WRITING REALITY:

THE MASTER CHORD AND WIDER VIEWS IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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by

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Abstract

by

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Writing Reality engages the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry David Thoreau as a window through which to reconsider the ontological stakes of the deliberative deadlock that led to the Civil War. By 1850, just over sixty years after the signing of the United States Constitution, the fresh and fertile ground turned up by the American Revolution had bloomed into a bog. The passing of the Fugitive Slave Law recharged the crisis of the Constitutional Convention, spectacularly revealing the nation’s precarious footing that a tradition of practical politics had consistently shrouded. While some politicians attempted to continue the nation’s founding protocol of compromising around the principle of unity, others decided that the only way out of the bog was locating a solid foundation—“a higher law than the Constitution” that could provide a transcendent standard from which to regulate national policy. The challenge remained persuading the nation to agree on such an authority.

Comparing Stowe’s attempt to convince the nation to prioritize the “master chord of Christianity” with Thoreau’s push towards “wider views of the universe,” Writing
Reality illustrates the range of appeals to a higher law and recasts the antebellum crisis as a conflict over the nature of reality itself. As it maps Stowe and Thoreau’s shared trajectory from committed proponents of nonviolent deliberation to outspoken supporters of John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, the dissertation tracks the way ontological commitments ultimately transcended loyalty to the democratic process that sustained the early republic. In narrating Stowe and Thoreau’s struggle to define America’s highest priority, this project illuminates the contingencies and violence involved in forging the nation’s modern values, while interrogating the limits of deliberative democracy and the possibility of peaceful coexistence.
For Rachele,

who told me to keep wanting.
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................................................... v

Prologue .......................................................................................................................................................... 1

Writing with the Realometer: The Fugitive Slave Law, Higher Law, and Coexistence 2

A Brief History Of Antislavery Discourse in America.............................................................................. 17

Part I “The Master Chord” Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Response to the Fugitive Slave Law ......................... 39

Introduction.................................................................................................................................................... 40

Chapter 1 Countering Compromise: Amplifying the Master Chord in Uncle Tom’s Cabin......................... 52

The Fugitive Slave Act and America’s Christian Destiny........................................................................... 53

Christian Slavery, Irrefutable Structures, and Ends over Means.............................................................. 60

Frederick Douglass, New Testament Christianity, and “the living dramatic reality” .............................. 67

Senator Bird, Eliza, and Disproving Politics ................................................................................................. 75

Disputing Slavery’s Benevolence and Exposing “What Slavery Is”......................................................... 79

Rethinking the Union’s Priorities ................................................................................................................. 97

Chapter 2 The Southern Stumbling Block: Christian Progress and the Incompatible South in Dred......................... 101

Competing Realities and the Response to Uncle Tom’s Cabin ................................................................. 103

The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Christian Progress........................................................................ 118

Bleeding Kansas and the Limits of Peaceful Persuasion........................................................................ 125

Dred, Modern Civilization, and Direct Access.......................................................................................... 136

Modern Ideality and Southern Opposition................................................................................................. 150

Dred’s Threat, Unstoppable Progress, and Reforming a Failed State ...................................................... 163

Part II “Wider Views Of The Universe” Henry David Thoreau’s Response to the Fugitive Slave Law ........................................................................................................................................ 178

Introduction................................................................................................................................................... 179
Chapter 3 Walking To Reform: Thoreau, Slavery, and the Framework of the Universe ................................................................. 194
The Path to Walden Pond is Paved with Abolitionists ...................... 198
Writing Scripture and Liberalizing the Faith of Men .......................... 205
Cut and Dried Schemes and the Framework of the Universe ................... 222
Walking, Reality, and Reform ...................................................... 234

Chapter 4 “What Institutions Of Man Can Survive A Morning Experience”: Thoreau’s Struggle To Wake The World ................................................................. 256
The Trouble with Readers, Returning to Walden and Recording Truth ........... 259
Expanding and Revising Walden to Wake the World .............................. 270
The Trial of Massachusetts and the Test of Wider Views ............................ 289
Returning to the Reformers and Really Living ....................................... 299
John Brown, Violence, and America’s Morning Experience ...................... 310

Epilogue ................................................................................. 320

The End of Deliberation and the Battle for a Better World ......................... 321

Bibliography ............................................................................. 331
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PROLOGUE
WRITING WITH THE REALOMETER:

THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW, HIGHER LAW, AND COEXISTENCE

Most of us not only live with many goods but find that we have to rank them, and in some cases, this ranking makes one of them of supreme importance relative to the others.

Charles Taylor, 1989

By 1850, just over sixty years after the signing of the Constitution, the fresh and fertile ground turned up by the American Revolution had bloomed into a bog. Newly acquired territory, gained from a controversial war with Mexico, held up a mirror to this quagmire, as debates over the fate of the added real estate reflected the nation’s precarious footing that a tradition of practical politics had consistently shrouded. The dilemma of whether or not to allow slavery into the new territory renewed the crisis of the Constitutional Convention. Disagreements over which version of the nation should extend to fill the expanding borders hit a crisis point in early 1850 over the question of California’s admission to the Union as a free state. Following the same practice that had thus far kept the nation together, politicians cooked up a compromise they hoped would appease both the North and the South. The compromise’s inclusion of a more robust Fugitive Slave Law set off a maelstrom within the Senate and across the country. Rather than acquiescing to the standard political protocol of appealing to the principle of unity, many writers and activists turned to interrogating the grounds of that union. This study

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centers primarily on two antebellum writers, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry David Thoreau, who contested attempts to differentiate the debate into the political, economic, or religious preferences of separate regions and called instead for a comprehensive reassessment of national priorities.

While Stowe and Thoreau came of age in a growing nation that repeatedly tested the adequacy of its original footing, the Fugitive Slave Law hit squarely upon a fissure in the bedrock that had the potential to bring down the whole structure—and just about everybody knew it. Scrambling to keep the enterprise together, prominent patriots like Daniel Webster defended the law on the grounds of its adherence to the Constitution. Others, including Stowe and Thoreau, were less willing to let the nation’s founding document continue obscuring the necessity of doing the right thing when it came to slavery. In response to Webster’s using the Constitution to justify the Fugitive Slave Law, William Seward, a first term senator from New York, delivered an impassioned speech on the Senate floor, famously evoking “a higher law than the Constitution” that demanded greater loyalty.² The phrase “higher law” had been in circulation for years, with the idea extending back to the Puritan notion of divine law, but Seward’s decisive speech on the divisive Senate floor catapulted the term into the national discussion surrounding the Fugitive Slave Law.³ His speech helped spark the next phase of an ongoing and fiery debate that went on to shake the nation over the course of the decade as

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people stretched the limits and questioned the ends of constitutional authority like never before.

In an early response to the controversy, published under the title *Conscience and the Constitution*, the famed biblical scholar Moses Stuart remarked, “Never, since the Declaration of Independence, and the formation of the United States Constitution, has there been so much deep feeling excited, or so much effort called forth.” While Stuart opposed Southern slavery (without finding slavery itself a sin), his response to the controversy centered on authority: “Virginia may do wrong, (I fear she is so doing), but Virginia is not under our supervision or jurisdiction; nor are we, in any degree, accountable or responsible for her errors or sins!” In response to the notion that “there is a higher law than the Constitution, the law of heaven written on our hearts and consciences,” Stuart pointed to the limits of individual conscience: “Can my private conscience prescribe to Virginia how she shall regulate her laws of property? Can my conscience decide, that sovereignties are not to be left to their own sense of duty?”

Equating the notion of a higher law with conscience and then cataloging the errors of misled consciences, from Saul of Tarsus to Ignatius of Loyola and Mary Queen of England, Stuart dismissed appeals to higher laws than the Constitution when it came to civic matters. “Who has discovered and determined such a law?” he asks. “The honest answer would be, their own passions and prejudices. It is a conscience wholly

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5 Moses Stuart, *Conscience and the Constitution*, 60.

subjective.”⁷ For Stuart, the subjective conscience is not enough to disregard or overturn the “solemn compact” made by “those immortal men and patriots, who formed our Constitution, and who in all our States accepted and approved of it.”⁸ The higher law as determined by individual conscience was simply too unstable an authority on which to attempt governing the nation.

In an 1850 review titled “Higher Law,” Orestes Brownson—one-time transcendentalist and converted Catholic—responded to Stuart with his own assessment of the problem that individual conscience created for the efficacy of appeals to a higher law. Brownson was unabashed in acknowledging a higher law than the Constitution, but argued that the existence of such a law “does not itself justify the appeal to it against the Constitution, either by Mr. Seward or the opponents of the Fugitive Slave Law.”⁹ In the case of Seward, Brownson suggested that “the question of the compatibility or incompatibility of the Constitution with the law of God was a question for him to have raised and settled before taking his senatorial oath,” which oath left him “no plea for appealing from it to a higher law.”¹⁰ Seward’s sworn oath to uphold the Constitution made it “perfectly easy to condemn the appeal of the Senator, without, as Abolitionists and Free Soilers pretend, falling into the monstrous error of denying the supremacy of the


¹⁰ “If he discovered the incompatibility of the imperative provisions of the Constitution only after taking his oath,” Brownson further clarified, “he was bound from that moment to resign his seat,” Brownson, “Higher Law,” 356.
Divine law, and maintain that there is no law above the Constitution.”\textsuperscript{11} The reality of such a higher law indeed foregrounded, according to Brownson, “the grand principle held by the old martyrs,” who “chose martyrdom rather than obedience to the state commanding them to act contrary to the Divine law.”\textsuperscript{12} When it came to the average citizen deciding the path of martyrdom, Brownson, like Stuart, boiled the question down to an issue of discernment: “But who is to decide whether a special civil enactment be or be not repugnant to the law of God?”\textsuperscript{13} Unlike Stuart, however, Brownson labeled this a fundamentally Protestant conundrum.

Styling the higher law debate “a grave and a perplexing question for those who have no divinely authorized interpreter of the Divine law,” Brownson identified the roots of the issue in the “Protestant principle of private judgement.”\textsuperscript{14} This principle, in his estimation, “places the individual above the state, private judgement above the law, and is wholly incompatible with the simplest conception of civil government.”\textsuperscript{15} “No civil government can exist, none is conceivable even,” he explained, “where every individual is free to disobey its orders whenever they do not happen to square with his private convictions of what is the law of God.”\textsuperscript{16} Brownson attributed such a Protestant practice to the destruction of ecclesiastical authority and insisted that if “transferred to civil matters, it would equally put an end to the state, and abolish all civil authority, and

\textsuperscript{11} Brownson, “Higher Law,” 356.
\textsuperscript{12} Brownson, “Higher Law,” 357.
\textsuperscript{13} Brownson, “Higher Law,” 357.
\textsuperscript{14} Brownson, “Higher Law,” 357.
\textsuperscript{15} Brownson, “Higher Law,” 357.
\textsuperscript{16} Brownson, “Higher Law,” 357.
establish the reign of anarchy or license.”

This differentiation between the suitability of Catholic or Protestant principles to answer the ongoing national debate may sound like petty denominational squabbling to modern readers, but it reveals the high stakes that surrounded the antebellum crisis. Brownson bemoaned how “after three hundred years of experimenting” Protestantism found itself “as far as ever from solving the problem, how to reconcile liberty and authority.”

The issues surrounding the Fugitive Slave Law hearkened back, as he emphasized, to a central tension between individual liberty and civic authority that the nation, along with the greater Atlantic world, continued to wrestle with.

After years of deliberation, Brownson himself responded to the quandary by accepting the authority of the Catholic Church. “We have an infallible Church to tell us when there is a conflict between the human law and the Divine” he declared. “We have always a public authority, which, as it is inerrable, can never be oppressive, to guide and direct us, and if we resist the civil law, it is only in obedience to a higher law, clearly and distinctly declared by a public authority higher than the individual, and higher than the state.” Finding security and stability in this transcendent authority, Brownson, like any good convert, enthusiastically pointed to the absence of such authority in the Protestant tradition he had left behind:

There is no principle on which the Abolitionists and Free Soilers can justify their resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law. They cannot appeal to the law of God, for, having no authority competent to declare it, the law of God is for them as if it were not. It is for them a mere unmeaning word, or meaning only their private judgment or individual judgment, which is no law at all, and if it were would at

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best be only a human, and the lowest conceivable human law. ...The highest conceivable human authority has passed the law in question, and in so doing has declared it compatible with the law of God; and as its opponents have only a human authority at best to reverse the judgment of the state, nothing remains for them but to yield it full and loyal obedience.20

Unlike Catholics, who “respect and obey the government as the ordinance of God, in all things not declared by our Church to be repugnant to the Divine law,” Protestants must obey the highest authority they have, which by Brownson’s lights, is simply human authority. As civil law extends from the highest human authority, Protestants are, in this formulation, bound to obey it, at least “till they can bring a higher authority than the state, and a higher authority than their own private judgment, to set it aside as repugnant to the law of God.”21 “This higher authority they have not,” Brownson confidently concluded, “and therefore for them there is no higher law.”22

Although seeped in his own prejudices against the Protestant position, Brownson certainly hit the root of the national crisis. The turmoil of antebellum America indeed swirled around the question of authority and ultimate allegiance—what Perry Miller described in his history of the early American legal profession as a constant questioning of “highest obligations.”23 The first step in answering such a question, as Brownson makes clear, is accessing/discerning the highest law.24 Once determined, the next step


24 On this point, it may be important to clarify the distinction between conscience and higher law, as the close association between the two makes it easy to mistake the appeal to higher law for a turn inward to an individual’s opinion or isolated judgement rather than a turn outward to external standards. The abolitionist argument for loyalty to a higher law did not call for loyalty to an isolated and anarchic conscience, but rather asserted the ability of the conscience to discern external truth.
required assessing its accordance with civic law. Conflicts between the two inherently raised the question of loyalty: which law should be obeyed? According to the January 1851 issue of the Princeton Review, “The answers given to this question are very different and some of them so portentous that the public mind has been aroused and directed to the consideration of the nature of civil government and of the grounds and limits of the obedience due to the laws of the land.”

The author of the Princeton Review article attempted to answer the question with a perplexing distinction between obedience and submission—obeying the higher law but submitting to the law of the land. Brownson, of course, avoided such mental gymnastics by joining the Catholic Church. If the church determined a conflict between civic and divine law, then the response was resistance to the civic law at all costs—“the grand principle held by the old martyrs.” As the “divinely authorized interpreter of the divine law,” the Church offered a gauge that he could confidently reference and comply with. From his perspective, as long as his countrymen lacked such a universal gauge, they were doomed to chaos. Yet, despite Brownson’s sweeping dismissal of alternative claims to authority, he was not the only one clamoring for or claiming such a gauge.

Stowe and Thoreau both shared Brownson’s opinion that the only way out of the bog the nation found itself in was locating a solid foundation—a transcendent authority that could slice through the arguments of the day and stabilize the nation by providing

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grounds from which to measure and justify national policy. “Let us settle ourselves,”

Thoreau wrote in the midst of the turmoil,

and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin having a point d’appui, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time.28

According to Thoreau, the bog that mired the globe by the 1850s could not be escaped by climbing up, out, or around it, nor retreating to the safety of previous institutions. Escaping the swamp required digging downward to the rocks in place beneath it all, then building on that foundation and gauging everything according to that standard. Latent in Thoreau’s imagery is the assumption that there is indeed some reality out there, some point d’appui beneath all of the mud and slush, church and state, philosophy and religion. The scope of Thoreau’s project at Walden—the search for a hard bottom or higher law—was not the singular quest of a Concord eccentric, but one manifestation of a widely felt desire. Like Thoreau, Stowe similarly called for a reconsideration of national and individual priorities, encouraging her contemporaries towards greater harmony through the acceptance of a common tonic. Engaging the work of Stowe and Thoreau as a window through which to reconsider the antebellum struggle over authority that climaxed in the Civil War, this study explores the “realometers” these writers used to gauge the state of the nation and invite their contemporaries to right things accordingly.

The need for such a realometer had less to do with the absence of authority and more to do with the proliferation of competing authorities. When Brownson claimed that the only true authority lies in the Catholic Church and dismissed the possibility of claims to higher authority by anyone else—resigning his non-Catholic countrymen to chaos—he did so convinced that he finally had a firm grasp on reality. Yet, the core of the problem facing antebellum America was, of course, the copious number of people who shared Brownson’s strength of conviction but not his conclusions. Charles Taylor describes this as a condition of our secular age: “We all learn to navigate between two standpoints: an ‘engaged’ one in which we live as best we can the reality our standpoint opens us to; and a ‘disengaged’ one in which we are able to see ourselves as occupying one standpoint among a range of possible ones, with which we have in various ways to coexist.”29 The Fugitive Slave Law strained the possibility of such coexistence by pitting alternative standpoints against each other in a way that many found irreconcilable. It required the North to face their complicity in the nation’s peculiar institution. While certain contingents sought to continue compromising with other standpoints, others asserted the reality and priority of their own standpoint. Brownson avoided wading into this particular controversy due to believing that the Catholic Church declared it a nonissue, but Thoreau and Stowe dove in head first.

This dissertation traces the way Stowe and Thoreau sought to end deliberation on the question of slavery by locating realometers and asserting portraits of reality they hoped would transcend and dismantle the standpoints supporting it. To this degree, one implicit goal of this dissertation is to signal the contingency of American ideals and

illustrate the extent to which writings like those of Stowe and Thoreau contributed to construing American society around certain principles rather than others. However much common human flourishing abounded as an ideal in early America—historians like Gordon Wood point out that the “traditional message of Christian love and charity came together with the Enlightenment’s stress on modern civility and common sociability to make the decades following the Revolution a great era of benevolence and communitarianism”—people continued to struggle throughout the antebellum period to agree on not only what flourishing looked like, but also what humanity looked like.30 Part I of this dissertation explores Stowe’s role in the modern prioritization of goodwill or human flourishing as the orienting basis of society. Part II considers Thoreau’s efforts to expand that notion of flourishing beyond strained understandings of humanity and nature.

As committed proponents of deliberative discourse and nonviolent demonstration, Thoreau and Stowe worked to argue for and against particular foundations of civic government, but encountered a national populace that refused to live up to the views of reality they each articulated. This study tracks how Thoreau and Stowe’s commitment to their particular views of reality ultimately transcended their loyalty to the deliberative democratic process that sustained the early republic, as manifest in their praise of John Brown’s attack on Harper’s Ferry. Mapping this shared trajectory between these two writers illustrates how ontological commitments can transcend a neat differentiation of power. This dissertation not only traces this deliberative crisis, but seeks to color it—to detail the visions of reality that lured Stowe and Thoreau past the possibility of

compromise to the point of supporting a violent overthrow of the standing civic authority. In other words, my intention is not just to identify the way Thoreau and Stowe embraced higher laws over the Constitution, but flesh out what those higher laws were and how Stowe and Thoreau went about trying to convince their countrymen to observe them.

To this end, the readings I offer here are aimed at uncovering each writer’s sense of what Charles Taylor calls “fullness.” Taylor uses this term to describe the general orientation and sense of wholeness that humans perceive and aspire to achieve. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor re-narrates modernity as the product and process of significant changes to Western society’s conception of and approach towards “fullness.” “I wanted to use this as something like a category term to capture the very different ways in which each of us (as I claim) sees life as capable of some fuller, higher, genuine, more authentic, more intense … form,” Taylor clarifies.

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31 “We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape,” writes Taylor. “Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring,” (Taylor, *A Secular Age* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007], 5).

32 The narrative that Taylor offers of modernity essentially traces how this orienting sense has transformed over the past 500 years. “We have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside or ‘beyond’ human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it (in a wide range of different ways) ‘within’ human life,” he explains. “The great invention of the West was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose workings could be systematically and explained on its own terms, leaving open the question whether this whole order had a deeper significance, and whether, if it did, we should infer a transcendent Creator beyond it” (*SA* 15, 27). While not compulsorily dispensing the belief in a transcendent realm beyond the immanent world, this altered perception of the natural world paved the way (or opened up the possibility) for seeking and obtaining fullness outside of a belief in a transcendent power or realm. This led to the creation of a completely immanent means of conceiving and achieving fullness, described in terms of human flourishing that does not require a transcendent realm or dimension. Taylor further suggests that the constant pull or “cross pressures” between immanent and transcendent perspectives led to the creation of more neutral perspectives that failed to align entirely or completely with one or the other. “Where they don’t lead simply to prolonged uncertainty or havering, cross pressures of this kind have been responsible for a host of new positions,” Taylor explains. “We are torn between an anti-Christian thrust and a repulsion towards some (to us) extreme form of reduction: so we invent new positions” (*SA* 599). Taylor’s story tracks the context, development, and variety of these new positions in the modern world.
Why do this? Because I think that it is valuable to try and grasp a position you find unfamiliar and even baffling through trying to bring into focus the understanding of fullness it involves. This is particularly the case if you want to understand it, to be able to feel the power it has for its protagonists, as against simply dismissing it. The argument that I’m putting forward is this, all human beings make something like this kind of distinction, and it’s very important to me to have, if not this word, this, as it were, general category, because I think that part of what’s involved in understanding other positions is their notion of fullness (or ‘motivating intensity’ as Michael Warner suggests we put it). I think it was a very, very useful idea to try to introduce this notion of a general facet or dimension of the human condition where people strive for—have a sense of—what really, fully; authentically; living would be, and to feel that they either aren't there or they are there, or they're getting there, or they're losing it, or they'd like to get there, and so on. This is something that plays a role in people's lives.

With this exposition, Taylor mourns “shallow misunderstandings” that often surround other positions, citing the ways people of faith often assume that atheists simply find the world meaningless, or youth-driven social movements (like those in the 1960s) are young people simply abandoning themselves to drugs and hedonism. His focus on fullness is an attempt to resist reducing the significance of other people’s positions and belief. “You can go on and on about how people fail to understand each other,” he continues, “because they aren’t asking themselves the question—given that this is, as I think, something that crops up in all different human lives—what is their sense of ‘fullness’?” While I sympathize with scholars who have been hesitant to take up the word “fullness,” my study embraces the general concept that people organize their lives and cultures around some imagined authenticity, perception of authority, sense of proper conduct, or notion of really living. It also follows Taylor in approaching the modern condition not as a

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34 From this perspective, even asserting or perceiving a complete lack of possible authority itself becomes a source of authority to guide one’s actions and organize one’s life around. For criticisms of the term, see Jonathan Sheehan “When Was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. Responding to Sheehan, Taylor writes, “Fullness is not a category
steady process of realizing one inherently true perspective, but a contingent process that involves navigating a variety of perspectives. Thinking about reality in terms of an encompassing orienting authority, my goal is not to interrogate how well these writers represent reality, but rather to elucidate the reality their writings represent and compose.

I am intentionally evoking the broad and general term “reality” as a means of undermining a differentiated focus that would categorize either of their perspectives within a binary like “religious” or “secular.” In taking up an overtly “religious” writer like Harriet Beecher Stowe alongside a writer often hailed as a patriarch of the “spiritual but not religious movement,” I am seeking to explore and compare orienting authorities and corresponding commitments, rather than classify them according to a proscribed set of ideas. I resist such classification on the grounds that such labels have, as Gauri Viswanathan writes, “lost their descriptive value and function instead as signposts to given attitudes.”35 The interest of this dissertation is to push past such signposts in an effort to actually explore and compare the different assumptions that writers in antebellum America relied on to make sense of the world. To approach their sense of reality or fullness, my operating questions are: what imagined values or existence are they orienting themselves, their lives, and their world around? How do these assumptions influence the way they confront the problems facing the nation? What type

35 Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1998), xv. Such attitudes often associate the religious with the unsubstantiated, making the secular, which marks everything “not religious,” a euphemism for designating a presumably objective reality. Such designations not only lack descriptive value, but also obscure the fact that all pictures of reality hinge on decided assumptions. For more on the mutual relationship between the religious and the secular see Tracy Fessenden, “‘The Secular’ as Opposed to What?” *New Literary History* 38, no. 4 (2007): 631–36. For more on constructed pictures of reality see Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Harvard UP, 2015), 1-55.
of a world are they inviting their readers to join them in creating? What type of world are they trying to destroy? Answering these questions in the pages that follow, this dissertation examines Harriet Beecher Stowe and Henry David Thoreau’s written efforts to right the imagined realities of their readers.
A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTISLAVERY DISCOURSE IN AMERICA

Be it good or bad, it has grown up with our society and institutions, and is so interwoven with them, that to destroy it would be to destroy us as a people. ...I hold it to be a good, as it has thus far proved itself to be to both, and will continue to prove so if not disturbed by the fell spirit of abolition.

John C. Calhoun, 1837

While a lot of things changed from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, the heart of antislavery sentiment was not one of them. The earliest known public objection to slavery in Britain’s North American colonies occurred in 1688 at Germantown, Pennsylvania. Stating a disapproval of “the traffic of men-body,” the protest statement begins with a straightforward sentimental appeal: “Is there any that would be done or handled at this matter? viz., to be sold or made a slave for all the time of his life?” The presumed answer to that question guides the remainder of the document:

Now, though they are black, we cannot conceive there is more liberty to have them slaves as it is to have other white ones. There is a saying that we should do to all men like as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of generation, descent, or colour they are. And those who steal or rob men, and those who buy or purchase them are they not all alike? Here [in the new world] is liberty of conscience, which is right and reasonable: here ought to be likewise liberty of the body except of evil-doers, which is another case. But to bring men thither; or to rob and sell them against their will, we stand against.

The statement goes on to conclude with a request that mirrors those that many antislavery activists would make over the next century and a half: “Now consider well this thing, if it is good or bad. And in case you find it to be good to handel these blacks in that manner, we desire and require you hereby lovingly that you may inform us herein, which at this time was never done, viz., that Christians have such a liberty to do so.”

The authors of this protest wondered about the potential arguments Christians could possibly use to defend their practice of slavery.

Such curiosity, however, ran up against entrenched assumptions that understood slavery as an ancient institution that early colonizers imported and continued, rather than began. Emphasizing the difference between enslaving the free and utilizing those already enslaved muted the pointed nature of the Germantown protest’s encouragement to self-reflection and justification. From a certain perspective—as Virginia courts officially began recognizing property in men and women in the early 1640s—early colonizers in the Americas simply began purchasing existing slaves instead of indentured servants.

Employing existing and lawful labor resources in a manner that had been utilized throughout history, these colonizers did not necessarily see themselves as singularly immoral nor feel immense pressure to defend an institution they did not create. They accommodated slavery’s associated evils as had others before them.

Rooted in the Quaker beliefs of the community, the Germantown protest signaled an egalitarian sentiment emerging from a deeply stratified world. Paul Finkelman ties the colonial period’s lack of similar public stances against slavery to an “imperial social

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structure, which implicitly justified bondage,” based as it was on distinctive classes and social hierarchies. ⁴ In addition to being endorsed by the British crown, slavery was reasonably amenable to the hierarchical views motivating Western European efforts to colonize the new world. As David Brion Davis articulates, the view of slavery during the colonization of the Americas balanced slavery’s incongruence with an ideal order against the necessities of a sinful world. Enslaving someone was different than purchasing an already enslaved person—as the latter did not affect the broader sense of order. ⁵ To the common seventeenth century outlook, Davis argues, “servitude appeared to balance natural freedom and worldly fate, human authority and the equality of men under the supreme rule of God.” Conceptualized within “an idealized picture of a dutiful servant in a Christian family,” slavery was viewed “not so much as a righteous punishment as a model of man’s dependence on higher authority.” ⁶

Slavery’s continued existence relied on this dependent model—where God’s authority was acquiesced to as a result of its being the highest authority, rather than its accordence with the right principles the Germantown document gestures towards. The anomaly of the Germantown protest lies in its interrogating the grounds of slavery that contemporaries took for granted. These established assumptions were increasingly destabilized, however, by the egalitarian and evangelical direction that politics and religion in the colonies pursued throughout the eighteenth century.


⁵ David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Western World (NY: Oxford, UP, 1988), especially 165-222. “American slaveholders,” Davis suggests, “took comfort in the thought that they had simply received their bond servants from others, and bore no moral responsibility for what might have happened in Africa or the high seas” (202).

