stand up in court, and the legal system continues to deliver blows to Harry's and Clayton's senses of order, justice, and reason. The world is turned upside down indeed when Clayton meets the fourth Gordon, another "child of Tom Gordon's father" (she is mentioned briefly in the first volume of the novel). In a letter sent from Dred's camp in the Dismal Swamp, Harry informs Clayton that Cora, another sister, who was "beautiful and good," was bought by a man who settled with her in Ohio, emancipated and married her, and left her and their children his estate when he died. The actual "heir-at-law" of the estate, though, is Tom Gordon, who "sued for the property" and won, and had the emancipation declared null and void, acquiring the woman and her children in the bargain. Attempting to intervene, Clayton learns that the family has already been sold, and when he follows them to the slave market.

Reaching Alexandria, he finds the town in an uproar, and finds Cora at the center of it. When he first sees her she is "haggard and wan," but her "splendid dark eyes had a peculiar and fierce expression" and the lines of her face "were settled into an immovable fixedness of calm determination. There was even an air of grave, solemn triumph on her countenance;"⁶⁷ she has killed her two children.

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That this sort of event would still be sensational over a century later when Toni Morrison wrote *Beloved* demonstrates the boldness of Stowe's fictional move here. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin* she included the murder-suicide of a slave woman and her infant, but here she places the woman, presumably mostly white like Harry, in court to face the legal system. That Stowe would attempt to make a slave woman Medea and turn a Nat Turner into a Jeremiah in the same novel speaks not only to her ambition as a political novelist but to the extremity of the political situation in the late 1850s. Cora seems to "regard the formalities of the court with the utmost indifference" and delivers her statement with "a peculiar but calm expression of mingled triumph and power."⁶⁸ Like Dred, and now like Harry, Cora is now not above, but beyond the law, beyond the absurdity of the United States' slave code, and has transgressed in a way that matches the power of its horror and injustice. Her confession is an indictment, and her madness is sanity.

"I killed them! And, O, how glad I am that I have done it! Do you want to know what I killed them for? Because I loved them!—loved them so well that I was willing to give up my soul to save theirs! I have heard some persons say that I was in a frenzy, excited, and did n't know what I was doing. They are mistaken.

In this bitter passage, Cora sneers at the "old proud Virginia blood" in her veins, "as it is in half of those you whip and sell," and contrasts the hideous land of the Old Dominion, the laws of which dragged from freedom her and her children, who could "no more hold property than the mule before his plough," with another landscape of freedom: "the laws of your country gave me back to [Tom Gordon]," Cora says, but "I sent [my children] to lie down in green pastures with the Lord." Now, "at any rate, they are safe."⁶⁹

When Harry offers her his help, she prefers to "[l]et the law take its course," as it had done so far. She has already, like John Brown would in a real Virginia jail, thrown out the Southern clergy, "ministers who pretend to preach the Gospel, and support oppression and robbery," who came to her, with "hands . . . defiled with blood."⁷⁰ Clayton then worries whether he should even tell Harry, "lest that excitement should blaze out in forms which should array against him, with still more force, that society with which he was already at war."⁷¹

Like Melville, Stowe contrasts the barbarity of legal reasoning with the madness of revolutionary thought. Having reached the limits of reasoned discourse, Stowe is still not ready to take the war to Africa, as Brown was. But she makes a valiant effort to describe the madness

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of legal slavery in terms that do justice to its extremity. Having created a Medea to exemplify the level of tragedy in the daily life of the South, she returns to the Dismal Swamp. After Cora's case is settled, the slaves meet in the swamp, at the grave of runaways. Dred directs Harry to read the Declaration of Independence, prefacing it himself with a brief explanation of "the story that they celebrate":

"It was years ago that this people was small, and poor, and despised, and governed by men sent by the King of England, who, they say, oppressed them. Then they resolved that they would be free, and govern themselves in their own way, and make their own laws. For this they were called rebels and conspirators; and, if they had failed, every one of their leaders would have been hung, and nothing more said about it. When they were agreeing to do this, they met together and signed a paper, which was to show to all the world the reason why. You have heard this read by them when the drums were beating and the banners flying. Now hear it here, while you sit on the graves of men they have murdered!"⁷²

Harry reads the document "which has been fraught with so much seed," then asks "if the laws that they put upon us be not worse than any that lay upon them. They complained that they could not get justice done to them in the courts. But how stands it with us, who cannot even come into a court to plead?" The slaves respond with their own list of grievances. Here Stowe turns to an actual Virginia case, 1851's *Souther vs. Commonwealth*, and quotes the verdict in a note. The court decided that "the owner of a slave, for the *malicious, cruel, and excessive beating of his own slave, cannot be indicted,*" for it was important to *protect the master from prosecution, even if the whipping and punishment be malicious, cruel, and excessive* [emphasis original].⁷³ Legal discourse gives way to prophecy as Dred begins to preach "the word of the Lord against this people," insisting that "[t]he God of their fathers judge between us!" The class-driven grievances of his preaching recall the anger of Wat Tyler and the old English radicals; the slaveholders are "a rebellious people" who "will not hear the law of the Lord!"

"Woe unto them, for they have cast lots for my people Because they sold the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes! They pant after the dust on the head of the poor, and turn aside the way of the meek" ⁷⁴

In *Dred*, the day of grace that Stowe believed remained when she wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has passed, and violent judgment has come. Dred continues, quoting perhaps the most rebellious and bloodthirsty passage of the Old Testament

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“I will tread them in my anger, and trample them in my fury, and their blood shall be sprinkled on my garments, and I will stain all my raiment! For the day of vengeance is in my heart, and the year of my redeemed is come! And I looked, and there was none to help! And I wondered that there was none to uphold! Therefore mine own arm brought salvation, and my fury it upheld me! For I will tread down the people in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury!”⁷⁵

The sense that this judgment will come in the form of a divinely sent surrogate is an interesting subtext here, but Dred despairs of divine deliverance, as his sermon collapses after his outpouring of rage into a list of grievances against divine law. “How long, O Lord, how long? . . . Why sleepest thou, O Lord? Why withdrawest thou thy hand? . . . Wilt thou hold thy peace forever?” he cries; “Behold how they hunt for our lives! Behold how they pervert justice, and take away the key of knowledge! . . . Wilt thou not avenge thine own elect, that cry unto thee day and night?”⁷⁶

The conflation of revolutionary vision and Biblical prophecy, quite common in American rhetoric, allows us some sense of how easy it was for the Transcendentalists to see Brown as an Old Testament prophet *and* a Cromwellian Puritan. Dred’s vision that “When the Lord delivereth them into our hands, one shall chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight,”⁷⁷ is a poetic echo of Brown’s plan for a mountain-based guerilla insurgency, “where one man for defense will be equal to a hundred for attack.”⁷⁸

Stowe’s attempts to link Biblical prophecy and Enlightenment era revolution, and her fascination with Nat Turner’s violent and, for her, disturbing visions, lead her to articulate her own narrative conflict in describing Dred’s “agonizing conflict,” and in doing so, she is able to come closer to articulating the contradictions in sentimental narrative, as Philip Fisher sees it in Rousseau, which Stowe calls the “sentiment of justice, this agony in view of cruelty and crime.” Dred’s “psychological condition” seems to be that he was “possessed, after the manner related in ancient fables, by the wrath of an avenging God.” The common human attribute that causes us “to feel pain at the sight of injustice, and to desire retribution for cruelty and crime,” was in Dred “an absorbing sentiment, as if he had been chosen by some higher power as the instrument of doom.”⁷⁹

Dred, in other words, was a born revolutionary. Still, Stowe can’t bring herself to unleash a rebellion; Dred’s faith in his purpose is finally shaken when no sign from above comes, and he

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quails at the insistence of his friend Hannibal to “reward them as they have rewarded us!”⁸⁰ without a signal from above. The men are cowed by Milly, who appears at the meeting to again preach Christian forbearance. Milly has emerged from “de wilderness” where there was “blackness and darkness,” and her appeal to “pray de Lord to give 'em repentance” and “Leave de vengeance to him” is met, like Judge Clayton’s verdict, with “dead silence;” though the chances for a peaceful end to slavery have all but vanished, Dred sees that “The hour is not yet come.”⁸¹

The white characters also come to a standstill in their efforts. Clayton is set on moral suasion and legal reform in order to build an infrastructure for gradual emancipation, if not for the slaves, then “for the sake of the whites, for this is carrying us back into barbarism, as fast as we can go;”⁸² Stowe echoes Hildreth *and* Walker here:

“I don't believe there's any country in old, despotic Europe where the poor are more miserable, vicious, and degraded, than they are in our slave states. And it's depopulating us; our men of ability, in the lower classes, who want to be respectable, won't stand it. They will go off to some state where things *move on* . . .”⁸³

Clayton believes that the South has “to take the first step towards progress, some time, or we ourselves are all undone.” Russel replies that the slaveholders “don't mean to let the *first* step be taken They'll die first.”⁸⁴ For the grandees of the South, the “poor whites may go to the devil, for all them; and as for the ruin of the state, it won't come in *their* day; and ‘after us the deluge,’ you know.”⁸⁵ Russel’s description is remarkably similar to the account of the Slave Power that John Brown gave William A. Phillips in Kansas a year before. Russel sees that the slaveholders

“are our masters; they are yours; they are mine; they are masters of everybody in these United States. They can crack their whips over the head of any statesman or clergyman, from Maine to New Orleans, that disputes their will. They govern the country. Army, navy, treasury, church, state, everything is theirs; and whoever is going to get up must go up on their ladder. There is n't any other ladder”⁸⁶

When Brown insisted that “nothing but war can settle the question” now, Phillips thought he was hearing “the dream and vagary of a man who had allowed one idea to carry him away [but it] has a strangely prophetic look to me now.” Brown describes a history of the South in terms very similar to Stowe’s:

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“Gradually the pecuniary interests that rested on slavery seized the power of the government. Public opinion opposed to slavery was placed under ban. The politicians of the South became slavery propagandists, and the politicians of the North trimmers. When the religious and moral sentiment of the country indicated a desire to check this alarming growth, a threat of secession was uttered, and appeals were made not to risk the perpetuation of this glorious republic by fanatical antislaveryism They never intend to relinquish the machinery of this government into the hands of the opponents of slavery. It has taken them more than half a century to get it, and they know its significance too well to give it up.”⁸⁷

Stowe demonstrates a prophetic bent herself as well, describing American history as the growth of the Slave Power conspiracy that would ultimately extend *beyond* the official end of slavery. For Russel, the cynical observer of imperial *realpolitik*, the Southern “aristocracy” has “mounted the lightning, and they are going to ride it whip and spur,” assembling a “splendid slaveholding empire” from “Cuba [to] the Sandwich Islands.” While the North continues to build “their factories, and their warehouses, and their schools, and their internal improvements,” the South will rule the empire: “We are trained to rule from the cradle. We have leisure to rule. We have nothing else to do,” and so will be Rome to the North’s Greece, “if we are careful, and don’t tell them too plain where we are taking them, they ’ll never know it till they get there.”⁸⁸

Also sounding like Brown, Stowe’s Jeffersonian reformer Clayton assures his friend that “God and nature fight against evil,” but soon learns that some recent public comments of his are being called “inflammatory and seditious” in the papers.⁸⁹ “The hand of Joab is in that,” Russel thinks, returning Stowe again to the same vocabulary Melville draws from. Russel tries to impress on Clayton the physical danger he is in. His description of the hierarchy of the South suggests the same sort of militarization and false consciousness that Harriet Jacobs saw after the Nat Turner rebellion. The poor whites powerless, “because they have got votes, and we have the guiding of them;” they are “fools, and don’t know what hurts them,” unlike the slaves, who are “deep,” and hear and see everything; “whatever is going on in the community is always in their mouths,” and their talk leads to white fear of black rebellion: “That lies at the bottom of a good many things in our state, more than we choose to let on”⁹⁰

Clayton still believes that legal reform will save the South; “If you want insurrection, the only way is to shut down the escape-valve,”⁹¹ but Russel understands the realities of the situation. The

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threat of violence increases quickly and dramatically, and provides Stowe the opportunity to make direct reference to various incidents of Southern intimidation, like the caning of Charles Sumner and the Kansas War. Her most potent reference points, though, are decades old. When father Dickson is beaten by Tom Gordon's mob for preaching abolition, Stowe compares the scene to the one in Alton, Illinois, in 1837. "Every one remembers the story how the frail and delicate wife of Lovejoy placed her weakness as a shield before the chamber door where her husband was secreted,"⁹² she says, evoking an event already fading in time; the escalating violence she portrays in her 1857 book has been boiling for twenty years.

Stowe's boldness here is in imagining the conflict beyond the white vs. white violence of Bleeding Kansas and the attack on Sumner (she evokes the caning of Sumner here as Gordon "proved his eligibility for Congress by beating his defenceless acquaintance on the head, after the fashion of the chivalry of South Carolina")⁹³ and grafting black rebellion onto white resistance. When Clayton breaks up the mob flogging Dickson, and is subsequently attacked himself, he is saved by Harry, who emerges from and fades back into the swamp before Gordon can react. The alliance of white and black is the last straw precipitating mass organized violence. But Stowe cannot bring herself, finally, to unchain the revolutionary potential in Dred's visions, and kills Dred in order to avoid it. His death in the violence that follows Gordon's attack on the swamps falls "like a night of despair on the hearts of the little fugitive circle in the swamps" and "the hearts of multitudes in the surrounding plantations, who had regarded him as a prophet and a deliverer," and the insurrectionary moment passes.

The grand and solemn voice hushed, and all the splendid poetry of olden time, the inspiring symbols and prophetic dreams, which had so wrought upon his own soul, and with which he had wrought upon the souls of others, seemed to pass away with him, and to recede into the distance and become unsubstantial, like the remembered sounds of mighty winds, or solemn visions of evening clouds, in times long departed.⁹⁴

The Dismal Swamp, ground of the natural law that inspires freedom, comes alive to note his passing; when he is buried "there was for a time a silence so deep that the rustling of the leaves, and the wild, doleful clamor of the frogs and turtles in the swamps, and the surge of the winds in the pine-tree tops, were all that met the ear."⁹⁵ Stowe suggests, finally, that Dred's weakness was precisely his spiritual interpretation of his condition, which should have been turned toward

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political enlightenment; he “had struggling within him the energies which make the patriot and the prophet,” but “had knowledge enlightened and success crowned them, his name might have been, with that of Toussaint, celebrated in mournful sonnet by the deepest thinking poet of the age [Wordsworth].”⁹⁶

But Stowe absolves Dred of his failings, and in language as qualified and indirect as anything in *Benito Cereno*, Stowe compares the spiritual fate of a Nat Turner with that of the statesmen of a slave empire:

there was stamped upon the sombre face an expression of majestic and mournful tranquillity, as if that long-suffering and gracious God, to whose judgment he had made his last appeal, had rendered that judgment in mercy. When the statesmen and mighty men of *our* race die, though they had the weaknesses and sins of humanity, they want not orators in the church to draw the veil gently, to speak softly of their errors and loudly of their good, and to predict for them, if not an abundant entrance, yet at least a safe asylum among the blessed; and something not to be rebuked in our common nature inclines to join in a hopeful amen. It is not easy for us to believe that a great and powerful soul can be lost to God and itself forever.⁹⁷

Dred’s followers bury him in the graveyard he created for runaways in the swamp, on a “quaint and shaggy mound” he named “*Jegar Sahadutha*, or the ‘heap of witness,’” ensuring that at least some aspect of his vision will survive him. But with rebellion averted, the gothic romance ends as Dred, “like a kingly cedar uprooted,”⁹⁸ is mourned by the natural world, and the conventional, and unthreatening, solutions to oppression—escape—is all that remains.

Dred’s death finally pushes Clayton outside the law, but not to revolution; instead, he helps the Gordons’ slaves and the swamp community escape. Though in breaking the law, Clayton could finally “feel himself to be doing right,” his goal is to remove Harry and the survivors of Dred’s followers “from the oppressions which were goading them” and therefore “prevent a development of bloody insurrection.”⁹⁹ The Underground Railroad, which “has removed many a danger” from the South, provides the alternative to bloodshed. “One has only to become well acquainted with some of those fearless and energetic men who have found their way to freedom by its means, to feel certain that such minds and hearts would have proved, in time, an incendiary magazine under the scorching reign of slavery,” but they chose to risk their own lives rather than take their masters’.¹⁰⁰

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This path, though, must not only remove the threat of black rebellion in this case, but of white apostasy against Southern institutions and law. Clayton, having facilitated literacy among slaves, is informed by a judge that “the course you have been pursuing with regard to your servants, being contrary to the laws and usages of our social institutions, can no longer be permitted among us.” Clayton, believing that such a “course is so evidently called for by the spirit of the Gospel, and the spirit of the age,” had “suppose[d] such laws to be a mere relic of barbarous ages, which the practical Christianity of our times would treat as a dead letter.” He is “mistaken;” the anti-literacy laws “are indispensable to the preservation of our property, and the safety of our families. Once educate the negro population, and the whole system of our domestic institutions is at an end.”¹⁰¹ Clayton’s accuser, Mr. Knapp, like Dred, remembers the Vesey conspiracy as a family legacy, though the lessons he learned from it are different.