⁶ Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Western World, 201.
Present in the British colonies throughout the seventeenth century, slavery oscillated between civic and religious responsibility. As prevalent scriptural justification of slavery in the colonies initially centered on a basic distinction between Christians and heathens, widespread conversion to Christianity among the enslaved created a serious dilemma. If baptizing the enslaved implicitly challenged the grounds of their continued enslavement, slave owners worried that evangelizing their slaves might inevitably deprive them of their property. In response, Virginia’s General Assembly passed a statute in 1667 that denied baptism-implied manumission. Establishing slavery as a civic matter, the statute combatted the conversion dilemma, without curbing efforts to evangelize the enslaved.\(^7\) Formal opinions from the Attorney General and Solicitor General in 1729 officially applied this same position to the British kingdom at large.\(^8\) Taking slavery out of the hands of the church allowed Christians to minister to the enslaved without being ultimately responsible for their freedom, but it also left slavery with a thin defense beyond an appeal to civic authority, which the Declaration of Independence ultimately complicated.

The political upheaval of the American Revolution brought with it a wave of abolition, as several northern states rapidly extended the ideals of the Declaration to all their inhabitants. This was, of course, easier done in the north where slavery was less prevalent and less economically significant. The swift wave of action by civic bodies in the north, inherently removed the necessity of religious handwringing. But the lack of similar response from southern civic bodies—despite ideological opposition to slavery—

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\(^8\) Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Western World*, 209.
left ample opportunity for religious response.⁹ White churchmen in the south, however, revealed the same unwillingness to act against what, until then, had been persevered as a civic issue outside their jurisdiction.¹⁰ As a result, Southern statesmen entered the constitutional convention in 1787 without a sturdy abstract moral defense of slavery, relying instead on economic and historical arguments.¹¹ As one South Carolina delegate put it, “if slavery be wrong, it is justified by the example of the world.”¹² The success of the constitutional convention suggests that the appeal to slavery’s prominence throughout world history sufficiently sanctioned a sidestepping of moral questions, at least enough to empower the economic argument that the South could not survive without it and, as a result, the Union depended on it. This sense of slavery’s necessity to the viability of the Union became an underlying assumption and rallying cry throughout the early republic.

Although the Southern delegates secured protection of slavery in the new nation’s constitution, their thin moral defense of slavery needed reinforcement. Fatefully, although slavery’s confirmed status as a civic issue cemented the irrelevance of a heathen/non-heathen defense of slavery, it cleared the way to more fully conceptualize “a master-slave relationship in which both parties belonged to the community of the

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⁹ Irons points to Jefferson as the epitome of this dissonance between creating moral conflict over slavery, while never working to end it. Finkelman suggests that despite Jefferson’s labelling slavery “a great and political moral evil,” he implicitly created formidable grounds for supporting it in his thoughts on race and emphasis on the need for labor (Finkelman 22). Jefferson, in his contradictions, exemplifies the Southern paradox of acknowledging the evil of slavery without taking action to actually end it, and in many cases working desperately to preserve it.

¹⁰ Irons suggests that, as pressure mounted on slavery throughout the 1780s, Christian leaders in Virginia resorted to “creative inaction,” sidestepping the question by appealing to slavery’s status as a civil rather than spiritual affair (Irons, 56).

¹¹ Finkelman, Defending Slavery, 23.

The result was an increased emphasis on paternalism, which, as Eugene Genovese details, “defined the involuntary labor of the slaves as a legitimate return to their masters for protection and direction.” While slaves remained legal property—capable of being bought and sold—the living and working space they shared with Southern slaveholders required “some measure of self-interest and respect.” “Southern paternalism,” Genovese explains, “developed as means of mediating irreconcilable class and racial conflicts.” It asserted that both parties mutually benefitted from the arrangement—the slaveholder providing guidance and protection in exchange for the labor of the slave. The mutual benefit of this exchange—that it had everyone’s best interest in mind—could be mobilized to satisfy the call of Christian benevolence. Furthermore, insisting that this paternal social structure was ordained by God served as a means of offsetting the complications created by an increasing egalitarian sentiment—like that found in the Declaration. With slavery’s status as a civic issue under scrutiny, this God-ordained paternalism came to serve as a focal point for renewed moral justification.

Appeals to the mutual benefits of slavery graced the first meeting of Congress in 1789, bolstered by explanations of scriptural support and racial reasoning a year later. The 1790 speech of South Carolina’s William L. Smith is especially significant in this regard, as it outlined the persistent contours of proslavery thought—including paternalism, race, history, and scriptural sanction—before historical events typically

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understood to contribute towards proslavery thought, including the Haitian revolt (1791) and the invention of the cotton gin (1794). Smith’s passionate defense of slavery suggests that the seeds of a fervent Southern resistance were planted early on—he concluded his remarks by claiming to have successfully “removed the force of observations which have been advanced against the toleration of slavery, by a misguided and misinformed humanity.” His own efforts to sanctify slavery gained greater steam and eloquence as time went on. In an 1818 address, he determined to “show from the Bible itself that slavery was permitted by Divine authority.” Reading God’s instructions to Moses regarding bond-men from Leviticus 25:39-46, Smith concluded, “It might be hoped that this would satisfy the scruples of all who believe in the divinity of the Bible. … If [the antislavery advocates in Congress] have not turned after strange gods, it is hoped the authority I have quoted might satisfy them.” In an 1820 address discussing the Missouri compromise, Smith also directly battled the prominent anti-slavery accusation that “slavery is against the spirit of the Christian religion.” “When, and by what authority,” Smith questioned, “were we taught to separate the positive laws of God from the Christian religion? Christ himself gave a sanction to slavery” (219). While Smith’s forthrightness might have been exceptional, he voiced what became a founding defense of slavery up through the Civil War: God sanctioned the slavery system for the

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mutual benefit of all involved, and any criticism of the system must contend with that ultimate authority.

Despite the lurking presence of arguments like Smith’s, slavery’s general disavowal throughout the so-called Age of Revolution—most notably in the end of the Atlantic slave trade—led many Americans to assume the inevitability of complete abolition. For such people, the Missouri Compromise of 1820 came as a salient wake up call. All hopes that the abolitionist wave would gradually isolate slavery to the South where it would slowly die were dashed with the Missouri Compromise’s protected expansion of slavery into the new territories. New territory gave slavery renewed lifeblood. Furthermore, the compromise crystallized the political protocol that the Constitution introduced—slavery’s dubious moral status would be neglected in favor of political expediency. Union became the trump word restraining the national discussion of slavery at every turn.

The liability of the growing moral opinion against slavery, however, did not go unnoticed. Less than two decades after the Missouri Compromise, John C. Calhoun responded to antislavery petitions sent to the Senate in 1837 with a resounding defense of

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21 This was a principle Harriet Beecher Stowe understood clearly, as she explained in the preface to the European edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: “Unless more slave territory is gained slavery dies—if it is gained it lives.—Around this point political parties fight and manoeuvre and every year the battle wages hotter, and it is fast becoming the great national question,” (Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* [Leipzig: Bernard Tauchnitz, 1852], x).

22 For discussion of the silence that followed the Missouri Compromise, see Forbes, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath*, 19-141.
slavery and prophetic vision predicting the Union’s eventual demise on the basis of slavery’s moral status. Calhoun opened by designating the petitions’ pronouncement of slavery as “sinful and odious, in the sight of God and man” to be part of a “systematic design of rendering us hateful in the eyes of the world—with a view to a general crusade against us and our institutions.” Rather than discounting such pronouncements, Calhoun registered their dangerous potential. He began by urging the Senate’s version of the House’s “gag rule” in simply refusing to accept the petitions. Receiving such petitions, he argued, would lead to the formation of a committee, followed by deliberation, followed by action. Denouncing the notion that “the most effectual mode of arresting the progression of abolition is, to reason it down,” Calhoun insisted that slavery was a subject beyond the jurisdiction of Congress and thus “they have no right to touch it in any shape or form, or to make it the subject of deliberation or discussion.” If such petitions were allowed to continue, and the “incendiary spirit” of abolition is given room to spread, he prophesied, “it will spread and work upwards till it brings the two great sections of the Union into deadly conflict.” The prescience of his subsequent prophecy is too rich to abridge:

However sound the great body of the non-slaveholding States are at present, in the course of a few years they will be succeeded by those who will have been taught to hate the people and institutions of nearly one-half of this Union, with a hatred more deadly than one hostile nation ever entertained towards another. It is easy to see the end. By the necessary course of events, if left to themselves, we must become, finally, two people. It is impossible under the deadly hatred which must spring up between the two great sections, if the present causes are permitted to operate unchecked, that we should continue under the same political system. The conflicting elements would burst the Union asunder, powerful as are the links which hold it together. Abolition and the Union cannot co-exist.

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Shaping a sense of the dangerous potential of antislavery advocates, Calhoun threw down a rhetorical gauntlet that would continue to define the legislative slavery discussion over the next two decades.

Antislavery activism came to be viewed as an extremist affront to the collective welfare of the nation and peaceful maintenance of the Union—a notion that persisted and shaped the compromising efforts of 1850, including the Fugitive Slave Act. Framing the slavery debate in this way increased legislative reticence, but it did not squelch the moral discussion. Calhoun’s fear of the rising generation was, of course, not unfounded. Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, was a newly married twenty-five-year-old when Calhoun delivered that speech, and Henry David Thoreau was in his final semester at Harvard. Calhoun’s anxieties reflected the touchy nature of the debate, and a concern that, regardless of Southern defense, the fanatical arguments of the North would be infectious and overwhelming. Yet, as abolitionist activities intensified, so did proslavery arguments like those of William L. Smith. As the nineteenth century wore on, the different sides gradually fortified their trenches awaiting the inevitable battle that was sure to come. Ironically, it was the end of a military war that mobilized the sectional conflict into rhetorical combat that would last for the next decade.

When the controversial war with Mexico ended in 1848, it resulted in vast land gains that revitalized the debate over slavery’s expansion. While slavery’s connection to the maintenance of the Union had become a common presumption, the new territory created fresh ground for familiar questions about the foundation and future of the nation. In 1850, California’s request for admission into the Union as a free state without an
accompanying slave state threatened the current balance in the Senate and commenced another legislative crisis. From a political standpoint, the inability to reconcile differing points of view necessitated loyalty to the founding agreement that formed and bound the nation together. But the question of whether to admit new territories as free states or slave states was troubling because, as Daniel Webster put it, “The framers of the Constitution never contemplated the acquisition of foreign territory.” With the Constitution presenting the highest law of the land—the binding compact made between appeased parties—it’s failure to directly confront the question of slavery’s expansion left space for lively debate, with opposing sides deducing their positions from separate principles (states’ rights, universal liberty, etc.).

On January 29, 1850, in anticipation of the controversy that would surround California’s formal bid, Kentucky Senator Henry Clay presented a series of resolutions, which he called a “great national scheme of compromise and harmony.” Introducing what would become known as the Compromise of 1850, Clay implored his fellow Senators to employ a portion of the “care and deliberation” in considering them as he devoted to preparing them. The resolutions included admitting California as a free state, leaving the fate of slavery in the remaining new territories to the care of their local sovereign governments, fixing the boundaries of Texas south of New Mexico in exchange for assuming debts incurred by the former Republic of Texas, abolishing the slave trade in the District of Columbia, employing more stringent legal efforts in

25 Daniel Webster, “Oregon,” Congressional Globe 31st Cong., 1st Sess. (August 12, 1851), 1077. Webster continues on in this Senate address regarding the Oregon territory to claim that the constitutional convention marked slavery as “a State institution,” from which he deduces that slavery only exists as “local law” and can therefore only be enacted and regulated on a local level—meaning Congress did not have the power to determine or enforce slavery in the territories.
returning those who flee bounds of service or labor in one state by escaping into another, and, finally, confirming Congress’s inability to regulate the trading of slaves between slaveholding states. He shared them following a short preamble that stated a desire “for the peace, concord, and harmony of the union of these States to settle and adjust amicably all existing questions of controversy between them arising out of the institution of slavery, upon a fair, equitable, and just basis.”

Clay’s scheme sought not just harmony and compromise, but harmony through compromise. He invited his fellow Senators to see how his proposed resolutions provided “no sacrifice of any principle.” Rather they put forth a plan “founded upon mutual forbearance, originating in a spirit of conciliation and concession.” By admitting that they likely asked for a “more liberal and extensive concession” from the Free states of the North, Clay connected that concession primarily to the existence in these states of “a sentiment averse to the institution of slavery” dictated by “considerations of humanity and philanthropy.” He characterized this attitude as “a sentiment without sacrifice, a sentiment without danger, a sentiment without hazard or peril, without loss.” “In one scale, then,” he explained, “we behold sentiment, sentiment, sentiment alone; in the other property, the social fabric, life, and all that makes life desirable and happy.” The North, he reasoned, should consent to greater concession because they had only sentiment at stake. Characterizing Northern aversion to slavery as the product of isolated sentiment—a trivial consideration compared to the totality of life and happiness—Clay sought to control the parameters of the debate, assuming that

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leverage in negotiations would be conceded to whoever has the most at stake. This is a familiar rhetorical strategy—whoever defines the stakes of the argument shapes the course and outcome of the debate.

Aware of the significant debate his resolutions were sure to raise, Clay reached deeper into his rhetorical repertoire and concluded his proposal with a dramatic anecdote. A man, he explained, without foreknowledge of the day’s impending proceedings, happened to visit his room that very morning and present a fragment from the coffin of George Washington. Bypassing any suspicions about how this man obtained such a relic, Clay characterized the gift not as “a sad presage of what might happen to that fabric which Washington’s virtue, patriotism, and valor established,” but as a “warning voice coming from the grave to the Congress now in session to beware, to pause, to reflect before they lend themselves to any purposes which shall destroy that Union which was cemented by his exertions and example.” 28 This stirring closing image and the conflicting aims of his resolutions suggest that Clay sought “the peace, concord, and harmony of the union” through compromise around the principle of unity rather than any shared principle reflecting common national values. Assuming the discord could not be helped, he aimed to reduce it to a tolerable level and keep the Union together at all costs.

Abolitionists, of course, pointed out that such calls for tolerance and prioritizing of national unity inherently sublimated the question of slavery—postponing the debate rather than confronting the issues at stake. William Lloyd Garrison, for example, described Clay as “a brilliant orator, and exceedingly attractive and magnetic in social life, but utterly devoid of principle, and one who has done more than any other man to

extend and perpetuate slavery, and render popular the accursed doctrine of ‘compromise.’” Garrison had been railing against compromise for years. From his perspective, even the US Constitution’s legitimation of slavery made the compact, “in the nature of things and according to the law of God, null and void from the beginning.”

For abolitionists like Garrison, no compromise could disguise the injustice of slavery. Any compromise on the issue—whether in the name of unity or anything else—required a sacrifice of principle.

Clay’s strategy for defending the compromise rested, to a certain extent, on downplaying such sacrifice. Clarifying the primary objects of his resolutions in a follow-up speech a week later, Clay reiterated his “endeavor to frame such a scheme of accommodation [so] that neither of the two classes of States into which our country is unhappily divided should make a sacrifice of any great principle.” Clay construed any disapproval of the compromise as a matter “not of principle, not of principle at all, but of feeling, of opinion,” devoid of the “careful, rational, and attentive examination” that national policy decisions required. This masculine appeal to rationality over sentiment...
proved significant—picked up and echoed most famously in Daniel Webster’s exhortation, “let us not be pigmies in a case that calls for men.”

Webster’s support of the compromise, which upset many of his fellow Northerners, reflected Clay’s same prioritization of the Union. Webster was, however, less patronizing of Northern motivations and he troubled Clay’s classification of aversion to slavery as “sentiment alone.” In his infamous March 7th Senate speech, Webster historicized sentiments surrounding slavery to contend that there was, at the ratification of the constitution, a “coincidence and concurrence of sentiment between the North and the South” concerning the evil of slavery. He concluded, however, that opinions had simply changed. Referring to the North, Webster suggested that antislavery views had “taken hold of the religious sentiment of that part of the country, as it has more or less taken hold of the religious feelings of a considerable portion of mankind.” Despite connecting Northern sentiment with the feelings of humanity at large, Webster still consented that there are also “thousands of religious men, with consciences as tender as any of their brethren at the North, who do not see the unlawfulness of slavery.”

Conceding the religious nature of the differing sentiments that now overwhelm the nation, Webster responds with a time-tested truism: “religious disputes are apt to become warm.” With an acute awareness of the variety of religious opinions, Webster complicates assumptions like Stowe’s that assume the answer to the question lies in

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33 He rehearsed a perspective of Christianity that the likes of Stowe would affirm: “The object of the instruction, imparted by mankind, by the Founder of Christianity...went directly to the first fountain of all political and all social relations of the human race—the individual heart and mind of man” (270).

34 Webster, “Speech of Mr. Webster,” 270.
simply approaching it with an eye to Christian duty. For Webster, reducing the debate to religious duty only reveals the variety of religiously legitimated responses, and thus heightens rather than resolves the tension.

Although amending Clay’s scaling of the problem to clarify that the conflict is more than “sentiment alone” versus “all that makes life desirable and happy,” Webster nevertheless arrives at a similar conclusion of the need to properly weigh out what is at stake. The warmth of such disputes, according to Webster, blinds men from seeing “how too hot a pursuit of one duty may involve them in the violation of another, or how too warm an embracement of one truth may lead to a disregard of other truths equally important.” Adamant that moral principles not be confused with the precision of mathematics, Webster railed against those chasing perfection at the expense of the good: “If their perspicacious vision enables them to detect a spot on the face of the sun, they think that a good reason why the sun should be struck down from Heaven.” Positing slavery as a spot on the sun that is the Union, Webster approaches the conflict over slavery in terms similar to Clay. Although clarifying how the question for both sides runs deeper than a mere feeling—bound up in religion as it is—Webster stops short, in this setting, of weighing in on whether slavery is right or wrong. He never engages the question of slavery outside of the context of the Union, where some folks think slavery is good, some folks think it is bad. Prioritizing the welfare of the Union over individual opinions, Webster invokes the virtue of self-sacrifice. Firmly rooted in that context, he ultimately denounces idealists unwilling to compromise “in submission to difference of

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35 Webster, “Speech of Mr. Webster,” 270.
opinion, or to other men’s judgement.” He condemns those choosing, in other words, what amounts to their own opinion over the welfare of the Union and in contrast to the Constitution.

Webster articulated this position even further in a May 1851 speech in Buffalo, New York—which ran in the *National Era* the week prior to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s premiere in that same publication. More forthcoming about his distaste for slavery, but equally resolute about his adamant support for what he considered his constitutional duty, Webster explained:

> Gentlemen, I regret extremely that slavery exists in the Southern States, and that Congress has no power to act upon it. But it may be in the dispensation of Providence some remedy may be found for it. But in the meantime, I hold onto the Constitution of the United States; and you need never expect from me, under any circumstances, that I shall falter from it that I shall be otherwise than frank and decisive.37

Open about his personal feelings in a setting less formal than the Senate floor, Webster nevertheless holds fast to an ideological perspective that Gordon Wood locates at the heart of the American Revolutionary experiment. According to Wood, “the sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole formed the essence of republicanism and comprehended for Americans the idealistic goal of their Revolution.” Americans turned to revolution by linking the end goal of government to “the public good” (a phrase Wood identifies as second only to “liberty” in its frequency within Revolutionary

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36 Webster, “Speech of Mr. Webster,” 271.

37 Daniel Webster, “Speech of Daniel Webster, at Buffalo May 22” *The National Era* 22 (May 29, 1851), 86.

From the perspective of the public good, a fundamental deficiency of monarchial governments in England and around the world resulted from their “sacrificing of the public good to the private greed of small ruling groups.”\(^{40}\) A republican government, in contrast, would be designed towards communal good and rooted in the virtue of the people, trusting, in other words, the people’s ability to identify and pursue the best interests of the public.\(^{41}\) In this context, the divisiveness that accompanied slavery came down to the people’s inability to agree on whether it gratified the public good or sectional greed.

Acculturation into sections, North and South, increasingly fractured the idea of a common public good, as Americans grew wary (and weary) of seeing national interests dictated by the preferences of one section over the other. Such sectional feelings were widely apparent at this point in the nation’s development and on full display in the debate over the 1850 compromise, especially vivid in the remarks of that third member of the Great Triumvirate, John C. Calhoun. A dying Calhoun, in remarks read for him by a Virginian senator a few days before Webster’s speech, cut straight to the chase, declaring the precarious state of the Union. Agitation of the slavery question, as he predicted in 1837, destroyed “the equilibrium between the two sections in Government, as it stood when the constitution was ratified and the Government put into action.” Consequently


\(^{41}\) As Gordon Wood notes in *The Empire of Liberty*, “This reliance on the moral virtue of their citizens, on their capacity for self-sacrifice and impartiality of judgement, was what made republican governments historically so fragile” (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 8.
“one section has the exclusive power of controlling the Government.”42 From this perspective Calhoun proposes that the Union could be saved not by “eulogies on the Union”—which he likens to a physician eulogizing his dying patient’s health—but only by “adopting such measures as will satisfy the states belonging to the southern section that they can remain in the Union consistently with their safety and honor.”43 In Calhoun’s eyes, because the South remained faithful to the Constitution, “the responsibility of saving the Union rests on the North, and not on the South.”44

The poignancy with which Webster prioritized his constitutional duty reflects the extent to which he accepted Calhoun’s premise that the vitality of the Union rested on respecting the dictates of the Constitution and equally legitimating the positions of the parties involved. “My affections, my children, my hopes, my everything, is with the North,” Webster assured his Buffalo audience in May 1851. “But when I stand up before my country as one appointed to administer the Constitution of the country, by the blessing of God, I will be just.”45 Webster’s sense of justice here unfolds within the terms of the Constitution, which included provisions for slavery—provisions Webster felt bound to protect. Embracing this conservative stance, Webster joined Calhoun in calling for the preservation of the original 1787 pact that officially formed the nation as a collective body.


45 A line met, according to The National Era’s transcriber, with “great applause,” Webster, “Speech of Daniel Webster, at Buffalo May 22,” 86.
Yet, not everyone felt that altering the terms of that original compact in relation to newly gained territories constituted an innate danger to the Union. William H. Seward, a former Governor of New York, a future member of Lincoln’s cabinet, and a leading anti-slavery proponent in the Senate, took the floor a few days after Webster’s March 7th speech to engage “the great and absorbing argument, that the Union is in danger of being dissolved.” Like Webster, Seward clearly pledged his allegiance: “I do not know what I would not do to save the Union.” He broke from Webster, however, by articulating a clear moral stance against slavery and expressing his willingness to vote accordingly. Nevertheless, he justified that break not as prioritizing his moral views over the welfare of the Union, but rather as a rejection of the plausibility of disunion altogether. “I shall not suffer a fear which I have not,” he told the Senate, “to make me compromise one sentiment—one principle of truth or justice—to avert a danger that all experience teaches me is chimerical. Let, then, those who distrust the union, make compromises to save it.” Positioning faith in the Union as enabling loyalty to “a higher law than the Constitution,” Seward surmised that the Union could weather the factions over slavery as it weathered so many previous factions of the past on its path towards progress. The possibility of faction did not, in other words, compel him to abandon his fight to defend the moral principles he believed in, “because faction could find no fulcrum on which to place the lever to subvert the Union.” Whereas Webster—fearing the fragility of the


Union—accepted the necessity of certain sacrifices to preserve the terms of the Constitution, Seward refused those sacrifices on faith in the Union’s security. The peace and harmony of the united nation, for Steward, did not hinge on loyalty to the Constitution, as he famously declared in this same speech that “there is a law higher than the constitution, which regulates our authority over the domain, and devotes it to the same noble purposes.” “The territory is a part—no inconsiderable part—of the common heritage of mankind,” he continues, “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.”

Seward appeals to an authority existing beyond or previous to the Constitution.

Webster, however, refuses to countenance any exterior authority that presumed to supersede the Constitution. “But it may be in the dispensation of Providence some remedy may be found for [slavery],” he told the crowd at Buffalo, “But in the meantime, I hold onto the Constitution of the United States.”

Reticent about what such a providential remedy might look like or include, Webster remained adamant in his support of the Constitution and his dismissal of what he considered the fanatical position of Northern abolitionists. In the Compromise of 1850, his appeal to more fully enforce the dictates of the Constitution ultimately won out. Framed as a compromise capable of easing tensions and avoiding war, versions of Clay’s resolutions eventually passed individually in September 1850, but only after failing as an omnibus bill two months earlier. The variety of factors influencing the various opinions about slavery’s fate in the

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50 Seward, “California, Union, and Freedom,” 265.

51 Webster, “Speech of Daniel Webster, at Buffalo May 22,” 86.
new territories circled back, in one way or another, to the future and vitality of the Union. This divisive compromise seemed like a test of the limits of the existing Constitutional structure and a final experiment in the national capacity to “sacrifice upon the altar of the Union, every unhappy sectional feeling.”

The compromise’s inclusion of what became the Fugitive Slave Act proved particularly influential in unsettling appeals to Union as the highest demand of public life. In making the apprehension of runaway slaves a duty binding on all citizens, the Fugitive Slave Law, as it was also known, highlighted the complicity of the Free States in slavery and challenged the possibility of being an apathetic or disapproving bystander. For many, the law helped transform slavery from an institution that Free States simply tolerated within the Union, to an institution that Free States were forced to support and participate in. Intended to postpone a genuine assessment of slavery, the compromise ended up compelling the country to confront it with new vigor.

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PART I

“THE MASTER CHORD”

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE’S RESPONSE TO THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW
INTRODUCTION

In February 1851, five months after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, Harriet Beecher Stowe asked her brother Henry to send “anything that will give me the argument that Christians use who defend the slave law.” “I might perhaps feel more charity,” she wrote, “if I saw the other side—at present I cannot see or imagine what plausible thing can be said—except that might makes right.”¹ Four months after sending this request, Uncle Tom’s Cabin began appearing serially in the National Era.² In her “Concluding Remarks,” Stowe identifies this bewilderment over Christian support of the Fugitive Slave Act as the catalyst for the story:

[S]ince the legislative act of 1850, when she heard, with perfect surprise and consternation, Christian and humane people actually recommending the remanding escaped fugitives into slavery, as a duty binding on good citizens,—when she heard, on all hands, from kind, compassionate and estimable people, in the free states of the North, deliberations and discussions as to what Christian duty could be on this head,—she could only think, These men and Christians cannot know what slavery is; if they did, such a question could never be open for discussion. And from this arose a desire to exhibit it in a living dramatic reality.³

Perplexed by those deliberating over their Christian duty in response to the Fugitive Slave Act, Stowe admits that she entered the debate with the express purpose of ending it. Her search for Christian arguments supporting the law seems to have amounted to the


conclusion that, in the absence of sensible justification, those defending the slave law simply misunderstand slavery. Once readers see slavery exhibited in a living dramatic reality, she concludes, they will perceive its obvious incompatibility with basic Christian teaching. That incongruence will, consequently, undercut all other reasons for supporting the institution and end the current deliberations on the subject.

Geared toward this goal, Stowe’s anti-slavery strategy in Uncle Tom’s Cabin is predicated on an ostensibly common conception of Christianity that assumes the illegitimacy of a “might makes right” defense. Lawrence Buell has noted how the inherent risk of such broad presumptions—in terms of their potential to alienate readers who hold alternative perspectives—has to be reconciled with the novel’s unmatched and immediate impact. The “gospel according to Stowe” was a runaway bestseller. The success of Stowe’s work can, however, distract attention away from its alienating potential. The abundance of individual and institutional support that Stowe’s Christian contemporaries devoted to slavery left ample room to doubt her confidence in the universal Christian response that would follow a clearer understanding of “what slavery is.” Supporters of slavery, as Mark Noll has persuasively argued, had more or less won the hermeneutical debate according to exegetical standards of the time. Dismissing such Biblical defenses of slavery by assuming the unified Christian response that would inevitably follow a clearer understanding of the institution, Stowe framed her novel around a particular sense of Christianity that she hoped to prove universal.

The novel’s 1852 preface gestures towards the basis of Stowe’s vision in reference to the dawning of a “better day.” “Every influence of literature, of poetry, and of art, in our times,” Stowe writes, “is becoming more and more in unison with the great master chord of Christianity, ‘goodwill to man.’” (V). Identifying Christianity’s “master chord,” Stowe reveals a standard according to which she and her readers, as fellow Christians, could evaluate the progress of their times and the state of the nation.