“Sir, my father was one of the magistrates on the trial of those men Now, all the leaders in that affair could read and write. They kept their lists of names; and nobody knows, or ever will know, how many were down on them, for those fellows were deep as the grave, and you could not get a word out of them. Sir, they died and made no sign; but all this is a warning to us.”¹⁰²

Clayton wonders why “you don’t suppress your own newspapers,” for there is simply no American language that doesn’t militate against oppression; “we must suppress our whole literature, if we would avoid it.” Whenever “a congressional discussion, or a Fourth of July oration or senatorial speech” is reprinted, the papers will be “full of incendiary excitement.” As long as the slaveholders resist the logic of their own rhetoric, “you will be found fighting against God.”¹⁰³

Stowe continues to place her most cool-headed analysis in the mouth of the complacent cynic Frank Russel, who later reminds Clayton of the militarized surveillance state that is the South, which is “not a democracy, but an oligarchy, and the mob is its standing army. We are, all of us, under the ‘Council of Ten,’ which has its eyes everywhere. We are free enough as long as our actions please them; when they don’t, we shall find their noose around our necks.” The “rabble” are the “hands” of the “large proprietors,” and “this warning about popular excitement just means, ‘Sir, if you don’t take care, I shall let out my dogs, and then I won’t be answerable for consequences.’”¹⁰⁴ This is liberty in “a world of humbugs.” Stowe again echoes Melville here, as Russel shrugs, “We are all slaves to one thing or another . . . except Robinson Crusoe . . . and he

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tears all his shirts to pieces and hangs them up as signals of distress, that he may get back into slavery again.”¹⁰⁵ Russel sees that Clayton is “checkmated,” his reform plans “utterly hopeless.” The moment that the South may have been open to some emancipation plan is long gone, wiped away by the promise of Manifest Destiny and the machinations of the Slave Power conspiracy.

“From the very day that they began to open new territories to slavery, the value of this kind of property mounted up, so as to make emancipation a moral impossibility. It is, as they told you, a *finality*; and don't you see how they make everything in the Union bend to it? Why, these men are only about three tenths of the population of our Southern States, and yet the other seven tenths virtually have no existence. All they do is to vote as they are told — as they know they must, being too ignorant to know any better.”¹⁰⁶

For Clayton as well as Harry and his friends, all options are now dead letters, and they arrange to escape disguised as a slaveholder and his entourage. But with Dred gone, the sea no longer promises freedom; it throws her orphans back to America. Secretly boarding a ship to the North, the refugees experience a sort of Middle Passage that almost ends in disaster as the ship is caught in a storm that leaves the bark, like Melville's *San Dominick*, “drifting helplessly toward a fatal shore,” until it is “wedged among rugged rocks, washed over every moment by the fury of the waves,”¹⁰⁷ bringing the refugees full circle from Dred's vision of freedom in the hull of a shipwreck. Old Tiff, another of this novel's Uncle Tom figures, sacrifices himself so that the children on the ship can escape, and as it sinks, the refugees are “cast, wet and dripping, but still living, upon the sands,”¹⁰⁸ still trapped in the United States. Tiff miraculously survives, though, and the party establishes a sort of fantasy Timbucto in Canada, where even Clayton settles, beyond the reach of U.S. law. Stowe contrives an absurdly happy ending through a twist of fate “of so romantic a nature,” Stowe tells us, that “we should hesitate to insert it in our veracious narrative.”¹⁰⁹ But Stowe's real ending is more forceful. Her appendices juxtapose the insurrectionary visions of *Nat Turner's Confessions* with the benighted logic of Southern law. “*Souther v. The Commonwealth*” is the basis for the “terrible stories” Stowe includes in the chapter *Jegar Sahadutha*. The stories “of the most fiend-like cruelty” are all a matter of “judicial record.” Their placement in this chapter serve to underline Stowe's own sense of Southern jurisprudence. Jegar Sahadutha was a “mound of witness” to the covenant of Jacob and Laban, seen by Biblical scholars as “a mutual warning, not a blessing.”¹¹⁰ With the inclusion of the case

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in relation to Turner's "confession," Stowe seems to echo Dred's final words as he dies in the Dismal Swamp: "O, earth, earth, earth! Cover thou not my blood! . . . Let the God of their fathers judge between us."¹¹¹

Neither Stowe nor Melville are alone in deferring or displacing black rebellion, either leaving it offstage or suspended by circumstance, or providing an incomplete, second-hand account. Just as Nat Turner's voice is only available through Thomas Gray's suspect version, many of these fictional slave revolts exist only in recollection or imagination, if at all; slave revolt can be talked about, somewhat unreliably, but not seen. In "The Town-Ho's Story," as well as the incomplete, edited court transcript in *Benito Cereno*, the reader gets a mediated version of events. In *The Heroic Slave*, likewise, the reader learns of Washington's successful seizure of the ship only through the words of the racist first mate. In Stowe and Child, it is barely held off, deferred to the future by luck, grace, and the Christian goodwill of blacks. For Hildreth, who wrote at the beginning of the abolition movement, and in Martin Delany's incomplete 1859 novel *Blake, or The Huts of America*, written by an associate of Brown while the Old Man was laying his plans, it is immanent.

Delany is perhaps second only to Frederick Douglass in importance as a black intellectual and abolitionist in the period just prior to the Civil War. "His career," writes his biographer Frances Rollin (writing under the pseudonym "Frank"), "has been very remarkable," having been associated with "every advance movement relative to the colored people" up to and through the Civil War. His name even "fell upon the ear of the terror-stricken Virginians, in connection with John Brown, of Ossawatimie."¹¹² Delany was a close associate of Brown at a crucial point in the planning of the Harper's Ferry raid, though they disagreed strongly on tactics. A major participant in the Chatham convention at which Brown's Provisional Constitution was drafted, Delany later denied that the specifics of the plan had been discussed, though every other man present disputed this.

In April of 1858, Delany was visited in Chatham, Ontario, by an old bearded man who "looked like one of the old prophets." Delany was thrilled to meet "the grand old hero" of Bleeding Kansas,¹¹³ and explained the old man's plan as "a great project in his scheme of Kansas

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emigration.” Surprised that Brown had sought him out, Delany was told that “the people of the Northern States are cowards; slavery has made cowards of them all. The whites are afraid of each other, and the blacks are afraid of the whites. You can effect nothing among such people,” and that Brown was looking for more serious men. With Brown’s plans, which he “fully revealed,” Delany “found no fault, but fully favored and aided in getting up the convention.”¹¹⁴ Delany described the plan as “nothing more” than to “make Kansas, instead of Canada, the terminus of the Underground Railroad,” in order to “test . . . whether or not the right to freedom would be maintained” in the territories prior to statehood. Brown also told Delany that he had devised a way to build “a fortification so simple, that twenty men, without the aid of teams or ordnance, could build one in a day that would defy all the artillery that could be brought to bear against it,” though only Brown and John Kagi (“a young lawyer of marked talents and singular demeanor”) actually knew the method, and were not forthcoming about it.¹¹⁵ Delany claimed that “the idea of Harper’s Ferry was never mentioned, or even hinted,” and that the Provisional Constitution, “so inexplicable to the slaveholders,” was in fact simply an attempt to draft a charter for an independent state.¹¹⁶ In Delany’s version, many at Chatham were concerned “that according to American jurisprudence, negroes, having no rights respected by white men, consequently could have no right to petition, and none to sovereignty,” and that an official assertion of basic rights should be devised; in order to avoid being seen as “lawless and unorganized, existing without government,” the parties should declare their rights and responsibilities as “an independent community be established within and under the government of the United States, but without the state sovereignty of the compact, similar to the Cherokee nation of Indians, or the Mormons.” Brown assented to this, and the document was reproduced.¹¹⁷

Rollins claims that Delany “is remembered, by those who attended the councils at Chatham, as having objected to many propositions favored by Captain Brown, as not having the least chance of giving trouble to the slaveholders,” and the two argued to such a degree that Brown became angry enough to insist to the others present that “if Dr. Delany is afraid, don’t let him make you all cowards.”¹¹⁸ The convention ended, however, with the two men retaining their respect for each other, and regardless of any disagreements they may have had, Rollins calls Brown “the man whom Providence had chosen to warn a guilty nation of its danger, and

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throughout whom the African in America received the boon of freedom,” waxing quite poetic when describing “that night when the Rubicon of slavery was crossed by that band of hero pioneers who confronted the slave power in its stronghold.”

The first sound of John Brown's rifle, reverberating along the Shenandoah, proclaimed the birth of Freedom. Already he saw the mighty host he invoked in Freedom's name. He heard their coming footfalls echoing over Virginia's hills and plains, and upon every breeze that swept her valleys was borne to him his name entwined in battle anthem. He saw in the gathering strife that either Freedom or her priest must perish, and with a giant's strength he went forward to his high and holy martyrdom, thereby inaugurating victory.¹¹⁹

Rollins recounts the coincidence that Brown's jailer was a childhood acquaintance of Delany, and, “in the midst of hostile faces lowering with hate and fear towards him who sat beside him on his way to death, [said], ‘Captain Brown, you are a game man,’ prov[ing] himself, after his prisoner, the bravest man in Virginia that day.”¹²⁰ Delany was later questioned about his dealings with Brown, but, like most of Brown's acquaintances, escaped prosecution. Like many commentators, Rollins suggests the perverse nature of the letter of the law by noting that within a few years of the raid, “the chairman of [the Mason] committee” was “a fugitive, a prisoner, and an exile,” and

Virginia the battle ground of contending armies, one inspired by an anthem commemorating the name of him whom Virginia in her madness sacrificed to her destruction, the other endeavoring to destroy the Union in accordance with the teachings of the judges of Captain Brown and his followers.¹²¹

Whatever Delany's misunderstanding, willful or not, or Brown's evasiveness, which no other convention member perceived, the plan as Delany read it bears a remarkable similarity to many of the events in *Blake*. Brown and Delany both sought to bring the inspiration of Toussaint and the Maroons—anti-imperial, post-colonial revolution—to North America, where it was sorely lacking.

At the time of the Harper's Ferry raid itself, Delany was in Africa, working toward his own version of black self-determination. Stowe includes Delany's ideas in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, basing George Harris' project of emigration and nationalism on Delany's own desire for an independent black nation, outlined in his "Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States." George yearns “for an African *nationality*.” Though he is half

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white, to his father he “was no more than a fine dog or horse,” and so decides to “cast in my lot” with “the oppressed, enslaved African race;” George, in fact, wishes “myself two shades darker, rather than one lighter.”¹²² In Stowe’s imagination, George’s plan resembles the one Brown made for a provisional nation in his imagined Alleghany Maroon communities: a rebel community “of picked men, who, by energy and self-educating force, have, in many cases, individually, raised themselves above a condition of slavery,” though in Liberia, not Virginia. Brown, of course, would never imagine that black men, like *any* men, needed to be “raised above a condition of slavery” by anything except a condition of freedom.¹²³

It’s in Stowe’s conception of political possibilities for blacks that we can see the “humble” complacency Philip Fisher describes. Her conflicted fear of the consequences of black political agency within the United States demonstrates the stalemate that the United States had by now compromised its way into. Already in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the lack of options to violent confrontation over slavery are clear. But Stowe sees the solution only through the actions of nations, not individuals; George can’t bring about emancipation “as an individual; but, let me go and form part of a nation, which shall have a voice in the councils of nations, and then we can speak. A nation has a right to argue, remonstrate, implore, and present the cause of its race,—which an individual has not.”¹²⁴ This ignores the origin of the United States themselves in a group of individuals who planned and organized a revolution, which Stowe seems to begin to see in *Dred*. In contrast to white and black colonial schemes, Brown’s plans explicitly demanded inclusion; various documents he wrote in the 1850s, like the Provisional Constitution and the League of Gileadites’ paperwork, were written specifically to countermand the language of white supremacy that was United States law.

Quite possibly in response to Stowe’s novel, Delany tried his own hand at fiction in order to more fully articulate his vision of rebellion, creating a hero who seems to combine L’Ouverture, Turner (or Vesey), Brown, and Harriet Tubman. It’s possible that Delany based his plot in part on a sort of urban legend that arose about Gabriel’s conspiracy in 1800, and that “by some singular fatality has obtained more circulation than all the true accounts put together.” Thomas Wentworth Higginson records its circulation to just after the Turner rebellion, when the *Liberator* reprinted it from an Albany paper. It was “refuted in detail” at the time, but “resuscitated in the John-Brown.” The story is “fresh, spirited, and full of graphic and interesting details, nearly

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every one of which is altogether false,” but which also captures the defiant nobility of the slave rebel that Delany hoped to capture.¹²⁵ The story makes Gabriel “a rather mythical being, of vast abilities and life-long preparations,” who “travelled all over the Southern States, enlisting confederates and forming stores of arms,” just as Delany’s protagonist does. When the plot is discovered, Gabriel flees to San Domingo, but is finally captured. “Finally,” Higginson tells us, “the narrative puts an eloquent dying speech into Gabriel’s mouth,” departing from the habit of slave rebels to die silently but recalling Brown’s final speech, before, in the oldest versions of the story, he is “torn to death by four wild horses.”¹²⁶

IF DELANY had the tale in mind while composing *Blake*, he abandoned the grim finale of the story. Rather than being captured and executed on the way to San Domingo, Delany’s hero Henry Blake sails to Cuba to foment rebellion. Blake is Henrico Blacus, a Cuban native, not only literate but highly educated and informed in international politics, who brings the tactics and spirit of Caribbean revolution to North America, just as Brown intended to do. *Blake* follows other anti-slavery novels in charting the escaping slaves’ northward trek, but like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Delany’s plot, in part one, follows a dual trajectory.

Unlike the contrast between the northward movement of George and Eliza and the southward descent of Tom, though, Delany’s protagonist’s journey doubles back on itself. First, Henry Blake traverses the southern states preparing a region-wide rebellion, then returns home to gather his family and friends and lead them to Canada; the plot, in a way, resembles Brown’s Harpers Ferry raid, the goal of which was both to ferry escapees to Canada and encourage participation and further penetration into the South by those willing to stay. In part two of Delany’s novel, the plot doubles back again, as Blake boards a ship to Cuba, his birthplace, to prepare for hemispheric rebellion against empire and white supremacy. While Henry’s tour of the south resembles the fictional accounts in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Clotel*, or *The Slave* in surveying aspects of an abusive, dysfunctional social system, it is not a narrative of escape from, or descent into, slavery. And while *Blake* resembles the travel narratives of Henry Olmsted and James Redpath in gauging the threat of slave violence, Delany’s novel is an insurrectionary travelogue, not only exposing the cracks in the façade of paternalist ideology and the practice of forced labor, but describing an organized resistance to it. Delany creates a South similar to John Brown’s

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conception of a potential network of rebel leaders, tying together not only anecdotal evidence of slave suffering, but of slave insurgence as well. Henry's expedition to sow the seeds of revolt parallels the course of the planners of the annexation of Cuba, confronting the transcontinental ideology of Manifest Destiny with the diasporic ideology of global resistance to slavery, conquest, and exploitation.

Delany's novel may be much closer to reality than anyone has imagined. As we've seen, Karen Whitman claims that historians have traditionally underestimated the readiness of local blacks to participate in the Harper's Ferry raid, and that "Brown could have counted on just the kind of recruitment—and organization—that he hoped for. In 1858, Brown's ally George B. Gill discussed a widespread "military organization of black men and women" with a black man named Reynolds.

Reynolds had been through the South himself, visiting and organizing. He told Gill of the many references in Southern newspapers to this or that favorite slave being killed or found dead, and claimed that these were slaves who had been discovered as leaders of liberation plots. Reynolds said the blacks were only waiting for Brown, or someone else, to make a successful initiative move, then their forces would be put into motion.¹²⁷

Whether this is fact or wishful thinking—and the evidence suggests that at the very least, the desire to rebel was widespread—Delany makes the underground network of rebels-in-waiting a foundation of his novel's plot.

This conspiratorial network among the lowest classes of society is mirrored in *Blake* by one among the ruling class. *Blake* sets its insurrectionary travelogue against the workings of the Southern plutocracy, represented here by "Colonel" Stephen Franks, owner of the plantation where Blake lives, and his co-conspirators in the plot to annex Cuba. The novel opens upon a meeting of these conspirators as they prepare to leave the Deep South and sail to the island, where we meet them later as the two conspiracies approach direct confrontation. This rumored conspiracy, too, is based in fact: the Ostend Manifesto of 1854 argued that Cuba was "necessary" to United States prosperity and should be obtained "at any price."¹²⁸ The desire for the island came mainly from the South, since it was seen as a new source of agricultural profit. After meeting with his co-conspirators, Franks returns to his plantation to find a visitor from the North, Arabella Ballard, the wife of a prominent judge. She assures him that the North will be "true to

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the country” on a “present issue,”¹²⁹ alluding to the annexation plot; Ballard believes that Americans must be “united” on “every policy in every section of the Union,”¹³⁰ signaling early on Delany’s belief in the North’s complicity with the imperial ambitions of the Slave Power.

Like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the action of *Blake* is set in motion by the sale of a slave, and the circumstances surrounding the sale present the perversions of human relations and religious beliefs inherent in the slave system. His background unknown to whites, Henry Blake, a free black man, is married to Margot, “Maggie,” and lives with her on the Franks estate as a servant. During Blake’s absence on an errand, Franks sells Maggie, whom he had promised to free at some point. Maggie had turned away Franks’ attempts to make her one of his concubines, violating one of the most basic tenets of the master/slave relationship—“the will of the master” must be “absolute . . . deny him this and you at once deprive him of the right to hold a slave.”¹³¹ Franks’ wife Maria is heartbroken by Maggie’s departure, considering her maidservant like a sister to her: “the mistress and maid sometimes wore dresses cut from the same web of cloth.”¹³² Franks thinks his wife has “lost [her] balance of mind” to react so strongly,¹³³ and Ballard is “astonished” that Maria “would take on so about a Negro girl”; Maria “appear[s] to have lost your reason.”¹³⁴ Taking the tenets of paternalism seriously—that is, extending human feeling toward someone of color—is evidence of an unsound mind. This is the real nature of paternalism; normal feelings and relationships can’t withstand the slave system or white supremacy. Maggie seals her fate by choosing to honor social norms of virtue, while for Maria, Maggie’s own virtue is beside the point; it is her slave’s fidelity to her that matters.

Delany indulges a fantasy of paternalism here—partly to further isolate Franks, his villain, from any human alliance—in which women of virtue align against the predatory patriarchs of the ruling class. Whether this sort of relationship existed between women of different races in the South (they certainly abound in literature), the abolitionist press continued to report items like one titled “Uncle Tom’s Cabin Outdone,” in *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* in 1855, in which a woman,

having had her jealousy aroused by some unexplained conduct of her husband, seized one of her negro slaves, and after tying her up and whipping her until weary of her work, poured boiling water over her abdomen and legs until the skin was all scalded off . . . The poor victim was then locked up in a smoke-house,

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where she remained over night, and the next day was strung by a rope attached to one of the smoke-house joists.

The woman who inflicted the torture “made no attempt to escape, and manifested the utmost indifference” to the black woman’s death.”¹³⁵ In a later scene, Delany reinforces the link between economic and sexual abuse that paternalism masked, as well as the indomitability of the enslaved African-American population, when Henry, during his journey across the South, comes upon a plantation worked almost entirely by nearly naked women.

Like most abolitionist writers, Delany demonstrates the difference between the religion of freedom and slavery. When Henry confronts Franks about Maggie, Franks has him sold on the spot (though he is actually free), and the only structure large enough to accommodate the crowd is the local church. For Delany, Christianity is a slaveholders’ tool. Maggie’s parents, the core of the slave “family” on the plantation (and Aunt Judy is one of Franks’ former concubines), are devoutly religious, but it is the slave religion of their oppressors, and their false consciousness is signaled by their slave dialect. Judy and Joe learn that “Onah po’ chile is gone,” but in the face of oppression and abuse, they “look to de Laud”—for Delany the “God of the oppressed”—and pray, in a confusion of “devotion and sorrow,” asking “How long! O Laud how long.”¹³⁶ Later a slave who is not part of Henry’s plans, a “girl with a high turban of Madras on her head,” wishes “dese ole ablish’nehs” who she believes to be stirring up trouble in the area, dead, “case da steal us an’ sell us down sough to haud mastas, w’en we got good places.”¹³⁷

Blake must construct an alternate version, a liberation theology that inspires rebellion in some of the ways Stowe at least partly sanctions in *Dred*. While Margot’s family tanks de Laud and sits still to see the salvation, Blake and his cohorts turn Christianity to their interests. Delany replicates the confrontation that Stowe constructed between Dred and Millie, though Delany’s potential rebel leader is not a half-mad visionary but a shrewd, educated man who wants “hope this side of the vale of tears” and has “waited long enough on heavenly promises.” Judy believes that the slaves “is po’ weak an’ bline cretahs,” but Blake finds it “useless to stand here and have the same gospel preached into my ears by you, that I have all my life time heard from my enslavers.”¹³⁸ Once a devout Christian, his “faith has been wrecked on the stony hearts of such pretended Christians” as his master.¹³⁹ Henry claims to have had a conversion experience that turns him into a revolutionary. Though once “slavery made me a sinner,” he now “trust[s] the

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Lord as much as ever, but I now understand him better than I use [*sic*] to.”¹⁴⁰ He seeks to instill a different interpretation of scripture, no longer based on “the principles and advice of you old people ‘standing still, to the see the salvation’ . . . with me, ‘now is the accepted time, today is the day of salvation.’”¹⁴¹

Like Nat Turner, Delany ties Christian vision to insurrection. Meeting two close friends after his escape from the Franks plantation, Henry confides that he has “matured a plan for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the successful overthrow of slavery!” His associates are concerned at the difficulty of the project “in the present ignorant state of our people in the slave States,” but Henry claims that the problem has been “obviated. It is so simple that the most stupid among the slaves will understand it as well as if he had been instructed for a year.”¹⁴² The plot is a sort of mystical outgrowth of the “nature” of the land, the slaves, and the supernatural—a representation of natural law embodied in the landscape itself,

“so simple . . . the trees of the forest or an orchard illustrate it; flocks of birds or domestic cattle, fields of corn, hemp, or sugar cane; tobacco, rice, cotton, the whistling of the wind, rustling of the leaves, flashing of lightning, roaring of thunder, and running of streams all keep it constantly before their eyes and in their memory, so that they can’t forget it if they could.”¹⁴³

Henry’s co-conspirators are confused by this, and by the fact that “such is the character of this organization that punishment and misery are made the instruments for its propagation,” but trusting their leader, they co-opt the scripture of slave religion, joking that they must “Stan’ still an’ see da salvation,”¹⁴⁴ making the implicit threat of the actual text more clear. The passage is from Exodus, a reassurance by Moses to the slaves in Egypt. “Don’t be afraid,” he tells them. “Stand still, and see the salvation of Yahweh, which he will work for you today: for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you shall never see them again.”¹⁴⁵

Eric Sundquist prefers to cast *Blake’s* importance into metaphor, more like Revelations than Exodus—a dream always immanent, but endlessly deferred. A literary critic above all, Sundquist argues that *Blake* “is a work in which radicalism is first of all an act of consciousness,”¹⁴⁶ placing the figurative and metaphoric over the real and historic. But, though Sundquist calls it “manic” and “futile,”¹⁴⁷ the Harper’s Ferry raid too was an act of faith, regardless of its outcome; the *willingness* to act was the raid’s most important element, and Brown hoped to prove, in Delany’s words, that “the slave’s consciousness of his or her power to act, to resist, and the master’s

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consciousness that his illicit power will always be under siege.”¹⁴⁸ In this sense, Brown is an important link in the evolution of liberation theology. In this scene from *Blake*, as Henry and his friends Charles and Andy lay their plans, the *application* of Delany’s formulation of Higher or natural law is made explicit when, responding to Henry’s concerns about his possible religious objections to the plan, Andy replies that “It’s paut of my ‘ligion . . . to do whateveh I bleve right.”¹⁴⁹

Like other abolitionist fiction, Delany’s survey of the South reveals the cracks in the ideology of paternalism and the economy of slave labor, but his goal is to demonstrate that the vast slave conspiracy could exist right under the noses of the slaveholders. Delany articulates the range of pro-slavery arguments available, perhaps communicating some of his own experiences in the North in making Judge Ballard, the Northerner, a belligerent racist, and giving Major Armsted, another of Franks’ Southern cronies, a more utilitarian philosophy. Black men are “just like you . . . and I” in their attempts to position themselves in whatever class system they find themselves in. The white perception of the beginnings of Henry’s actions betrays the racist inability to see reality. As slaves begin to disappear from his plantation, Franks, who thinks “that a Negro’s skull is too thick to comprehend anything,”¹⁵⁰ believes that “whites [are] at the head” of these actions.¹⁵¹ This incomprehension allows the slaves to articulate their most frightening desires in plain sight and hearing, under the guise of paternalist joking. Armsted, “a great jester” who was “ever ready to give and take [a good joke], even from a slave,”¹⁵² recounts his experiences with “two good-natured black fellows, full of pranks and jokes” that he owns. One morning when he meets one of them, the slave “made a sudden halt, placing himself in the attitude of a pugilist, grasping the muscle of his left arm, looking me full in the eyes exclaimed ‘Maus Army, my arm aches for you!’” Armsted believes that “pleasantry is the life and soul of the social system” and that if a slave is “satisfied that you respect him as a man, he’ll work himself to death to prove his worthiness.”¹⁵³ Armsted is also “just as readily hold a white as a black in slavery, were it the custom and policy of the country to do so;” he is “morally opposed to slavery,” but “while the thing exists, I may as well profit by it,” a sentiment that is a key point in George Fitzhugh’s pro-slavery *Cannibals All!*

Delany’s white characters are imminently reasonable and civil, able to discuss issues without heat or passion, comfortable in their opinions and comfortable with the status quo; the

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destabilizing “fanaticism” of a John Brown are nowhere present, and Franks and his cabal march blithely toward their fates. During a discussion on slavery, the Judge suggests that they “drop the subject” and hopes that “the free interchange of opinion will prove no detriment to our future prospects and continued friendship,” and the Major heartily agrees.¹⁵⁴ Like Melville and Stowe (and later Twain), Delany plays this scene for the most horrified laughter; to move through the slave-holding South is to enter a jaw-droppingly dystopian landscape, where savagery is taken for granted by the most refined gentlemen. The levels of absurdity here would, Delany assumes, will be self-evident to his reader, but it is important to Henry’s plot that neither North nor South had, as Brown would say, studied the slaves right, and their real intentions go unnoticed by the gentry.

Ballard is the first Northern judge to have returned a fugitive slave under the 1850 Compromise, and defends his “fidelity to Southern principles,” but is still not prepared for the casual savagery of the planters, who entertain him at one point by flogging a small boy (Delany claims this scene is taken from fact; it also stirs echoes of Brown’s autobiographical letter). One of the North’s “ablest jurists,” Ballard believes firmly in the logic of the Dred Scot decision, arguing that free blacks are “free-men by sufferance or slaves-at-large,” and can be claimed at any moment, and he is horrified at the porous caste system of Cuba, where “blacks enter largely into the social system,” and “you must exchange civilities with whomsoever solicits it” so that “the most stupid and ugly Negro you meet in the street may ask for a ‘light’ from your cigar.” This state of things is “a moral pestilence;” the “mongrel Creoles are incapable of self-government, and should be compelled to submit to the United States.”¹⁵⁵

This fear and loathing of the European colonies’ relative lack of white supremacist support for the slave economy gets beneath the vague fears of the papist Old World that Melville parodies throughout *Benito Cereno* and, to a lesser extent, *Moby-Dick*. Delany’s use of Cuba as the last vestige of the threat of black equality in the Western Hemisphere recalls both San Domingo and Texas as similar threats, in which a lack of rigid racial hierarchy signals insurrection. The Cuba that Henry travels to is similar to the complicated caste system in Haiti that James McCune Smith maps out in his 1841 lecture.

The terror of the Old World empires that creep into the backgrounds of these stories—France, Great Britain, Spain, Portugal—is the terror of race mixing that represents the first crack in a

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race-based legal system. Smith explains that, rather than the strict racial division of United States law, French San Dominique “enforced four distinct classes or *Castes*,” categorizing race and class “by a circumstantial minuteness of detail, which was the first source of the bitterest and least reconcilable hatred.” This caste system created a hierarchy made up of a top layer, the white planters, “an almost irresponsible oligarchy.” Immediately beneath them were free blacks who were “the offspring of the first class and the female slaves,” and who were often educated and cultured landowners, but nevertheless “victims of an odious proscription from all the rights of citizenship.” Ironically, it was this class from which the “*trained soldiery*” was drafted to police the slaves. The “*petit blancs*” beneath them were “ignorant and filled with strong prejudices” and “being excluded from habitual fellowship with the class of great proprietors . . . were thrown into an ambiguous situation,” neither black nor white; they were “tyrants to those beneath them,” the slaves.¹⁵⁶

Smith reports that “the free colored population [in Haiti] at the period of the revolution, held nearly one fourth of the slaves with one third of the soil of the colony; and that they equalled [sic] the whites in numbers and intelligence, and were trained in arms,” so that “the odium of caste under which they writhed” drove them toward revolution. The imposition of increasingly restrictive laws in the French-controlled section of the island was a striking contrast with the other European powers. “In the Portuguese and Spanish colonies no such odious regulations existed,” Smith says, and “in the British West Indies the worst features of caste were abolished” beginning in 1762 in Jamaica.¹⁵⁷ To this situation Smith adds the “most extraordinary exciting cause,” the French Revolution, “so inseparably linked” to the ultimate fate of the colony “that it will be necessary to weave it into the narrative” of slave revolt.

The incomprehensibility of black rebellion like that in Haiti is central to Delany’s intent in creating an account of a black man moving freely through the South, from Mississippi to Texas to Florida and back to Mississippi, “[f]rom plantation to plantation . . . sowing the seeds of future devastation and ruin to the master and redemption to the slave.” Henry’s plot is “more terrible . . . than the warning voice of the destroying Angel in commanding the slaughter of the firstborn of Egypt,”¹⁵⁸ and he succeeds where all slave conspiracies failed, in establishing a broad base of support without fear of betrayal.

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Delany manages to evoke his theme of hemispheric rebellion even before Henry leaves for Cuba. In Henry's trek across the South, Delany writes a sort of history and geography of slave rebellion, stretching from New Orleans to Charleston, where Henry is greeted as "a nudder Denmark 'mong us" by "one of the remaining confidentials and adherents of the memorable South Carolina insurrection."¹⁵⁹ Henry also visits Gabriel's Richmond, and then "the mystical, antiquated, and almost fabulous" Dismal Swamp, where he consults "old confederates" of Turner, "bold, courageous, and fearless adventurers," who "for many years [had] defied the approach of their pursuers," and "hailed the daring young runaway as the harbinger of better days."¹⁶⁰ In the Dismal Swamp, Henry confers with a group of Nat Turner's old friends.

In this fearful abode for years of some of Virginia and North Carolina's boldest black rebels, the names of Nat Turner, Denmark Veezie, and General Gabriel were held by them in sacred reverence; that of Gabriel as a talisman. With delight they recounted the many exploits of whom they conceived to be the greatest men who ever lived, the pretended deeds of whom were fabulous, some of the narrators claiming to have been patriots in the American Revolution.¹⁶¹

Gamby Gholar, "a noted high conjurer," tells him, "I been lookin' fah yeh dis many years."¹⁶² Henry pays his respects to the old men, participating in pseudo-tribal ritual with them, and having the title of High Conjurer conferred on him, but he later dismisses their practices to his friends. When asked what good it is to be a conjuror, Henry replies simply that it "makes the more ignorant slaves have greater confidence" in their leaders, but that the art of conjure itself is bogus, only serving to instill fear, but that, in order for his plan to succeed, "we must take the slaves, not as we wish them to be, but as we really find them to be."¹⁶³ Often he finds them too passive and complacent, waiting for their promised emancipation on their masters' deaths or other delusion of future deliverance. Henry sees that it is "this confounded 'good treatment' and expectation of getting freed by their oppressors, that has been the curse of the slave." He himself once believed his wife's master's claims, only being disabused of his fantasy by Maggie's sale. "A 'good master' is the very worst of masters," he now believes; "Were they all cruel and inhuman, or could the slaves be made to see their treatment aright, they would not endure their oppression for a single hour!" His friend Andy, too, has finally seen the light; once he couldn't imagine leaving his master, but since their conspiracy began, "I got mo' an' mo' to hate 'im. I could chop 'is head off sometime, I get so mad. I bleve I could chop off Miss Mary' head; an' I

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likes hur.”¹⁶⁴ Henry sees it as the more rational choice to “scatter red ruin throughout the region of the South.”¹⁶⁵ His journey ends, significantly, in the Dismal Swamp, where

Finding ample scope for undisturbed action through the entire region of the Swamp, he continued to go scattering to the winds and sowing the seeds of a future crop, only to take root in the thick black waters which cover it, to be grown in devastation and reaped in a whirlwind of ruin.¹⁶⁶

In New Orleans, Blake discovers that the largely independent population of “faithful and industrious” urban slaves are already prepared to slaughter the white population and destroy the city, but they are not as lucky as Henry, and their plans are revealed. An “inquisition” is held (suggesting the connection between the draconian legal institutions of the South and the medieval fanaticism of the Old World, and recalling the 1741 New York purges), in which

the betrayer Tib developed fearful antecedents of extensive arrangements for the destruction of the city by fire and water, thereby compelling the white inhabitants to take refuge in the swamps, whilst the blacks marched up the coast, sweeping the plantations as they went.¹⁶⁷

Floyd Miller suggests that this incident is based on an 1837 conspiracy in Louisiana that is described in Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*.¹⁶⁸ Northup’s account links the plot to the Invasion of Mexico. The leader of the plot was Lew Cheney, “a shrewd, cunning negro,” but “unscrupulous and full of treachery.” Cheney “conceived the project of organizing a company sufficiently strong to fight their way against all opposition, to the neighboring territory of Mexico,” but betrayed the plot himself. Northup’s description recalls Lydia Maria Child’s “The Black Saxons” and anticipates *Blake*. The slaves, of course, met “far within the depths of the swamp,” while Cheney “flitted from one plantation to another in the dead of night, preaching a crusade to Mexico, and, like Peter the Hermit, creating a furor of excitement wherever he appeared.” The rebels assemble supplies, but are discovered in the woods before they can proceed. Cheney, “becoming convinced of the ultimate failure of his project, in order to curry favor with his master, and avoid the consequences which he foresaw would follow, deliberately determined to sacrifice all his companions.”¹⁶⁹

The terror that spread, and the reaction to it, were similar to that in Virginia in 1831 recalled by Harriet Jacobs. Slaves throughout the area, regardless of their involvement, were seized and, “without the shadow of process or form of trial, hurried to the scaffold,” and the havoc was such

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that a local Army regiment finally had to intervene to end the “indiscriminate slaughter.” Cheney himself survived, escaped, “and was even rewarded for his treachery,” though “his name is despised and execrated by all his race” in Louisiana. Northup sees the incident in a broad context of resistance and revolt. During the Invasion of Mexico itself, news of American success “filled the great house with rejoicing, but produced only sorrow and disappointment in the cabin.” Most slaves along the gulf “would hail with unmeasured delight the approach of an invading army,” and plans for rebellion were not uncommon. The “idea [of] insurrection” was “not new,” Northup reminds us. He participated in a number of such discussions, “and there have been times when a word from me would have placed hundreds of my fellow-bondsmen in an attitude of defiance.” He always decided, however, that relative lack of resources meant that “such a step would result in certain defeat, disaster and death, and always raised my voice against it,” again resting on expediency rather than ethical objection to revolt. However, Northup warns,

They are deceived who flatter themselves that the ignorant and debased slave has no conception of the magnitude of his wrongs. They are deceived who imagine that he arises from his knees, with back lacerated and bleeding, cherishing only a spirit of meekness and forgiveness. A day may come—it will come, if his prayer is heard—a terrible day of vengeance when the master in his turn will cry in vain for mercy.¹⁷⁰