Indicative of progress and essential to harmony, such a standard transcended all other considerations and desires. Dissatisfied with the way “politicians contend, and men are swerved this way and that,” Stowe frames Uncle Tom’s Cabin in the preface as an attempt to convince readers that the slavery question, regardless of “conflicting tides of interest and passion,” ultimately came down to whether or not the institution was in tune with Christianity’s master chord, goodwill to man.

Such an appeal was complicated by the fact that, despite Stowe’s confidence, not everyone shared her sense of Christianity’s master chord. For many of her contemporaries, the meaning and priority of goodwill remained what William James refers to as a “living option.” Although repugnant to Stowe’s perspective, the Fugitive

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7 “A live hypothesis,” James writes in “The Will to Believe,” “is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed.” “A living option,” he continues, “is one in which both hypotheses are live ones” (The Will to Believe [1869] in Pragmatism: A Reader ed. by Louis Menand [New York: Vintage, 1997], 70). James makes a distinction between a living option that a person can avoid weighing in on and “a forced option” where there is “no standing place outside the alternative”—a choice must be made before going on. The national discussion of slavery, in these terms, had never been posed as a forced option. Beginning with the Constitution, statesman and politicians consistently avoided choosing between alternative perspectives by turning to careful deliberation and compromise. In these deliberations the Union became the forced option, the stakes upon which decisions were made, with slavery an appendage to that discussion. In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, however, Stowe worked to construct slavery into a forced option—a dilemma that had to be solved if the nation continued to stay together. Acknowledging Lewis O. Saum’s argument that “the spirit of the ordinary American of the mid-nineteenth century more closely resembled his Puritan ancestors than his twentieth-century descendants,” this chapter considers how Uncle Tom’s Cabin contributed to this eventual shift in spirit by altering the focal point of national discussion (The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America, [Wespoint, CT: Greenwood, 1980], xxiii).

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Slave Act, from other perspectives, reflected benevolent citizenship and Christian propriety as it was designed to preserve a God-ordained institution. The theological essence of the “might makes right” argument that Stowe referenced in her letter to Henry held that because God, as the Supreme Being in the universe, declared slavery right, no one could declare it wrong, regardless of how confounding it may seem from a limited human perspective. God’s might, in other words, ultimately makes right. While pointing out the seeming injustices of slavery might indeed provoke sympathy for the enslaved, the need to obey God’s indisputable commands transcends such concerns, requiring the sacrifice of such sympathy, however difficult. One’s perspective on slavery, in other words, came down to the authority structure used to frame it. Different priorities and starting points created seemingly irreconcilable perspectives.

Faced with this spectrum of opinions, nineteenth-century America survived on the sutures of compromise. The catalytic Fugitive Slave Act was one piece of an ongoing deliberative endeavor that sought to temper the growing sectional cacophony by working together to build on common ground between opposing views. In light of varied opinions on Christian principles and faced with sectional dispute over slavery’s role in the newly expanded republic, the common denominator between perspectives boiled down to the shared desire to preserve the Union. As such, sectional unity served as the ultimate priority dictating political deliberation and compromise. Just as a “might makes right” defense deferred all opposing arguments to the duty of obedience to divine command, the compromising efforts enabling the Fugitive Slave Law subordinated all objections to slavery beneath the higher goal of preserving the Union.
Posing a meaningful challenge to either of these positions required more than a clearer picture of slavery’s grim details—even a picture painted by “one of the most gifted and popular of American writers.” Vivid depiction of human suffering would raise the stakes of the debate by revealing the high cost involved in either obeying God’s supposed will or in compromising to preserve the Union, but the sympathy incurred through a clearer comprehension of such costs had limited purchase in religious and political systems that assumed the necessity of sacrifice in pursuit of the greatest good. As long as the greatest or only agreed upon common good remained obedience to God’s incontestable commands or the preservation of the Union, sympathy for the enslaved took a back seat.

As a result, Stowe’s quest to end deliberation on slavery faced a problem of priorities—any sympathy her novel generated ran up against the question of efficacy. Critical interest in Uncle Tom’s Cabin has long focused on the merits and limits of Stowe’s attempt to awaken and inspire increased goodwill for the enslaved through a stirring sentimental narrative. Nevertheless, the consistent focus on how the novel produces sympathy has yet to account for the whole of the novel’s power in making use of that sympathy. Whether generated by fear or love, increased sympathy for the

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8 This was the description The National Era used when advertising Uncle Tom’s Cabin for several weeks in advance of its initial run, “A New Story by Mrs. Stowe,” National Era 19 (May 8, 1851): 2.

9 Although Stowe’s sentimentality influenced critical neglect and dismissal of the novel through much of the 20th Century (including James Baldwin’s famous rebuke in “Everybody’s Protest Novel”), it was also the basis of renewed interest in Stowe that crystallized between the late 1970s with Ann Douglas’s The Feminization of American Culture (1977) and the mid-1990s with Joan Hedrick’s Pulitzer Prize-winning biography (1995). Important touchstones in this conversation that continue to drive dialogue include Jane Tompkins’ Sensational Designs (1985), Phillip Fisher’s Hard Facts (1987), and Gillian Brown’s Imagining Domestic Individualism (1992).

10 Kevin Pelletier, for example, has recently questioned the critical consensus on the central role love plays in Stowe’s sentimental strategy. Arguing that Stowe knew she couldn’t depend on “the spontaneous generation of love, even among those who may read about the slaves’ deplorable
enslaved would have amounted to little without being effectively framed to contend against the authority registers supporting slavery and steering the compromise debates.\textsuperscript{11}

By making “goodwill” what Charles Taylor calls a “hypergood,” Stowe asserted an alternative frame of reality that legitimated the kind of sympathy her narrative generated.\textsuperscript{12} Stowe understood that resolving the deliberative crisis over slavery required converting readers to a comprehensive vision that clearly defined the priority and parameters of goodwill in the context of slavery. “The object of these sketches,” she clarified in her preface, “is to awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race ... to show their wrongs and sorrows, under a system so necessarily cruel and unjust as to defeat and do away with the good effects of all that can be attempted for them, by their friends, under it” (45). Displaying how slavery, even among those with the most circumstances,” Pelletier suggests that Stowe used “fear to activate sympathy,” trusting the “fear of immolation” and a “desire for self-preservation, of evading God’s vengeance” to impel her more obstinate readers to sympathy for the enslaved. (\textit{Apocalyptic Sentiment}, [Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2015], 99-104). Yet, Pelletier’s concerns about the limits of love’s ability to induce sympathy similarly apply to a fear-induced sympathy. Just as the efficacy of an appeal to love relies on a shared sensitivity to maltreatment and suffering, the efficacy of an appeal to God’s vengeance relies on a shared understanding of God’s position on slavery. For readers who shared this understanding, the combination of love and fear was likely powerful. But not everyone shared this perspective. Furthermore, not everyone venerated sympathy in a way that made appealing to it an effective means of change. This essay specifically considers Stowe’s efforts to combat this lack of respect for such sentiments.

\textsuperscript{11} In his analysis of moral revolutions, Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to the inadequacy of moral sentiment to enact significant change. Using several different case studies, he notes how moral arguments were in place long before any real change. It’s not, he suggests, until the issue becomes a question of personal honor that change occurs. This analysis resonates with Appiah’s argument in suggesting that Stowe ultimately had to unseat the registers of authority upon which her opposition based their position and claims to virtue and honor (See Appiah, \textit{The Honor Code} [New York: W.W. Norton, 2010], especially chapter 3). In making this claim, I’m following critical efforts over the years that have worked to de-center sentimentality in discussions of the novel. See especially Molly Farrell, “Dying Instruction: Puritan Pedagogy in \textit{Uncle Tom's Cabin}” (2010); Gregg Crane, \textit{Race, Citizenship, and Law in American Literature} (2002); Alfred Brophy, “Harriet Beecher Stowe's Critique of Clave Law in \textit{Uncle Tom's Cabin}” (1996); Gregg Camfield, “The Moral Aesthetics of Sentimentality: A Missing Key to \textit{Uncle Tom's Cabin},” (1988).

\textsuperscript{12} Taylor calls these “goods which are not only incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about,” (\textit{Sources of the Self} [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992], 63).
benevolent intentions, spurned and prevented any semblance of goodwill, Stowe called the authority of slavery into question and confronted the founding premise of the republic.

The attempt to prioritize her particular sense of goodwill was, as Susan Ryan has suggested, “keeping with the era’s diffuse theories of a connection between the health and legitimacy of the nation and the benevolence of its citizens.” In antebellum America, the broad consensus on this need for benevolence stemmed from both Christian teaching and perceived political necessity. The nation’s earliest founders insisted on the role “virtue” played in maintaining the republic. “Public virtue cannot exist in a Nation without private Virtue,” wrote John Adams in 1776, “and public Virtue is the only Foundation of Republics.” George Washington similarly claimed, in his 1796 farewell address, “It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.” The continued prevalence of this connection shone through in the published writing of Stowe’s own husband, Calvin, who claimed in an 1840 address on the stability of the nation that “our government rests on the supposition of intelligence and virtue, and cannot exist without it.”

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Nevertheless, Americans from the Revolution through the antebellum period consistently disagreed over the precise meaning and political manifestations of virtue. Mark Noll attributes the survival of the early republic to the way such “flexible republican categories” accommodated an assortment of democratic attitudes in the same way “flexible Protestant loyalties” accommodated contrasting religious attitudes. The ambiguity left room to debate different ideas about republicanism, but from within a presumed core commitment to republicanism—not unlike theological debates that occurred within a core commitment to Christianity. Terms like “virtue” and “the people” reflected underlying commitment to a general republican ideology, but veiled assorted understandings of their specific meaning. The debate surrounding slavery pivoted on how these terms were understood and the national vision they inspired, as opinions differed on whether the institution genuinely sought the best interests of all involved.

In this sense, Stowe’s rhetorical strategy was less about turning a political problem into a religious problem and more about sketching a holistic picture of slavery that confronted the ultimate good or standard guiding the nation and its institutions. The critical tendency to differentiate Stowe’s Christian-based sentimentalism from political discourse reinforces the precise binary that Stowe hoped Uncle Tom’s Cabin

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17 Ryan suggests that “Antebellum Americans so often wrote about benevolence because they were engaged in ongoing and at times vitriolic conflicts over its meaning,” Grammar of Good Intentions, 10.

18 Noll, America’s God, 90-1.

would explode. Rather than relocate the slavery debate from the political podium to the religious pulpit or from the legal realm to the domestic sphere, her novel sought to prove that the master chord of Christianity transcended imagined boundaries between “religion” and “politics” and constituted the only priority that would lead to genuine harmony.

The crescendo of the volatile debate over the nation’s guiding standard was the Civil War, when, as Noll suggests, Northern armies “enforced the meaning of virtue.” Engaged in the rhetorical battle that led up to this crescendo, Stowe’s novel paved the road for such martial imposition. Uninterested in adding one more perspective to be considered in the ongoing debate, Stowe’s desire to end the discussion wholesale posed a significant challenge to the early republic’s tradition of deliberative democracy. If the

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20 Arguing that Stowe “relocates the center of power in American life, placing it not in the government, nor in the courts of law, nor in the factories, nor in the marketplace, but in the kitchen,” Jane Tompkins’ famous reappraisal of the novel inspired a critical tradition that tends to cloister Stowe’s project outside of “conventional political terms.” Readers in this vein, as Gregg Crane aptly summarizes, “characterize Stowe’s notion of sentiment as part of a feminine, maternal, and domestic realm that is ostensibly opposed to the masculine realms of law and the marketplace” (“Dangerous Sentiments: Sympathy, Rights, and Revolution in Stowe’s Antislavery Novels,” Nineteenth-Century Literature 51, no. 2 [September 1996], 182). This pervasive sense of Stowe’s sentimentality as “non-legal alternative to the law of slavery” has subsequently shaped readings of Dred, causing some critics to consider it an amendment to Uncle Tom’s Cabin that adopts a legal and political focus in response to the ineffectuality of Uncle Tom’s Cabin sentimental approach (see Lisa Whitney, “In the Shadow of Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Stowe’s Vision of Slavery from the Great Dismal Swamp,” [1993]). In bifurcating Stowe’s sentimental discourse from conventional political action, such readings misperceive the type of political work that Stowe’s sentimental discourse performs. Such bifurcation is indicative of a critical perspective that assumes a neat separation between spheres and categories, whether domestic and political or religious and secular. As explained in the introduction, this dissertation implicitly challenges such a perspective in considering the comprehensiveness of Stowe’s argument in its interrogation of the bedrock of reality.

21 Molly Farrell gestures towards this in noting how the novel’s religious imagination “moves swiftly between intimate and global scales, between domestic spaces and frontiers.” Farrell’s point is that the “Stowe’s religious imagination seeks to build a spiritual community from the inside out by shaping intimate ‘feelings’ and political ‘interests,’” continuing Lyman Beecher’s mission of building a nation on the rock of Jesus Christ, “not bound together by territory or laws, but through a cultural hegemony that cuts across family relationships” (“Dying Instruction: Puritan Pedagogy in Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” 244-5).

22 Noll, America’s God, 91.

23 Sandra Gustafson’s Imagining Deliberative Democracy (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011) is the definitive study of this tradition and a conversation partner here. Gustafson suggests that the willingness of dignitaries like Daniel Webster “to compromise on slavery raises important questions about the limits of deliberation that continue to challenge theorists of deliberative democracy” (7). Yet, coupled with such
Civil War “demonstrated the limits of the nation’s deliberative practices and institutions,” as Sandra Gustafson has noted, then *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* reflects the combative rhetorical position that pursued those limits.24 In her quest to prove the unquestionable veracity of her particular notion of virtue, Stowe inherently, as Richard Yarbrough contends, “eliminated the possibility of finding a common ground or compromise solution.”25 Instead of negotiating with opposing perspectives, she focused on defeating them—working to completely delegitimize both those willing to tolerate slavery as a matter of political expediency and those who supported it as an outright benevolent institution based in sound religious and moral teaching. By rejecting the religious premise that God ordained slavery and the political premise that democratic expediency required a bracketing of her antislavery sentiment, Stowe hoped to leave the cruelties and injustices of the slavery system indefensibly exposed.

Questions is the foundational quandary over the place of religious discourse within the deliberations of a democracy—a challenge Gustafson considers “chief” among those facing theorists and practitioners of deliberative democracy today (218). *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a provocative partner to think through these questions with. It is structured as a religiously-based “conversation stopper,” but does so in a way that clearly exposes the limits of deliberation. See Gustafson 86-96, as well as Richard Rorty, “Religion As A Conversation Stopper,” *The Ethics of Citizenship: Liberal Democracy and Religious Convictions*, 135-140.


25 Stephen R. Yarbrough, “Misdirected Sentiment: Conflicting Rhetorical Strategies in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin,*” *Rhetorica* 12, no. 2 (May 1994), 196. Yarbrough juxtaposes Stowe’s “conversion rhetoric” against “persuasion rhetoric,” which involves “a process of discovering common ground and then working from that ground toward mutually sharable attitudes and ideas that can induce mutually desirable actions” (196-197). Conversion rhetoric, according to Yarbrough’s analysis, “entails a systematic exposure of the grounds upon which individuals found historically their values and purposes, revealing the inadequacy of those grounds and the incapacity of the individual to establish proper grounds, thus preparing the individual to surrender unconditionally to an exterior, transcendent authority” (198). Kevin Pelletier has argued that God’s position as this ultimate transcendent authority for Stowe, enabled her rhetorical inclusion of both divine love and divine fear. It is certainly true that Stowe used “God’s vengeance as the last desperate measure to restore humanity to white Americans” (104). I am emphasizing here, however, that despite her use of apocalyptic terror as a failsafe, Stowe built her argument entirely around a Christian vision that positioned “good-will” as primary standard and ultimate objective—for God, individuals, and for the nation.
The first half of this dissertation explores how Stowe combatted these two positions. The implications of my argument follow in line with Yarbrough’s contention that although Stowe intended to express sympathy for the enslaved and certain slaveholders, her complete undermining of the grounds supporting slavery amassed empathy for the enslaved while progressively stymying sympathy for those supporting enslavement. The charity that Stowe links to seeing “the other side” proves contingent upon the legibility of that side. Revealing the absence of any “plausible thing [that] can be said—except might makes right,” Stowe’s antislavery novels ultimately discredit the integrity of the Southern position, fanning the flames of sectional hostility that would eventually burst into martial conflict.

The first chapter details Stowe’s attempt to refute the compromising position by reframing anti-slavery sentiment from one minor concern within a sectional dispute to a major concern at the heart of Christianity and national character. It offers a close reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* that traces Stowe’s attempt to delegitimize support of slavery by casting it outside of and in vibrant conflict with the goodwill the Bible illustrates and encourages. It also demonstrates how Stowe uses this biblical sense of goodwill to assess both the means and ends of slavery. Because the legitimacy of calls for sacrifice in the name of the greater good hinge on the authenticity of that greater good, Stowe questions the authenticity of the greater good being used to authorize slavery—whether theologically or politically—by illustrating both the injustices involved in the everyday practice of slavery and the debased people and society that slavery inevitably produces. The next chapter traces how Stowe reiterates this position in her follow up novel, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, and further articulates her call for a modern, principle-
based reform that would lead the nation towards the light of Christ’s coming and away from the darkness of the past. Detailing Stowe’s efforts to cast slavery as an antiquated system based in a primitive theology that stands in opposition to the progress and destiny of the American nation, the chapter argues that Dred reflects Stowe’s weakened confidence in the South’s willingness to honor America’s deliberative process and salient recognition that the road to modern progress may need to be paved with blood.
CHAPTER 1
COUNTERING COMPROMISE:
AMPLIFYING THE MASTER CHORD IN UNCLE TOM’S CABIN

Mrs. Stowe having made up her mind that slavery is an abomination in the sight of God and man, thinks of nothing but the annihilation of the pernicious system. From the first page of her narrative to the last, this idea is paramount in her mind, and colors all her drawings.

The New York Times, 1852

In the preface to the European edition of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Stowe declared that the Fugitive Slave Law “has done more than all preceding agencies to bring out and concentrate the moral force of the nation against slavery.” While a host of writers and activists encouraged this confrontation, Uncle Tom’s Cabin became and remains the touchstone endeavor due to the way it painted a picture that challenged widespread apathy and delegitimized the way politicians tended to frame the debate. Politicians like Clay attempted to frame the dispute between “the social fabric, life, and all that makes life desirable and happy” in the South and “sentiment alone” in the North. Rather than just tip Clay’s scales by proving the harrowing details provoking that sentiment, Stowe undercut his whole frame by aligning that sentiment with the master chord of Christianity—the gauge of human progress. As the master chord of Christianity, the

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2 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin [European Edition] (Leipzig: Bernard Tauchnitz, 1852), x.
principle of goodwill rivaled the authority of the Constitution and posed an alternate lens through which to approach the slavery debate.

Rooted in a relatively simple appeal to goodwill, the power of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did not come down to the novelty of Stowe’s argument, but rather the force of her appeal. Stowe illustrated the circumstances of slavery in a way that awakened her readers to the stakes involved in the debate and challenged the foundation of the proslavery position. The goal of the novel is to convince her readers that the harmony and happiness of the nation settles not on loyalty to a particular structure, but rather fidelity to universalizing principles that reflect the nation’s true priority of ensuring goodwill for all. Stowe understood that winning America to the antislavery position hinged on stoking this fidelity among the national populace. She also knew that deliberation on the subject would not end until the existing arrangements and opposing perspectives were thoroughly discredited. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe set out to shift the slavery debate from a sectional dispute to a crisis over the soul and foundation of the nation by pursuing the question that political compromise bracketed—does slavery lead to or ensure the pursuit of happiness to which all are equally entitled? Working to counter any and all answers to the affirmative, Stowe structured the novel to reveal slavery’s complete lack of any benevolent foundation, and thus expose the hypocrisy of tolerating and legitimating it within the United States.

**The Fugitive Slave Act and America’s Christian Destiny**

Stowe built her argument upon the momentum of preachers and activists that similarly spoke out against the Fugitive Slave Act. In that same February 1851 letter to Henry requesting more information on the Christian defense of slavery, Stowe
commended Henry’s anti-slavery efforts as well as those of their other brother Charles.

In November 1850, two months after the Fugitive Slave Law, Charles delivered an influential sermon entitled “The Duty of Disobedience to Wicked Laws.”3 In the sermon, Charles urged his parishioners and fellow Christians to actively disobey the new law on the grounds that “might makes right” was bad policy based on antiquated theology. Charles reflects upon the day of judgement when the “public as well as the private acts of every man will undergo impartial examination,” and considers how the Fugitive Slave law will fare. Asserting that “laws are to be judged of by certain principles of natural right … as more clearly evolved in the gospel,” Charles claims that such “principles of right are eternal, not made.” “The law of God,” he explains, “is his declaration of what is from eternity, and must be right—not his arbitrary decision of what shall be right.” Aligning principles of natural right with the laws of God as put forth in the gospel, Charles contends that God’s will is not the origin of rightness, but rather perfectly aligned with rightness as an eternal principle. To say that God is the origin of what is right would nullify “right” as an independent principle since it infers that rightness is determined by whomever has the power—suggesting, in other words, that “might makes right.” “God’s will is always right, and the measure of right in fact,” he clarifies, “but it is because he perceives omnisciently what is eternally and immutably right, and conforms to his own perceptions and legislates accordingly.”4

3 This sermon was delivered at the Second Presbyterian Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana but later published in The Liberator and circulated in pamphlet form by the Free Presbyterian Church of Newark, New Jersey, where Charles eventually became the supply pastor.

Because “divine legislation does not make things right or wrong,” Charles concludes that human legislation can’t either. As a result, “the mind of man is destined to be always testing its own legislation by those principles on which God tests it and will render verdict in the judgment.” This sense that right and wrong principles exist independent of God puts the onus on humans to consider the reasons for their political legislations and establishments. In the context of this principle-based approach, appeals to tradition and slavery’s existence throughout history are insufficient. Since the “slave is a man” and “has a right to be free,” Charles deduces that “it is wrong to deliver him up when he has made himself free.” It is, therefore, the duty of good citizens and Christians to disobey wicked laws that say otherwise. Suffering punishment that accompanies such actions groups the dissident with past Christian martyrs “who were stoned, sawn asunder, and of whom the world was not worthy.” “With them to rise and reign eternally,” he declares, “will be ample reward.”

Ultimately, Charles outlines an approach that prioritizes principles above all else. He refuses loyalty to any law that jars with the principles of justice. Significantly, he applies that logic to religious and political contexts alike. If legislation does not simply make things right or wrong any more than God does, the virtue of a law needs to be considered before it can be expected to be obeyed. “As divine legislation constitutes God’s declaration of what is absolutely right,” human legislation, Charles argues, “is

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nothing but a declaration of the public idea of right; or at least can rise no higher than the public idea.” The obvious limitations of the public idea of right—evident both past and present—indicate that “law must be progressive.” “Ancient laws are now seen to have been barbarous, not because they had some elements of right,” he explains, “but because they had some elements of wrong admixed.” As a result, “modern laws continually amend, supersede, and annul laws that are older.” Improved legislation will thus follow “just in proportion as the national intellect and conscience are developed,” or “as man returns towards the image and likeness of God.”7 Charles’s sermon delineates a progressive view of history that measures progress not by increasing obedience to God’s arbitrary laws, but rather human embrace and adherence to the same principles to which God’s laws adhere.

Stowe’s approach to the political deadlock over slavery reflects her brother’s same sense of historical progress and emphasis on divine principles. A crucial component of this endeavor involved asserting humanity’s collective progress towards greater unison with these eternal principles over the course of human history (and thus illuminating the obsolescence of antiquated ideas like “might makes right”). In the process of identifying Christianity’s master chord in the preface, Stowe references the sad history of the Anglo-Saxon treatment of the African race to situate her novel on a temporal cusp. “But another and better day is dawning,” she explains, “The poet, the painter, and the artist now seek out and embellish the common and gentler humanities of life, and, under the allurements of fiction, breathe a humanizing and subduing influence, favorable to the development of the great principles of Christian brotherhood” (V-VI).

Adherence to these principles accounts not only for the prospects of the future, but also the failures of the past. “In this general movement, unhappy Africa is at last remembered,” Stowe continues,

Africa, who began the race of civilization and human progress in the dim, gray dawn of early time, but who, for centuries, has lain bound and bleeding at the foot of civilized and Christianized humanity, imploring compassion in vain. But the heart of the dominant race, who have been her conquerors, her hard masters, has at length been turned towards her in mercy; and it has been seen how far nobler it is in nations to protect the feeble than to oppress them. Thanks be to God, the world has at length outlived the slave-trade!” (VI)

Conceiving the African plight within the context of “the race of civilization and human progress,” Stowe reveals a developmental sense of human nature and history, which pertains to not only the advancement of the uncivilized but also the increasing refinement of “civilized and Christianized humanity.” While ending the slave trade marks civilized society’s steady progress towards becoming better Christians—“more in unison with the great master chord of Christianity, ‘goodwill to man’”—the next step involves unequivocally recognizing enslaved Africans as fellow men equally deserving of the same “goodwill” shown to others. Explicitly humanizing the enslaved thus became the primary task Stowe undertook in the pages of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a goal explicitly indicated by its original title The Man That Was a Thing and implicitly reflected in its sentimental drawing on real-life experiences.8

Stowe approaches this task confident that the world will outlive slavery just as it had historically outlived so many previous offenses. “It is a comfort to hope,” she continues in the preface, “as so many of the world's sorrows and wrongs have, from age to age, been lived down, so a time shall come when sketches similar to these shall be

valuable only as memorials of what has long ceased to be” (viii). From here, picturing the future of an “enlightened and Christianized community … on the shores of Africa” looking back to bondage in America “like the remembrance of Egypt to the Israelite,” Stowe offers what Nina Baym considers “history from a divine point of view,” which imagines the world “progressing inexorably toward a known end, the millennium that would mark history’s closure” (viii). While millennialism often stirs up images of catastrophe, the millennialism of the nineteenth century was generally, as Claudia Stokes clarifies, “a philosophy of human history that produces narratives forecasting the eventual destination of human civilization, steadily heading not toward destruction but toward a new age characterized by enlightenment, improvement, and the elimination of all worldly ills.” Stowe’s confidence in modernity’s march towards greater Christian brotherhood—living down the world’s sorrows and wrongs from age to age—reflects this “postmillennial” vision.

Postmillennial thinking represents, as Gordon Wood frames it, “both a rationalizing of revelation and a Christianizing of the enlightened belief in secular progress.” The historical narratives that stem from this belief in secular progress imagine modernity as a process of “shuck[ing] off some false beliefs, baseless fears, and imagined objects.” In what Taylor dubs “subtraction stories,” secularity is viewed as

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the modern condition which remains after illusions have been sufficiently subtracted from the human imagination and experience. Because that which is shucked off and subtracted is branded “religious,” secular progress comes to inherently constitute religious decline—the eradication of religion becomes an inevitable byproduct, if not an end goal. Yet, by imagining modern progress in terms of increased adherence to fundamental Christian principles, rather than the gradual decline of religion, the postmillennial sense of progress inverts the ends of this secular narrative. Progress remains the central theme, but the conclusion and process are imagined in entirely different terms.

In Stowe’s Christianization thesis, the evils of society are indeed being shucked off as part of “the race of civilization and human progress,” but such progress reflects unison with the master chord of Christianity. Unlike traditional subtraction stories, Stowe does not explain this process in the negative sense only, but focuses on how the development of Christian brotherhood requires both casting off prejudices and cultivating Christ-like love. Comparing her sense of progress to subtraction stories nevertheless highlights the extent to which Stowe conceives of the modern world within a particular narrative that follows a teleological trajectory, which narrative she extends to her anti-

‘orthodox’ modes of theory in this domain,” as Taylor recapitulates, “is that ‘modernity’ (in some sense) tends to repress or reduce ‘religion’ (in some sense)” (SA 429).