With *Blake's* Southern journey of conspiracy complete, Delany begins to expand the scope of his vision. Henry now shepherds his family to Canada, evading capture in the North through intelligence, luck, force of will, and willingness to respond to threats with violence. Finally leaving the United States, though, his friends are disillusioned by their prospects in Canada. Delany, who lived there himself for a time, is unusual among anti-slavery novelists in suggesting that passing beyond the borders of the United States is not quite an arrival in the Promised Land. Though English law established universal equality, “yet by a systematic course of policy and artifice, his race with few exceptions in some parts, excepting the Eastern Province, is excluded from the enjoyment and practical exercise of every right, except mere suffrage-voting.”¹⁷¹

But England is still a far cry from the despotism of Spain, Portugal, and especially the United States. In taking his story from the American South, to Canada, to Cuba, to Africa, and back to Cuba on a ship loaded illegally with slaves destined for U.S. markets, Delany triangulates through the international tensions and complicities in the slave trade, building momentum toward

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a cataclysm in the South that he seems not to have gotten to write. In *Blake*, the United States is surrounded by competing empires, as well as threatened from within by a population of slaves that Delany, like Brown, believed was “the crop of a future harvest” of freedom.¹⁷²

Cuba is a sort of geographical and metaphoric midpoint between Haiti, the free black republic established through slave rebellion, and Texas, the free white republic established to defend slavery and absorbed into the United States by invasion. The last vestige north of Central America of the original European empires competing with England for dominance of the new World, Cuba represented a peculiar and complicated mixture of competing forces in the history of New World conquest and racial caste. Delany exploits this reality in his second volume, bringing together the elements of the Atlantic slave trade and its enemies in an even more thorough and contemporary way than Melville in *Benito Cereno*. The drama of rebellion in the Western Hemisphere involves, in Sundquist’s words, “slaves; free blacks and mulattos; the Spanish government; the creole and American ‘patriots’ in Cuba; the pro- and anti-slavery annexationists and their filibustering mercenaries, to name just the primary factions,”¹⁷³ but Delany also includes the abolitionist power of the British navy and the insurrectionary potential of American slaves, and, implicitly, the uncontained egalitarianism of the French Revolution, the model for Haiti and anathema to the American conception of democracy. Henry himself collapses these layers of Trans-Atlantic culture into one character; he tells the Portuguese mate of the slave ship *Vulture* (a frequent abolitionist alternative to the symbol of the American eagle) that he is “African born and Spanish bred,” but goes by an English name.¹⁷⁴ (200). Sundquist says that the “volcanic energies of revolution” in Delany’s novel, which draws on the energies of “America’s own 1848,” come not only “from slavery alone but from the fact that colonial rule (or imperial expansion) fueled by slave labor increased the pressure of servile insurrection exponentially.”¹⁷⁵ Delany may have also been aware that America’s 1848 included the first discussions of John Brown’s plan for rebellion and discussion with American black leadership. Delany’s elaborate meetings between the Cuban rebels in Volume 2 of *Blake* are grandiose versions of the Chatham Convention, also taking place outside of U.S. soil.

The move to Cuba allows Delany to imagine rebellion in a less monolithically united social and legal system (at least as far as slavery was concerned) than the U.S. Cuba is a complex, contradictory culture in which French slaveholders wear broaches engraved with “Liberte,

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Equalite, Fraternite!”¹⁷⁶ while slaves are usually naked¹⁷⁷ but have the right to offer their owners a sum in Spanish currency to buy their freedom, and petition the local church if the owner rejects it. This is shocking to Americans in Cuba, who are told that, in contrast to U.S. statutes, “the law in its wisdom supposes it better to lose our property than our lives.”¹⁷⁸ Havana is like New Orleans in its constant state of systematic, militarized vigilance, and the slave population is always “ripe for a general uprising.”¹⁷⁹ Delany’s American slaveholders in Cuba resemble Delano in their confusion over international politics, but like Melville, Delany sees the common ground in various imperial cultures as their racism; Spain believes that, should it lose Cuba, black rebellion would be preferable to U.S. conquest or annexation because “the Negroes are more docile, contented, religious, and happy [and so] more easily governed.”¹⁸⁰

The rebellion is to take place on a Spanish holiday, and this telescopes all the tensions present in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and western revolutionary tradition, between the Old World and the New. The carnival atmosphere of Cuba recalls not only New Orleans, gateway to the Caribbean, Europe and Africa, but also the old Cavalier settlement of Thomas Morton, in which Indians were welcome and Puritans were not. It also recalls the millennia-old tradition of the suspension of social rules during a holiday, the original image of revolution, “the world turned upside down.” Delany exploits the quasi-religious element of revolution, suggesting that the coincidental appearance of the *Communist Manifesto* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that Leslie Fiedler points out is less coincidental than Fiedler imagines. Leszek Kolakowski’s 1976 *Main Currents of Marxism* argues that the strength of Marxism is in its “unique —and truly original—blend of promethean Romantic illusion and uncompromising historical determinism” (), its quasi-religious promise of better days through struggle. For Blake and his co-conspirators, slave revolt is “God’s work,” which “He requires at our hands.”¹⁸¹

Blake also comments on the close connections between slave conspiracy and imperial conspiracy, as both fact and fiction. Henry’s movements through Cuba are mirrored by those of the Americans embroiled in the Ostend conspiracy of annexation, and the novel draws on the rumors of an 1856 slave conspiracy that was supposed to have followed the election of the Republican candidate,¹⁸² and the Cuban *La Escalera* conspiracy of the 1840s. Sundquist points out the “peculiar ambiguity” of the slave conspiracies; in the case of *La Escalera*, for instance, there is “disagreement, extending to modern accounts, about whether or not any significant

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conspiracy existed,” and Sundquist argues that “if the conspiracies were true, the slaveholders’ reaction and suppressive terror were natural consequences: theorists of benevolence notwithstanding, slavery *was* a state of controlled racial war.”¹⁸³ The obverse is true as well: the conspiracies, if true, were natural consequences of the state of controlled racial war that slavery consists of. But if, as seems the case, many slave conspiracies were simply rumor, then the claim of slave conspiracy is one of the most effective weapons in the arsenal of those waging the war, one of the most effective means of social control, not only of the slaves, but of the free population as well, permanently enlisting them into a militarized racism by which they become invested in a system from which they derive no direct benefit.

FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE, the Harper’s Ferry raid takes on even more historical, tactical, and symbolic significance. As Sundquist tells us, Delany telescopes his historical chronology, just as Melville does in *Benito Cereno*. A major character in the book’s second volume, a leading member of Blake’s conspiracy (and his cousin), is Placido, an actual radical Cuban poet. The real Placido was executed during the *La Escalera* purge in 1844, an act of mass murder that “effectively annihilated the threat of slave revolt and of free colored political radicalism, giving Spain a reprieve of several decades from such internal pressures” in Cuba (and ironically playing into United States imperial ambitions again at the end of the 19th century). Therefore, Delany’s compressed timeline “reanimates a potential for allied Afro-New World revolt that had, in fact, been severely undercut” by the late 1850s.¹⁸⁴ If this is so, and if the threat of hemispheric rebellion that is the backstory to *Benito Cereno*, *Dred*, and *Blake* is a possibility that has diminished exponentially since the triumph of Toussaint, then Brown’s raid represents the most radical political possibility in the hemisphere at the time: an inter-racial attack on slavery, not in a small colony of a distant empire, but in the very heart of the most powerful, affluent, and reactionary society in a worldwide slave economy.

THESE CONSPIRACIES and their indeterminability cut both ways, proving both a widespread threat of insurgence and a widespread paranoia. The reaction to the Harper’s Ferry raid is another indicator of this militarized paranoia; many

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commentators, pro-slavery, pro-South, and pro-Union, drew connections directly from Brown to Seward, Sumner, and Lincoln. While New York mayor Fernando Wood thought that “Brown should not be hung, though Seward should be if I could catch him,”¹⁸⁵ Harper’s Ferry resident George Mauzy saw a connection between Brown and all the utopian radicalism in the North, writing his children on the day Brown was executed that

This has been one of the most remarkable circumstances that ever occurred in this country, this old fanatic made no confession whatever, nor concession that he was wrong, but contended that he was right in everything he done, that he done great service to God, would not let a minister of any denomination come near or say anything to him, but what else could be expected from him, or anyone else who are imbued with "Freeloveism, Socialism, Spiritualism," and all the other isms that were ever devised by man or devil.¹⁸⁶

At the same time, the raid *was* the result of a limited conspiracy of a small group of powerful men; though it was Brown’s plan, and the classic American lone nut theory became easy to apply to him, he did not act alone.

Delany’s unfinished novel cuts off abruptly, but fittingly, with a conspirator’s cry, “Woe be unto those devils of whites, I say!”¹⁸⁷, returning the language of revolution to David Walker at his most blunt. The last chapter Delany completed was called “American Tyranny—Oppression of the Negroes.” In thirty years, nothing had threatened or ameliorated the slave system, and it looked less likely to change in 1859 than it had in 1829. To see John Brown’s plan as mad and fanatical in light of the political intransigence that had created a more entrenched economy of oppression and violence over the course of a generation is to indulge in a striking level of willful denial.

A number of factors mitigated against widespread rebellion, and the black hero imagined by Delany never emerged. John Brown hoped to recruit Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Delany himself, to participate in his raid. Delany later denied knowing of Brown’s plans, though every other member of the Chatham Convention was aware that direct action into the South was being prepared. Douglass notoriously refused to accompany Brown to Virginia, to the long-standing resentment of the Brown family. Only Tubman considered the plan seriously, though illness seems to have prevented her joining Brown in time. Recent biographers speculate, on the one hand, that she feigned illness, and on the other, that she may have been in the Virginia

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countryside seeking recruits (though pure conjecture, if this were true it might suggest one of the reasons Brown delayed in town when he could have retreated to the hills as planned).¹⁸⁸

THE HARPER'S FERRY RAID, then, was conceived within a system of symbols and images as well as historical, political, and geographical realities. Novels of widespread revolt record a violent stasis—every option has run out. To the choices of death or flight, the possibility of rebellion is added, but its first action is buried, frozen in a field of meaningless words. To read the works of fiction discussed here is to see the logic by which the Harper's Ferry raid seemed a reasonable response to the existing political situation, and to read Stowe, Melville, and Delany is to map a trajectory toward violence that it would not take a fanatic or monomaniac to recognize. Brown famously claimed that it would be better that a generation were wiped from the earth than that slavery be allowed to continue. But in calling slavery "the sum of all villainies," Brown reinforced James McCune Smith's argument that slavery, as practiced on San Domingo, "was more destructive of human life than the *wars*, *insurrections*, and *massacres* to which it gave birth." On that small island it "destroyed no less than 5,000 human beings per annum."¹⁸⁹ Though Brown is still described mainly as religiously motivated, it's clear from Stowe's writing that traditional Calvinism as she understood it was not enough to drive revolutionary political action. From Melville especially we get a sense of the complete violation of meaningful discourse that the legal system built around the slave economy represented, and from Delany we get a conception of black rebellion that is not beholden to white approval to proceed. Brown's friend Douglass fictionalizes a relationship between black and white abolitionists that barely exists in reality, though in his own relationship with Brown he had found a more radical ally than he was perhaps ready to describe in public. Interestingly, though, it's Hildreth, the historian and intellectual, whose vocabulary most closely matches Brown's, a discourse of moral outrage and call to arms based not simply on traditional Christian imagery but on the logic of democratic principles.

It should be clear, however, that a moral precedent for the Right of Revolution, whether seen as based on religious or natural law, was explicit in the Declaration of Independence and implicit in much of the legal and political discourse of the United States. John Brown did not need to be a "fanatic" to read the implicit message of Christianity as commonly understood in 19th century

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North America, from the new Testament admonition to “remember those in bonds as bound with them” to the Old Testament conception of the “guilty land” of America.

After his arrest, during his trial, and after his execution, Brown’s legend was built by his New England Transcendentalist allies, his more radical associates from the war in Kansas, and his black abolitionist friends, all claiming his actions and philosophy for true American republicanism, and all fighting the wave of reaction and appeasement that resisted their efforts. Frederick Douglass, perhaps familiar with *Moby-Dick*, which his friend James McCune Smith had reviewed favorably in his Paper, wrote presciently in *The Heroic Slave* about the effort to reveal the truth of history in the face of American amnesia and delusion, which would close like the surface of the ocean over the heads of freedom fighters like Nat Turner and Madison Washington. His description seems to echo the closing passages of *Moby-Dick*, in which the *Rachel* searches against hope for her children, orphans thrown overboard from the doomed Ship of State:

Curiously, earnestly, anxiously we peer into the dark, and wish even for the blinding flash, or the light of northern skies to reveal him. But alas! he is still enveloped in darkness, and we return from the pursuit like a wearied and disheartened mother, (after a tedious and unsuccessful search for a lost child,) who returns weighed down with disappointment and sorrow. Speaking of marks, traces, possibles, and probabilities, we come before our readers.¹⁹⁰

Douglass suggests that the story of the United States was incomplete. He and other friends, associates, and admirers of John Brown would soon try to keep the waters of forgetfulness from closing over the Old Man’s head.

NOTES TO CHAPTER EIGHT

¹ Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, p. 223.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁵ Stowe, *Dred*, vol. II, p. 273.

⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p. 255.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, I p. 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I p. 44.

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¹¹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 23.

¹² *Ibid.*, I, p. 45-46.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, p. 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 305.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p. 46-47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II, p. 294.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 239-240.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 240-241.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II, p. 292.

²¹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 10-11.

²² *Ibid.*, I, p. 253.

²³ *Ibid.*, I, p. 253-255.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p. 241.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, p. 291-292.

²⁶ "So completely had he come into sympathy and communion with nature," Stowe writes of her rebel hero, "that he moved [through it] with as much ease as a lady treads her Turkey carpet." II, p. 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II, p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. 275.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 241-242.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, I, p. 242.

³¹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 243.

³² Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, p. 47.

³³ Stowe, *Dred*, I, p. 244.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, I, p. 246.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, I, p. 293.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. 291.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I, p. 292-293.

³⁹ Lynn Veach Sadler, "The Samson Figure in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Stowe's *Dred*," *New England Quarterly* 56 (September 1983):443.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I, p. 256.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 256-257.

⁴² *Ibid.*, I, p. 21.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, II, p. 99-101.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 103.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II, p. 104.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II, p. 105-106.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. 106.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 140.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, II, p. 141.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 142.

⁵² *Ibid.*, II, p. 146.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, II, p. 144.

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⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 151.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 177-178.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, II, p. 195.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, II, p. 197.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. 193.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 264.

⁶⁰ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, p. 3.

⁶¹ *Dred*, II, p. 199.

⁶² *Ibid.*, II, p. 189.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, II, p. 180.

⁶⁴ Villard, p. 299.

⁶⁵ *Dred*, II, p. 201.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, II, p. 202.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 205-206.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. 206.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 206-207.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 208-209.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 210.

⁷² *Ibid.*, II, p. 225.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, II, p. 228n.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 230-231.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 231-232.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, II, p. 279.

⁷⁸ Douglass, *Life and Times*, p. 340.

⁷⁹ *Dred*, II, p. 275.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, II, p. 232.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 233-234.

⁸² *Ibid.*, II, p. 237.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 238.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Phillips, "Three Interviews with Old Brown."

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, II, pp. 243-244.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 240.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, II, p. 243.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, II, p. 260.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, II, p. 271.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 296.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 299.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. 298.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 302.

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¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 313.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, II, p. 314.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, II, p. 317.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, II, p. 320.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, II, p. 323-324.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, II, p. 326.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, II, p. 327.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 330.

¹¹⁰ Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 294-5.

¹¹² Rollin, pp. 10-11.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88-89.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹²² Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 374.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

¹²⁵ Higginson, *Black Rebellion*, pp. 95-96.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

¹²⁷ Karen Whitman, "Re-evaluating John Brown's Raid at Harpers Ferry," *West Virginia History* v34, #1, (October 1972, <http://www.wvculture.org/history/jb11.html>).

¹²⁸ A brief, concise account of the controversy is included in David Potter's *Impending Crisis*, see pp. 177-198 for a broad discussion, and 190-193 for the Ostend Manifesto.

¹²⁹ Delany, *Blake*, p. 4.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹³⁵ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*.

¹³⁶ Delany, *Blake*, p. 12.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

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¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁵ Exodus 14:13.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁴⁷ Delany, *Blake*, p. 197.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 63-64.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁵⁶ McCune Smith, p. 7-8.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Delany, *Blake*, p. 83.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

¹⁶⁹ Northup, p. 247 .

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 248-249.

¹⁷¹ Delany, p. 152-153.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁷³ Sundquist, p. 219.

¹⁷⁴ Delany, p. 200

¹⁷⁵ Sundquist, p. 219

¹⁷⁶ Delany, p. 168

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 183-184

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184

¹⁸² Wish, Harvey. "The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856." *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 5, No. 2. (May, 1939).

¹⁸³ Delany, p. 210.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Villard, p.502.

¹⁸⁶ Stern, p. 107.

¹⁸⁷ Delany, p. 312.

¹⁸⁸ Larson, p. 174.

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¹⁸⁹ McCune Smith, p. 23.

¹⁹⁰ Douglass, "Heroic Slave," p. 26.