13 Reciting the premise of these subtraction stories, Taylor summarizes, “We just needed to liberate ourselves from the old horizons, and then the mutual service conception of order was the obvious alternative left. It needed no inventive insight, or constructive effort. Individualism and mutual benefit are the evident residual ideas which remain after you have sloughed off the older religions and metaphysics” (SA 169).
slavery project and vision of America. Because the grand narratives we humans imagine ourselves within inevitably influence our sense of self, society, and world, acknowledging the anticipated ends of Stowe’s imagined teleological narrative helps illuminate the texture of her antislavery commitments. Secular subtraction stories of modern progress, for example, might frame the abolition of slavery as the result of American citizens finally realizing the irrationality of slavery—making abolition a victory on the road to a more rational future. Stowe’s story of modern progress, however, calls for the abolition of slavery as part of a greater realization of the principles of Christian Brotherhood, making it a step closer towards ultimate unison with the master chord of Christianity, rather than away from Christianity or religion itself. From this perspective, Stowe’s anti-slavery writing secularizes slavery in the sense of characterizing it in direct contrast with religious principles. In marking slavery as an institution that needs to be cast off in the pursuit of Christian progress, Stowe fashions abolition into a Christian imperative.

**Christian Slavery, Irrefutable Structures, and Ends over Means**

Nevertheless, as Daniel Webster stressed, not everyone in America understood or approached the institution of slavery convinced of its sacrilege. By the 1850s, proslavery arguments infused Southern thought. In September 1850 (the same month the Fugitive Slave Act passed), *De Bow’s Review*—a widely circulated Southern journal—published an essay titled “Slavery and the Bible.” The editor introduced the essay as “a summary of

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14 For further discussions of Stowe’s millennial ideas see Stokes, “The Christian Plot: Stowe, Millennialism, and Narrative Form,” in *The Altar at Home*; Kevin Pelletier, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism*; Cushing Strout, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Portent of Millennium.”

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the Bible argument for slavery” while also suggesting that “the subject is growing hacknied.” The essay is framed as a direct response to those in the United States who “believe that holding slaves is morally wrong” based “upon precepts taught in the Bible.” Acknowledging that those who support slavery and those who oppose slavery both take the Bible “as the standard of morality and religion,” the author begins by suggesting that as “we come to such opposite conclusions from the same foundation, it may be well to consider, whether the Bible teaches us anything, whatever, in regard to slavery; if so, what is it and how is it taught.” The author proceeds to pinpoint the exact distinction between positions:

The anti-slavery party maintain, that the Bible teaches nothing directly upon the subject, but, that it establishes rules and principles of action, from which they infer, that, in holding slaves, we are guilty of a moral wrong. This mode of reason would be perfectly fair, if the Bible really taught nothing directly upon the subject of slavery: but when that book applies the principles it lays down to the particular subject in controversy, we must take the application to be correct. We think we can show, that the Bible teaches clearly and conclusively that the holding of slaves is right; and if so, no deduction from general principles can make it wrong, if that book is true.”

In illuminating this difference, the author acknowledges that the common mode of determining a Biblical stance on an issue involves deduction from “general principles” that the Bible establishes. The author maintains, however, that such deduction is only required and viable in the absence of particular and direct teaching on a subject.

The hermeneutical task, as this authors frames it, comes down to determining whether or not the Bible directly confronts the particular issue at stake. To prove in this case that the Bible expressly weighs in on slavery, the author points to how, despite slavery’s long existence, from “the earliest period of time down to the present moment,”

15 “Slavery and the Bible,” De Bow’s Review 9 (September 1850), 281-286.
sacred writers have never condemned it in the slightest degree. After cataloging examples of slavery among the biblical patriarchs, whom God never rebuked, the author then notes God’s specific words to Moses that seem to initiate the grounds for slavery (Leviticus 25: 39-46). In the midst of this exegesis, and feeling that he has conclusively proved the Bible’s sanctioning of slavery, the author reiterates his primary contention: “No law which came directly from him (the fountain of morality), can be considered morally wrong; it might be imperfect in not providing for circumstances not then existing—but, so far as it does provide, its provisions are correct. Nothing which God ordained can be a crime, and nothing for which he gave express permission can be considered wrong.”

God’s Biblical ordaining of slavery thus becomes the trump card in the hand of the Southern exegete—if God ordained it, no one can touch it. God’s might, in other words, makes right.

Nevertheless, God’s ordaining of a particular institution did not assert the perfect execution of the institution nor diminish grounds for improvement. “Like all the institutions of the Deity,” the De Bow essay concluded, “the holding of slaves may become criminal, by abuse of the slave; but the relation, in itself, is good and moral.”

This concession represented a crucial response to the antebellum demand for benevolence and the poignant accusations of cruelty that generated sympathy for the antislavery cause. Instead of leaving God’s incontestable command a persistent thorn in the national project of building a benevolent society, proslavery advocates assuaged such flames by emphasizing the need for benevolence within God’s ordained structure. The religious

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16 “Slavery and the Bible” De Bow’s Review, 281, 284.

defense of slavery, in this way, did not depart from the need for goodwill as much as assert the existence of transcending restraints or guidelines that shaped the best manifestation of that goodwill. Freedom for the enslaved was out of the question because it presumably went against God’s condoning of slavery. A charitable paternalism, on the other hand, contributed towards explaining and justifying God’s irrefutable command by asserting slavery as divinely designed to ensure the good of all involved. Failure to execute this design appropriately, thus came down to the weakness of humans involved rather than the shortcomings of the social structure.

Christian denominations in the South worked to articulate this position and confined their invitations toward increased goodwill within such limits and structures. A particularly evocative example of this came in an invitation by the Baptist State Convention in the year leading up to the Fugitive Slave Act that “offered a premium of $200 for the best Essay on the Duties of Christian Masters to their Servants; and assigned the duty of making the award to a committee selected from the leading religious denominations of the Southern and South-western States.”18 The three winning essays were published by the Southern Baptist Publication Society in 1851. These essays are united in their emphasis on countenancing slavery as a particular social relationship designated by God, not unlike husband and wife or parent and child. “These are all different relations,” Rev. H.N. McTyeire of New Orleans wrote in his contribution, “and imply distinct obligations as they do distinct facts.” Reverend A.T. Holmes of Georgia endorsed this same structure claiming that this relationship is “of Divine appointment,

(that between master and servant as positively as any other,) and, therefore, the duties which are involved, are all of Divine requirement.” Holmes emphasizes that the relations between master and slave should be in the line with “the law of Christ, and the law of Christ is the law of kindness and good will.” “But the law of Christ,” Holmes critically clarified, “contemplates a wise and judicious exercise of kindness, and imposes the necessity of that wholesome discipline, which secures, in its results, the happiness of all concerned.” The whole proslavery Christian argument turned on this clarification. Kindness and good will were indeed the end goal, but they were only achievable by maintaining, with “wholesome discipline,” the social order that God ordained for the “happiness of all concerned.” 19

Clearly, there are stark differences between this proslavery position that emphasized goodwill within certain limits/structures and Stowe’s antislavery position that emphasized an unrestricted and egalitarian commitment to goodwill. Reconciling these positions thus required some level of compromise between these two positions, or coming together around a common goal or authority. This was, of course, Webster’s whole point—compromising around the Constitution was necessary because people simply cannot agree on a higher law or, in Thoreau’s terms, a hard bottom. Because the

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19 A. T. Holmes, “The Duties of Christian Masters,” in Duties of Masters to Servants: Three Premium Essays (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 131-4. “The Christian master, in pursuing such a course,” Holmes reiterates, “acts in the fear of God, discharges his trust in singleness of heart, and contemplates the end, as one who, knowing that he has a master in Heaven, would be prepared to render satisfactory account of his stewardship” (134). Standing at that day with a clear conscience, Holmes suggests, requires that a master be a friend, protector, guide, and teacher of his servants. “Let the light of your superior knowledge shine upon the darkness of his ignorance, and let his credulity and superstition yield to that simplicity and godly sincerity, which the holy religion of the Son of God secures to all, masters and servants, who are brought to feel its sanctifying power” (148). Holmes adds to this last part clarification about what’s appropriate: “Some plan should be adopted to suit their capacity. . . Let the master exercise his judgement, that his servants may be benefited by his wise arrangements for their spiritual well-being” (149).
North and the South have fundamentally different conceptions of the higher reality that society organizes itself around to ensure happiness, compromise is a political necessity. The nation is otherwise doomed to an eternally deadlocked dispute (or, ironically, doomed to vindicate “might makes right” by resorting to war).

However, rather than legitimate the Southern position and attempt to work out some form of peaceful, plural coexistence, preachers like Charles Beecher and writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe attempted to resolve the issue through demonstrating the virtue of their position and the delusion of opposing perspectives. Because both positions were geared towards a vaguely similar goal of establishing a generally benevolent society, the controversial question came down to what it took to accomplish that goal, or how a benevolent society was organized. Stowe’s answer emphasized the difference between structures and principles. By responding to the national stalemate surrounding the question of slavery with an appeal to goodwill, Stowe’s master chord attempted to prioritize the specific ends motivating both religious and political structures, rather than the structures themselves.

Critics who over-emphasize Stowe’s interest in the domestic realm, and construe the family as the basis and structure of Stowe’s ideal, run the risk of mistakenly implying that she is working towards enacting a specific form rather than evoking the principles or conditions a formal structure produces and ensures. Stowe, as David Weimer suggests,

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20 The notion of benevolence as a political necessity developed in hand with a tradition of benevolent theology, advanced by figures like Jonathan Edwards who claimed that “true virtue consists in love to being in general,” (An Essay on the Nature of True Virtue [London: W. Oliver, No.12, 1778], 11).

21 Jane Tompkins, influentially, walks this line in describing Rachel Halliday’s kitchen as a daguerreotype of Stowe’s idealized heaven, where “and this is the crucial innovation—men are incidental” (145).
“does not envision the movement from individual to institution to society as a simple homology in which the family defines the best (or even the only) way to organize individuals. Instead, she evaluates and compares the merits of different institutions—especially those she associates with religion and political economy—in the production of society.”22 This is, of course, not to say that Stowe did not believe in the family structure as a model institution. It is rather to emphasize that Stowe witnessed firsthand how standardizing an institution or structure can decenter the individual principles that authorize such a structure. Accentuating Stowe’s fidelity to a particular societal structure overlooks her clear emphasis on the “development of the great principles of Christian brotherhood” that she understood social structures and institutions to be continually adapting and improving in accordance with. For Stowe, there are non-negotiable ends in place, but not necessarily means. Her goal was never to determine which institutions reflect God’s explicit structure, but rather determine which institutions produced the principles that mattered to God.

Stowe’s sense of the mutability of structures constitutes her primary departure from the proslavery position—both religiously and politically. Like William Lloyd Garrison, she believed that social structures and compacts—whether the institution of slavery or the constitutional Union of the United States—are only as good as the principles that they are built on and the conditions they create and produce. Garrison’s call to reassess the Constitution, which he had been echoing since the 1830s, hinged on the contention that a structure’s failure to produce desired ends is grounds for

reexamining the viability of the structure. The nation’s inability to decide on common ends troubled any attempt at structural reassessments. While Thoreau searched for such ends in the Concord woods, arguing for dynamic observance of the laws the universe perpetually revealed, Stowe turned to the Christian tradition, settling on “goodwill to man” as the underlying, inevitable, and ever-nearing end goal—the finish line for “the race of civilization and human progress.” This end goal created the basis of Stowe’s religious/political/social reality, the realometer according to which she would gauge appropriate conduct, behavior, policy, and structures. Goodness—doing good to one another—ultimately became the highest duty because it is the highest end. With such rocks in place, Stowe based her call for abolition on slavery’s lack of benevolent ends. Figuratively enacting Thoreau’s call to “work and wedge our feet downward,” her novel systematically cut “through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance,” exposed slavery’s inability to secure the desired “happiness of all concerned” that politicians like Henry Clay insisted upon.23

Frederick Douglass, New Testament Christianity, and “the living dramatic reality”

Reframing the issue from a sectional debate over whose needs matter more—the white citizens of the North or the white citizens of the South—with the highest good being the maintenance of the Union, to a question of adhering to a universal principle, Stowe altered the standard of assessment in a way that centered the needs of those whom senators tended to leave out of their debate, the enslaved.

At the time Stowe wrote the novel, a leading voice calling for increased
collection of the needs and greater potential of the enslaved was Frederick
Douglass. Stowe’s approach strongly resonates with Douglass’s efforts in The
Narrative of Frederick Douglass (1845). Not unlike Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the theological
impetus of Douglass’s Narrative is most directly expressed in the paratext. He provides
an “Appendix” to readers as a means of clarification or preemptive response to potential
objections. “I find,” Douglass explains, “since reading over the foregoing Narrative, that
I have, in several instances, spoken in such a tone and manner, respecting religion, as
may possibly lead those unacquainted with my religious views to suppose me an
opponent of all religion. To remove the liability of such misapprehension, I deem it
proper to append the following brief explanation.” Although he describes the appendix
as simple clarification of his religious stance, it ends up as the launching point of a
powerful indictment in light of the supporting evidence the Narrative provides.

Douglass’s attempt to articulate his religious position includes detailing his
fidelity to Christianity’s true character and America’s departure from it. “I love the pure,
peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ,” he delineates, “I therefore hate the
corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical

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24 See Robert S. Levine, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative

25 My emphasis on the paratextual reflects Gérard Genette’s contention that paratextual elements
of a book, like a preface or appendix, provide “a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a
privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that—whether
well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more
pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies),” Paratexts:
Thresholds of Interpretation (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 2.

26 Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by
Himself [1845] (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002), 104.
Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.”

To plant his antislavery position firmly in the Christian tradition, Douglass defines “Christianity proper” and then delineates the sinfulness of slavery according to that standard. This is similar to the way Stowe directs her narrative by identifying Christianity’s master chord in the preface. In antebellum religious discourse, pronouncing the core of Christianity was not uncommon, though the emphasis might differ depending on the attempted argument. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, defended his famous abstention from the Lord’s Supper around the central tenet that “Freedom is the essence of Christianity.”

Since he found no significance in the Lord’s Supper, binding himself to it required a sacrifice of Christianity’s very essence. Pursuing that line of argument, he centered his resignation from the Unitarian ministry in fidelity to Christianity rather than departure. Douglass similarly grounded his antislavery stance in fidelity to “Christianity proper” against “the boldest of all frauds.”

While the standard of “Christianity proper” that Douglass accentuates mirrored Stowe’s master chord, his approach also shared Emerson’s sharp focus on personal experience. Just as Emerson rejected the Lord’s Supper based on its ultimately not being “suitable to me,” Douglass rejects “slaveholding religion” on its not being suitable to me—as both a black man, subject to its injustice, and a proper Christian, committed to “the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ.”

Having reported his data in

27 Douglass, Narrative, 105.


29 Douglass, Narrative, 105.

30 Douglass, Narrative, 107. As a personal narrative, Douglass is also able to demonstrate the damning effect that slavery has on his own faith. When he claims that “Slavery proved as injurious to her
the form of his personal story, he proceeds in the appendix to provide potential interpretations of that data. His primary conclusion concerns the twisted form of “American Christianity.” “Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ,” he explains, “I recognize the widest possible difference.”31 By accentuating this in the appendix, Douglass effectively mobilizes his narrative to support of a particular diagnosis. Based on his own life experiences and with respect to his own understanding of the Christian faith, he rejects the American church’s claim to Christianity and concludes with the hope that “this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system & hastening the glad duty of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds.”32

In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe pursued Douglass’s precise objective, but took a much softer approach to the American church. She considered scorning the entirety of the Christian church akin to throwing the baby out with the bath water. In July of 1851, a month after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* began to appear serially in *The National Era*, Stowe wrote to Frederick Douglass requesting information about a future setting in her story. In that same letter, Stowe also informed Douglass that although she read and admired his

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paper, she wished to modify his opinion regarding the church being “Pro-slavery.” She offered this specific corrective likely in response to a brief note that Douglass published in the inaugural issue of *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* only a few weeks earlier.

Douglass’s remarks came in response to commentary in New York’s *The Independent*, which reported Douglass’s previous rebuke of the Church and Government:

“With the religion of the one, and the politics of the other, our soul shall have no communion. These we regard as central pillars in the horrid temple of slavery. They are both pro-slavery; and on that score, our controversy with them is based.” In answer to *The Independent’s* open call for him to explain whether an individual could be responsible for the supposed position of either institution beyond the individual’s own acts and influence, Douglass replied, “A member of a church is as much responsible for the character of a church, as the church is responsible for the character of its member.”

“We mean by a pro-slavery church,” he continued,

that church whose ministers of the North have prostituted the Bible (without expulsion of rebuke to vindicate slavery and its off-shoot, the barbarous and inhuman fugitive slave law); that church whose members bring the whole weight of their moral, religious, and political influence to bear at the ballot-box against the slave, and in favor of the oppressor; against that church, individually and collectively, we shall bear our most stringent testimony, and advocate secession from it as demanded alike by our duty to God and to man. We mean by a pro-slavery government not merely that political party now in power, but all political parties in this country which do not make the abolition of slavery a special and primary object of their organization. Against all such we take our stand, deeming their destruction essential to the triumph of Justice and liberty.\(^{33}\)

Douglass’s frustration with the lack of an outspoken and significant stance against slavery on the part of the government and the church resonates with the stimulus behind

\(^{33}\) Frederick Douglass, “Frederick Douglass, editor of the North Star, proposes,” *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, (June 26, 1851).
Stowe’s project—her consternation at how Christians were not making abolition a “primary object of their organization.” Stowe differs from Douglass, however, in being wary about associating the whole church with the evils of slavery. To do so, she contends, creates the possibility of turning people away from what she believes to be the only genuine hope for defeating slavery.

Acknowledging that the church does not presently use its full weight to put an end to slavery, Stowe wrote Douglass that “if the moral power of the church were brought up to the New Testament standpoint” it would put an end to slavery and a host of other sins.34 Her confidence in this eventual possibility connects to the faith she outlined at the start of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—the dawning of “another and better day … favorable to the development of the great principles of Christian brotherhood” (V). Citing the New Testament standpoint alongside the increasing number of abolitionists within the church, Stowe beseeches Douglass to note where the positive developments are already occurring and recognize that “the strength and hope of your oppressed race does lie in the church.” “Everything is against you,” she writes,

but Jesus Christ is for you, and He has not forgotten his church, misguided and erring though it be. I have looked over with despairing eyes, I see no hope but in Him. This movement must and will become a purely religious one. The light will spread in church, the tone of feeling will rise, Christians North and South will give up all connection with, and take up their testimony against, slavery, and thus the work will be done.35

Convinced of inevitable Christian progress, Stowe implores Douglass to realize that the success of the abolitionist movement lies in keeping it within the bounds of religion and

34 Harriet Beecher Stowe to Frederick Douglass, (July 9, 1851), as quoted in *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe, compiled from her letters and journals by her son, Charles Edward Stowe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1889), 152.

35 Harriet Beecher Stowe to Douglass, (July 9, 1851), 152-3.
gaining the increasing attention of the church to prevent other priorities from superseding it. The question for Stowe is not how slavery will end, but rather when—when will the church rise up to New Testament standards. As a result, Stowe implores Douglass not to turn his back on the church, but rather help speed abolition along by encouraging its members to rise to such standards.

As signaled in the preface to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Stowe assumed that Christians will rise up to New Testament standards once they “know what slavery is.” Determined to paint the clearest picture possible, Stowe emulated Douglass’s focus on illuminating slavery’s real conditions and intentionally built her novel on incidents and narratives written by escaped slaves. This involved borrowing authenticating techniques commonly found in slave narratives, including, as Joan Hedrick points out, frequent use of a “polemical, editorial voice.” Stowe’s reliance on and borrowing from slave narratives was a strategy her contemporaries noticed. In a letter to Frederick Douglass that appeared in Frederick Douglass’s Paper, Martin Delany claimed that Stowe “draughted largely on all of the best fugitive slave narratives—at least on Douglass’, Brown’s, Bibb’s, and perhaps Clark’s.” Although Delany admitted that he’d never actually read Uncle Tom’s Cabin, relying instead on what he heard second hand from his wife’s reading, he consented that, “these draughts on your narratives, clothed in Mrs. Stowe's

36 Joan D. Hedrick, Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life, Revised ed. edition (NY: Oxford UP, 1995), 217. Hedrick posits that Stowe adapted slave narratives strategies into “a highly effective medium that combined literary realism, political satire, and sermonic power.” She points, in other words, to the influence slave narratives had in shaping Stowe’s work to be what Jane Tomkins famously called, “a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time” (127).

37 Martin Delany to Frederick Douglass (April 15, 1853) in Frederick Douglass’s Paper (April 29, 1853), 3.
own language, only makes her work the more valuable, as it is the more truthful.”

Despite Delany’s personal inattentiveness to the actual text, he was correct in his assertion of Stowe’s indebtedness to Douglass and others as well as her commitment to being truthful. In her July 1851 letter to Douglass inquiring whether she might be put in touch with Henry Bibb to gain information about slave life on a cotton plantation, Stowe mentioned that she had referenced a paper written by a Southern planter but preferred another standpoint “to be able to make a picture that shall be graphic and true to nature in its details.”

Stated here in the process of writing, this desire for veracity reflects a dedication she maintained in the wake of the novel’s publication, most notably with her eventual publication of *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a full-length study providing documentary evidence of the novel’s claims.

Committed to realism, Stowe worked to craft compelling scenes that clarified the stakes surrounding slavery by infusing the institution’s necessary contingencies with unquestionable Christian consequence. Stowe, as Gregg Camfield suggests, “saw what is difficult for us to see, that sentimental aesthetics, in spite of their tendency toward abstraction, promote realism rather than allegory.” Camfield argues that unlike typological allegory, which “has its source immediately in God, suggesting that God must inspire a person’s improvement,” Stowe’s sentimental realism “places the source of uplift in human nature, suggesting that human beings have their own power to grow toward God.”

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38 Delany to Douglass, (April 1853), 3.

39 HBS to Douglass, (July 9, 1851), 152.

responsibility for improvement. This conviction grounded her postmillennial vision of human progress and informed her emphasis on modeling appropriate or inappropriate Christian behavior.

**Senator Bird, Eliza, and Disproving Politics**

Nowhere is this more apparent than in her masterfully staged scene where a senator who voted for the law incidentally confronts the magnitude and reality of its implications and must decide how to act. The scene opens on Senator Bird and his wife enjoying an evening at home discussing the merits of the recently passed law. Referencing the type of political arguments Clay put forth regarding sacrifice, the narrative voice introduces the senator by opining that “he rather liked the idea of considering himself a sacrifice to his country” (142). In response to his wife’s concerns over whether the law accords with Christianity, the senator replies that “it seems necessary, and no more than Christian and kind, that something should be done to quiet the excitement” (142). His wife, however, has no patience for such blatant punting of the issue at hand. Challenged to defend the unchristian law itself, the senator patronizingly replies, “we mustn’t suffer our feelings to run away with our judgement; you must consider it’s a matter of private feeling—there are great public interests involved,—there is such a state of public agitation rising, that we must put aside our private feelings” (144). Mrs. Bird rejects this not by championing the independent virtue of private feelings, but by contextualizing those feelings firmly at the root of the Christian tradition: “Now, John, I don't know anything about politics, but I can read my Bible; and there I see that I must feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the desolate; and that Bible I
mean to follow” (144). With this firm basis declared, Mrs. Bird continues from this conviction in a biblical sense of goodwill to engage all of the senator’s arguments.

To the insinuation that such biblical precepts might be suspended with respect to stirring “a great public evil,” Mrs. Bird poignantly responds, “Obeying God never brings on public evils.” Bypassing the senator’s attempt to wind up “a very clear argument,” she instead cuts to the crux of the issue: “Would you now turn away a poor, shivering, hungry creature from your door, because he was a runaway?” (144). Mrs. Bird refuses to allow attention to be directed away from the specifics of the requirements involved in following this law, and their incongruence with clear Christian praxis. Calling obedience to the law under such circumstances “a very painful duty,” the senator tries to retreat into further “reasoning,” but only further prods his wife’s inquisition. “I hate reasoning,” she tells him. “There’s a way you political folks have of coming round and round a plain thing; and you don’t believe in it yourselves, when it comes to practice.” Such a challenge directly precedes the announcement of an exhausted and frantic Eliza turning up on their back porch, just in time to put the senator’s resolve to the test.

Throughout the subsequent narration of how the Birds respond, the editorial voice takes care to emphasize the imprudence of bracketing sentiment when considering and debating the slavery question: “How sublimely he sat with his hands in his pockets, and scouted all sentimental weakness of those who would put the welfare of a few miserable fugitives before great state interests!” (155). The senator supported the law, the narrator clarifies, when “his idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word,—or at the most, the image of a little newspaper picture of a man with a stick and a bundle.” “The magic of the real presence of distress,” the narrator continues, “the imploring
human eye, the frail, trembling human hand, the despairing appeal of helpless agony,—these he had never tried. He had never thought that a fugitive might be a hapless mother, a defenceless child,—like that one which was now wearing his lost boy’s little well-known cap” (155-156). Connecting Eliza’s terror to the Bird's’ devastation at losing their own child, Stowe creates this encounter between Eliza and the Senator to expose the isolation and imaginative limits of the senator’s once eloquently reasoned arguments, and the patent absurdity of a Christian trying to actually put them in practice.

A crucial component of Stowe’s strategy for clarifying proper Christian conduct was making biblical principles overwhelmingly applicable to the lives and treatment of the enslaved, as the scene with Senator Bird and Eliza further illustrates. Once faced with slavery’s real circumstances and aware of Eliza’s plight, Mr. Bird finds himself continually discovering ways to assist her, literally enacting the scriptural injunction to clothe the naked when he offers Mrs. Bird’s gown and his own cloak as replacement for Eliza’s torn clothes. With this scene, Stowe essentially reenacts the parable of the Good Samaritan found in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus relates the parable in response to the question asked by a lawyer: “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). Stowe offers the parabolic answer throughout the Birds’ encounter with Eliza. She clarifies Eliza’s neighborly status and demonstrates the proper duty of the Christian in response to the Fugitive Slave Law. Despite whatever theoretical or abstract reasoning Mr. Bird manages to come up with for supporting the Fugitive Slave Law, when he finally grasps his relationship to the escaped slave—when he finally knows “what slavery is”—he clearly perceives his Christian duty, and his actions mirror those of the Good Samaritan: he puts Eliza in his own carriage, takes her to a safe place, and with a subtle
but powerful gesture, slips the proverbial inn keeper a ten dollar bill with the simple words, “It’s for her” (161). Hedrick points out how Stowe likely based this scene on the experience of her friend Professor Upham. In a letter to her sister Catharine, Stowe retells how although Upham supported gradual abolition, “until that is to be done he is for bearing every thing in silence & stroking & saying ‘pussy pussy’—so as to allay all prejudice & void all agitation.”41 Describing the dinner argument she had with him on this point, she pleasantly noted that when a fugitive knocked on his window seeking redress the very next day, Upham gave him money, his wife gave him supplies, and they together wished him well on the way to Canada. Such experiences seem to have invigorated Stowe’s confidence that people would rise to the occasion once they understood what was at stake.

Imagining Professor Upham’s experience playing out between a Senator and a fugitive, Stowe meant to demonstrate how adherence to the Christian master chord plainly wins out in real time. Once faced with the reality of slavery, even a senator recognizes that Christian duty towards Eliza ultimately requires no discussion—“It will have to be done, though, for aught I see,—hang it all!” (152). Meditating on how “cheap” he’ll now feel when returning to his legislative duties, Senator Bird nevertheless insists again, “hang it, I can’t help it!” Any choice on the matter he may have once intellectually entertained evaporates when faced with the truth of the situation. Mrs. Bird responds to her husband’s realization by indirectly referencing her earlier doubts about his personal ability to carry out the requirements of the legislative bill he helped pass:

41 HBS to “Dear Sister” [Catherine Beecher], n.d. [1850 or 1851] as cited in Joan Hedrick, A Life, 205.
“Could I have ever loved you, had I not known you better than you know yourself?” (153). Mrs. Bird’s stated prescience on this issue, reflects Stowe’s own optimism for her project and confidence in her progressive Christian vision. She maintains here what she claims in the Concluding Remarks, “These men and Christians cannot know what slavery is; if they did, such a question could never be open for discussion.” Stowe believes that one thing keeping Christians apathetic towards slavery is their disconnection from it and ignorance concerning the realities involved. Thus, she assumes that exhibiting the “living dramatic reality” will open and inspire a Christian response that will reveal the futility of all current attempts to defend it.

Echoing Seward’s contention of “a higher law than the Constitution,” Stowe decontextualized the issue of slavery from the debates surrounding the Union, deliberately dismissing the notion that any obligations could transcend the priority of observing basic Christian principles when faced with a real situation.⁴² Stowe’s effort to reduce political debates to their basis in human to human interaction resonates with Thoreau’s ecological approach to the issue, as discussed in the chapters to come. For both of them, slavery required a ground up, rather than top down perspective—duty to a religious or political structure could never supersede duty to individual beings.

**Disputing Slavery’s Benevolence and Exposing “What Slavery Is”**

Despite Stowe’s efforts to suggest the impossibility of the Fugitive Slave Law being justified at the person-to-person level, however, she registered the force of the

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arguments asserting that such a Christian response could/should be restrained in
decrease to political commitments or religious understanding. On display in Senator
Bird’s initial attempt to justify the law, these restraints are directly identified in Stowe’s
description of the prototypical slave trader’s dispassionate disposition:

> The trader had arrived at that stage of Christian and political perfection which has
been recommended by some preachers and politicians of the north, lately, in
which he had completely overcome every humane weakness and prejudice. His
heart was exactly where yours, sir, and mine could be brought, with proper effort
and cultivation. … You can get used to such things, too, my friend; and it is the
great object of recent efforts to make our whole northern community used to
them, for the glory of the Union. (208).

Highlighting the hardened stoicism that practicing or tolerating slavery requires, Stowe
juxtaposes this cultivated and seasoned trader with that of Uncle Tom, who “had not
learned to generalize, and to take enlarged views” (209).43 “If he had only been
instructed by certain ministers of Christianity,” the narrative voice continues, “he might
have thought better of it, and seen in it an every-day incident of a lawful trade; a trade
which is the vital support of an institution which an American divine tells us has ‘no evils
but such as are inseparable from any other relations in social and domestic life’” (209-
10). Quoting a Northern minister’s use of the same proslavery arguments that percolated
throughout Southern publications, Stowe cites the increasing attempt to authorize slavery
alongside other familiar institutions. Stowe deprecates this effort by offering the
simplicity of Tom’s unencumbered perspective: “But Tom, as we see, being a poor,
ignorant fellow, whose reading had been confined entirely to the New Testament, could

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43 The large views Stowe references here are distinct from Thoreau’s sense of situating slavery in
the cosmos. Here, they refer to the idea that the demands of political stability or theological orthodoxy
require the sacrifice of immediate feelings. This is the exact opposite from Thoreau who argues that
political institutions are so ephemeral in the grand scheme of things that sacrificing one’s conscience not
only does violence to immediate living, but it also perpetuates an institution destined for change anyways.
not comfort and solace himself with views like these. His very soul bled within him for what seemed to him the *wrongs* of the poor suffering thing.” Contrasted with the cultivation of the slave trader, Tom’s anguish for a suffering woman is made to reflect the New Testament’s simplification of the Old Testament’s convoluted law, implying Jesus prioritizing of love and his call to comfort the poor in body and spirit. Tom’s New Testament education—void of political appeals to the glory of the Union or religious appeals to American slavery’s sanctity as an institution—failed to cultivate the hardened demeanor that tolerating slavery’s atrocities required.

In addition to emphasizing the incongruity between New Testament teaching and this call for “disciplined” goodwill, Stowe recognized the need to debunk the insistence that slavery held “*no evils but such as are inseparable from any other relations in social and domestic life.*” This claim implied that the occasional misuse and abuse of slavery did not alter the fact that God ordained slavery for the benefit of all. As T.H. Holmes explained, the “Divine appointment” of slavery made the duties involved a “Divine requirement,” meaning “Divine displeasure attends their violation.”

In other words, the evils of slavery stem not from the basis of the institution itself, but from stewards who fail to fulfill their duty regarding it—just as a father might fail to perform his paternal duties. Dismantling this perspective, as Stowe understood, hinged on disputing slavery’s “Divine appointment.” Yet, the potency of the exegetical strategy that employed the Bible in support of slavery complicated the efficacy of a straightforward hermeneutical debate. As a result, Stowe concentrated on proving slavery’s evils to be intrinsic and

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singular, pressing the question of whether a benevolent God would authorize an institution that was so completely appalling.

Struggling to crack this entrenched hermeneutical defense, Stowe’s strategy for proving slavery’s evils resorts to a form of ad hominem attack—a common recourse for frustrated disputants. As Stowe catalogs the reasons offered in support of slavery through various scenes, she takes frequent stabs at not only the logic of Christian support for slavery, but also the dubious character of the people accepting and posing the argument. The genuine moral earnestness that she paints Senator Bird with when he finally comes in to contact with and comprehends the plight of the enslaved sharply contrasts with the aloof callousness with which she colors those who defend and safeguard slavery. In the “Select Incident of Lawful Trade” steamboat scene, for example, she describes a “genteel woman, who sat at her state-room door sewing,” and responded to the suggestion that slavery brought shame upon the nation by insisting, “O, there's a great deal to be said on both sides of the subject.” However, this assertion of verboseness never extends past the woman’s opening contention that “the negroes are better off than they would be to be free.” After haphazardly engaging with another woman on the issue, she eventually agrees with the raised counterpoints before yawning and repeating “for a finale, the remark with which she had begun” (200). From putting this indifference and circular reasoning on display, Stowe jumps to engaging the argument that slavery simply aligns with God’s will, by narrating a “grave-looking” clergyman’s defense: “‘Undoubtedly. It pleased Providence, for some inscrutable reason, to doom the race to bondage, ages ago; and we must not set up our opinion against that’” (200). She icily relates how this might-makes-right argument is offered to the uneasy slaver trader, Haley—who “ha’ant no
larning”—as a means of calming his troubled conscience. Haley’s conscience is again pricked, however, when he learns “there’s differences in parsons,” and that another clergyman onboard condemns slavery with an appeal to the scripture “All things whatsoever ye would that man should do to unto you, do ye even so unto them” (201). Abreast of the possibility that “mabee [slavery] won’t go down the Lord, neither, when ye settle with Him,” Haley ultimately determines to eventually end his work as a slave trader, but only once he balances his accounts, which the narrator notes as “a process which many gentleman besides Mr. Haley have found specific for an uneasy conscience” (202-3). Prying into the reasoning offered explicitly and implicitly in support of slavery, Stowe challenges the virtue of the arguments involved, by questioning the magnanimity of the “genteel” women, “graven-face” priests, and “unlarnt” but financially motivated slave traders who come together in support of it.

Stowe’s effort to challenge the public perception of chivalrous and benevolent slaveholders parallels her attempt to alter the public perception of brutal and ignorant slaves. She illustrates the humanity and virtue of her black characters with the same purpose that she displays the cruelty and selfishness of white slave owners. While methodically working to display how slavery dehumanizes the enslaved, she similarly emphasizes how slavery enables, if not engenders, the malevolence of its stewards. In making this case, Stowe pursued a narrative strategy similar to that of Frederick Douglass. Douglass’s efforts on this front included his characterization of the damaging effects slavery had on previously good people, most notably Mrs. Auld: “a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings. 45 “Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me,”

45 Douglass, Narrative, 57.
Douglass explains, “When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach.”46 Beginning with this allusion to Matthew 25 and the parable of dividing the Sheep and the Goats, Douglass continues to layer biblical language in the next line, “Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness.” Douglass frames Mrs. Auld’s acceptance or practice of slavery as the direct cause driving her away from the “heavenly qualities” central to Christianity. The structure of this decline has its opposite parallel in Douglass’s encounter in Nantucket with Mr. Nathan Johnson who aided the fugitive Douglass. Of Mr. Johnson, Douglass made sure to clarify, “I can say with a grateful heart, ‘I was hungry, and he gave me meat; I was thirsty, and he gave me drink; I was a stranger, and he took me in.’” More than simply demonstrating the cruelty or benevolence of the people he interacts with, Douglass interprets such qualities and conduct within a Christian register—pronouncing their greater significance. This effort is part of Douglass’s attempt to demonstrate the separation between “good, pure, and holy” Christianity and the “bad, corrupt, and wicked” counterfeit peddled in support of slavery.47

Like Douglass, Stowe similarly sought to illuminate the religious stakes embedded in the circumstances of her narratives—to paint slavery with the light of her clear Christian perspective—by measuring slavery’s end results in comparison to clear

46 Douglass, Narrative, 59.

47 Douglass, Narrative, 105.
scriptural principles of love and compassion. She, too, sought to prove that slavery relied on and encouraged a debased character. When first introducing the slave catcher Tom Loker, for example, Stowe depicts him taking his friend’s assertion, “If you a’nt the devil, Tom, you’s his twin brother” as a compliment. She contrasts the tavern that Loker and his slavecatching associates haunt—a society she drolly apologizes for introducing her readers to—with the love-filled home of the Quakers Rachel and Simeon Halliday.

The Halliday home is so committed to Christian principles of benevolence that their children are even instructed not to hold enmity for slaveholders: “I am surprised at thee, son, thy mother never taught thee so. I would do even the same for the slaveholder as for the slave, if the Lord brought him to my door in affliction” (224). Expectedly, these precise circumstances present themselves when Loker is injured while pursuing George and Eliza Harris, and the Quaker community prove good on Simeon’s word. Moved by the compassion shown to him, Loker ultimately assists the runaway slaves in their escape, commencing a moral and spiritual reformation that—demonstrating the inverse of Mrs. Auld’s transformation in Douglass’s narrative—parallels his disentanglement from the slave-catch business.

Unsatisfied with displaying how slavery legitimated the character traits that slavescatching required (low-hanging fruit as it were), Stowe also sought to elucidate slavery’s detrimental influence on the wide range of people involved with the institution. Joan Hedrick suggests that by “linking the story of Eliza and George Harris with that of Uncle Tom,” Stowe “yoked the freedom narrative to a bondage narrative,” which “had the political virtue of directing the reader’s attention away from escape and back to the
enduring realities of slavery.” These realities Stowe put on display were not only those endured by the enslaved, however, but also those endured (and enjoyed) by the slaveholders and their supporters. The white men that Tom meets along his progressive journey being sold down the river collectively define a negative correlation between one’s involvement with slavery and one’s unison with the principles of Christian brotherhood. This spectrum ranges from the religiously apathetic (Mr. Shelby) to the morally insecure (Haley), appallingly immoral (Tom Loker), morally wracked (Augustine St. Clare), and utterly damnable (Simon Legree). The actions of these men are juxtaposed with the Christian valor and courage of the white men who oppose slavery, including Mr. Bird (when he learns what it is), John Van Trompe, the Quakers Simeon and Phineas, and, finally, the young George Shelby.

Stowe’s depiction of the white women involved in slavery reflects a similar pattern. Mrs. Shelby is “a woman of high class, both intellectually and morally” who exercised “unlimited scope in all her benevolent efforts for the comfort, instruction, and improvement of her servants” (54-5). Nevertheless, despite all of her best intentions, the reason her home can never be a refuge of peace and safety like that of the Quaker matriarch, Rachel Halliday, lies solely in the presence of slavery. Mrs. Shelby’s peaceful estate was sawn asunder by an “incident of lawful trade” that separated Eliza from her child and Tom from his family. “I was a fool,” she concludes upon realizing the state of things, “to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil. … I thought, by kindness and care, and instruction, I could make the condition of mine better than freedom—fool that I was!” (84). Mrs. Shelby represents those Stowe referenced in her

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preface who “without any fault of their own, are involved in the trials and embarrassments of the legal relations of slavery,” and forced to acknowledge that the enslaved are subject to a “a system so necessarily cruel and unjust as to defeat and do away the good effects of all that can be attempted for them, by their best friends, under it.” “God’s curse on slavery,” as Mrs. Shelby labels it, impedes even those with the best intentions.

As the happenings on the Shelby farm display in full force, American chattel slavery, by designating a human being property and therefore “a thing,” legally relocated agency from the hands of the enslaved individual into the hands of a steward or overseer. The benevolent paternalism defense that this allowed the overseer to direct the development of impoverished and lesser beings—and was, therefore, in the best interest of the enslaved—obviously rested on racist assumptions, as the presumed substratum nature that made one eligible for enslavement was determined solely on the basis of African descent. As many critics rightly point out, Stowe’s progressive vision and literary characterization of these enslaved individuals both combatted and preserved such racism. In spite of such persistent racism, however, Stowe was unequivocal in disputing chattel slavery’s incongruence with the ends to which benevolent paternalism paid lip service.

Stowe mapped the episode on the Shelby’s farm to stage a direct challenge to the notion that slavery was created for benevolent intentions. Mrs. Shelby’s benevolent ambitions only shrouded, as Stowe worked to reveal, the power structure that the institution’s sanctioning of and reliance on the domestic slave trade illuminated. The narrative episode suggests that when the chips are down, and push really comes to shove,
slavery exposes its benevolent limits and reveals itself to be an economic institution. Mr. Shelby consents to sell Eliza’s child and Uncle Tom to save his whole estate—“Either they must go, or all must” (84). The difference between slavery and freedom, as Mrs. Shelby learns, comes down to the fact that slavery facilitates and sanctions such a choice. Tom being taken from his family and Harry from his mother are legitimate dealings in the institution of slavery because slaves are assets before they are people. The crisis on the Shelby farm, which Stowe uses to open and propel the rest of her narrative, depicts the institution of slavery as a fundamentally inadequate structure for accomplishing the benevolent ends that good people like Mrs. Shelby aspires towards. Stowe begins her narrative, in other words, by demonstrating how a system designed to regulate property can hardly be considered the ideal means of securing the happiness and progress of all involved.

Stowe closes her narrative on the opposite end of the spectrum, using the villainous Simon Legree, a former pirate, to reiterate slavery’s singular capacity for evil as something wholly distinct from other institutions. Illustrating what chattel slavery is capable of permitting, Stowe challenges the Divine origin of slavery by putting its satanic qualities on full display in the character of Legree, who greets Tom with the declaration, “I’m your church now,” and proves true to his promise that “I’ll conquer ye, or kill ye!” (482, 582). When George Shelby arrives on the scene of Tom’s death and informs Legree, “I will proclaim this murder. I will go to the very first magistrate, and expose you,” Legree is able to confidently shrug off the threat: “Where you going to get witnesses?—how you going to prove it?—Come, now!” George’s awful realization—“There was not a white person on the place; and, in all southern courts, the testimony of
colored blood is nothing”—leads to the sentiment that Stowe hopes to instill in all her readers: “He felt, at that moment, as if he could have rent the heavens with his heart's indignant cry for justice; but in vain” (592). Posing the terrible demise of Uncle Tom and potential existence of a person like Legree, Stowe complements her narration of how slavery frustrates even those with the best intentions by revealing how it dangerously enables those with the worst. The liability of a Legree, she suggests, irredeemably offsets even the most successful efforts of a Mrs. Shelby.

These two ends of the spectrum, which begin and conclude the novel, combine to illustrate a point Stowe makes clear in the middle of the novel’s focus on the estate life of the lackadaisical aristocrat Augustine St. Clare. Volume I ends and Volume II begins with Augustine in dialogue with his pious Northern cousin about the virtues, vices, and realities of slavery. “Talk of the abuses of slavery! Humbug!” Augustine explains to Miss Ophelia in a particularly revelatory moment,

“The thing itself is the essence of all abuse! And the only reason why the land don't sink under it, like Sodom and Gomorrah, is because it is used in a way infinitely better than it is. For pity's sake ... many of us do not, and dare not,—we would scorn to use the full power which our savage laws put into our hands. And he who goes the furthest, and does the worst, only uses within limits the power that the law gives him” (311).

Refuting the idea that the abuses of slavery are common to all social relations and outliers in an otherwise wholly beneficial system, the novel’s structure builds towards and out from this assertion. Despite whatever good use slavery might be put to by the well-intentioned Mrs. Shelbys of the world, Augustine identifies the chief feature chattel slavery is designed and predicated upon—granting complete and absolute power to one person over another—as blatant abuse. Using such power in a way that is “infinitely better than it is” does not, Stowe contends, compensate for the injustice of the structure
itself, which sets it wholly apart from the other “social relations” with which defenders attempt to associate it. Stowe seeks to demonstrate how chattel slavery withholds, from the enslaved, basic human rights that are intrinsic (however unequally distributed) in all other social relations and that prohibit the type of atrocities that Legree is able to get away with.

By illustrating how slavery was based in and produced malevolence on a fundamental level, rather than—like any other social institution—simply endured the wicked influence of independent actors, Stowe contested the divine authority of the institution. In this sense, her project in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* involved not only sentimentalizing slave narratives to generate emotive reactions but also mobilizing these narratives in a way that questioned how a social structure that intrinsically oppresses and systematically corrupts people could possibly come from a benevolent God. Her narrative illustrations work to suggest that the absolute power slavery granted its stewards was not the design of a benevolent God, but simply a corrupt system employed by one group of people to hold power over another, less powerful, group.

While the novel begins with Mrs. Shelby illuminating how slavery inevitably stunted the efforts of even those with the best intentions, and concludes with Simon Legree hyperbolically illustrating slavery’s corruption and displaying how far its legal limits extended, the central portrait of the St. Clare estate identifies the true enablers of the slavery epidemic—the educated and respected members of Southern society who admit slavery’s lack of divine appointment and benevolent structure and yet, maintain and preserve the institution regardless. Stowe’s characterization of Southern aristocracy during Tom’s purgatorial stay at the St. Clare estate suggests that the naivety of Mrs.
Shelby and the brutality of Legree only persist because a knowing class of people allow it.

Stowe accentuates this precise point in a conversation between two gentlemen, just as Tom departs the St. Clare estate and meets Legree. In response to Legree’s celebratory explanation of the brutality with which he treats his slaves, the older gentleman insists to the younger, “‘You must not take that fellow to be any specimen of Southern planters. … He is a mean, low, brutal fellow!’” Conceding the point that “there are also many considerate and humane men among planters,” the younger gentleman, nevertheless, emphasizes Augustine St. Clare’s same contention that slave laws allow such a man to “hold any number of human beings subject to his absolute will, without even a shadow of protection.” “In my opinion,” the younger man tells his older associate, it is you considerate, humane men, that are responsible for all the brutality and outrage wrought by these wretches; because, if it were not for your sanction and influence, the whole system could not keep foothold for an hour. If there were no planters except such as that one. …the whole thing would go down like a millstone. It is your respectability and humanity that licenses and protects his brutality. (485-6)

Stowe inserts this scene after having painting the tragic fate of Tom, who previously witnessed the humane treatment to which the older gentlemen refers, but nevertheless now lies victim to the calloused fists of the presumed exception, Simon Legree. Moreover, it is not only Tom’s current fate that Stowe employs to challenge the value of humane slaveholders offsetting the weight of the inhumane, but also what the reader learns following Tom’s journey through several different humane plantations up until this point. Even the humane and refined stewards of the institution recognize slavery’s clear lack of benevolent basis and yet persist in the institution anyway.
Stowe offers twin perspectives on the aristocratic response to such knowledge in her portrait of literal twins, Augustine and Adolf St. Clare, whom she describes as “opposites on every point” (387). In response to Alfred’s toleration of his son Henrique’s meritless whipping of an attending servant, Augustine asks after Henrique education in “the first verse of a republican’s catechism, ‘All men are born free and equal!’” (390). Rather than defend Henrique’s actions along those lines, Alfred simply dismisses the principle all together as “one of Tom Jefferson’s pieces of French sentiment and humbug,” claiming that is it “perfectly ridiculous to have that going the rounds among us, to this day.” St. Clare’s sardonic acknowledgment of such ridiculousness signifies the incongruence between that founding principle of the nation and the nation’s current state.

Stowe parallels Augustine’s reserved discomfort over such incongruence with Alfred’s unabashed endorsement, “For my part, I think half this republican talk sheer humbug. It is the educated, the intelligent, the wealthy, the refined, who ought to have equal rights and not the canaille” (391). Rather than appeal to Divine appointment or feign the benevolence of the system, Alfred simply asserts his partiality towards preserving his own class: “We must set our face against all this educating, elevating talk, that is getting about now; the lower class must not be educated.” To Augustine’s charge that the enslaved are getting education nevertheless—only in a “barbarism and brutality” that should worry the genteel class should the enslaved ever gain the upper hand, Alfred adamantly insists, “They shall never get the upper hand! …I'm not afraid to sit on the escape-valve, as long as the boilers are strong, and the machinery works well.” Countering Alfred’s anti-republican sentiment and his jokily referring to the day the boilers burst as “Dies declarabit,” Augustine, insists that “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” (392). Referring to this as more “red republican humbugs,” Alfred’s retort marks the tone of genteel nihilism that, however distinct from Legree, is no less ominous: “Well, I hope I shall be dead before this millennium of your greasy masses comes on” (392). If the extreme opposite end of the spectrum from Mrs. Haley’s benevolent intentions is Simon Legree demonstrating the awful power that American chattel slavery grants its stewards and the horrific consequences should such a steward exercise that power without restraint, than Alfred’s position offers a central perspective on slavery that, for Stowe, proves doubly damning in its abhorrence of the nation’s founding principles and omission of any benevolent commitments, all while coming from the mouth of an educated member of polite Southern society.

Augustine’s other companion, his wife Marie, offers a similarly disturbing perspective on those who insist on slavery’s divine appointment. Stowe’s characterization of Marie St. Clare, like that of Alfred, subtly rivals Simon Legree in suggesting that slavery not only enables the worst of human nature, but also engenders a consuming selfishness that poisons individuals, families, and, by extension, the nation. Calloused to the needs and humanity of those around her, Marie voices one complaint after another whilst reclined on her comfortable parlor furniture. Her lack of patience couples with complete bewilderment at her husband’s discomfort with the institution that sustains their comfortable life. “I’m thankful I’m born where slavery exists,” Marie explains in response to her husband’s misgivings, “I believe it’s right,—indeed, I feel it must be; and, at any rate, I’m sure I couldn’t get along without it.” (281). Exemplifying
how motherly virtue withers in the sun of slavery, Marie’s condescension towards those around her and obliviousness to her own selfishness walks the line between comedy and horror. Rather than attempt to wed slavery with Christian benevolence—as Mrs. Shelby tried and failed to do—Marie embraces her superiority as a God given right, designed to secure her own personal comforts. Reporting on a church sermon that “expressed all my views exactly,” Marie explains,

The text was, ‘He hath made everything beautiful in its season;’ and he showed how all the orders and distinctions in society came from God; and that it was so appropriate, you know, and beautiful, that some should be high and some low, and that some were born to rule and some to serve, and all that, you know; and he applied it so well to all this ridiculous fuss that is made about slavery, and he proved distinctly that the Bible was on our side, and supported all our institutions so convincingly. (279)

Ventriloquizing this position—slavery’s fixed place in a natural hierarchy determined by God and therefore unchallengeable by human means—through Marie St. Clare, Stowe utilizes the most effective strategy for combating the strength of this hermeneutical interpretation. One of the most selfish and intolerable characters in the novel, Marie’s reliance upon this argument implies that slavery is only the necessity of the selfish and loathsome lazy. Characterizing Marie in this way draws attention to the ends of the argument to which she holds fast. Stowe works to suggest that slavery is not, as Mrs. Shelby is forced to conclude despite her best efforts, conducted with the best interests of the slaves in mind, but rather the best interests of the slaveholders. Those who most strongly embrace the position that God’s might makes right, are those who, like Marie St. Clare, selfishly stand to benefit the most from it. Those, Stowe again implies, who hold the power already.
In Stowe’s narrative, the one to admit this most forthrightly is the one who witnessed the bias and abhorrent indolence of slaveholders like Adolf and Marie up close and personal—Augustine St. Clare. In an impassioned conversation with Miss Ophelia, Augustine wedges and cuts his way down to the hard bottom that slavery rests upon:

Strip it of all its ornament, run it down to the root and nucleus of the whole, and what is it? Why, because my brother Quashy is ignorant and weak, and I am intelligent and strong,—because I know how, and can do it,—therefore, I may steal all he has, keep it, and give him only such and so much as suits my fancy. Whatever is too hard, too dirty, too disagreeable, for me, I may set Quashy to doing. Because I don’t like work, Quashy shall work. Because the sun burns me, Quashy shall stay in the sun. Quashy shall earn the money, and I will spend it. Quashy shall lie down in every puddle, that I may walk over dry-shod. Quashy shall do my will, and not his, all the days of his mortal life, and have such chance of getting to heaven, at last, as I find convenient. This I take to be about what slavery is. (331)

Significantly, it is the charmingly evasive Augustine St. Clare that ultimately articulates the supposition behind reality that Stowe set out to paint. It all comes down to might makes right. Despite all the deliberative effort spent towards justifying and debating slavery’s foundation and merits, Stowe’s most affable character posits the unavoidable reality that if you examine it close up, there can, as he says, “be but one opinion”:

Planters, who have money to make by it,—clergymen, who have planters to please,—politicians, who want to rule by it,—may warp and bend language and ethics to a degree that shall astonish the world at their ingenuity; they can press nature and the Bible, and nobody knows what else, into the service; but, after all, neither they nor the world believe in it one particle the more. It comes from the devil. (331).

Tom’s journey from the St. Clare estate to the Legree plantation displays this devilish hard bottom, unadorned and unencumbered by the posturing of polite society.

Yet, before concluding Tom’s journey in Legree’s “dark place,” Stowe first introduces the young Evangeline as a shining counter example to Adolf’s bias, Marie’s haughtiness, and Augustine’s moral diffidence. Little Eva, as her mother bewilderedly
notes, “somehow always seems to put herself on equality with every creature that comes near her” (265). The example of nascent Southern virtue undefiled, Eva’s gentle earnestness demonstrates the alternative to the aristocratic self-consumption that surrounds her. When asked whether she prefers the Southern way of life to the Northern way of life, Eva can only think of justifying the Southern way of life on the grounds that “it makes so many more round you to love” (282). This line explicitly shades the northerner Miss Ophelia, whose time in the South awakened her to the implicit prejudices she acquired from living in a northern society that isolated her from those not of her race. But it is Eva’s reasoning—which strikes Marie as “odd”—that implies the line of argument that Stowe wants to pursue. It works from the very ends according to which Stowe attempted to frame the debate over slavery, and to which she holds both the North and the South accountable. What path—what institution, what structure—leads to or ensures the most love? Eva behavior, based as it was on this criteria, modelled such power and possibilities, especially in contrast to that of her cousin Henrique, which led even his father to admit that “there's no doubt that our system is a difficult one to train children under” (393). In rising above and resisting the prejudices that the slavery system evokes, Eva displayed the higher virtue of a life rooted in goodwill. Her love rehabilitated everyone from her morally wracked father to the pious but prejudiced Miss Ophelia to the naughty and despondent slave girl Topsy. Emphasizing Eva’s prioritizing of “Christ-like love,” Stowe offers “a lesson” to the nation—which is not, she clarifies, “the first time a little child had been used to instruct an old disciple” (411).

Stowe’s forceful articulation of this lesson in the character of Eva more fully contrasts with the catalog of characters she displays as either devaluing that lesson or, in
seeking to follow it, find the system of slavery completely incompatible. Marie’s conclusion that “distinctions in society come from God; and that it was so appropriate, you know, and beautiful that some should be high and some should be low” (279) together with Alfred’s assertion that the “Anglo Saxon is the dominant race of the world, and is to be so” (392) and Augustine’s rueful acknowledgment that “Because I don't like work, Quashy shall work” (331), all point to the true root of the national dilemma:

slavery is really not about benevolence at all, but simply about preserving a racial system that benefitted the comfortable and exploited the weak. “‘We’ve got ‘em and we mean to keep ‘em,’” as Augustine summates, “that’s just the whole of what all this sanctified stuff amounts to, after all; and I think it will be intelligible to everyone everywhere’” (279). Indeed, Stowe directed the whole of her narrative towards making that crude reality unquestionably clear.