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CHAPTER NINE: THE LESSON OF THE HOUR

Brown's Allies on the Roads to Harpers Ferry

By the beginning of the 1850s, the Union was a deeply dysfunctional organization, riven with insoluble conflict and barely contained violence. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Law would radicalize many in the North; the law made every American complicit in the slave system and criminalized refusal to participate in the capture of slaves. For committed abolitionists, the invasion of Mexico had already demonstrated the Slave Power's hold over the government, and proof that the slave system was a system of endless war, aggression, and violence that would have to be fought directly. The lawlessness of United States policy made oppositional lawlessness easier and easier. Henry David Thoreau's *Resistance to Civil Government*, written to articulate his opposition to the invasion of Mexico, establishes the primacy of higher law in no uncertain terms in his earlier essay:

It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. . . . Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.¹

Thoreau contends that everyone already knows this: "All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable." But the typical citizen is able to simply explain away the need to act—"almost all say that such is not the case now."² These are the men who, in Emerson's terms, prefer their vanilla and cream to social action, or who, like Whig Robert C. Winthrop in Theodore Parker's *Slave Power* address, find "provisions in the Constitution"—"of the United States, he means," Parker bitterly interjects, "not of the universe"—"which involve us in painful obligations [but none that] involves any conscientious or religious difficulty."³ For Thoreau, blind obedience to civil law makes every citizen complicit in atrocities like the Invasion of Mexico and the extension of the Slave Power. Most men in the United States lower themselves to the level of "wood and earth and stones," serving the government not as men but "as machines," "the standing army, and the militia" of injustice and terror, with "no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense."

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In contrast, “heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers,” who exercise their will and conscience, in serving man, “necessarily resist” the state, “and they are commonly treated as enemies by it.”⁴ Civil law is a machine that requires the complicity of mechanical men to run smoothly. Most men “think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil,” but for Thoreau, this “is the fault of the government itself,” and in his famous formulation, if the evil is “of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop” the “machine of government.”⁵

While Thoreau at this point practiced nonviolent resistance, it takes little imagination to take the step from nonviolence to direct action. In the state of things at the end of the 1840s, in fact, Thoreau contends that revolution has already become nearly inevitable; “the State will soon be able,” he says, “to take all my work of this sort out of my hands”—individual agitation will no longer be necessary because mass resistance to injustice will be unavoidable.⁶ It is not simply the tyranny of slaveholders that drives the U.S. toward this conclusion, but the appeasement and cowardice of Northern politicians like Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster, one of the chief architects of the 1850 Compromise. Such men are too enmeshed in the machine to observe its workings, Thoreau claims, but for “thinkers,” who “legislate for all time,” Webster’s “wisdom” is ignorance—“his quality is not wisdom, but prudence.” Webster’s truth is “the lawyer’s truth”—“consistent expediency” but “not Truth.”⁷ Webster “is unable to take a fact out of its merely political relations, and behold it as it lies absolutely to be disposed of by the intellect.” It is already a short step from Thoreau’s question here—“shall we be content to obey [unjust laws], or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?” to his later championing of John Brown. His only wish, he says in his *Plea for Captain John Brown*, a speech made just before Brown’s execution in 1859, is that “I could say that Brown was the representative of the North.” Instead he was the representative of universal justice who “did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid.”

In that sense he was the most American of us all. He needed no babbling lawyer, making false issues, to defend him. He was more than a match for all the judges that American voters, or office-holders of whatever grade, can create. He could not have been tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist.⁸

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Here Brown became the avatar of the life argued for in *Resistance to Civil Government*, *Walden*, and *Slavery in Massachusetts*. Like Thoreau, Parker would come to see Brown as the embodiment of the minister's increasingly radical vision of resistance to the Slave Power. In his 1858 address, *The Effect of Slavery on the American People*, Parker continually emphasizes the consensual nature of government power, a power that can be rescinded by its citizens. His opening argument is similar to Brownson's *Laboring Classes* (and in Emerson's more abstract treatment in *Self-Reliance*) in locating illegitimate authority in institutionalized religion; "the priest," Parker contended, "claimed to speak with authority superior to human consciousness. 'Believe' and 'Obey' were his two commands: 'Trust our office, and not your own soul!'"⁹ But while the priest and, by extension, the magistrate are "provisional", "the people alone are primitive and final . . . Democracy is direct self-government over all the people, for all the people, by all the people."¹⁰ Parker's use of *all* the people here implicitly includes black people; though Parker was as typically racist as many of his contemporaries in doubting black people's intellectual powers and in assigning various racialized attributes to them, he insisted that they were people and citizens—Americans. Robbing them of their inherent rights nullified democracy for all citizens, and all citizens had the right to protect their own and others' rights by force and must therefore be prepared for such violence: "in this stage of civilization," Parker thought, "the ploughman is not safe unless he have a sword as well as a share."¹¹ Parker would soon see Brown as a necessary corrective to the inability of the slaves to act on their own behalf.

It is the excellency of the man that he keeps his individualism at the utmost cost, and holds himself rigid and impenetrable against all foreign will. In order that every man may be able to do this, God gives us the terrible power of wrath, such a defense even to feeble men, and such terror to the invasive and usurping will, even when it is of the strongest sort. Slavery emasculates all virile individualism away. This is the maxim of humanity: "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." This is the maxim of slavery: "Submission to tyrants is obedience to God."¹²

Parker came to believe that Brown's example would ignite the North. When he learned of Brown's capture, he wrote to Francis Jackson that Brown would die "like a martyr, and also like a saint," and that his "noble[,],unflinching bravery" would not "fail to make a profound impression on the hearts of Northern men; yes, and on Southern men." He did not consider "the money" they had raised for him "wasted, nor the lives thrown away. Many acorns," he thought,

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“must be sown to have one come up.”¹³ Parker goes so far as to catalog the reasons he supported Brown, believing these reasons to “not at all peculiar to me,” but “a part of the public knowledge of all enlightened men.”¹⁴ His five reasons lay out the logic of violent civil resistance to slavery:

1. A MAN HELD AGAINST HIS WILL AS A SLAVE HAS A NATURAL RIGHT TO KILL EVERY ONE WHO SEEKS TO PREVENT HIS ENJOYMENT OF LIBERTY

2. IT MAY BE A NATURAL DUTY OF THE SLAVE TO DEVELOP THIS NATURAL RIGHT IN A PRACTICAL MANNER, AND ACTUALLY KILL THOSE WHO SEEK TO PREVENT HIS ENJOYMENT OF LIBERTY

3. THE FREEMAN HAS A NATURAL RIGHT TO HELP THE SLAVES RECOVER THEIR LIBERTY, AND IN THAT ENTERPRISE TO DO FOR THEM ALL WHICH THEY HAVE A RIGHT TO DO FOR THEMSELVES

4. IT MAY BE A NATURAL DUTY FOR THE FREEMAN TO HELP THE SLAVES TO THE ENJOYMENT OF THEIR LIBERTY, AND AS MEANS TO THAT END, TO AID THEM IN KILLING ALL SUCH AS OPPOSE THEIR NATURAL FREEDOM

5. THE PERFORMANCE OF THIS DUTY IS TO BE CONTROLLED BY THE FREEMAN’S POWER AND OPPORTUNITY TO HELP THE SLAVES

Parker was unapologetic in his support of violence; “four million slaves in the United States,” after all, are “violently withheld from their natural right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In fact, Parker saw the raid at Harper’s Ferry as a sign of things to come; “The American people,” he thought, “will have to march to rather severe music” soon, “and it is better for them to face it in season.”¹⁵

AND THEY DID; within two years, North America saw its most hideously violent carnage. But at the beginning of the decade, those who advocated the end of slavery remained a vocal but tiny minority who became more willing to confront the Slave Power directly. Like his colleagues, Emerson became increasingly more concise, more forceful, and more public in his ant-slavery activities. After his 1844 speech on British emancipation, he would annually use the anniversary to address the state of American slavery. The veiled threats of the 1844 address already became explicit in 1845: “a revolution,” Emerson stated, “is preparing at no distant day to set these disjointed matters right.”¹⁶ It was the role of one of Emerson’s heroes, Daniel Webster, in orchestrating the 1850 Compromise that moved Emerson to definitive activism.

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Webster's "Seventh of March" speech defending the Compromise became a turning point in New England politics, both in comforting the economic elite and in serving as a lightning rod for resistance to slavery. In this speech, Webster chose to confront the logic of William Seward, who had introduced the quasi-religious conception of Higher Law into the debates that sprang from the end of the successful invasion of Mexico and acquisition of vast new territories to be incorporated as states in the Union. On March 11, 1850, Seward, then a powerful Whig Senator from New York, presented Constitutional arguments against the extension of slavery and the admission of Texas, and compared the Fugitive Slave Law already present in the Constitution to the "despotism" of "the Dark Ages." After claiming that newly acquired territories like California are subject to the "perpetual, organic, universal" freedom provided to citizens under the Constitution, Seward invokes

a higher law than the Constitution, which regulates our authority over the domain, and devotes it to the same noble purposes. The territory [of California] is a part, no inconsiderable part, of the common heritage of mankind, bestowed upon them by the Creator of the Universe. We are his stewards and must so discharge our trust as to secure in the highest attainable degree their happiness.¹⁷

For support, Seward returns to "one of the most distinguished political philosophers of England" as his authority:

There is but one law for all, namely, that law which governs all law, the law of our Creator, the law of humanity, justice, equity, the law of nature and of nations. So far as any laws fortify this primeval law, and give it more precision, more energy, more effect, by their declarations, such laws enter into the sanctuary and participate in the sacredness of its character; but the man who quotes as precedents the abuses of tyrants and robbers, pollutes the very fountains of justice, destroys the foundations of all law, and therefore removes the only safeguard against evil men, whether governors or governed; the guard which prevents governors from becoming tyrants, and the governed from becoming rebels.¹⁸

Seward claims here that "Slavery and freedom are conflicting systems [whose] antagonism is radical, and therefore perpetual." "We cannot," he argues "be either true Christians or real freemen, if we impose on another a chain that we defy all human power to fasten on ourselves." For Seward, "Compromise continues conflict."¹⁹

Leading the opposition, Webster would implicitly dismiss any validity in Higher Law arguments, arguing that abolitionists had no monopoly on moral uprightness. "There are

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thousands of religious men,” he contends, “with consciences as tender as any of their brethren at the North, who do not see the unlawfulness of slavery.” Thousands more “take things as they are,” and accept slavery as a fact, seeing “no way in which, let their opinions on the abstract question be what they may, it is in the power of the present generation to relieve themselves” of its existence.²⁰ Webster impugns the “mischief” caused by abolitionist societies: they are made up of “perfectly well-meaning men” but “for the last twenty years have produced nothing good or valuable.” He insists that the Compromise will turn the nation away from “caverns of darkness . . . groping with those ideas so full of all that is horrid and horrible” into “the fresh air of Liberty and Union.”²¹

Anti-slavery advocates, including Emerson, who had long admired Webster, were outraged by the speech; the anniversary of Webster’s “infamous” Seventh of March speech “would be kept every year in the Emerson household.”²² The following year Emerson delivered his Fugitive Slave Law address on May 3, using the occasion to reveal the “treachery” of Webster, denounced as a “white slave,” yoked to “the chariot of the planters,” and the “head of the slavery party.” While the merchants of Boston had praised Webster as a hero for saving the economic *status quo*, Emerson accused him of having “no moral perception, no moral sentiment, but in that region—to use the phrase of the phrenologists—a hole in the head.”²³ Webster, in fact, is no American; “[i]n Massachusetts, in 1776, he would, beyond all question, have been a refugee. He praises Adams and Jefferson, but it is a past Adams and Jefferson that his mind can entertain. A present Adams and Jefferson he would denounce.”²⁴

Emerson defies Webster’s dismissal of Higher Law; the philosopher sees it as an element itself. In the wake of the Compromise, the very air is contaminated—“we do not breathe well. There is infamy in the air.”²⁵ “The crisis,” he says, is an oppressive, punitive presence, a measure of the nation’s sinfulness that demonstrates “the self-protecting nature of the world and of the Divine laws.” For “as much immorality as there is,” he says, “so much misery.”²⁶ The greater good, “the greatest prosperity,” cannot compensate for the suffering that generates it; the means of slavery couldn’t justify the ends of a wealthy, coherent society, and Emerson defines the wisdom of American society as madness. Affluence itself has lost meaning and value, causing a just man to look at his family and ask, “What have I done that you should begin life in dishonor?”²⁷ Emerson insists that very thinker will see “that a person ought not to obey such

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laws as are evidently contrary to the laws of God;” it is “the sentiment of duty” to contravene the Fugitive Slave Law—civil disobedience is obedience to Divine law: “An immoral law makes it a man’s duty to break it, at every hazard.” The existence of such a law undermines the society that sanctions it: “he who writes a crime into the statute-book digs under the foundations of the Capitol to plant there a powder-magazine, and lays a train.”²⁸

In contrast to his supposed youthful contempt for politics, Emerson now apologizes for what he sees as his own inaction in the face of the impending Compromise and his faith in the inevitability of the triumph of good. “I had thought, I confess,” he says, “what must come at last would come at first, a banding of men against the authority of this statute,”²⁹ foreshadowing of John Brown’s final admission that he had underestimated the entropy of U.S. society when he admitted that “I had thought with only a little bloodshed it [the defeat of slavery] might be done.”³⁰

Emerson would spend the remainder of the decade ameliorating that mistake, ultimately stepping symbolically into Webster’s own shoes as the eloquent political voice of New England. Emerson’s Seventh of March Speech, presented before the vote on the Kansas-Nebraska bill in 1854, answers Webster’s address of March 7, 1850, symbolically completing Emerson’s move from private thinker to social activist. Though he begins by apologizing (again) for addressing “public questions” (though by 1854 this disclaimer is a bit disingenuous)—“they are too often odious and hurtful; and it seems like meddling and a leaving of work peculiar to the scholar”—Emerson proceeds with a dramatic condemnation of the Kansas-Nebraska act and a eulogy to the dubious legacy of Webster, now dead two years, who “Four years ago to-night, on one of those critical moments in history when great questions are to be determined, when the powers of right and wrong are to be mustered in conflict, and it lies with one man to give a casting vote,” had “unexpectedly” thrown “his whole weight on the side of Slavery.” He moves to deflate Webster’s canonization as a Great Speaker, the senator’s claim to immortality, though “Mr. Webster’s literary agent believes that it was his own wish to rest his fame on the speech of the 7th of March.” Emerson dismisses his skills; “Nobody doubts that Daniel Webster could make a good speech,” but “Who doubts the power of any clever and fluent lawyer to defend any of the political parties, or either side of a suit in the courts?” Employed for the Slave Power, this skill is sophistry: “There are always texts, and thoughts, and arguments; but it is the genius and temper

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of the man who decides the question whether he will stand for the wrong or for the right.”³¹ No human documents can withstand unscrupulous human manipulation, and the lawfulness of U.S. society is a brutal sham:

You relied on the Constitution . . . but notwithstanding the plainness of its declarations, the robbing of a man and all his posterity forever more, are effected. You relied upon the Supreme Court. The law was right—an excellent law for the lambs; but what if unhappily the judges were chosen from the wolves and give to all the law a slavish interpretation. You relied upon the Missouri Compromise—that is ridden over And now you relied upon those dismal guarantees infamously made in 1850; and before Webster is yet crumbled they have crumbled—the eternal monument of his fame and the common Union is gone!³²

By 1855, Emerson firmly tied the call for heroism he had made almost twenty years previously to the fight against slavery. In January, after dropping the apology for intruding into political questions that he considered in his drafts, suggesting a firm commitment to his new role,³³ his “American Slavery Address” again cries out for a figure like John Brown to restore trust “in human virtue.”³⁴ Emerson’s speech on the assault on Charles Sumner the following year (the same event that inspired Brown and his men to a series of vigilante executions in Kansas) shows a terseness and anger surpassing prior political speeches, a trend that would continue throughout the decade. It also reveals a perhaps ambivalent but implicit acceptance of violence in the face of the violence of the South, while expressing the danger of morality in the current climate. In all of South Carolina there no one worthy of “be[ing] weighed for a moment in the scale” with Sumner. In the “game” the nation is playing, “the worst life” is “staked against the best.” If “a better man than Mr. Sumner” were elected, “his death would be only much the more quick and certain;” Massachusetts can now only “send foolish persons to Washington, if you wish them to be safe.”³⁵ Echoing his previous words on Lovejoy, Emerson calls for madmen to come forward to fight this battle. In September of the same year he declared at a Kansas Relief meeting that he was “glad to see the terror at disunion and anarchy is disappearing,”³⁶ and hoped for “a new revolution,” imploring his “fellow citizens” to tell any friends traveling outside the United States to return “lest they should find no country to return to” and to “stay at home, while there is a country to save.”

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By the late 1850s, the madmen were gathering; more and more abolitionists saw the intransigence of Congress, the Buchanan administration, and the Taney court as an impassable barrier to a legislative end to slavery. By this time, a decade of precipitous crises had led Charles Sumner to call the potential war between North and South an “Irrepressible Conflict”; the annexation of Texas, the Mexican War, the Fugitive Slave Law, the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the War in Kansas, the Dred Scot decision, had heightened the sense of crisis and increasing violence and instability for fifteen years. The idea that slaveholders were inviting their own doom was clearly stated by Frederick Douglass in 1855 in *My Bondage and My Freedom*:

The slaveholder, kind or cruel, is a slaveholder still—the every hour violator of the just and inalienable rights of man; and he is, therefore, every hour silently whetting the knife of vengeance for his own throat. He never lisps a syllable in commendation of the fathers of this republic, nor denounces any attempted oppression of himself, without inviting the knife to his own throat, and asserting the rights of rebellion for his own slaves.³⁷

By this time, too, a generation of young immigrants steeped in the European revolutions of 1848 joined the fight against slavery in the United States. Now Brown found some of his most militant white allies. In several cases, these men had first-hand experience with the revolutionary movements that had attracted so much attention in the United States in the late 1840s and early 1850s.³⁸ While many New Englanders saw little beyond personal interest in Kansas—settling there for the land and the opportunities—recent immigrants like Richard Hinton, Hugh Forbes, Charles W. Leonhardt, Charles Kaiser, August Bondi, Richard Realf, were all drawn to the insurgent possibilities in the territory.³⁹ In Brown, they found a kindred spirit.