Rethinking the Union’s Priorities

For Stowe, the Fugitive Slave Law only further legitimated an institution that contradicted the progress the nation and world was otherwise making towards “the development of the principles of Christian brotherhood.” By uprooting anti-slavery arguments from their association with mere sentimental feelings and planting them firmly in the basis of Christianity and modern progress, Stowe relocated the slavery debate from a typical sectional dispute to a battle over the guiding principles and essence of the nation. In so doing, she reframed the stakes of the debate from a question of preserving the Union to preserving the reason for the Union in the first place.

The hypocrisy and hollowness of prioritizing political Union over adherence to the most basic Christian mandate and professed ends of the republic served as the
concluding emphasis of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, just as it had for Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*. Douglass closes his appendix by parodying the popular Southern hymn “Heavenly Union”:

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Come, saints and sinners, hear me tell
How pious priests whip Jack and Nell,
And women buy and children sell,
And preach all sinners down to hell,
    And sing of heavenly union.

. . .

All good from Jack another takes,
And entertains their flirts and rakes,
Who dress as sleek as glossy snakes,
And cram their mouths with sweetened cakes;
    And this goes down for union.49
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Playing on heavenly union and political union, Douglass’s parody is as biting as it is clever. It leaves his reader ruminating on the hypocrisy of attempts to divorce political practice and from cherished fundamental beliefs. Stowe ends her narrative attacking these same mixed up priorities: “Not by combining together, to protect injustice and cruelty, and making a common capital of sin, is the 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 the stronger law, by which injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God!” (629). This final line of her “Concluding Remarks,” and thus her novel, caps her argument that combining together to save the Union around the wrong principles was a fool’s errand. God will eventually offer course correction, she warns, and it will be anything but pleasant.50


50 See Kevin Pelletier, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism*, for further discussion of how Stowe’s emphasis on love comes with the accompanying bite of apocalypse fear, wrath, and dread.
Throughout *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe sought to paint the circumstances surrounding slavery in a way that prioritized the basic unity of humanity over a political union of states. As she clarified to her European readers, “The great mystery which all Christian nations hold in common the union of God with man thro’ the humanity of Jesus Christ invests human existence with an awful sacredness and in the eyes of the true believer in Jesus, he who tramples on the rights of his meanest fellow-man, is not only inhuman but sacrilegious—and the worst form of this sacrilege is the institution of slavery.”

Built on the foundations of slave narratives, like Frederick Douglass’s, the novel was designed to display the sacredness of human existence and the master chord of Christianity as superseding any and all commitments. “In authorizing the circulation of this work on the continent of Europe,” she declared, “the author has only the apology that the love of man is higher than the love of country.”

This priority shone through to Stowe’s readers, regardless of their location. Douglass himself indicated the success of Stowe’s endeavor, calling *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* the “master book of the nineteenth century,” which, “bounded by no national lines, despises the limits of Sectarian sympathy, and thrills the universal heart.”

Eschewing “Sectarian sympathy” to craft a case against slavery based on more than “sentiment alone,” this master book offered the nation a master chord—inviting every individual to “see to it that they feel right” as the “man or woman who feels strongly, healthily and justily, on the great interests of

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51 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* [European Edition], vi.

52 Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, [European Edition], vi. Such insistence built on her declaration at the end of the novel that every individual “feel right” for the “the man or woman who feels strongly, healthily and justily, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race” (623).

53 Frederick Douglass, “A Day and a Night in ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* (March 4, 1853), 2.
humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race” (623). The harmony of humanity and the nation, according to Stowe, depended on the extent to which religious instruction, civic policy, social institutions, and individual feelings were in unison with this master chord.
CHAPTER 2
THE SOUTHERN STUMBLING BLOCK:

CHRISTIAN PROGRESS AND THE INCOMPATIBLE SOUTH IN DRED

*Had things remained tranquil as they were when the book began, it might have been quite another book and another name would have done.*

_Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1856*

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s tour-de-force illustration of “what slavery is” did not, as she had hoped, end national deliberation on slavery and the Fugitive Slave Law. Proslavery arguments, it turned out, were not to be so easily overcome. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* flew off store shelves, but the Fugitive Slave Law remained on the books, and Northerners continued to be tasked with ensuring that slaves remained in Southern fields. Stowe wrote the novel with confidence in America’s persuasion-based political process, hoping that a clearer picture of the issues at hand would convince congressional representatives and their constituents to correct the nation’s wrongs. She likely inherited such confidence from her father, Lyman Beecher, an influential minister who came of age in the first generation of the new republic, as the young nation cultivated a social imaginary outside of a monarchial structure. “Republicanism elevated persuasion over coercion and,” as Sandra Gustafson explains, “Beecher led the effort to adapt American

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1 Calvin Ellis Stowe and Harriet Beecher Stowe to Moses Dresser Phillips, 11 June 1856, Anti-Slavery (Collection of Distinction), Boston Public Library.
Protestantism to this new reality.”² Locating the roots of republicanism in ancient Israel, rather than Greece or Rome, he asserted the “heavenly origin” of “our own republic, in its constitution and laws.”³ Identifying this heavenly origin was less about inferring the intact perfection of the political system and more about insinuating the republican process as the divine means of facilitating the type of reform that would usher in the millennium. Although opposed to slavery, Beecher trusted the republican process of persuasion, and “believed that without the use of the most cautious and peaceful methods of reform the entire social system would be in jeopardy of being overthrown by slave insurrections, sectional hostility, and even civil war.”⁴ In writing Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Stowe reflected her father’s faith in the republican process, if not his caution, but the trying events of the 1850s would greatly test her resolve.

When it came to slavery, Stowe certainly inhabited a different world from that of her father, who was born less than a year before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The prospect of gradual abolition, which seemed like an inevitability at the turn of the century, became increasingly difficult to imagine as the decades passed. The barrage of political dealings and debate throughout the first half of the new century raised legitimate questions about persuasion’s ability to steer the nation towards the new millennium and whether the path of progress could possibly avoid the type of turmoil that her father’s generation both feared and tried so desperately to avoid. While the last chapter detailed Stowe’s confident plunge into the debate over the Fugitive Slave Law in

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³ Gustafson, Imagining Deliberative Democracy, 91.
an attempt to right the wrong of slavery through persuading the public mind—that supreme seat of republican authority—this chapter considers the aftermath of that effort. Surveying the negative response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Stowe’s subsequent endeavor to dismantle those complaints in *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1853), this chapter draws out the fundamental gap in perspectives that Stowe was up against and the challenge it posed to her vision of America’s destiny. It then turns to *Dred*, reading Stowe’s second antislavery novel as a response to increased Southern aggression and her attempt to portray Southern life in fundamental conflict with the modern path of progress she believed the nation and wider Christian world to be on. Ultimately, the chapter charts how Stowe, in turning the spotlight from meek Uncle Tom to intrepid Dred, moved from an optimistic and heartfelt plea for the nation to rise up towards its Christian potential to a harrowing assessment of the South’s backwards condition and a stark warning of the looming possibility that violence might be the only way out of the dismal swamp and into the modern age.

**Competing Realities and the Response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin***

The numerous proslavery responses to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* ranged in predictability and merit, assuming, as Alfred Brophy notes, a dual emphasis that continued to call for order over emotion while insisting that Stowe exaggerated slavery’s abuses.5 "The peculiar falsity of this whole book," claimed an 1852 review from *The New York Observer* "consists in making exceptional or impossible cases the

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representatives of the system. By the same process which she has used it would not be difficult to frame a fatal argument against the relation of husband and wife, or of parent and child, or of guardian and ward, for thousands of wives and children and wards have been maltreated and even murdered.\textsuperscript{6} Allowing the possibility that Stowe may not have been “actuated by wrong motives in the process of the work,” the review nonetheless derides Stowe’s methodology as “unpardonably wrong, [in] imput[ing] to any relation of life those enormities which spring out of the worst depravity of human nature.” In simply reiterating this common proslavery contention, such reviews bypassed the novel’s attempt to emphasize how chattel slavery, by making people property or things, voided the comparison to other social relations.

Other reviews more fully engaged Stowe’s argument, while also more fully attacking her motives. In an 1853 article for the \textit{Southern Quarterly Review}, Louisa McCord claimed that Stowe, “under the veil of Christian charity,” simply invented scenes that would generate book sales—accusing her of the same evil that Stowe recognized in slavery.\textsuperscript{7} McCord glossed the novel as recycled hyperbole, disputing claims to its singular revelations and even derisively complimenting its omission of the longstanding fable of the South’s “fattening negro babies for the use of the soup-pot.” While McCord rejects Stowe’s implication that slaveholders lack “all human feeling,” she focuses nonetheless on Stowe’s critique, claiming the “moral impossibility of her facts.” If slavery was really only about “dollars and cents,” McCord counters, a slave owner would never willfully destroy property that could otherwise be exchanged or traded for profit:

\textsuperscript{6} “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” \textit{The New York Observer} (21 October 1852).

\textsuperscript{7} Louisa S. McCord, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” \textit{Southern Quarterly Review} 23 (January 1853), 83.
“Even the vices of men are so arranged by an Omniscient Providence, that they are frequently found to balance one another, and even were the slave-owner the devil she imagines him, his malignity must be checked by his avarice.” Excusing “acts of cruelty, of maiming, or of murder, when they do occur,” to be the “result of violent passion and impulsive anger,” McCord suggests that the existence of pecuniary profit to be gained would prohibit the type of prolonged and diabolical torture with which Stowe colors the death of Tom at the hands of Legree.\(^8\) Interest combines with humanity, in other words, to prevent events like those on the Legree plantation and mediate the fears that Stowe’s characterization of the slave law posed. In this way, McCord engaged Stowe’s argument concerning chattel slavery’s dehumanizing basis, but colored that construal as a benevolent fail safe that actually protected the slave from the potential abuse of an inhumane slave owner. By making people property, the system of chattel slavery monetized them, imbuing them with a value that was universally legible, even to the most devilish slave holder.

Having offered this response, McCord nevertheless maintains the party line of benevolent paternalism in denying that slave owners only see their slaves as property. “Such human links as exist between the races under this system are,” she insists, “necessarily, all of a softening character.”\(^9\) In making this case, McCord reiterates that the paternalistic structure of slavery stems from the distinction of the races involved: “The natural antipathies of race are checked, and almost obliterated, by the peculiar relation which, at once, unites and separates the races, acting in social life like the

\(^8\) McCord, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” 112.

\(^9\) McCord, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” 112.
disjunctive conjunction in grammar, linking, yet severing so distinctly, that there is no possibility of confusion among the objects thus connected.”

She also clarifies that Anglo-Saxons and “Negros” are not separate but equal units, contending directly against Stowe’s inference that “the negro is the white man’s equal” and thus merely in need of opportunity that slavery prevents. McCord argues that Stowe fails to understand that the white race has reached an “eminence which to the negro nature is unattainable.” As evidence, McCord suggests that the “negro alone has of all races of men, remained entirely without all shadow of civilization.”

“The white man needed no leading strings,” she determines; “God created him for the leader and the teacher.”

While Stowe frames, in the preface to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Africa’s development as a sign of and opportunity for development of the human progress that would usher in Christ’s return, McCord cites the previous lack of development as evidence of a racialized hierarchy that reflects a divine order.

Some responses to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were more open than McCord to the moral ambiguities involved in slavery, but similarly asserted God’s higher authority and adamantly defended slavery on the grounds of obedience to such power. Mary Eastman’s

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12 McCord, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” 118.

13 For a thorough and compelling consideration of this racialized theology, see Jared Hickman’s *Black Prometheus* (NY: Oxford UP, 2016). McCord further engages the novel in assuming that Stowe’s own racialization only furthers this point, as it is the mulatto, who shine in the narrative, while the negro, “except where her imagination has manufactured for him such brutes of masters as are difficult to conceive, seems well enough suited to his position.” She writes Stowe’s relatable characters off as mulattoes, “a monstrous formation” whose “happiest position is probably in the slave States, where he quietly passes over a life, which, we thank God, seems like all other monstrous creations, not capable of continuous transmission.” Again, she suggests that such monstrous creations are checked “under the rules and restraints of slavery” more than the license abolition would provide (McCord, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” 118-9).
Aunt Phillis’s Cabin; Or Southern Life As It Is (1852) offers a particularly vibrant example of the “might makes right” defense that Stowe attempted to counter in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. “However inexplicable may be the fact that God would appoint the curse of continual servitude on a portion of his creatures,” Eastman writes in her preface “will any one dare, with the Bible open in his hands, to say the fact does not exist? It is not ours to decide why the Supreme Being acts! We may observe his dealings with man, but we may not ask, until he reveals it, Why hast thou thus done?”14 Such a line of reasoning locates the fundamental basis of moral action in the decision of whether or not to obey God’s commands, and devalues the need or attempt to comprehend such commands. This logic substitutes the need to inquire into the principles or ends of social institutions with a need to appropriately execute the social institutions that God revealed.

In defending the institution of American slavery through this insistence on unreflective obedience to God’s imperceptible actions, Eastman cites a reality base, or hard bottom, that is entirely different from Stowe’s. Elsewhere in the preface, Eastman writes, “The first of the ten commandments, insisting on the duty owing to the Creator, and the fifth, on that belonging to our parents, are the sources of all order and good arrangement in the minor relations of life; and on obedience to them depends the comfort of society.”15 Where Stowe, in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, offered the principle of goodwill as the master chord of a harmonious society, Eastman, in contrast, suggests that all order

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14 Eastman, Aunt Phillis’s Cabin, 15-16.

15 Eastman, 12. “[W]e live under the glorious and new dispensation of Christ,” she continues, “…The happiness of the human race was the object of his coming; and is it possible that the large portion of them then slaves could have escaped his all-seeing eye! … Oh! no; he came to redeem the world from the power of sin … he did not interfere with the organization of society … nor is there a word that fell from his sacred lips that could be construed into a condemnation of that institution which had existed from the early ages of the world, existed then, and is continued now” (17-18).
and good in society comes back to obedience to God’s commands. She proceeds to
denounce approaches like Stowe’s that attempt to assert “goodwill” over such obedience:

The application made by the Abolitionist of the golden rule is absurd: It might then apply to the child, who would have his father no longer control him; to the app[rentice], who would no longer that the man to whom he is bound should have a right to direct him. Thus the foundations of society would be shaken, nay, destroyed. Christ would have us deal with others, not as they desire, but as the law of God demands: in the condition of life in which we have been placed, we must do what we conscientiously believe to be our duty to our fellow-men.16

Eastman emphasizes “duty to our fellow men” in the context of God’s commands as the foundation of society. In this structure, although everyone might not be treated as they desire, the simple fact is that they will be treated as the law of God demands, in order to prevent the collapse of society altogether. This response to Stowe effectively highlights the way the disagreement over slavery came back to competing ultimate standards. In this case, Stowe’s fundamental mandate to treat “fellow men” with “goodwill” according to the principles of Christian brotherhood directly contrasts with Eastman’s mandate to honor “our duty to our fellow-men” according to the demands of God’s revealed law.

It is important to note that these two specific standards need not be at odds—it may indeed be possible to exercise “goodwill to man” and honor the specific demands of God’s law. These two specific standards only lead to crisis when they are presumed to be at odds—when it seems difficult to reconcile duty to the law of God with “good will towards men.” This is clearly the case that slavery presented. For Stowe, such incongruity challenged the divine authenticity of the law, as God would not deviate from eternal principles of love and goodwill. Eastman, on the other hand, was happy to admit uncertainty as to the reasons behind God’s law: “It is not ours to decide why the Supreme

Being acts!” Hinting at the difficulty of reconciling slavery with human notions of justice, Eastman stresses obeying God’s law from the conviction of human ignorance of God’s supreme knowledge. Because God’s law is the *genuine* path towards ultimate human happiness, it must be followed—regardless of how inexplicable it might be from a limited human perspective.

Eastman was, however, open about slavery’s being abandoned in other regions because of its no longer being deemed necessary: “In the South, they are necessary: though an evil, it is one that cannot be dispensed with; and here they have been retained, and will be retained, unless God should manifest his will (which never yet has been done) to the contrary. Slavery, authorized by God, permitted by Jesus Christ, sanctioned by the apostles, maintained by good men of all ages, is still existing in a portion of our beloved country. How long it will continue, or whether it will ever cease, the Almighty Ruler of the universe can alone determine.”

Like Daniel Webster in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Law, Eastman concedes that God could potentially end slavery, but omits any sense of what that divine intervention might look like. While Eastman saw *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as an affront to God’s commandments, others considered it a manifestation of the divine revelation Eastman felt the end of slavery required. Indeed, Stowe herself would claim at the end of her life that God wrote the novel, while she “merely did his dictation.”


18 Webster, as mentioned previously, told his audience, “But it may be in the dispensation of Providence some remedy may be found for it. But in the meantime, I hold onto the Constitution of the United States,” “Speech of Daniel Webster, at Buffalo May 22” *The National Era*, May 29, 1851.

Much of the difference between perspectives like that of Eastman and Stowe came down to the different relationships they perceived between humans and God, and the subsequent political and social consequences. Marie Caskey, biographer of the Beecher family, suggests that while “other theologians and preachers might go on talking about the rule of God and obedience of his subjects,” the Beechers “marveled aloud that Christians seemed so unwilling to dispense with the trappings of divine royalty.”

Believing in a God whose divinity did not yield arbitrary decisions, but rested in his adherence to eternal principles, Stowe, her extended family, and other like-minded Christians sought to organize society in accordance with the same eternal principles that God prioritized, rather than in reflection of some divine hierarchical structure. As her brother Charles wrote, “The mind of man is destined to be always testing its own legislation, by those principles on which God tests it.”

As love, or goodwill, is believed to be the upmost of these principles, it became the primary criterion for rendering judgement on how society was legislated and organized. Any discovered inconsistencies, like slavery, simply needed to be rectified. Writers like Eastman or McCord, on the other hand, maintained a sense of hierarchy ordained by God. With God arbitrating all truth and justice, one’s duty came down to obeying revealed laws and structures.

The difference between Stowe’s position and that of proslavery advocates relates in useful ways to what Taylor describes as a “neo-Durkheimian identification with the state” where “God is present because it is his Design around which society is organized”

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as opposed to “paleo-Durkheimian” where there is “a sense of the ontic dependence of the state on God and higher times.” The distinction is an important one for approaching Stowe’s sense of reality in connection to religious and political ends.

The “paleo-Durkheimian” designation communicates Taylor’s sense that ancient or pre-modern societies were typically embedded within an ontological hierarchy. These societies “conceive themselves as bodying forth some part of the Chain of Being. Behind the empirical fillers of the slots of kingship, aristocracy, and so on, lie the Ideas, or the persisting metaphysical Realities that these people are momentarily embodying. …Within this outlook, what constitutes a society as such is the metaphysical order it embodies. People act within a frame work which is there prior to and independent of their action.” These hierarchical structures of society gain their meaning and authenticity from their existence within or as an extension of a metaphysical or transcendent order.

Modernity, in Taylor’s narrative, begins as a disembedding from this sense of order. Taylor describes this disembedding as “seeking a relation to the Divine or the Higher, which severely revises the going notions of flourishing, or even goes beyond


23 “Humans have lived for most of their history in modes of complementarity, mixed with a greater or lesser degree of hierarchy. There have been islands of equality, like that of the citizens of the polis, but they are set in a sea of hierarchy, once you replace them in the bigger picture” (Taylor, A Secular Age, 169).

24 Taylor, A Secular Age, 192.

25 We should be careful not to consider Tompkins’s reading—the assertion that for Stowe “all human events are organized, clarified, and made meaningful by the existence of spiritual realities”—as conceiving Stowe’s notion of reality as something of a paleo-Durkheimian perspective. Attributing the spirit hierarchical ontological status in relation to the immanent, and mapping Stowe’s sense of reality on to some existing transcendent structure or order, would overlook Stowe’s modern sensibilities.
them, and can be carried through by individuals on their own, and/or in new kinds of sociality, unlinked to the established sacred order.”26 This break from a sense of being embedded within a sacred cosmic order “occurs as a revolution in our understanding of moral order” that “disembeds us from the social sacred; and posits a new relation to God, as designer.”27 Taylor looks to Grotius and Locke and theories of Natural Law as the most important contributors to the shape that the disembedded modern moral order assumed. The development of a new motive for morality—founded on principles of securing mutual benefit rather than emulating an existing transcendent order—relocates the foundation of society and political authority. “The correct political forms were not deducible from a telos at work in human society,” as Taylor explains; “What justified the law was either its being commanded by God (Locke), or its making logical sense, given the rational and social nature of humans (Grotius), or (later) its providing a way of securing the harmony of interests.”28 Taylor contrasts ancient and modern societies on the basis of a move from a hierarchical-based moral order embedded within a particular vision of the cosmos to a principle-based moral order disembedded from the cosmos and regulated according to notions of mutual benefit for human flourishing.29

26 Taylor, A Secular Age, 154.
28 Taylor, A Secular Age, 184.
29 “The modern social imaginary contrasts with various pre-modern forms in that these reflect an ‘embedded’ understanding of human life. In relation to an ancient regime kingdom, we are seen as already, since time out of mind, defined as subjects of the King, and indeed, even placed more exactly, as serfs of this Lord, who holds from a Duke, who holds from the King; or as a bourgeois of this city, who holds from, etc; or members of this Cathedral chapter, which is under this Bishop, who relates to both Pope and King; and so on. Our relationship to the whole is mediated. The modern citizen imaginary, on the other hand, sees us as all coming together to form this political entity, to which we all relate in the same way, as equal members” (457). “As an instrument,” Taylor also explains, “political society enables these individuals to serve each other for mutual benefit; both in providing security, and in fostering exchange and prosperity.
Taylor’s description of a neo-Durkheimian identification refers to imagining that the state possesses a Providential political mission, with God “as the author of a Design which this society is undertaking to carry out.” ³⁰ “What the activism of the American Revolutionaries added to this,” Taylor specifically suggests, “was a view of history as the theatre in which this Design was to be progressively realized, and of their own society as the place where this realization was to be consummated—what Lincoln will later refer to as ‘the last best hope on earth.’” ³¹

Stowe’s postmillennial vision—her sense of the world’s increasing Christianization—might be seen as a version of this specific religio-political understanding. Secularization, in Taylor’s narrative, occurs in the eventual transition from God as a designer, who holds authorizing influence over the moral order, to “human flourishing” eventually becoming its own ends as the stand alone authority of the moral order, which removes the necessity of God from the picture. ³² Yet, from Stowe’s modern religious perspective, human flourishing is both the immanent and transcendent end goal as God is ultimately committed to the eternal principles that make human flourishing possible. Her sense of transcendent reality, against which (as Jane Tompkins describes) “all human events are organized, clarified, and made meaningful,” is not an ordered

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Any differentiations of it are to be justified by this telos; no hierarchical or other form is intrinsically good” (170).

³⁰ Taylor, A Secular Age, 453.


³² See also James Turner, Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986).
spiritual structure that humans are trying to align with or emulate, but rather a perfected sense of immanent morality—pure goodwill to man.\textsuperscript{33} In as much as the immanent structures operate on the principles of mutual benefit or goodwill to man, they may be seen as in line with the fundamental basis of transcendent reality that Stowe prioritizes.\textsuperscript{34} In this formulation, the onus is on human actors to refine and alter immanent structures towards unison with the transcendent principles. On the other hand, the imperative of consistent obedience to a divine model indicative of the Paleo-Durkheimian approach as reflected in Eastman’s argument, lends itself to a conservative society, set on preserving God’s mandated structures—like slavery—rather than constantly working to more fully assure that societal structures align with God’s same principles.

\textsuperscript{33} Tompkins, Sensational Designs (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1985), 132. Stowe’s dichotomy that Tompkins picks up on between readers’ sympathies being either “in harmony with the sympathies of Christ” or “perverted by the sophistries of worldly policies” is complicated by this relationship between immanent political action and a transcendent spiritual reality. Conceiving the world on a trajectory towards Christianization suggests that “political and economic measures that constitute effective action” may eventually be regarded as more than “superficial, mere extensions of the worldly policies that produced the slave system in the first place.” From the Christianization perspective, it is possible that “specific alterations in the political and economic arrangements” may indeed come to reflect “a change of heart” and be grounded in “the sympathies of Christ.” Tompkins alludes to this in her suggestion that, according to Stowe, “historical change takes place only through religious conversion, which is a theory of power as old as Christianity itself,” and one that “is dramatized and vindicated in Uncle Tom’s Cabin by the novel’s insistence that all human events are organized, clarified, and made meaningful by the existence of spiritual realities (132). Identifying “spiritual realities” as Stowe’s orienting authority suggests that political action only has meaning for Stowe in accordance with its connection to a transcendent reality. “Reality, in Stowe’s view,” Tompkins adds, “cannot be changed by manipulation of the physical environment; it can only be changed by conversion in the spirit because it is the spirit alone that is finally real” (132). Yet, noting the authorizing and ordering influence of this spiritual reality stops short of explicating Stowe’s sense of that reality or the particulars of its ordering influence on her thoughts and actions. My contention here is that the spiritual reality by which Stowe believes “all human events are organized, clarified, and made meaningful” is not a divine hierarchical structure she’s trying to emulate, but rather a pure manifestation of goodwill. For the theological development of this notion see, Jonathan Edwards, An Essay on the Nature of True Virtue (London: W. Oliver, 1778), 11.

\textsuperscript{34} The idea of moral order expressed in the Declaration of Independence, as Taylor explains, “is quite different from the orders which preceded it, because it starts from individuals, and doesn’t see these as a priori within a hierarchical order, outside of which they wouldn’t be fully human agents. Its members are not agents who are originally embedded in a society which in turn reflects and connects with the cosmos, but rather disembedded individuals who come to associate together … to benefit others mutually” (447).
A similar difference can be recognized in the gap between Stowe and someone like Daniel Webster. Webster—in urging his compatriots to weather the storm surrounding slavery by holding fast to the Constitution (which permits slavery)—reflects a fidelity to structure over principle that resonates with Eastman. Of course, for Webster, unlike Eastman, this is a wholly political priority that he is able to separate from God’s commands. While Webster can admittedly “regret extremely that slavery exists in the Southern States, and that Congress has no power to act upon it,” he nevertheless insists upon fidelity to the constitutional compact rather than endorsing progressive reform towards unison with the moral principles he values.35 In June 1851, just as the first few installments of Uncle Tom’s Cabin had begun to appear serially in The National Era, Webster delivered an address to supporters in Canton Springs, Virginia that further clarified his position on the present crisis in the Union. Admitting that “human structures, however strong, do not stand upon the everlasting laws of nature,” Webster nevertheless claims that the fall of the “republican institutions of government” will “resemble that which would happen in the natural world were the sun to be struck out of heaven. . . . where all is now light, and joy, and gladness, there would be spread over us a darkness like that of Erebus.” Unlike Eastman, Webster’s fidelity is not to the structure of slavery, but the republican principles that facilitated the founding of the government that representatively sanctioned slavery into the national constitution. “Now, gentlemen, it is fame enough for me,” he told his supportive audience, “if it may be thought that in my political conduct I have maintained, defended, and acted upon the principles of Virginia and Massachusetts, as these principles were proclaimed and sustained in the two

35 Webster, “Speech of Daniel Webster, at Buffalo May 22,” 86.
great epochs in the history of our country, the Revolution, and the adoption of the present constitutional Government.”\textsuperscript{36} Instead of asserting obedience to God’s commands or prioritizing goodwill to man as the key to the peace, security, and prosperity of the nation, Webster, in the vein of Lyman Beecher, asserts the sanctity of political decisions made within a republican government. Republican principles informed and facilitated the Constitution, which, as a result, stands as the highest law in the land, until amended according to the due process of a republican institution.

Regretful of slavery himself, Webster never defends it as a moral institution, only its legitimacy given the laws of the nation. Individual disagreement with such laws, he strives to make clear, does not justify grounds for their immediate unilateral appeal. He defends the maintenance of the Union, despite the presence of slavery, on the grounds of republican principles and practicality—dismissing the determined reformism of abolitionists like Stowe to be vestiges of fanatical fantasy. “Those who assail the Union at the present day seem to be persons of one idea only,” he tells his audience, “They plant their batteries on some useless abstraction, some false dogma, or some gratuitous assumption.” They find “some spot, or speck, or blot, or blur” and are “at once for overturning the whole fabric.” “And when nothing else will answer,” he continues, “they invoke religion and speak of a higher law.” Webster muses that “this higher law ranges farther than the eagles flight above the highest peaks,” and insists that “no common vision can discern it” and “the hearing of common men never listens to its high behests.” As a result, “one should think it not a safe law to be acted on, in matters of the highest

\textsuperscript{36} Webster, \textit{Speech of Mr. Webster at Capon Springs, Virginia on June 28, 1851} (Washington D.C.: Gideon & Co., 1851), 6-8.
practical moment.” In the end, for Webster, the process of deliberation and compromise is the reliable and unmatched foundation of republican government, a practical means of governing in light of distinct opinions and perspectives. The appeal to a higher, transcending authority, that is not universally discernable by the common man, was in contrast, according to Webster, flimsy ground on which to, in Thoreau’s language, “found a wall or a state.”

Although impractical to a seasoned statesman like Webster, and frustrating to proslavery advocates like Eastman, the “false dogma” of Stowe’s progressive, higher-law-minded approach resonated (as book sales suggest) with domestic readers throughout America’s democratic republic, as well as international readers throughout Europe and elsewhere. A Parisian reviewer, for example suggested that Eastman’s response in Aunt Phillis’s Cabin to Stowe’s attack on slavery in Uncle Tom’s Cabin will “unlikely receive the same success” since “as always, the response to a “raw,” unequivocal and tangible fact, is an abstract defense, a sentimental anecdote, a picture of an ideal and impossible happiness.” This reading might similarly be applied to Webster’s insensible insistence that within the Union “all is now light, and joy, and gladness.” The impossible happiness that this reader recognized in Eastman’s work sharply contrasts with the authenticity that a German publication recognized in the Christian vision that Stowe offered in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Stowe’s novel highlighted, according to the reviewer,

a Christianity of the first centuries of the Christian community, where the “brothers and sisters” whispered their songs of praise to the Savior under the desert palms, in quiet chambers, or in the catacombs of the Eternal City. It is the

37 Webster, Speech of Mr. Webster at Capon Springs, Virginia,” 7-8.

greatness of this novel that it breathes afresh the spirit of this Christianity, in the face of which the chains of the slave and the purple of the Caesars fell to the dust once already, and the Roman eagle, dealt a mortal blow, lowered his proud pinions. Reading this novel we, oppressed by the sultriness of the age, feel the breezes of a new world blow refreshingly across our brow.\textsuperscript{39}

This breeze, “like a sign of warning from the New World to the Old,”\textsuperscript{40} was the same progressive movement that Stowe identified in her preface to \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} with the insistence that a “better day is dawning” where the “poet, the painter, and the artist now seek out and embellish the common and gentler humanities of life, and, under the allurements of fiction, breathe a humanizing and subduing influence, favorable to the development of the great principles of Christian brotherhood.” While these were the responses she had hoped for, and indeed received from Americans as well as Europeans, the persistence of proslavery arguments and political compromises continued to vex her.

\textbf{The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Christian Progress}

Frustrated at responses to \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} that sidestepped the unprincipled nature of slave laws while discrediting the horrors the novel disclosed, Stowe produced \textit{The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, which aimed to defend the reality of the picture her novel had painted. Published in 1853, \textit{The Key} consists of four parts. The first part focuses on substantiating the scenes and characters from \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, surveying real life replicas of her major characters one chapter at a time. Stowe moves in the second part to a more thorough conceptual and legal analysis, beginning with the chapter “What is

\textsuperscript{39} “The American Novel: \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}: or, Negro Life in the American Slave States,” \textit{Allgemeine Zeitung} [General or Daily Times], Stuttgart, Germany, 7 and 8 October 1852. Trans. by Alexander Sager as cited in \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} (Toronto: Broadview, 2009).

\textsuperscript{40} As quoted in Charles Stowe’s \textit{Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Story of Her Life} (Boston: Houghton, 1891), 195.
slavery?” In this section, she focuses on reiterating and developing the fundamental immorality of slave law that Augustine St. Clare identified and Simon Legree displayed: chattel slavery, by giving slave-owners unrestrained power over their property, offered no legal protection for the enslaved. Prying further into slavery’s negative impact on the formation of individuals and society, the third part insists on slavery’s detriment to society and contends against the notion that public sentiment protects the slave where the law comes up short. The fourth and final part indicts the American church for its support of slavery, documenting denominational backsliding from an adamant antislavery stance that previously had church members, “slaveholding and non-slaveholding, virtually formed into one great abolition society.”41 In total, The Key’s four sections provide documentary evidence and analysis that combines to support Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s illustration of slavery as “a system which is as injurious to the master as to the slave; a system which turns fruitful fields to deserts; a system ruinous to education, to morals, and to religion and social progress.”42

Like the novel, Stowe’s documentary study relentlessly worked to characterize slavery as a stumbling block to the otherwise promising progress of the nation. Her progressive vision tints the whole of the work. In her chapter on Augustine St. Clare, in the first part of The Key, she employed this progressive vision towards refuting the persuasive hermeneutical argument that aligned the Bible with slavery. Defending Augustine’s doubts about the church due to his viewing slavery as an immoral institution, she first mentions an anecdotal experience from her husband, Calvin. Calvin met a

41 Harriet Beecher Stowe, The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Boston: John P. Jewett and Co., 1854), 412. Italics in the original unless otherwise noted.

42 Stowe, The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 501.
former Virginian planter in Ohio who had become an unbeliever after his minister rehearsed a Biblical defense of slavery to which he could not respond. Knowing slavery to be indisputably immoral, the man had no choice but to doubt his faith, which he did until shown “the true scriptural view of the subject.” Rather than relate the details of that view herself, Stowe inserted an excerpt from the Baltimore Sun to perform that task for her, carefully noting how it came from “a paper in a slave state.” Commenting on a 600-page book entitled “Bible Defence of Slavery,” the article refutes the premise of the title on the grounds that “Slavery in the United States is a social institution, originating in the convenience and cupidity of our ancestors, existing by State laws, and recognised to a certain extent—for the recovery of slave property—by the constitution.” The article continues, in a tone directly reflective of Augustine, that “nobody would pretend that, if it were inexpedient and unprofitable for any man or any State to continue to hold slaves, they would be bound to do so on the ground of a ‘Bible defence’ of it.”

The article proceeds to compare the “curse of Ham” argument to previous claims made in Britain regarding a Jewish man entering Parliament, as if it were “the religious obligation of the Christian public to perpetuate the political disabilities of the Jews because it would be resisting the Divine will to remove them, in view of the “curse” which the aforesaid Christian Pharisee understood to be levelled against the sons of Abraham.” The author points out the bewildering conflict that such reasoning creates: “Admitting that God has cursed both the Jewish race and the descendants of Ham, He is

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43 In September 1852, Calvin delivered an inaugural address at Andover seminary entitled “The Right Interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures: The Helps and Hindrances,” which was published in Bibliotheca Sacra the following January, just prior to the publication of The Key. See Bibliotheca Sacra, Vol. 10, 37 (January 1853).

44 Stowe, The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 65-66.
able to fulfill His purpose, though the “rest of mankind” should in all things act up to the benevolent precepts of the ‘Divine law.’ Man may very safely cultivate the highest principles of the Christian dispensation, and leave God to work out the fulfilment of His curse.” Why, the author reasons, would God maintain a curse for himself while at the same time calling the rest of humanity to benevolence? Why, in other words, would God’s purpose be separate from humanity’s? “According to the same book and the same logic,” the article continues, “all mankind being under a “curse,” none of us ought to work out any alleviation for ourselves, and we are sinning heinously in harnessing steam to the performance of manual labour, cutting wheat by McCormick’s diablerie, and laying hold of the lightning to carry our messages for us, instead of footing it ourselves, as our father Adam did.” Challenging the notion that humans are stuck under any irredeemable curse, the author points to the fall of man as a comparison and ridicules the idea that humanity should remain in a primeval state. The underlying implication of this comparison concerns the assumed righteousness of progress that the telegraph and steam engine reflect. “With a little more common sense, and much less of the uncommon sort,” the author concludes, “we should better understand Scripture, the institutions under which we live, the several rights of our fellow-citizens in all sections of the country, and the good, sound, practical, social relations which ought to contribute infinitely more than they do to the happiness of mankind.”

This common sense rests on recognizing progress as an obvious contributor to the happiness of humankind that should, as a result, direct and guide biblical readings and the structure of social relations, just as it does technological advancements. Chattel slavery runs counter to such common sense, as

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Stowe further elaborates throughout *The Key*, in as much as it restricts and limits the progress of those involved, when increased human flourishing is unquestionably God’s end goal and the destiny of humanity.

Stowe uses *The Key* to especially highlight how slavery has derailed Christianity from the promising progress it had otherwise made towards this end goal. This is most vivid in the concluding part of *The Key* that focuses on the American Church. Stowe paints a picture of the Church’s fall from grace in renouncing or diminishing a formerly just and courageous stance. She recalled early declarations from Methodist and Presbyterian councils calling for the abolition of slavery. She reproduces, for example, The Presbyterian Assembly’s statement in 1818:

*It is manifestly the duty of all Christians who enjoy the light of the present day, when the inconsistency of slavery both with the dictates of humanity and religion has been demonstrated, and is generally seen and acknowledged, to use honest, earnest, unwearied endeavours to correct the errors of former times, and as speedily as possible to efface this blot on our holy religion, and to OBTAIN THE COMPLETE ABOLITION of slavery throughout Christendom and throughout the world.*

This sense of enjoying “the light of the present day” and correcting “the errors of former times” becomes an important point in her characterization of the slavery position. She notes how the emphasis on gradual emancipation that was to follow this declaration amounted to little when, two years later, Missouri was admitted as a slave state, increasing demand in the Southern-slave market: “Instead of school-teachers, they had slave-traders; instead of gathering *schools*, they gathered *slave-coffles*; instead of building school-houses, they built slave-pens … and so went the plan of gradual emancipation.” From here, Stowe asserts, the Church’s tone on slavery changed, as Assemblies not only failed to take further action on slavery but also reversed course
entirely in excluding anti-slavery synods, which eventually resulted in denominational splits along slavery and anti-slavery lines that further burgeoned support for slavery in Southern churches.  

The seeming archaic nature of the whole enterprise left Stowe bewildered. “Here we are, in this crisis” Stowe bemoans, “here in this nineteenth century, when all the world is dissolving and reconstructing on principles of universal liberty—we Americans, who are sending our Bibles and missionaries to christianise Mahometan lands, are upholding with all our might and all our influence, a system of worn-out heathenism which even the Bey of Tunis has repudiated!” With this reference to the Bey of Tunis’s abolition of slavery nearly a decade earlier, Stowe both emphasizes how universal abolitionism had become and illuminates the irony of American missionaries seeking to Christianize other lands whilst their home nation failed to adhere to fundamental Christian principles. “This worn-out, old, effete system of Roman slavery,” she continues, “which Christianity once gradually but certainly abolished, has been dug up out of its dishonoured grave, a few laws of extra cruelty, such as Rome never knew, have been added to it, and now, baptised and sanctioned by the whole Southern Church, it is going abroad conquering and to conquer!” “The only power left to the Northern Church,” she concludes, “is the protesting power: and will they use it?” Having laid out the awful situation and located the obligation to protests slavery’s stunting of the church and nation’s progress, Stowe called for an increase in the kind of protest that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* initiated.

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46 Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 412.

47 Stowe refers here to the abolition of slavery by the Bey of Tunis in 1846.
The Key triumphantly concludes with a chapter titled “What Is to Be Done?”

“The thing to be done, of which I shall chiefly speak,” she answers, “is, that the whole American Church, of all denominations, should unitedly come up, not in form, but in fact, to the noble purpose avowed by the Presbyterian Assembly of 1818, to seek the entire abolition of slavery throughout America and throughout Christendom.” “So long as she [the church] neglects this,” she contends, “it will lie in the way of everything else which she attempts to do.” Where Webster paints the Union as the sun giving light to the nation—posing slavery as a simple “spot on the face of the sun”—Stowe paints the American Church “like the rising of a glorious sun, shedding healing from his wings, dispersing mists and fogs, and bringing songs of birds and voices of cheerful industry, and sounds of gladness, contentment, and peace” to all the world, with slavery “a disastrous spot of dim eclipse, whose gradually widening shadow threatens a total darkness.”

Feeling that slavery fundamentally obscured the light of the Union and the light of the Church, Stowe wanted her readers to recognize how slavery cast a shadow that collectively muted the brilliance America had to offer the world.

Although Stowe insisted on the abolition of slavery, she also, at this point, insisted on peace. She invested the American church specifically with a singular responsibility to take up the cause “because [the church] alone can perform the work peacefully.” “If this fearful problem is left to take its course as a mere political question, to be ground out between the upper and nether millstones of political parties,” she warns, “then what will avert agitation, angry collisions, and the desperate rending of the Union?” Stowe feared that a purely political solution to this problem, unrestrained by the higher

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48 Stowe, The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 494.
lights of religion, would lead to a violent rending of the nation. “No, there is no safety but in making it a religious enterprise, and pursuing it in a Christian spirit, and by religious means.” She dedicated the bulk of The Key’s final chapter to expounding that spirit and defining those religious means based on an detailed exegesis of apostolic counsel from 2 Corinthians 2:16: “By pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left.” Offering specific consideration of what each of these mean, Stowe concludes The Key with the assertion that only Christianity can save the day. The peaceable resolution of the conflict depends on heeding the principles of love and longsuffering that the Christian gospel prioritized. For Stowe, The Key coupled with Uncle Tom’s Cabin to further demonstrate how the progress of the nation depended on and was reflected in the extent to which love and goodwill were embraced. Stowe’s faith in the possibility of peacefully persuading the nation to such an embrace would be tested, however, by the events that unfolded less than a year after The Key’s publication.

Bleeding Kansas and the Limits of Peaceful Persuasion

In January 1854, Stephen Douglas—reminiscent of Henry Clay exactly four years before, though lacking similar showmanship—introduced a bill that would repeal the Missouri Compromise’s restriction of slavery’s extension to south of parallel 36°30’ and replace it with the rule of popular sovereignty. Stowe, along with many, saw this as a

49 Stowe, The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 495.

50 Stephen Douglas, “Territory of Nebraska,” Congressional Globe, 33rd Congress, 1st Session (January 4, 1854), 114. The size and importance of the bill required printed copies to be circulated, delaying actual discussion until March.
devastating proposition, given her resolve that new land provided slavery’s only life
blood: “Around this point political parties fight and manoeuvre and every year the battle
wages hotter, and it is fast becoming the great national question.”51 Her initial response
to the latest episode in this national question involved a direct public appeal to “The
Women of the Free States of America,” which was published in the Provincial Freeman
on March 25, 1854. “The question is not now, Shall the wrongs of Slavery exist, as they
have, on their own territories?” she explained, “but shall we permit them to be extended
over all the free territories of the United States?” Answering with a resounding no,
Stowe assumed an international perspective, recalling the passionate antislavery
sentiment she witnessed during her recent trip to Europe: “Why all this emotion in
foreign lands! Is it not because the whole world has been looking towards America with
hope, as a nation specially raised up by God to advance the cause of liberty and
religion?”52 Convinced of the providential mission of the United States, Stowe continues
the work of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and The Key, framing slavery as wholly detrimental to
that mission in conflicting with both Christianity and the nation’s founding principles—
threatening America’s leading role in the divine destiny of the world.

Stowe closed her appeal on a familiar note of encouragement for peace: “Let us
pray that in the agitation of this question between the North and the South the war of
principle may not become a mere sectional conflict, degenerating into the encounter of

51 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin [European Edition] (Leipzig: Bernard Tauchnitz, 1852), x.

52 Harriet Beecher Stowe, “An Appeal to the Women of the Free States of America on the Present
Crisis in our Country” (February 23, 1854) in The Oxford Harriet Beecher Stowe Reader ed. by Joan D.
physical force.” In *The Key*, she had similarly cautioned her readers to remember that this “holy controversy must be one of principle, and not of sectional bitterness.” “We must not suffer it to degenerate, in our hands, into a violent prejudice against the South,” she warned, “and, to this end, we must keep continually before our minds the more amiable features and attractive qualities of those with whose principles we are obliged to conflict.” This is the essence of deliberative exchange—honoring and respecting, even admiring people, whilst disagreeing with their principles. Stowe’s limit in this domain, of course, came down to her simple intolerance and unwillingness to compromise ultimate priorities: “But, while we cherish all these considerations, we must also remember that it is no love to the South to countenance and defend a pernicious system. …Whatever else we compromise, we must not compromise the rights of the helpless, nor the eternal principles of rectitude and morality.” Seeking to maintain this resolve in the face of impending doom that expansion of slavery was sure to bring, the eventual signing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in May 1854 and the subsequent years of civil unrest that broke out between pro and antislavery residents—“Bleeding Kansas”—ultimately convinced her that the country needed another glimpse into the realities of slavery and the genuine threat it posed to the nation.

In this sense, the Kansas-Nebraska Act stoked the same indignation and response as the Fugitive Slave Law. The subsequent product, *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856), painted slavery in the context of America’s global destiny. In the novel’s

53 Stowe, “An Appeal to the Women,” 456

54 Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 501.

55 Stowe, *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 501.
preface, Stowe asserted this destiny directly: “If ever a nation was raised up by Divine Providence and led forth upon a conspicuous stage, as if for the express purpose of solving a great moral problem in the sight of all mankind, it is this nation.” In further delineating slavery’s threat to that destiny, Stowe made obvious use of the major themes from The Key—applying her documentary support for the story in companion with its publication rather than in retrospect, as was the case with Uncle Tom’s Cabin and The Key. The appendices that Stowe attaches to the end of Dred crib whole sections from The Key, briefly introducing these excerpts in connection to the events of the novel. Focused on the results of chattel law (Appendix II) and the waning of Church reform (Appendix III), these appendices reflect her attempt to fictionalize the legal and religious arguments against slavery that The Key foregrounded. The predictability of these two themes stands in contrast, however, to the surprising inclusion of extracts from the Confessions of Nat Turner that make up her first appendix. Stowe offers these extracts as an illustration of the charismatic views ascribed to her titular character Dred. Dred is a new character for Stowe, unseen in Uncle Tom’s Cabin or The Key, inspired by an intervening episode that manifested the extent of the nation’s dire circumstances.

Upon hearing news of Stowe’s plans for another story, the Senator Charles Sumner wrote to Stowe with excitement believing that exposing slavery in another narrative would “act directly upon pending questions, and help us in our struggle for Kansas, and also to overthrow the slave-oligarchy in the coming Presidential election.”

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56 Harriet Beecher Stowe, Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp (Chapel Hill: U of NC P, 2000), 3. All other references to this text cited parenthetically. Italics in the original unless otherwise noted.

57 Charles Stowe, The Story of Her Life, 268. Sumner’s assertion of the context that would inevitably surround Stowe’s next novel supports David Grant’s framing of Dred as the first campaign novel written by a major American writer. Grant, “Stowe’s Dred and the Narrative Logic of Slavery’s
Coincidentally, the direction of the novel would ultimately be determined by Sumner’s own fate. Over the span of two days in May of 1856, Sumner delivered his famous oration, “The Crime Against Kansas,” rebuking the evils occurring at Kansas’s expense and calling out the legislative perpetrators. He bitingly compared South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler to Don Quixote for his play-acting chivalry in defense of “the harlot Slavery” and Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas to Sancho Panza, “the squire of Slavery … ready to do all its humiliating offices.” Two days later, on May 22, South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks retaliated for Sumner’s verbal assault on the honor of his cousin Andrew Butler and his home state by physically assaulting Sumner at his desk in the Senate chamber, beating him to the brink of death with a cane. Brooks’s assault appeared to be part of a Southern zeitgeist, as it came the day after a state-sanctioned posse of proslavery activists descended on Lawrence, Kansas, sacking the Free Soil town and leaving a trail of burning buildings and destroyed printing presses in their wake. Coupled together, these events enraged and alarmed the people of the North, who feared that they manifested the depth of Southern intemperance on the question of slavery and displayed a disturbing proclivity towards violence.

Stowe felt the influence as much as anyone, and it altered the course of the novel she had already begun. On June 11, three weeks after the violent outburst, Calvin Stowe wrote to the publisher Moses Phillips informing him that Harriett had finished about 100 pages of manuscript and requesting his input on her intention to change the book’s title.

Extension,” in *Political Antislavery Discourse and American Literature of the 1850s* (Newark, DE: U of Delaware P, 2012), 39. My reading of the novel resonates with Grant’s claim that *Dred*’s different plots trace slavery’s “increasing hegemony and movement into free spaces … until the novel’s landscape, like the nation, finds itself stripped down to the bare choices of absolute freedom and absolute slavery” (42).

from “Canema,” the name of the Gordon family plantation and early setting of the novel, to “Dread: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp.” Describing the new title as “startlingly suggestive, completely appropriate, full of meaning,” Calvin speculated that, “as things now are, the very title itself will sell thousands and thousands of copies.” Presuming some pushback from Phillips, he further added, “There is a dignified state of feeling in the very atmosphere of Boston which recoils from every thing decidedly strong. This is not the feeling of the country. The title we find here is not at all too startling for the book itself or for the subject which the book addresses.” Calvin implies that as Boston dignity and diplomacy were clearly no longer the order of the day, Harriett wanted to produce something that matched the “feeling of the country.” Stowe added her own explanatory lines to the end of Calvin’s letter:

Dread is in reality the hero of the book—the dismal swamp the theater[,] and now when every body is in an excited state & craving excitement this name will do – I see it. Had things remained tranquil as they were when the book began, it might have been quite another book and another name would have done. But now we both are persuaded that this is the best[,] Dread appears in the stage now soon & surprises more or less to the end.”

The end to the previous period of tranquility simply ended Stowe’s previous plan for the book—things were different now, and the nation needed a different book. The published text reflects this difference. Partway through the novel, the docile plantation narrative takes a sudden turn when Nina Gordon, the protagonist and benevolent lord of the Canema estate, suddenly dies, and Dred, a fugitive slave with insurrectionary visions, unexpectedly emerges from the shadows of the dismal swamp. Both Harriett and Calvin’s use of Dread with an “a” as opposed to Dred, which the title eventually became

59 Calvin Ellis Stowe and Harriet Beecher Stowe to Moses Dresser Phillips, 11 June 1856, Anti-Slavery (Collection of Distinction), Boston Public Library.
(matching the character) signal the intentionality of the homophone and the extent to which the novel’s title and subject matter encapsulate both meanings.

While it’s unclear when she dropped the “a,” her request to change the initial title became a piece of publishing lore. In Fifty Years among Authors, Books and Publishers, published thirty years later, J.C. Derby recalled: “Mr. Phillips heard Mrs. Stowe say that when she was about in the middle of the book the assault on Charles Sumner took place, and she was so indignant at the outrage, that instead of carrying out some of her characters and making them like little Eva, charming and tender, she introduced this spirit of revenge under the name of the negro Dred.”

Stowe’s letter to another correspondent a week after writing to Phillips further confirms the influence the violent outbreak had on the novel: “The book is written under the impulse of our stormy times, how the blood & insults of Sumner and the sack of Lawrence burn within us I hope to make a voice to say.”

Voicing her internal burning was not necessarily a new strategy for Stowe—both Uncle Tom’s Cabin and The Key were full of outrage—but the spirit of revenge that pulses through Dred, and that Dred (the character) indeed embodied, suggested her wearying restraint and heightened awareness of the implications and impending results of Southern obstinacy on the issue of slavery.

In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Stowe briefly inserted the threat of a slave revolt into an exchange between the aristocrats, and twin brothers, Augustine and Alfred St. Clare. Alfred rejects Augustine’s ominous warning of a potential slave uprising like that of San

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61 Harriet Beecher Stowe to Duchess of Sutherland, 17 June 1856, Box 1, Folder 38, Papers of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Albert and Shirley Small Collection Library, University of Virginia Libraries.
Domingo as “red republican humbugs”: “The Haytiens were not Anglo Saxons; if they had been, there would have been another story.” Alluding to the “pretty fair infusion of Anglo Saxon blood among our slaves,” and the possibility that there are “plenty among them who have only enough of the African to give a sort of tropical warmth and fervor to our calculating firmness and foresight,” Augustine predicts, “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.” Alfred calls such talk “Nonsense!” and reassures his brother: “‘Never you fear for us; possession is our nine points. We've got the power. This subject race,’ said he, stamping firmly, ‘is down and shall stay down! We have energy enough to manage our own powder.’”62 The caning of Sumner typified the “might makes right” basis of slavery to which this scene alludes, but manifested it not only in reference to the keeping down the subject race, but also stamping down even those Anglo Saxons who dared to object or interfere.

This too, however, was not necessarily a new concern for Stowe. She directly addressed this topic in The Key where she characterized the slave power as “a united, consistent, steady, uncompromising principle,” and the “resisting element” as “wavering, self-contradictory, compromising.”63 Stowe, as previously discussed, set out to change the character of the resisting element by writing of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which rejected compromise and sought to end deliberation on the subject by offering so clear a picture of slavery’s atrocities that the right course of action would be obvious. By the time she wrote The Key, however, she caught a sense of the proslavery strategy for ending

62 Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 392-3.

63 Stowe, The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 427.
deliberation by simply refusing to allow it. “The perfect inflexibility of the slave-system, and its absolute refusal to allow any discussion of the subject,” she wrote in The Key, “has reduced all those who wish to have religious action in common with slaveholding Churches to the alternative of either giving up the support of the South for that object, or giving up their protest against slavery.” In her mind, the decision to prioritize uniting the American church over ending slavery was made by people “who did not realise the full peril of the slave-system, nor appreciate the moral power of Christian protest against it.” She went on to point out how this caused even northern religious publications to omit any mention of slavery, not because they support slavery, but because they wish to maintain Southern readers: “The South will not read our books, if we do not do it. They will not give up, and we must. We can do more good by introducing gospel truth with this omission than we can by using our Protestant power.” While Stowe acknowledged this argument and empathized with its intention, she also pointed out that the troubling consequence of this seemingly small concession is to render the whole of the American Church more or less inert on the question of slavery.

Part of the effectiveness of the Southern strategy, as Stowe recognizes in The Key, is that it simply halts the deliberative process, preventing the dialogic exchange that powers change in a democratic republic. The Southern refusal to tolerate criticism of slavery skewed the open exchange of the public sphere in bringing imbalanced social, civic, and even physical consequences on those who dared to broach the subject. “The very heart shrinks to think what the faithful Christian must endure who assails this institution on its own ground,” Stowe sympathetically admitted, before concluding with

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64 Stowe, The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 427-8.
characteristic resolve, “but it must be done.” In an attempt to offer her readers some encouragement, she relates how even in the North there was once “a universal effort to put down the discussion of it here by mob law.” Detailing how “printing-presses were broken, houses torn down, property destroyed,” Stowe triumphantly asserts that “Brave men, however, stood firm; martyr blood was shed for the right of free opinion in speech; and so the right of discussion was established. Nobody tries that sort of argument now—its day is past.” Relating a similar episode in Kentucky, Stowe again stresses, “But there were brave men there, who feared not violence or threats of death; and emancipation is now open for discussion in Kentucky.” Courage, she suggests, is the currency with which discussion will have to be purchased in some areas, but it is a reward worth the price and essential to the nation. “The fact is, the South must discuss the matter of slavery,” Stowe insists. “She cannot shut it out, unless she lays an embargo on the literature of the whole civilised world. If it be, indeed, divine and God-appointed, why does she so tremble to have it touched? If it be of God, all the free inquiry in the world cannot overthrow it. Discussion must and will come. It only requires courageous men to lead the way.”

Stowe concluded The Key’s final chapter with this plea for courageous men to speak out against the institution and initiate discussion. And if it comes to death, she comforted her readers, “then will you know a joy which is above all other joy” by following Christ’s example of laying down his life for his friends. The open discussion of the facts and circumstances of slavery is worth paying the ultimate sacrifice, because, as she asserted in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, such discussion will inevitably end the deliberation.

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65 Stowe, The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, 502-3.
on the topic by revealing the baselessness of slavery—thus opening the path of freedom for the enslaved and progress for the nation as a whole.