One of these young Europeans was James Redpath, whom Brown met and befriended in Bleeding Kansas, and who became Brown’s first biographer, ally, and kindred spirit. Like Brown, he claimed to have “solemnly swor[n]” in childhood “to devote [my] life to avenging the oppressed.”⁴⁰ Albert von Frank points out Redpath’s probable grounding in the Chartist movement in England; the reporter described himself as “a member of a disfranchised class” who, still in his early twenties, intended with his writing “to precipitate a revolution.”⁴¹ Nearly on the eve of war, certainly on the eve of John Brown’s war, Redpath insists that war has always been the only option: “Let slavery alone,” he argues, “and it lives a century. Fight it, and it dies”.

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...to Gradual Emancipation I am resolutely antagonistic I am not willing that our robbers should give notes on time—for freedom and justice at thirty days, or thirty years, or any other period: rather let them be smitten down where they stand, and the rights that they have wrested from their slaves be wrested—if necessary—with bloodshed and violence, with the torch and the rifle, from them.⁴²

Like Brown, Redpath believed that slavery was “a state of perpetual war,” not only against slaves, but against all American citizens, and that it was crucial that blacks and whites fight together to end it. In *The Public Life of Captain John Brown*, Redpath claims that one of the main functions of the Provisional Constitution was to “alarm the Oligarchy by discipline and the show of organization. In their terror they would imagine the whole North was upon them pell-mell, as well as all their slaves.”⁴³ In his 1859 book *The Roving Editor, or Talks with the Slaves in the Southern States* (dedicated to Brown, the “old Hero” of Bleeding Kansas), he dismisses “the ultimate efficacy of any political anti-slavery action which is founded on Expediency—the morals of the counting-room,” and claims that he would “not hesitate to urge the friends of the slave to incite insurrection and servile wars,” but “would slay every man who attempted to resist the liberation of slaves.” Like Brown, Redpath insists that war has always been the only option: “Let slavery alone,” he argues, “and it lives a century. Fight it, and it dies.”⁴⁴

For Redpath, as for Hildreth, the United States “is not a Nation, but an unnatural joining of two hostile peoples.”⁴⁵ Far more strident than Brown, Redpath is, in von Frank’s words, “the architect” of Brown’s “heroic legend,”⁴⁶ who sees the struggle against slavery as part of a pan-historical, global battle for justice; the allusions he employs to describe Brown (and himself) present the history of Western civilization itself as one of endless struggle against tyranny. His pseudonyms as a “roving editor” compiling evidence of slave discontent were John Ball, Jr., after an English priest who inspired Wat Tyler’s revolution, and “Jacobius,” evoking the French Revolution.⁴⁷ In the preface to *The Public Life* alone, Redpath compares Brown, “the last of the Puritans,” to David, Samson, Christ, and the Yankees who fell at Bunker Hill, articulating Brown’s myth in terms not only of resistance to oppression but of self-sacrifice and willingness to face overwhelming odds: he was the Old Testament warrior sacrificing himself to slay the enemies of God, the New Testament brother of all men, and the patriot willing to fight against the organized armies of oppression; “history will place” him “not among Virginia’s culprits, but

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as high, at least, as Virginia's greatest chief . . . attempting to carry out to their legitimate results."⁴⁸ Brown was the "warrior of the Lord and of Gideon," anointed by God to defeat a much more powerful foe, a "semi-barbarous Commonwealth" and "fifteen despotic States."⁴⁹

In Redpath's account of the war in Kansas, Brown himself becomes a Heroic Slave like the hero of Frederick Douglass' novella. The indomitable Old Man travels in disguise, is unflappable in battle, and cows both political and military opponents. The Brown family and other Free State settlers become stand-ins for the tormented slave families of anti-slavery literature, subjected to the dangers and violence catalogued in Weld's *Slavery As It Is* and Stowe's *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The state of war had now been extended; it was not just the black population that was under siege, but Northern whites, further proving that it was freedom itself that the Southerners warred against, with the complicity of the federal government. Northerners are kidnapped, chained, beaten, robbed, raped, and killed by ravening Southern "ruffians." Their houses are burned, their livestock stolen or slaughtered, their crops destroyed or lost. Northern bodies are "mangled and disfigured," left "to be worked on by flies;" men, women, and children hide "without shelter . . . almost in a state of starvation," and "none but bodies of armed men" can travel safely through the dystopian landscape. Houses stand in ruins, crops rot in the fields, and towns stand deserted; in the settlement of Staunton, "every inhabitant had fled for fear of their lives," most having "left their effects liable to be destroyed or carried off"—the "gloomy scene," which Brown himself describes with Melvillean bleakness, is "like a visit to a sepulcher." Testifying before the Massachusetts legislature, Brown offers to "exhibit to the Committee, if they so desired, the chains which one of his sons had worn" when held by the border ruffians. "The "cruelties" the son "endured, added to the anxieties" of being held captive, "had rendered him . . . a maniac."⁵⁰

Redpath's focus on Kansas demonstrates that the South would soon do to the North what it had done to Africa—pillage it for riches and destroy its freedom. His narrative makes the state of war that the United States has declared against the Free State project explicit, the government actively destroying one way of life in favor of another. In Brown's words, Free Soil men, like rebellious slaves themselves, were "fighting for their wives, their children, their homes and their liberty," while pro-slavery fighters were "mercenary vagabonds" on a "frolic," attracted by "the whisky and the bacon" or there "under the compulsion of opinion" or afraid to be "denounced as

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abolitionists.”⁵¹ The time and effort spent by the Free State settlers to protect themselves from the raiding pro-slavery hordes prevents them from making a living, building homes, or even caring for their sick and burying their dead. Brown calculates the lost wages incurred in the defense of Lawrence, costs that would normally be expended by the government in thousands of dollars; the personal “loss and suffering,” the Old Man adds, “cannot be estimated.” These free citizens are being robbed of their ability to spend their time in work necessary to their own livelihoods, just like slaves. In contrast, Brown makes “a detailed estimate of how much the National Government had expended in endeavoring to fasten Slavery in Kansas.” “Save the people’s money; the dear people’s money!” Brown mocks, asking, to the laughter and applause of those listening, “why these politicians had never cried out, ‘Save the people’s money!’ when it was expended to trample . . . the rights, lives, and property of the Northern squatters. They were silent then.”⁵²

Once Brown gets to Harpers Ferry, and the narrative is in the South itself, Redpath can deploy tropes common to slave narratives and anti-slavery fiction and tracts. Invaded by the “manly” and intrepid Liberators, the Virginia gentry responds like Old World “satraps”, decadent, corrupt, and brutal. Redpath draws a comparison between “the Virginia savages of the olden time with the Virginia gentlemen of the present day,” a “vivid illustration of the effects of slavery on the manners of men.” The parallel is straight out of Walker’s *Appeal*—the venal cruelty of modern-day white Christians in stark contrast to the generosity of a supposedly inferior race. In “Pagan Virginia, two centuries and a half ago,” Pocahontas “flung herself before her father’s tomahawk, on the bosom of an English traveler[, and] lives to-day, the ideal beauty of Virginia.” In modern-day Harpers Ferry, white, free, Christian American citizens dragged a “prisoner of war,” Brown’s son-in-law William Thompson, into a nearby home, but were prevented from killing him “by a young lady throwing herself between their rifles and his body.” The woman, a “modern Pocahontas,” didn’t stop them to protect the wounded man, but because she “didn’t want to have the carpet spoiled!” So the Virginians, in a scene that plays like one from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*,

dragged him to the bridge, where they killed him in cold blood. They shot him off the bridge; shot him as he was falling the fearful height of forty feet; and, some appearance of life still remaining, riddled him with balls as he was seen crawling at the base of the pier.

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The abolitionist “marauders” are now fully identified with the slaves they sought to free. Redpath quotes a local paper’s depiction of the vicious treatment of the retreating raiders, which excuses what “may be thought [of as] cruelty and barbarity” in the treatment of the dead men’s bodies: “the state of the public mind had been frenzied by the outrages of these men[, who] being outlaws, were regarded . . . *not as human creatures.*” The raiders, in allying themselves with slaves, were now reduced to the status of slaves: less than human, and so fit only to be “food for carrion birds” or a display to warn others against similar tactics.⁵³

When the raid fails, Brown’s imprisonment and execution provide opportunities for repeated displays of Oriental barbarism. For Redpath, the trial was a contest between the empty statutes of tyranny and the self-evident justice of natural law. The state prosecutor “ridiculed” Brown’s insistence that he be “dealt with by the rules of honorable warfare,” but for the Old Man, the state of war, which had existed since the establishment of the slave trade between the Slave Power and the “oppressed people” held in bondage and “all other people degraded” by U.S. law, had finally been acknowledged by the indictment itself, which charged him with “feloniously and Traitorously mak[ing] rebellion and levy[ing] war against the said Commonwealth of Virginia.”⁵⁴ But when the trial was over, Brown was “satisfied that his motives were now correctly understood, and that no injury to the Cause would ensue from his heroic unsuccess,” and went back to his cell “a conqueror.”⁵⁵

On the day of his hanging, Charlestown looked like an armed camp, with “nearly three thousand militia troops . . . on the ground.” A cannon had been aimed at the scaffold, so that “in the event of an attempted rescue, the prisoner might be blown into shreds.” Civilians were not allowed to attend the hanging, and stayed home “to watch the movements of their slaves.” Brown’s final request, that he not be kept waiting on the scaffold, was ignored; the troops were paraded through the grounds in “the hideous mockery of a vast military display.”

For ten minutes at least . . . the troops trod heavily . . . hither and thither, now advancing toward the gallows, now turning about in sham defiance of an imaginary enemy.

Each moment to every human man seemed an hour, and some of the soldiers, unable to restrain an expression of their sense of outrage, murmured—*Shame! Shame!*⁵⁶

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Brown's final moments on earth are made the equal of any of the pornographic sensationalism of Weld or Stowe. Brown's still-dangling body is poked and prodded for signs of life by two physicians, one representing Virginia and one the U.S. government. Some soldiers reportedly want to inject the body with arsenic "to make sure work;" others "wished that at least the head might be cut off and retained." Displaying similar "bloodthirstiness," local medical students who were given Watson Brown's corpse supposedly skinned it, "dried and varnished" the muscular, circulatory, and nervous systems, and displayed them. But Brown's triumph over them was "unseen by the Virginians;" mirroring the military procession away from the scaffold was "another procession," one of "earth's holiest before the Throne of God," and like Uncle Tom, "John Brown stood at the right hand of the Eternal. He had fought the good fight, and now wore the crown of glory."⁵⁷

It was not only among a few radical abolitionists in New England that Brown was celebrated. For Victor Hugo, following the drama in Europe, "the murder of Brown" would create "a secret fissure" in the Union, which would "tear it asunder." Brown's execution "was something more terrible than Cain slaying Abel—it is Washington slaying Spartacus."⁵⁸ As a corrective to the voyeuristic, impotent spectacle that Philip Fisher sees in Rousseau's image of the beast attacking a mother and child, the abolitionists invented an image as sensational and sentimental: the spectacle of Brown marching to the gallows, stalwart, bathed in sunlight, showered in roses, kissing a slave child. Hugo, too, orientalizes the South, and the rest of the country as well, describing Brown's trial in terms Melville's readers, and readers of sentimental melodrama, might recognize, a kangaroo court where the defendant was

Stretched upon a truckle bed, with six half-closed wounds . . . bleeding through his mattress, the spirits of his two dead sons attending him . . . "Justice" in a hurry to have done with the case . . . the defense cut short . . . forged or garbled documents put in evidence . . . two guns, loaded with grape, brought into the court . . . forty minutes of deliberation; three sentences of death. I affirm, on my honor, that all this took place, not in Turkey, but in America.⁵⁹

Hugo alters the image of the impotent voyeur, changing it to a moment of witness; "the gaze of Europe" was upon the drama in the American South.⁶⁰ It was a moment that turned the North into Saul on the road to Damascus—a transformative event, the moment when the "insurrection of thought" of the past generation became an insurrection of arms. When Brown's trial ended in

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Charlestown, Wendell Phillips delivered an incitement to his Brooklyn audience (at Henry Ward Beecher's church on November 1), telling them that the "lesson of the hour" was "insurrection." Redpath's text of the speech in *Echoes of Harpers Ferry* tells us that the remark caused a "sensation" in the crowd. He then tells them that "the last twenty years have been an insurrection of thought," which "always precedes an insurrection of arms."⁶¹ The tables had turned since the murder of Lovejoy and the violence of the anti-slavery mobs of the late 1830s. Now the other side has taken up arms.

Phillips' speech is as complete and devastating a picture of American empire as Melville's fictions of the early 1850's, employing the same metaphors (and revealing how much Melville complicated them), and putting Brown at the helm of the battle against that empire. He contrasts the "unchanging *terra firma* of despotism" with the "ocean of unchained democracy, with no safety but in those laws of gravity that bind the ocean in its bed . . . that the race gravitates toward right . . ."⁶² Virginia heads "a herd of States that calls itself an empire, because it raises cotton and sells slaves,"⁶³ but is "only a pirate ship," while "John Brown sails the sea a Lord High Admiral of the Almighty."⁶⁴

Phillips seems to invoke both Hobbes and O'Sullivan here, but he quotes Cicero, to the effect that "no government . . . can exist except on the basis of the willing submission of all its citizens, and by the performance of the duty of rendering equal justice between man and man." There is "no such thing" as the Commonwealth of Virginia, which is itself "a chronic insurrection" against principle.⁶⁵ Virginia, Phillips says, "is only another Algiers."

The barbarous horde who gag each other, imprison women for teaching children to read, prohibit the Bible, sell men on the auction-blocks, abolish marriage, condemn half the women to prostitution, and devote themselves to the breeding of human beings for sale, is only a larger and blacker Algiers.⁶⁶

It's Phillips who sees that Brown, like Melville's Babo, plays out the logic of his culture—with violence. He revisits and reinscribes the arguments Garrison made almost thirty years before: slaves have the right to rebel, they have the right to use force, and free men have an obligation to assist them. May the slave "resist to blood—with rifles?" Phillips suggests that we "Ask Byron on his death-bed in the marshes of Missolonghi,"⁶⁷ invoking the generation-old abolitionist saw that slaves must free themselves, a call to rebellion.

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Phillips' speech is remarkable in its rejection of racism. His models for revolt are black. No "race held in actual chains" ever freed itself, except for one. It was not "Blue-eyed, haughty, contemptuous Anglo-Saxons;" they were serfs who "waited till commerce, and Christianity, and a different law, had melted our fetters."⁶⁸ Nor was it the grand Old World nations of Spain and France. Phillips holds up the black slaves of Haiti as "the only race in the record of history that ever, after a century of oppression, retained the vigor to write the charter of its emancipation with its own hand in the blood of the dominant race."⁶⁹ His disappointment in Brown for failing to live up to their model is palpable. Painting a picture recalling the rebels of the Caribbean, Phillips imagines Virginia as an embattled colony surrounded by a Maroon army; "Suppose," he says, "John Brown had not staid [sic] at Harpers Ferry."

Suppose on that momentous Monday night, when the excited imaginations of two thousand Charlestown people had enlarged him and his little band into four hundred white men and two hundred blacks, he had vanished, and when the gallant troops arrived there, two thousand strong, they had found nobody! The mountains would have been peopled with enemies: the Alleghanies [sic] would have heaved with insurrection! You would never have convinced Virginia that all Pennsylvania was not armed and on the hills⁷⁰

Brown defeated himself by not following his own plan, Phillips claims; Virginia could not have conquered him. But it doesn't matter; "Virginia has not slept sound since Nat Turner led an insurrection in 1831, and she bids fair never to have a nap now," he quips darkly, nor would it as long as slavery and the memory of Turner, Toussaint, and Brown, survive.

Another of Brown's close abolitionist allies, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, would undertake a rhetorical project similar to Phillips' speech; not only would he place Brown within a history of black slave rebellion that stretches back to the colonial Caribbean, but he would rewrite that history to make the rebels the heroes, justifying and normalizing black rebellion and Orientalizing planter society. Higginson published a series of articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1859 to 1861, tracing the history of black resistance to slavery in the New World; his intent was to convince Northerners that freed slaves would be their allies in building a democratic world—that John Brown was right.

Blunt, funny, erudite, and sensible, Higginson is sort of a white counterpart to Frederick Douglass as a foil for Brown; his anger comes not in the righteous attacks of Douglass but a

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smug dismissiveness that sweeps aside cant as effectively as the former slave's oratory. Higginson is a unique and valuable voice in abolitionist letters. He doesn't have the grim, absurdist intellect—or the ability to layer multiple literary, religious, and political allusions seamlessly on top of each other—of Melville, or the rarified passion of Emerson; he is not the poetic crank that Thoreau, or even Parker, is. Higginson is a Man's Man who has turned on his fellows, speaking with a voice of assurance and self-possession, the extreme confidence of an affluent, educated white urbanite in America, but whose barbs are aimed at the nonsensical rubbish that other affluent, educated white urban American men seem to accept as gospel.

Two piles of such rubbish were that black men were not capable of fighting for their freedom, and that white men who allied themselves with slaves were madmen and fools. Higginson draws an historical line that turns Harpers Ferry from a localized outbreak of misguided abolitionist fanaticism to part of a long tradition of resistance to oppression that points back through the Old Dominion and the Dismal Swamp to the origins of democratic movements in the Atlantic region, from the Continental Congress to the French Revolution—"inseparably linked" to the history of slave rebellion, in James McCune Smith's words—to the formation of the black republic of Haiti.⁷¹ The major slave rebellions in the United States between the Revolution and the Civil War, as Eugene Genovese notes, "reflected the world as it was emerging in the era of the great revolution in Saint-Domingue and the revolutionary struggles in Europe and America."⁷²

Higginson anticipates Genovese's scholarship by a century, describing a progression from the Revolutionary era to the eve of the Civil war:

Three times, at intervals of thirty years, did a wave of unutterable terror sweep across the Old Dominion, bringing thoughts of agony to every Virginian master, and of vague hope to every Virginian slave. Each time did one man's name become a spell of dismay and a symbol of deliverance. Each time did that name eclipse its predecessor, while recalling it for a moment to fresher memory: John Brown revived the story of Nat Turner, as in his day Nat Turner recalled the vaster schemes of Gabriel.

Like Brown's raid, Gabriel's rebellion was intended to be a bi-racial movement striking at the heart of the economy of forced labor that had risen along with the conquest of the Americas and the subsequent revolutionary movements in England, France, North America, and the Caribbean.

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Theories of equality and evidence of oppression were everywhere; as Higginson writes, “Liberty was the creed or the cant of the day.” The nation John Brown was born into in May of 1800 was a nation arguing incessantly over the nature of freedom, to which, Higginson says, “a slave insurrection was a mere corollary. With so much electricity in the air, a single flash of lightning foreboded all the terrors of the tempest.”⁷³

Higginson finds numerous parallels between Brown’s plan to start his campaign at Harpers Ferry, and Gabriel’s conspiracy, planned the year Brown was born, which was meant to overwhelm Richmond, the capital of the Old Dominion. If the slaves managed to take the city, Higginson argues, “the penitentiary held several thousand stand of arms; the powder-house was well stocked; the Capitol contained the State treasury; the mills would give them bread; the control of the bridge across James River would keep off enemies from beyond.” Gabriel’s men would then issue a call to “their fellow-negroes and the friends of humanity” to join their cause. However, “in case of final failure, the project included a retreat to the mountains,” so Brown was “anticipated by Gabriel, sixty years before, in believing the Virginia mountains to have been ‘created, from the foundation of the world, as a place of refuge for fugitive slaves.’”⁷⁴

But Brown and Gabriel both took their inspiration at least partly from the Caribbean freedom struggles in the Caribbean. Inspired by Toussaint, and recognizing the role of wilderness in the success of those campaigns, Brown looked to the North American landscape for similar advantage, and saw the “far-reaching Alleghanies [*sic*]” as a natural gift to the slaves. He made them “the basis of my plan,” for “God has given the strength of the hills to freedom.” Filled with “good hiding places,” where guerilla bands could “baffle and elude pursuit for a long time,” they were also “full of natural forts, where one man for defense will be equal to a hundred for attack.” Brown believed his knowledge of the mountains would allow him to “take a body of men into them and keep them there despite of all the efforts of Virginia to dislodge me.”⁷⁵

Higginson’s series begins in Jamaica. His opening passage suggests the romance of rebellion that had been inspired in radical abolitionists by Brown’s conception of mountain guerillas as the bane of organized oppression:

The Maroons! it was a word of peril once; and terror spread along the skirts of the blue mountains of Jamaica when some fresh foray of those unconquered guerrillas swept down from the outlying plantations, startled the Assembly from its order, Gen. Williamson from his billiards, and Lord Balcarres from his

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diplomatic ease,—endangering, according to the official statement, “public credit,” “civil rights,” and “the prosperity, if not the very existence, of the country,” until they were “persuaded to make peace” at last.

The Jamaican rebels were “the Circassians of the New World,” except that, unlike “the white mountaineers,” they were never defeated. Higginson still sees the world in black and white, so to speak: the island’s population was divided into “an effeminate, ignorant, indolent white community of fifteen hundred” and “a black slave population quite as large and infinitely more hardy and energetic.” He turns conventional historical models upside down, though, in noting that, as

the children of Cromwell's Puritan soldiers were beginning to grow rich by importing slaves for Roman-Catholic Spaniards, the Maroons still held their own wild empire in the mountains, and, being sturdy heathens every one, practised Obeah rites in approved pagan fashion.

Following Brown’s logic, Higginson sees the secret to the Jamaican Maroons’ ability to remain undefeated by Spanish and British colonial armies in their “topographical advantage;” the cliffs where they lives where “often absolutely inaccessible, while the passes at each end admit but one man at a time,” creating “a haven” for the rebels and “a series of traps for an invading force.” Higginson paints a picture of British defeat that Brown must have imagined replicating for American slaves in the Alleghenies:

Tired and thirsty with climbing, the weary soldiers toil on, in single file, without seeing or hearing an enemy Suddenly a shot is fired from the dense and sloping forest on the right, then another and another, each dropping its man[;] the heights above flash with musketry, while the precipitous path by which they came seems to close in fire behind them. By the time the troops have formed in some attempt at military order, the woods around them are empty, and their agile and noiseless foes have settled themselves into ambush again

Higginson also follows Brown in challenging conventional ideas about industriousness and race, suggesting that the wealth and luxury of the mountaineers rivaled, or surpassed, that of Southern planters and Northern capitalists. His description of their living conditions contains dashes of Rousseau’s noble savage, Thoreau’s back-to-the-land ethic, Emerson’s romanticism, and his own envy of their resourcefulness and culture. “English epicures used to go up among them for good living,” they ate so well, living off the “strange land-crabs, plodding in companies

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of millions” and the wild pigs that became “the delicious ‘jerked hog’ of buccaneer annals; “the very weeds of their orchards had tropical luxuriance in their fragrance and in their names,” Higginson sighs, “and from the doors of their little thatched huts they looked across these gardens of delight to the magnificent lowland forests, and over those again to the faint line of far-off beach, the fainter ocean-horizon, and the illimitable sky.” Violating all sense of American assumptions about such savagery, Higginson insists that the Jamaican Maroons “were quite orderly and luxuriously happy.”⁷⁶

Nevertheless, the structures of power and property put in place by the colonists made it inevitable that “there was an ‘irrepressible conflict’ behind all this apparent peace, and the slightest occasion might, at any moment, revive all the old terror;” the Maroons, allied with the slaves, ultimately rebelled against British rule and continued to maintain their freedom. The colonists panicked, and the island became “more like a garrison under the power of law-martial, than a country of agriculture and commerce, of civil judicature, industry, and prosperity;” Higginson’s description of the state of the island is reminiscent of the highly militarized racism of the Southern United States. Finally persuaded to surrender, the Maroons are betrayed, the “guaranty of continued independence” they are given “outrageously violated.” Those who surrendered were exiled in Halifax. Compared to “their delicious life in the mountains of Jamaica, it seemed rather monotonous to dwell upon that barren soil,” and the settlement languished, just as the isolated settlement of Timbucto near Lake Placid—Gerrit Smith’s gift to free blacks—faded.

Higginson had struggled not only to imagine blacks as equal members of U.S. society, but to find models of other white men like Brown, who recognized the vicious absurdity of race-based caste. His second essay about black rebellion is the only one in which a white character figures more prominently than the rebels themselves. Searching for a historical precedent for Brown himself, Higginson presents the story of John Gabriel Stedman, the Scottish mercenary sent by the Dutch to subdue the Maroons of Surinam, who instead became enamored of the flora and fauna of the area and respectful of the Maroons’ anti-colonial militancy. Stedman is a potential model for Higginson, and he traces his transformation from dutiful Scottish mercenary sent by the Dutch to “subdue rebel negroes” in

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Surinam to a man beyond the pale. In 1773, as rebellion in the British colonies in North America was beginning, Stedman found himself “beneath the rainy season in a tropical country, wading through marshes and splashing through lakes,” while “commanded by an insufferable colonel” and “howled at by jaguars,” all the while being “shot at by those exceedingly unattainable gentlemen, ‘still longed for, never seen,’ the Maroons of Surinam.”⁷⁷

Stedman’s story is one of “enchantment,” and Higginson follows him closely as he pursues an alternate path through the “earthly paradise” he enters. When Stedman first appears, he is a character as naïve as Captain Amasa Delano in Melville’s *Benito Cereno*. “Never,” Higginson tells us, “did a “meagre, starved, black, burnt, and ragged tatterdemalion,” as he calls himself, carry about him such a fund of sentiment, philosophy, poetry, and art.” In this account, Stedman resembles John Brown in representing “the highest triumph of man over his accidents, when he thus turns his pains to gains.” Stedman retreats into an almost childlike sense of wonder at his surroundings, and though the mission is “dismal work,” and his men suffer more from the insects, reptiles, and bats of the forests than from the Maroons, their captain “kept his health,” endlessly studying the flora and fauna, his “passion for natural history, a ready balm for every ill. Here he was never wanting to the occasion; and, to do justice to Dutch Guiana, the occasion never was wanting to him.”⁷⁸

But unlike Melville’s Delano, Stedman’s benign nature unsuits him for his brutal mission. Stedman’s first sight upon his arrival was the flogging of a naked, shackled slave woman; unable to view this as normal, Stedman quickly assesses the “state of society worthy of this exhibition,—men without mercy, women without modesty, the black man a slave to the white man’s passions, and the white man a slave to his own.”⁷⁹ Recent scholars have found much to say about this episode. Mario Klarer describes the scene as an example of “Humanitarian Pornography,” presented to elicit the reader’s sympathy, but remaining strangely titillating. Klarer explains that

on the one hand, we have to identify with the tortured slave girl, on the other, we are invited, via Stedman as her unsuccessful protector, to indirectly partake in her punishment as an active agent. A few lines later in the *Narrative* we learn that the female slave died because of the additional two hundred lashes inflicted on her after Stedman’s intervention. The paradoxical situation for the narrator, as well as the reader through identification with the narrator, is that he becomes an agent of power.⁸⁰

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Klarer's interpretation recalls another late 20th century critic's formulation of the way such "humanitarian," or sentimental, imagery functions. Philip Fisher, in his 1985 *Hard Facts*, characterizes the kind of sentimental language deployed in abolitionist literature like Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by describing an image from Rousseau, in which a helpless spectator, trapped behind bars without the ability to intervene, watches a mother and child outside attacked by a wild beast, which kills and devours the child. Fisher argues that this image "contains the primary psychology of sentimental narrative itself[:] What horrible agitation seizes him as he watches the scene which does not concern him personally! What anguish he suffers from being powerless to help the fainting mother and the dying child." Fisher explains that "in the scene, where there once was a family, there remains only an individual who has lost everything. The compassion of the imprisoned man is a model of that of the reader," who is unable to act to save the characters in the novel; but because their concern is disinterested, it "is the best evidence of humanity itself."⁸¹ He argues that, by assuming that "feeling and empathy are deepest where the capacity to act has been suspended," the sentimental writer advances a "cautious and questionable politics[;]By limiting the goal of art to the revision of images rather than to the incitement to action, sentimentality assumes a healthy and modest account of the limited and interior consequences of art."⁸²

But this is hardly the case; though Stowe insisted that, at the very least, readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* could "feel right," she hardly assumed that her readers' "capacity to act" had been "suspended." Higginson himself clearly meant to influence public opinion with these articles, but like Brown, he recognized them as part of a larger project that also required direct action.⁸³ The very image Fisher describes recurs again and again in abolitionist literature, not as an admission of passivity but as a call to arms.⁸⁴ Higginson, like Brown, believes that *feeling* right leads to *acting* right, identifying with the victim of oppression enough to fight alongside them and help them to fight. Higginson doesn't read Stedman as voyeuristic; in the "pornographic" aspects of Stedman's writing, Higginson finds not the empty suffering of Rousseau's helpless victims, but defiance worthy of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and John Brown⁸⁵:

Not a rebel ever turned traitor or informer, ever flinched in battle or under torture, ever violated a treaty or even a private promise. But it was their power of endurance which was especially astounding; Stedman is never weary of paying

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tribute to this, or of illustrating it in sickening detail; indeed, the records of the world show nothing to surpass it; "the lifted axe, the agonizing wheel," proved powerless to subdue it; with every limb lopped, every bone broken, the victims yet defied their tormentors, laughed, sang, and died triumphant.⁸⁶

The rebels are models of a kind of masculinity Higginson clearly admires, and finds in Brown if not in Stedman. They are "no saints;" they drink, the women are sexually free, and they are pagan, but they display "martial virtues," and their "only crime consisted in avenging the wrongs done to their forefathers." The rebels, Higginson reports, "repaid these atrocities in kind," but in detailing their brutality he articulates his ultimate acceptance of Brown's position, that slavery is a state of war. Had the Maroons not exacted vengeance on the colonists, "it would have demonstrated the absurd paradox, that slavery educates higher virtues than freedom." It would be absurd "if we expect the insurrectionary slave to commit no outrages." Having "seen their brothers and sisters flogged, burned, mutilated, hanged on iron hooks, broken on the wheel, and had been all the while solemnly assured that this was paternal government," the Maroons "could only repay the paternalism in the same fashion, when they had the power. . . . They could bear to watch their captives expire under the lash, for they had previously watched their parents."⁸⁷ It is simply human nature to respond to inhuman treatment by becoming inhuman, and Higginson allies himself, and his (white) readers, with the slaves. "If it be the normal tendency of bondage to produce saints like Uncle Tom," he declares, "let us all offer ourselves at auction immediately."

Higginson struggles with his own racial attitudes while he seeks to enlighten his readers, and undergoes a sort of evolution between the publication of his rebellion series and his account of his experiences during the Civil War. Like Stowe revising her racial ideas in her 1856 novel *Dred*, Higginson does his best to move toward a real alliance with black people as well as black freedom in the abstract, if not a true identity with them. Even the most radical white abolitionists were still moving, in the late 1850s and early 1860s, toward the position Brown held at least in the 1840s, and in *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, Higginson watches his soldiers carefully, analytically, still struggling with the Otherness—the Orientalism—of the armed black man ("Had an invitation reached me to take command of a regiment of Kalmuck Tartars, it could hardly have been more unexpected."⁸⁸), but

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still determined to bring his reader, the American citizen, along as he allies himself with the slave rebel, who now finally constitutes the fifth column that Jefferson feared in 1776—now not in the United States but in enemy “Secesh” territory. Both Brown and Stedman are invoked within the first few pages, and Higginson clearly sees his role as a vindication of Brown’s plan; he “had been an abolitionist too long and had known and loved John Brown too well, not to feel a thrill of joy at last on finding myself in the position where he only wished to be.”⁸⁹ If Brown had been inspired by the example of the Maroons, he had also been confident in his ability to train American slaves as guerillas. Higginson, a more conventional thinker, was perhaps thinking of James McCune Smith’s account of the Haitian revolution, the success of which had been in part due to the fact that the free black population had had “among them a considerable number trained to arms;”⁹⁰ he was determined to offer his men the discipline of proper military training, an opportunity, as he saw it, to join American society on equal footing with whites.

Higginson is now writing himself into the history he has devised, of the alliance between black and white fighters against the anti-democratic tyranny of the Old World. Like Brown, he leads black fighters into the South. Like Stedman, he descends into an exotic landscape; the Southern seacoast is a fading Old World colony out of a travel narrative. Coming first to the “raw and bare . . . new settlement” at Hilton Head, his steamer heads upriver, the water “ripp[ing] duskily toward Beaufort” past “stiff tropical vegetation.” The water itself “seemed almost as fair as the smooth and lovely canals which Stedman traversed to meet his negro soldiers in Surinam.”⁹¹

If Higginson is Stedman in Surinam, his soldiers are the uncivilized Maroons. He is not yet at the end of his own journey toward identification with his troops; he is still closer in his racial views to Gerrit Smith’s romantic paternalism than to Brown’s acceptance of equality.⁹² When he first meets his regiment, they “all looked as thoroughly black as the most faithful philanthropist could desire,” and he reports their speech in dialect.⁹³ “The air is full of noisy drumming” in camp whenever “my young barbarians are all at play.”⁹⁴ Higginson’s “ambivalence” and racial othering are still palpable—both the South and the blacks are alien to him. He wonders at the “pure” Africanness of his soldiers, and another group he encounters who are “on the average lighter in complexion” than his troops also “look more intelligent” and “take wonderfully to the drill.”

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Higginson begins to undergo a transformation as he lives among these men; soon “the full zest of the novelty seems passing away,” and his soldiers “go through all their daily processes . . . just as if they were white.” He even occasionally characterizes himself as having crossed the color line: it is only when the white officers came forward at daily drills “that I am reminded that my own face is not the color of coal.”⁹⁵ One can imagine Higginson mulling over Brown’s plans; he seems to be legitimizing Brown’s belief that he could have easily trained a guerilla army on the run. While he relies on a number of clichés and tropes, he is careful to stress condition rather than characteristic (he carefully weighs the differences between men from different states), and to equalize attributes as much as possible. “At first,” he thinks, “they all looked just alike,” but soon “they are just as distinguishable . . . as so many whites.” He quickly discovers “the absurdity of distrusting the military availability of these people.” They seem as bright as white soldiers, and living as they do is easy for them; “they are better fed, housed, and clothed than ever in their lives before, and they appear to have few inconvenient vices.” The former slaves are “simple, docile, and affectionate almost to the point of absurdity.” Cool and impassive in battle, they “come to me blubbing in the most irresistibly ludicrous manner on being transferred from one company in the regiment to another.” They are supremely disciplined on duty and supremely unreserved off, though they probably curse less than a Quaker woman—possibly another of several allusions to Stowe.⁹⁶

Higginson’s observations almost constantly waver between racist romance over the “mysterious race of grown-up children with whom my lot is cast,”⁹⁷ and anti-racist commentary. On one hand, he marvels at the picture of the men, “the brilliant fire lighting up their red trousers and gleaming from their shining black faces, eyes and teeth all white with tumultuous glee,” under “the mighty limbs of a great live-oak, with the weird moss swaying in the smoke, and the high moon gleaming faintly” above them. On the other, he knows that “to-morrow strangers will remark on the hopeless, impenetrable stupidity in the daylight faces of many of these very men” because of their own ignorance as well as the deliberate design of the ex-slaves’ “solid mask under which Nature has concealed all this wealth of mother-wit.” His strategy for normalizing black soldiers seems to borrow as much from Stowe as from Brown, and as much from his vast knowledge of literature as from his own observations. Early in his diary, Higginson recreates a scene from Child’s “The Black Saxons” when he listens, mainly unobserved, to his men tell

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stories around their fire at night, and an “old uncle,” an “ancient Ulysses,” speaking in dialect, describes his escape from slavery. Having “heard the stories of Harriet Tubman, and such wonderful slave-comedians,” Higginson is taken as much by the man’s performance, “dramatized to the last degree,” as he is the man’s resourcefulness, daring, and cool-headedness in devising and executing his plan at great risk. In Higginson’s eyes, “oppression simply crushes the upper faculties of the head, and crowds everything into the perceptive organs” of slaves, but he hopes to “be lucky enough to have you at my elbow, to pull me out of it” should he find himself in “any serious scrape, in an enemy’s country.”⁹⁸ While “the mass of men are naturally courageous up to a certain point,” Higginson’s soldiers “had the two-o’clock-in-the-morning courage, which Napoleon thought so rare.”⁹⁹

He also compares them in his mind to the Maroons he had spent so much time researching, finding parallels in their courage and their adaptability. One of his favorite soldiers “makes Toussaint perfectly intelligible;” Higginson thinks that “No anti-slavery novel has described a man of such marked ability.” But he still sees the jungle in this man; “His gait is like a panther’s . . . and if there should ever be a black monarchy in South Carolina, he will be its king.”¹⁰⁰ Most of his soldiers were from the Sea Islands, where some “had literally spent their whole existence on some lonely island or remote plantation, where the master never came, and the overseer only once or twice a week. With these exceptions, such persons had never seen a white face,” and Higginson expects to find some of the same vices present among the Jamaican rebels. What he has gleaned from books is never far from his mind, but he revises his education as he goes, realizing that fact trumps fiction in most of these people’s lives. “There were more than a hundred men in the ranks,” he knows, “who had voluntarily met more dangers in their escape from slavery than any of my young captains had incurred in all their lives.”¹⁰¹ Reading ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ in our camp . . . would have seemed tame. “I was constantly expecting to find male Topsies, with no notions of good and plenty of evil,” he tells us. “But I never found one.”¹⁰²

In the course of his experiment, Higginson was under “constant surveillance;” the “spectacle” of a “battalion of black soldiers . . . seemed then the most daring of innovations,” and “a single miniature Bull Run, a stampede of desertions”—events that could be predicted among, and accepted from, white soldiers—“and it would have been all over with us;” there would not be “another effort to arm the negro.”¹⁰³ But he frequently seems a voyeur himself, amazed at the

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spectacle of black men and women responding to their emerging role as citizens. One day at a parade, as Higginson “took and waved the flag, which now for the first time meant anything to these poor people,”

there suddenly arose, close beside the platform, a strong male voice (but rather cracked and elderly), into which two women's voices instantly blended, singing, as if by an impulse that could no more be repressed than the morning note of the song-sparrow.--

"My Country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing!"

People looked at each other, and then at us on the platform, to see whence came this interruption, not set down in the bills. Firmly and irrepressibly the quavering voices sang on, verse after verse; others of the colored people joined in; some whites on the platform began, but I motioned them to silence. I never saw anything so electric; it made all other words cheap; it seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed. . . . Just think of it!--the first day they had ever had a country, the first flag they had ever seen which promised anything to their people
.....¹⁰⁴

Higginson admires these people in the same way he admired the Maroons, and Brown himself—as strange, alien elements which he sees as distinct from himself, but which he recognizes must be somehow integrated into his society if it is to survive. Higginson is probably as responsible as anyone for the oversimplified mythic stature of Brown as a Puritan throwback,¹⁰⁵ and as a Unitarian intellectual, he sees the spiritual lives of his soldiers as foreign and strange. He thinks it would be easy to make them “fanatics, if I chose.” He adopts “a sort of sympathetic admiration, not tending towards agreement, but towards co-operation,” toward their beliefs; he is unable to reach a point of identity with the slaves. At the same time, he continually draws parallels between their ideas and his own culture. While slave religion seems “essentially Mohammedan, perhaps, in its strength and its weakness,” his soldiers’ “philosophizing is often the highest form of mysticism; and our dear surgeon declares that they are all natural transcendentalists.” In contrast, white soldiers “seem rough and secular;” Higginson hears “our men talk about ‘a religious army,’ ‘a Gospel army,’ in their prayer-meetings,”¹⁰⁶ and he seems to see an identity between the slaves and his friend John Brown: “It used to seem to me that never, since Cromwell's time, had there been soldiers in whom the religious element held such a

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place.”¹⁰⁷ And through Brown, he and his men bond, again and again singing “the John Brown song, always a favorite,”¹⁰⁸ as they march.

Brown and the Maroons, and the idea of rebellion play on Higginson’s mind all through the war. He wonders that with their “capacity of daring and endurance, they had not kept the land in a perpetual flame of insurrection; why, especially since the opening of the war, they had kept so still.” He had imagined all his life that “had I been a slave, my life would have been one long scheme of insurrection. But I learned to respect the patient self-control of those who had waited till the course of events should open a better way. When it came they accepted it.” Finally Higginson finds that he does not entirely agree with John Brown; the slaves “had no mountain passes to defend like the Maroons of Jamaica,—no unpenetrable swamps, like the Maroons of Surinam. Where they had these, even on a small scale, they had used them.” But “Insurrection on their part would at once have divided the Northern sentiment; and a large part of our army would have joined with the Southern army to hunt them down,” just as it was federal troops who captured Brown. Higginson has found a way to follow Brown, but remain in the fold of his country; with the war under way, it is now easier to see the North as the upholder of democracy and the South as the despotic foreign power abolitionists had called it. And the slaves, by “waiting till we needed them,” made certain that “their freedom was secured.”¹⁰⁹

But Brown’s shadow never passes from Higginson’s “experiment.” In explaining why “this particular war was an especially favorable test of the colored soldiers,” Higginson’s thoughts echo with the Old Man’s words and actions. The slaves “had more to fight for than the whites. Besides the flag and the Union, they had home and wife and child;” but Brown had claimed that Northerners fought for the same things, and that the Free State settlers in Kansas had known this. But finally, Higginson at least temporarily passes beyond the pale and into the world of risk and death that his role models had. Like his soldiers, who “fought with ropes round their necks,” he risked more than simple death in battle. The “Secesh” ordered that any “officers of colored troops should be put to death on capture;” his soldiers knew this, and “they took a grim satisfaction” in the knowledge.¹¹⁰

At the heart of the “experiment” of a bi-racial military alliance is, in Higginson’s mind, not simply the question of whether his men could fight, but whether they can become citizens. “Do these people appreciate *justice*?” he asks some of his Northern associates; “If they did it was

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evident that all the rest would be easy.” He and his fellow officers conclude that his men are like all men, inherently prepared to live free lives:

General Saxton, examining with some impatience a long list of questions from some philanthropic Commission at the North, respecting the traits and habits of the freedmen, bade some staff-officer answer them all in two words, and— ‘Intensely human.’ We all admitted that it was a striking and comprehensive description.¹¹¹

This conclusion is a radical re-evaluation of American political structure, and for Higginson, whether he was able to fully agree with the Old Man or not, saw John Brown’s creative revision of American founding principles as the inspiration for this re-evaluation. In committing himself not to easy myths of national origin but to the responsibilities that Revolutionary political theory demanded, Brown inspired a re-examination of those myths, and a reinvestment in those responsibilities. Brown had acted not out of sentimental pity, but outrage and solidarity, opening the door to revolution, possibly the only door left in 1859, or perhaps in 1829, or 1789.

Brown was now the flashpoint that ignited the continuing arguments over the necessity, and efficacy, of violent rebellion and whites allied with blacks against an oppressive state, would constellate around him. His willingness to back his appeals to justice with bodily risk and the threat of violence is the aspect of his abolitionism that not only separates him from most white abolitionists, but which ties him most directly to the history of black rebellion against slavery. In those terms, John Brown becomes an important participant in what was the most important conflict in American history. As we’ve already seen with Hildreth, Brown contributed rhetorically to an understanding of the abolition of slavery as an issue that cut across racial, gender, and class lines, and that had to be engaged with militancy, and many writers of this period articulated understandings of the slavery issues in ways that Brown either expressed or acted upon. Eric Sundquist argues that the “spread of black rebellion in the New World” was not “the erosion of the ideology of American Revolution” into mere insurrectionary anarchy and barbarism, “but rather its transfer across the color line.”¹¹² Inspired himself by this “transfer;” John Brown transferred it *back*, “purif[ied] and redeem[ed]” of the taint of racism. Brown’s vision of a Southern invasion and biracial attack on the slave economy would succeed, but only after it had been institutionalized and backed by the resources of a large industrial economy; the Union Army, including armed black troops, succeeded where Brown failed, in both real and

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symbolic terms. Ultimately, even pacifist William Lloyd Garrison had to declare, in the September 7, 1860 issue of *The Liberator*, that “*John Brown was right*, because he denied the validity of unrighteous and tyrannical enactments, and maintained the supremacy and binding obligation of the ‘Higher Law.’” The long argument over the meaning of the Declaration of Independence in relation to American slavery and civil order seemed settled. But in fact, the argument would continue indefinitely, and at each turn in the heated debate, John Brown, his body mouldering in a grave on “the Smith Land” in upstate New York, would be resurrected.

THE END

NOTES TO CHAPTER NINE

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 387.

² *Ibid.*, p. 389.

³ Theodore Parker, *The Slave Power* (Boston: American Unitarian Association), James K. Hosmer, editor

⁴ Thoreau

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.

⁸ Henry David Thoreau, “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” *Great Short Works of Henry David Thoreau*, Wendell Glick, editor (New York: HarperPerennial, 1982), p. 317.

⁹ Parker, “The Effect of Slavery on the American People.” *Theodore Parker, An Anthology*. Ed. Henry Steele Commager (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 319.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 321-322

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 323

¹² *Ibid.*, 327

¹³ Weiss, p. 178.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-1711.

¹⁶ Len Gougeon, *Virtue’s Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 98.

¹⁷ Seward’s Higher Law speech can be found here:
<http://eweb.furman.edu/~benenson/docs/seward.htm>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Whipple, p. 603.

²¹ *Ibid.*,

²² Gougeon, p. 139.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings*, Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, editors (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) p. 204.

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²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

²⁶ Gougeon, p. 162.

²⁷ Emerson, p. 183.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 191,186, 206.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 180.

³³ Gougeon, p. 207.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

³⁷ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, p. 165.

³⁸ Abolitionists made ironic use of U.S. praise of the revolutionary movements in Greece, Hungary, Poland, and other Eastern European countries at this time. See, for instance, Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, p. 172.

³⁹ See Albert J. von Frank, "John Brown, James Redpath, and the Idea of Revolution," *Civil War History* 52.2 (2006), pp. 142-160. Von Frank's article opens a number of new avenues for historiographers of Brown, of abolitionism, and of the period.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

⁴² Redpath, *The Roving Editor; or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*, ed. John R. McKivigan (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 7.

⁴³ Redpath, *Public Life*, p. 204.

⁴⁴ Redpath, *Roving Editor*, pp. 3-8.

⁴⁵ Redpath, *Public Life*, pp. 100-101.

⁴⁶ Von Frank, p. 150.

⁴⁷ Redpath, *Roving Editor*, p. xviii.

⁴⁸ Redpath, *Public Life*, p. 42.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177-180.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91-92.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 298ff.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 403-406.

⁵⁸ Redpath, *Echoes of Harpers Ferry*, p. 102.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

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⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁷¹ James McCune Smith, *A Lecture on the Haytien revolutions: with a sketch of the character of Toussaint L'Ouverture : delivered at the Stuyvesant Institute (for the benefit of the Colored orphan asylum) February 26, 1841, (1841)* text recovered from Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Library, Cornell University:

<http://dlxs.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=mayantislavery;idno=16855015;view=image;seq=1>.

⁷² Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, p. 49.

⁷³ Higginson, *Black Rebellion*, p. 71-73.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷⁵ Douglass, "John Brown," in Ruchames, *Revolutionary*, p. 294.

⁷⁶ Higginson, *Black Rebellion*, p. 13-14.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36-37.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48-49.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁸⁰ Mario Klarer, "Humanitarian Pornography: John Gabriel Stedman's Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam," *New Literary History* 36.4, 2005, p. 562.

⁸¹ Fisher, Philip *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel*, Oxford University Press 1987, pp. 105-106.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁸³ Higginson had hoped, after Brown's arrest, to break him out of prison, and only abandoned the idea when Brown decided that the best way to salvage his failure would be by letting himself be hanged; see Redpath's account of Brown's trial in *Public Life*, pp. 291-343. Higginson proposal for Brown's rescue was not his first attempt at direct action; in 1854 he had helped lead a failed mission to free escaped slave Anthony Burns, actually killing a police officer in the process. See Albert von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns* (Cambridge Harvard University Press 1998).

⁸⁴ See, for instance, Delany's *Blake*, p. 246, where the image becomes inverted. The Cuban slaves and free blacks in the second half of the novel are forced to watch hounds being released on slaves as public sport and spectacle. As plans for insurrection proceed, however, free blacks are "determined that for the last time they had looked with passiveness upon the sad scene of training bloodhounds upon the living flesh of their kindred". Fear of insurrection arises in part when they begin to respond to this savagery with anger rather than accept it passively, and the ruling class grows uneasy.

⁸⁵ Though it falls outside the scope of this essay, there is an enormous discussion to have here on the way Brown falls into discourses of gender and race. Though Brown himself still remains to be given a full reading in these terms, some directions are suggested by work like that of Christopher Looby, who has read Higginson's *Army Life* as an example of a "proto-Mapplethorpean" gaze, reading black soldiers both as highly-charged carriers of political and sexual transgression and as ideal men. See "'As Thoroughly Black as the Most Faithful Philanthropist Could Desire': Erotics of Race in Higginson's *Army Life in a Black Regiment*,"

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Race and the Subject of Masculinities, Harry Stecopoulis and Michael Uebel, editors (Durham: Duke 1997), pp. 71-115. See more on Higginson's reading of Brown in note 74 below; it could be argued that for those sympathetic enough to see something more in Brown than the wild-eyed, wild-haired prophet/fanatic of John Curry's famous Kansas mural, the image created by Redpath and Higginson as much as by Thoreau has carried far more weight than a consideration of the Old Man's own words and actions. Redpath, especially, conflates Brown's violent militancy with a sort of Christian "manliness." Once again, Melville's writing on slavery, particularly *Benito Cereno*, represents what is arguably the most self-aware consideration of the ways in which discourses of gender and racial identity and spectacle helped create and maintain the slave economy; in *Army Life*, Higginson himself comes alarmingly close at times to the "benign" racism of Melville's fictional Yankee captain, Amasa Delano, a sort of anti-Ahab.

⁸⁶ *Black Rebellion*, p. 53.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁸⁸ *Army Life*, p. 2.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹⁰ Smith, *Hayti*, p. 9.

⁹¹ *Army Life*, p. 5.

⁹² For the most detailed account of Smith's abolitionist career, see John Stauffer's *The Black Hearts Of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002). Stauffer is sympathetic to Smith, the center of his study, but carefully describes Smith's ultimately unsuccessful struggle with his own racism. Other writers are less sympathetic; James Renahan, shocked that a group of educated men would support John Brown, contrasts Higginson's easy manliness with the effete dilettantism of Smith, in *The Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown* (New York: Crown, 1995).

⁹³ This is an unfortunate feature even among black writers; John Brown and Richard Hildreth are almost the only white abolitionist writers who reject this convention. Brown's 1848 magazine essay "Sambo's Mistakes" is written without resorting to dialect, as is Hildreth's 1836 novel *The Slave*.

⁹⁴ *Army Life*, p. 6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 189-190.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁵ Higginson's first impression of Brown is as "simply a high-minded, unselfish, belated Covenanter; a man whom Sir Walter Scott might have drawn." He also saw in Brown "that religious elevation which is itself a kind of refinement; the quality one may see expressed in many a venerable Quaker face at yearly meeting" (qtd in Villard 326). Thoreau and Emerson followed suit, comparing Brown to Cromwell and the Puritans. Later historians who were

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sympathetic to Brown took these men's views at face value, right up to recent bestseller David Reynolds. Political novelist, historian, and activist Truman Nelson, writing in the March 29, 1971 issue of *The Nation*, attacked another of Brown's bestselling biographers, Stephen Oates, for his characterization of Brown as an "orthodox nineteenth-century Calvinist who believed in fore-ordination and providential signs, in the doctrine of election, innate depravity and in man's total dependence on a sovereign and arbitrary God." Nelson's reading is far less orthodox; though "Brown might have said he believed in some of these things," he was hardly a straight Calvinist and in fact was not even a regular Church-goer for the last third of his life (DeCaro sheds light on this issue, illustrating Brown's dissatisfaction with one church after another that refused to take strong stands against slavery). If Brown was a Calvinist, Nelson argues, he was one "who so disbelieved in the innate depravity of man that he fought to free men often chained up like ferocious animals, who put guns in their hands and depended upon them to act toward their oppressors with justice and mercy:"

Here was an "orthodox Calvinist" who, for the last weeks of his life, preached in a Dunker church whose congregation believed in universal redemption and, in matters of faith and practice, resembled the Society of Friends. . . . it is true that he used a profoundly religious idiom in his writing and his speech, but, as Donald Freed recently pointed out, before Marx, the Bible provided radicals with an acceptable vocabulary of dissent which "allows one to take extreme positions when required and yet not cede an inch of humanism or patriotism to the status quo."

This is an issue that requires a good deal more study; as mentioned above, Brown's anti-racism and abolitionism seem to stem from his New Divinity upbringing, and the history of controversy and struggle over abolition in Connecticut, and the abolitionist culture of the Western Reserve, certainly play a major role in his later resolve in fighting to end slavery.

¹⁰⁶ *Army Life*, 41.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194-195.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹¹² Sundquist, p. 36.

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