Sumner answered Stowe’s call—courageously speaking out against slavery on the Senate floor and demanding its supporters account for themselves and their actions. The Free Soilers in Lawrence, Kansas did as well—rejecting the illegitimate authority of the proslavery territorial government and courageously setting up their own Free State legislature and active antislavery publication. The results, in the eyes of Stowe and her Northern compatriots, were startling: Sumner was nearly beaten to death at his own desk (it was years before he would return to work) and the town of Lawrence was ransacked and set ablaze. The novel that *Dred* became was written, and revised, in the wake of these events, whilst Stowe digested their implications and considered the possibility that courage and persuasion might simply not be enough. The South may be too far gone, or for that matter, not far enough along on the spectrum of modern progress. Tempering the optimism of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Key*, *Dred* echoes the alarm that the Sumner caning and the sacking of Lawrence sounded—the slave-holding South neither lives in accord with benevolent Christian principles, nor, by extension, plays by the rules of modern society. The novel depicts the South instead as a feudal oligarchy that relies on an antiquated theology to mask and justify a system based solely on power and violence.66

66 Stowe is indeed, as Gregg Crane suggests, participating, like all Americans, in an experiment that tests whether natural rights and morals can indeed wield power, but she is also specifically asserting principled, benevolent-based morality as markers of a modern progressive Christian society. She consequently works to depict the South’s ignorance of these principles as posing a threat to both the spiritual and moral order of the nation. See Crane, “Dangerous Sentiments: Sympathy, Rights, and Revolution in Stowe’s Antislavery Novels,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 51, no. 2 (September 1996): 176–204.
Dred, Modern Civilization, and Direct Access

Stowe commences her rebuke of the South’s antiquatedness from the opening lines of Dred’s preface. “The writer of this book has chosen, once more, a subject from the scenes and incidents of the slaveholding states,” Stowe began.

The reason for such a choice is two-fold. First, in a merely artistic point of view, 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 ... Hence, if the writer's only object had been the production of a work of art, she would have felt justified in not turning aside from that mine whose inexhaustible stores have but begun to be developed. But this object, however legitimate, was not the only nor the highest one. It is the moral bearings of the subject involved which have had the chief influence in its selection.

Reading the remarks of this preface in comparison with the remarks of her 1852 preface to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, reinforces Stowe’s interest in civilizational progress as a whole, as well as her sense of its enablers and impediments. Beyond producing exciting possibilities for fiction, the South’s developmental stagnation had consequences on the moral progress of the nations as a whole. Before proceeding in the preface to posit Dred as continuing the work of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in “revealing to the people the true character of that system,” Stowe establishes “the near vicinity of modern civilization of the most matter-of fact kind.” (3). Although some Southern ideologists celebrated the feudal and patriarchal qualities of their region, Stowe refers to Southern feudalism as a mark of its antiquatedness, which shone especially bright in contrast to the exemplarily
modern civilization to the North. These demarcations in the preface of *Dred* ground Stowe’s approach to slavery in terms of modern and ancient.

This binary gets quickly interwoven with religion, as Stowe communicates her sense in which Divine Providence accords with civilized progress. Going on to claim the providential origins of the American nation and its being “led forth upon a conspicuous stage, as if for the express purpose of solving a great moral problem in the sight of all mankind,” Stowe clearly positions the issue of slavery as the next conundrum impeding America’s progress. “God in his providence is now asking the American people,” Stowe continues, “Is the system of slavery, as set forth in the American slave code, right? Is it so desirable, that you will directly establish it over broad regions, where, till now, you have solemnly forbidden it to enter? And this question the American people are about to answer” (3-4). Directly associating *Dred* with the rising contention over the expansion of slavery into the western territories, Stowe—as she did in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—seeks to draw attention to the moral question underlying the political problem.

Emphasizing the role of *the people* in judging the morality of the slavery system further reveals her embrace of the republican political process grounded in the modern principles of a disembedded society over a hierarchical structure reminiscent of an embedded society. Stowe’s political strategy rests on the idea of a public sphere—which Taylor describes as standing in contrast, by its very nature, to notions of society that rely on a sense of law coming from a higher place. If God is asking the self-determinate people to decide whether slavery is right or wrong, the criteria upon which to determine

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67 For insight into the character of this celebration, see William Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).
the answer remains, as always for Stowe, whether slavery adheres to the “the master chord of Christianity, good-will to men.” Identifying “those who are now called to struggle for all that is noble in our laws and institutions” as her imagined audience, Stowe frames her novel as answering the question by providing “the response of a sympathizing heart” (4). Because such sympathy requires a full knowledge of the situation, she offers no apology “for once more endeavoring to do something towards revealing to the people the true character of that system” (4). “If the people are to establish such a system,” she contends, “let them do it with their eyes open, with all the dreadful realities before them” (4). As Dred sets out to provide those realities, the reader’s task, as Stowe lays it out, is to judge whether slavery adheres to the principles that Christianity and the American government are founded upon.

Stowe knew, at this point more than ever, that such founding principles were hotly contested. Personifying these different positions in a variety of characters, Stowe used the novel to stage a constant collision of perspectives and create an opportunity for comparative assessment. Gail Smith has described the way Stowe’s links these multiple perspectives to divergent hermeneutical practices: “Characters’ lives and happiness depend on how key texts are interpreted, and those interpretations are the subject of much thoughtful debate.” 68 Smith points out how throughout the novel “readings of the law, of the Declaration of Independence, and of the Bible vary widely, depending on the gender, race, and class of the reader,” and argues that the threat underpinning Dred is the gradual realization that “two or more people may read the same words and come to irreconcilably

68 Gail K. Smith, “Reading with the Other: Hermeneutics and the Politics of Difference in Stowe’s Dred,” American Literature 69, no. 2 (June 1997), 290.
opposed conclusions about their meaning.” Suggesting that Stowe’s fiction needs to be more seriously considered alongside Melville and Hawthorne within the context of higher criticism and biblical authority, Smith reads *Dred* as testing whether a juxtaposition of particular perspectives can reveal ultimate or absolute truth.69 “Facing the proliferation of differing interpretations of America’s sacred texts,” Smith writes,

> Stowe proposes in *Dred* a model of reading that we might call ‘cross-reading,’ in order to come as close as possible to the ‘truth’ of a text. By providing radically different readings of Scripture, of the law, of the Declaration of Independence, and of slavery—and in particular, by reading with the Other—perhaps ‘absolute truth’ can be achieved.

Smith concludes, however, that the potential of this cross-reading approach diminishes as the novel progresses. The contradictory interpretations create an “ambiguity and doubleness” that threatens the very possibilities of truth and suggests that meaning may depend entirely on the reader, which upsets, according to Smith, “the stability [Stowe] seeks in a democratic, pluralistic choice of textual interpretations.”70

Smith’s focus on cross-reading in the novel is unquestionably fruitful in drawing attention to the way Stowe intentionally juxtaposes various interpretations of foundational documents. Smith’s conclusion, however, founders in its assumption that Stowe’s dramatization of various hermeneutical interpretations legitimates them equally. While Stowe understands and recognizes “a democratic, pluralistic choice of textual interpretations,” she also posits a stabilizing hermeneutical standard or principle—namely

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69 Smith, “Reading with the Other,” 290. Smith highlights how *Dred*’s “sense of the radical ambiguity of America’s key texts appears to varying degrees throughout the literature of the volatile 1850s” (306). One such moment that Smith has in mind is the closing scene of Melville’s *Confidence Man*. And the final image of a man being “left alone in the dark,” “money-belt in hand, and life-preserver under arm,” which life preserver is really “the very stool I was sitting on.”

70 Smith, “Reading with the Other,” 290.
her sense of Christianity’s “master chord.” While the novel offers a whirlwind of characters constantly articulating, defending, and refuting positions on slavery, religion, and American society, Stowe’s staging of the characters is less concerned about “reading with the other” to *discover* the truth, and more concerned with demonstrating how the many different perspectives displayed in the novel measure up against *her sense* of the truth, especially as it concerns foundational principles of Christianity and republicanism. In other words, Stowe uses the deliberative moments of the texts not to find the absolute, but to assert it—illuminating which of the various perspectives adequately reflect her modern sensibilities.

Hermeneutic practice indeed, as Smith points out, underscores the many moments of conflict that pervade the novel, but Stowe brought to each of these interactions a decided sense of which hermeneutical methods reflected the progress of the modern age and which conveyed the inertia of a bygone era. The stakes surrounding the interpretation of scripture in antebellum America were high, constituting, as Mark Noll explains, the “major theological crux of the period leading up to the war.” To illuminate the character of the theological debates, Noll contrasts them with the disputes leading up to the Revolutionary war. The religious-political strife of the Revolution, according to Noll, was a debate between separate ideologies, “Loyalists who clung to an early-modern conception of hierarchy, tradition, and monarchial order, against patriots who contended for a modern understanding of rights, personal capacities and freedom.” He contrasts this against the debates leading to the Civil War which he casts as between

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“alternate visions of the same ideology made up of evangelical religion, republican political principles, and common sense moral reasoning.” Yet, while this might be the distinction reflected in the historical record, Stowe works in *Dred* to illustrate the pre-Civil War debate as in fact continuing this same debate between pre-modern and modern ideologies.

Finding slavery incompatible with “a modern understanding of rights, personal capacities, and freedom,” Stowe worked in *Dred* to emphasize the distance between these alternate visions of the same presumed ideology, challenging the South’s commitment to modern republican principles. Noll’s narrative of the hermeneutical debates nevertheless helpfully illuminates the context and grounds of Stowe’s approach. “By undercutting trust in other traditional authorities, the power-suspecting ideologies of the Revolutionary and constitutional periods had the ironic effect of scripturalizing the United States,” Noll explains.

Deference to inherited authority of bishops and presbyters was largely gone, obeisance to received creeds was largely gone, willingness to heed the example of the past was largely gone. What remained was the power of intuitive reason, the authority of written documents that the people approved for themselves, and the Bible alone….Trust in the Bible was a religious analogue to political trust in the Constitution, and the analogy was sometimes drawn explicitly….Those who trusted the Bible alone found themselves strategically effective in shoring up republican virtue. Religiously considered, reliance on the Bible alone meant that those who had experienced a life-transforming conversion could move immediately to proclamation, even itineration, without waiting formal institutional or denominational approval.

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73 Noll, *America’s God*, 373. “For consideration of the place of the Bible in early national America,” Noll continues, “it is revealing that Smith saw a common set of destructive authorities opposing trust in the Bible and also undermining the republican experiment. Religious liberty, that is, meant ‘being wholly free to examine for ourselves, what is truth without being bound to a catechism, creed, confession of faith, discipline, or any rule excepting the scriptures. … Many are republicans as to government, and are yet half republicans, being in matters of religion still bent to a Catechism, creed, covenant, or a superstitious priest. Venture to be as independent in religion as in those which respect the government in
Dovetailing with Stowe’s relationship to higher law, this approach to the scriptures created a similar crisis of authority, as it suggested the possibility of a potential free-for-all. In the case of both higher law and unmediated access to the scriptures “confidence in present abilities overmastered confidence in what was handed on from the past.” In both cases, “a liberated modern self was the starting point.”74 This sense of a modern self-understanding stemmed, as Taylor suggests, from “a revolution in our social imaginary,” that included relegating “forms of mediacy to the margins, and the diffusion of images of direct access.” “These modes of imagined direct access are linked to, indeed are just different faces of modern equality and individualism,” Taylor explains. “Directness of access abolishes the heterogeneity of hierarchical belonging,” giving rise to “the public sphere, in which people conceive of themselves as participating directly in a nation-wide (sometimes even international) discussion.”75 As heterogeneity and hierarchical which you live.’ Few Protestants expressed themselves as flamboyantly as Smith in the early republic, but most followed where he led” (375).

74 Noll, America’s God, 381.

75 Taylor, A Secular Age, 210-11. “The modern social imaginary no longer sees the greater trans-local entities as grounded in something other, something higher, than common action in secular time.” Taylor explains elsewhere. “This was not true of the pre-modern state. … The hierarchical order of the kingdom was seen as based in the Great Chain of Being. The tribal unit was seen as constituted as such by its law, which went back ‘since time out of mind’ … The importance in pre-modern revolutions, up to and including the English civil war, of the backwards look, of establishing an original law, comes from this sense that the political entity is in this sense action-transcendent. It cannot simply create itself by its own action” (208). Taylor describes the American Revolution as a watershed moment of the modern social imaginary in that out of fighting for “established rights as Englishmen … emerges the crucial fiction of ‘we, the people’, into whose mouth the declaration of the new constitution is placed … the idea is invoked that a people, or as it was also called at the time, a ‘nation’, can exist prior to and independently of its political constitution. So that this people can give itself its own constitution by its own free action in secular time. …The constitution-founding comes to be invested with something of the force of a ‘time of origins,’ a higher time, filled with agents of a superior kind, which we ceaselessly try to re-approach. But nevertheless, a new way of conceiving things is abroad. Nations, people, can have a personality, can act together outside of any prior political ordering. …There was thus a certain ‘verticality’ of society which depended on a grounding in higher time, and which has disappeared in modern society. …The principle of modern horizontal society is radically different. Each of us is equidistant from the centre, we are immediate to the whole. This describes what we could call a ‘direct-access’ society. We have moved from
belonging were at the heart of the proslavery position, the idea of direct-access and the sovereignty of the public sphere posed a potential concern.

Committed to this sense of “a liberated modern self,” Stowe identified the lack of a direct-access approach to the scriptures among slaveholders, as displaying the institution’s inherit backwardness and incompatibility with the modern advances of the American nation. One way she exposed the slaveholders’ clear hierarchical position was pointing to their refusal to let those in their care read the Bible themselves. One of her fictional Southern ministers admits a willingness to do so, if not for “the perverting influence of self-love” (429). This minister is, however, unable to answer how he avoids such a temptation himself. The minister finds himself in a trap: if he claims his special authority, he contests the direct-access hermeneutical standards that prevailed throughout the early republic, but if he allows the enslaved to read the Bible, then he faces the risk of their discovering some means of disputing its support of their condition. Stowe designs the encounter to spotlight the Southern fear of that possibility, or to Stowe’s mind, the certainty of that discovery. Such scenes are meant to challenge the proslavery faith in a direct-access approach to the Bible, and assert that the only thing supporting the biblical justification of slavery is a reliance on old forms and outdated conclusions—an unwillingness to read the Bible directly and follow where it leads.

Stowe faced an uphill battle in this case, however, as a large portion of the nation—embracing what Noll describes as a "Reformed, literal hermeneutic"—came to believe by the 1850s that the Bible indeed upheld slavery.76 According to Noll, such a

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76 Noll, America’s God, 377.
conclusion prompted three general responses: admit it and abandon the Bible (William Lloyd Garrison and company), accept it out of loyalty to the Bible’s supreme authority (most Southern defenders of slavery), or develop some mediating position that ensured the Bible’s authority but challenged its support of slavery. Stowe clearly pursued this third course, distinguishing “between the letter of the Bible (which might be construed to allow slavery) and the spirit of the Bible (which everywhere worked against the institution).”

Rather than floundering in uncertainty as a result of this hermeneutical dilemma, Stowe worked in *Dred* to articulate and display this type of mediating position, specifically modeling a direct-access hermeneutical practice that would inevitably lead to an understanding of Christianity’s highest law—which, she believed, would make the answer to slavery obvious.

Stowe set out to model this experience in her initial protagonist, Nina Gordon, who enters the novel as a carefree coquette, but is gradually weighed down by the issues facing her family and friends on the Canema plantation. Stowe frames Nina’s hermeneutical practice and subsequent religious conversion experience and antislavery sympathies as the inevitable route of a truly direct-access approach to the text. She contrasts Nina’s experience with other proslavery interpretations to reveal how the latter readings maintain undue allegiance to antiquated and hierarchical thinking. According to Smith, Stowe gradually turned to this emphatic approach and away from interrogative cross-readings over the course of her literary career:

From *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, through *The Key*, to *Dred*, Stowe moves from a faith in the reader and the text, to a fear of misreading, to a fear of the unresolved contradictions in the sacred word—paradigmatically, the Bible, but also the revered political documents of the American republic. After facing that radical

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indeterminancy, Stowe attempts in her remaining works to produce unity and certainty through a feminized discourse.78

Cross-readings virtually disappear from her later texts, Smith suggests, and in its place Stowe offers the perspective of a “particular kind of interpreter,” a divine mother trying “assiduously to heal the interpretive schisms that she represented [in *Dred*] as largely responsible for sundering the Union.”79 I am arguing, in contrast, that Stowe pursues a feminized or benevolent discourse all along, fashioning this “particular kind of interpreter”—focused on goodwill and committed to human flourishing—as the exemplar of modern progress in contrast with past misconceptions.

In *Dred*, as Nina exemplifies this modern benevolent interpreter, Stowe extensively contrasts with the stale and unmotherly Mrs. Nesbit. “Mrs. Nesbit considered herself very religious” the narrator tells the reader, “and, as there is a great deal that passes for religion, ordinarily, of which she may be fairly considered a representative, we will present our readers with a philosophical analysis of the article” (42). While the narrator goes on to describe Mrs. Nesbit’s religiosity, this attempt at “a philosophical analysis” might be said to gloss the way religion is continually compared and contrasted throughout the whole text. The narrator’s assessment of Mrs. Nesbit provides something of a model by which certain religious sentiment will be shown to fall short. “When young, she had thought only of self in the form of admiration, and the indulgence of her animal spirits,” the narrator explains, “When married, she had thought of self only in her husband and children, whom she loved because they were hers, and for no other reason.

78 Smith, “Reading with the Other,” 306.

79 Smith, “Reading with the Other,” 306.
When death swept away her domestic circle, and time stole the beauty and freshness of animal spirits, her self-love took another form; and, perceiving that this world was becoming to her somewhat passé, she determined to make the best of her chance for another” (42). Mrs. Nesbit’s life, even her embrace of religion, is described as driven wholly by selfish motivations. Such self-love contrasts starkly with the master chord of Christianity, and Stowe’s sense of a progressive society. “Religion she looked upon in the light of a ticket,” the narrator continues, “which, being once purchased, and snugly laid away in a pocket-book, is to be produced at the celestial gate, and thus secure admission to heaven. …By the Christian race, she understood going at certain stated times to religious meetings, reading the Bible and hymn-book at certain hours in the day, giving at regular intervals stipulated sums to religious charities, and preserving a general state of leaden indifference to everybody and everything in the world” (42). This manifestation of self-love, “indifference to everybody and everything in the world,” and rote observing of standard forms is juxtaposed against the selfless morality that Stowe posits as the basis of authentic Christianity. Mrs. Nesbit’s sense of the Christian race adheres to the formula-based religion Stowe sees as preventing the kind of moral-based decision-making that secures human flourishing. It is also rooted in an other-worldly focus that stages Christianity as simple adherence to a formula, akin to purchasing a ticket for another world rather than actually living and doing good in this world.

This contrast is further carried out in Mrs. Nesbit’s decrying Nina’s vanity in a “dying world” and the instinctual Nina’s determination to argue the reality and significance of the present world. “I love pretty things because they are pretty” she tells Mrs. Nesbit. “I like flowers and laces, and all of those things; and I mean to like them,
and I don’t think there’ll be a bit of religion in my not liking them. …And, if religion is going to make me so pokey, I shall put it off as long as I can” (46). Mrs. Nesbit’s insistence on disconnected otherworldliness drives Nina to the conclusion that religion may indeed not be right for her. This youthful disillusionment with religion is carefully staged in relation to the degree religion is approached as incompatible with modern sensibilities. That is, Stowe works to demonstrate how prevailing religious notions in the South rely on an antiquated theological perspective that, in failing to both register Christianity’s true focus on good-will to man and address human flourishing in the here and now, fails to attract the rising generation.

This comes out clearly as Nina’s religious longing is further juxtaposed with the stale notions of Mrs. Nesbit, and her pastor Reverend Titmarsh. In a discussion of the religious grounding of slavery following the camp meeting, Mrs. Nesbit expresses her dislike for Father Dickinson’s antislavery sermon, explaining, “Mr. Titmarsh preached quite another way when I attended church in E——. He proved that slavery was a scriptural institution, and established by God” (289). “I should think anybody's common sense,” Nina replies, “would show that a thing which works so poorly for both sides couldn't be from God” (289). Appealing to common sense in contrast to Titmarsh’s establishing slavery as a divine “scriptural institution,” Nina goes on to explain how strange she finds “people who have something they call religion,” but which doesn’t do them any good because it “isn't of any use—it doesn't make them better—and it makes them very disagreeable” (289). Although deciding that she would rather be as she is than “have what they call religion,” Nina also acknowledges the “others that have something which I know is religion; something that I know I have not; something that I'd give all the
world to have, and don't know how to get” (290). Stowe carefully balances Nina’s frustration with inert forms of religion against Nina’s clear recognition of and powerful desire for a more lively religious sense.

The novel expands this distinction in the process of narrating Nina’s conversion to Christianity, which occurs not as a result of the hermeneutical intricacies of the preachers, but rather her own direct reading of the scriptures. Nina accepts the request of Tiff—an old slave of a poor white family whose pitiful tale occupies one of the novel’s various threads—to “read us some out of de Bible, and teach us how to be Christians,” but only after she explains her own lack of knowledge and hope that they might learn together. In a letter to Clayton, her primary suitor and confidant throughout the novel, she summarizes the process of her self-transformation over the course of these reading-visits:

You know my queer old protégé, Uncle Tiff, who lives in the woods here. For some time past I have been to his house every day, reading to him in the Testament, and it has had a very great effect on me …I didn’t know myself how beautiful it was—how suited to all our wants. It seemed to me I never saw so much beauty in anything before; and it seems as if it had waked a new life in me. Everything is changed; and it is the beauty of Christ that has changed it. (346)

The letter continues narrating her experience in light of her previous contemplation over Aunt Nesbit and the true essence of religion: “Is this religion? Is this what people mean by conversion?” she writes,

I tried to tell Aunt Nesbit how I felt, because now I feel kinder to everybody; and really my heart smote me to think how much fun I had made of her, and now I begin to love her very much. She was so anxious I should talk with Mr. Titmarsh, because he is a minister. …He came and made a pastoral call, the other day, and talked to me. I don't think he understood me very well, and I 'm sure I didn’t understand him. He told me how many kinds of faith there were, and how many kinds of love … and he thought it was important to know whether I had got the right kind. He said we ought not to love God because he loves us, but because he is holy. …I didn’t understand anything about the different sorts of faith, but that I
felt perfectly sure that Jesus is so good that he would make me feel right, and give me right views, and do everything for me that I need. He wanted to know if I loved him because he magnified the law, and made it honorable; and I told him I didn’t understand what that meant. I don't think, on the whole, that the talk did me much good. It only confused me, and made me very uncomfortable. (346-7)

This interaction continues the “philosophical analysis” of religion that the narrator conducts in initially introducing Aunt Nesbit’s faith. Just as Nina’s investment in the immanent world was contrasted with Mrs. Nesbit’s resentment of it, here the simplicity and grace of Nina’s newfound faith is contrasted with Titmarsh’s mediating and convoluted explanations. Nina fails to understand or find comfort in Titmarsh’s technicalities or vaunting of the law, placing her confidence instead in Jesus’s goodness “doing everything for me that I need.” It is only when Nina grasps Jesus’s goodness that the true meaning of the texts opens up to her: “It seems to me that it has been all my life like the transparent picture, without any light behind it; and now it is all illuminated, and its words are full of meaning to me. I am light-hearted and happy—happier than ever I was.” Applauding Nina’s approach, Clayton encourages her to stay true to herself, imploring in a return letter, “Don't trouble your head, dear Nina, with Aunt Nesbit or Mr. Titmarsh. What you feel is faith. They define it, and you feel it. And there’s all the difference between the definition and the feeling, that there is between the husk and the corn.”

As the novel’s youthful hero and heroine unite around a shared prioritizing of feeling and goodness in contrast to her aged aunt and pretentious preacher’s preoccupation with definitions, laws, and precedent, Stowe clearly colors their particular hermeneutical and theological emphasis in a progressive or modern light. Nina’s approach to the scriptures allows her to separate the corn from the husk, shedding the
layers of dead tradition to taste the sweet kernel of truth that will light the world’s path toward the coming millennium. Tragically, the young couple is not able to continue fighting against the archaic arguments of Mr. Titmarsh together, as Nina is abruptly killed off by a wave of cholera. Like little Eva before her, Nina filled her primary role of modeling the right response to slavery and then abruptly exited the stage, leaving the remaining players to attend to practical matters and make the tough decisions.

Whether Nina’s death was planned all along or came as part of Stowe’s changing the direction of the novel in response to the attack on Sumner and sacking of Lawrence, the narrative certainly pivots in a dark direction. Following the cholera outbreak, Stowe turns from modelling true Christian experience to plumbing the depths of the dismal swamp that the South’s outmoded beliefs and loyalties created. As Dred enters the stage with a revolutionary proposition to overturn the whole system, the responsibility falls on Clayton, the idealistic lawyer, to try his hand at the republican process.

**Modern Ideality and Southern Opposition**

While both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Dred* seek to detail the “realities” of slavery to better inform the opinions and actions of the American populace, *Dred’s* distinction rests in Stowe’s matured awareness of the obstacles impeding this deliberative process, especially those that Sumner’s near murder in the Senate chamber made brilliantly clear. Clayton—described as “ideal to an excess”—repeatedly ventriloquizes the persuasive protestant approach that Stowe pursued with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Key*, and that Sumner displayed in “The Crime Against Kansas” (9). Clayton’s attentiveness of the horrors of the slavery system awakens a steady resolve to act, “to endeavor to excite the public mind on the injustice of the present slave-law, with a view to altering it” (393).
He pursues this course of action, based on his living under “a republican government,—in which we vote for our legislators, and, in fact, make the laws ourselves, and have the admitted right to seek their repeal” (432). He contextualizes this freedom of speech as distinct from past ages. Citing this distinction in a dispute with Southern ministers, who pointed to the apostles as models of never speaking out against slavery, Clayton attempts to emphasize the contrasting privileges, opportunities, and responsibilities that living in the modern American republic presents. “We make our own laws,” he tells them, “and every one of us is responsible for any unjust law which we do not do our best to alter. We have the right to agitate, write, print, and speak, and bring up the public mind to the point of reform; and, therefore, we are responsible if unjust laws are not repealed.” Yet, while dignifying and supporting the cogency and understanding of her leading man’s approach, Stowe also foreshadows its primary obstruction—offering a metacommentary on the lesson in Sumner’s caning as well as her own experience attempting to pursue Clayton’s exact course of action:

It was the fault of Clayton, and is the fault of all such men, that he judged mankind by himself. He could not believe that anything, except ignorance and inattention, could make men upholders of deliberate injustice. He thought all that was necessary was the enlightening of the public mind, the direction of general attention to the subject. ...He would take on himself the task of combining and concentrating those vague impulses towards good which he supposed were existing in the community. (392)

The awareness communicated here and elsewhere is less a realization of an inherently ineffective strategy—as several critics suggest—and more an acknowledgement that slaveholders and their supporters do not always prioritize the good, and are thus not

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operating according to modern standards of moral conduct and civil discourse that Stowe and Clayton’s strategy is organized around. Stowe seems to have realized that the means by which she once assumed a peaceful national change could occur—awakening the “public mind” to slavery’s inhumaneness—proved ineffective in a society that neither values “goodwill to man” as the master chord of Christianity and foundation of American society nor respects the peaceable methods of modern political action.

The preface to the London edition of *Dred* (also published in 1856) expresses this realization explicitly in centering on the significance of Brooks’s attack on Sumner. “When *Uncle Tom* was published, sentimental humanity was shocked that its author could represent a Legree beating defenceless Uncle Tom on the head with a cow-hide;” Stowe writes, “but sentimental humanity has lately seen, with her own eyes, the accomplished scholar and gentleman, the senator of a sovereign state, struck down unarmed and unsuspecting, by a cowardly blow, and, while thus prostrate, still beaten by the dastard arm which had learned its skill on a South Carolina plantation.” 81 While the American preface specifically centers on the task and decisions facing the nation, this British preface more fully situates the conduct of the South in relation to “civilization and human progress.” Pointing to the response of “sentimental humanity,” Stowe sets the actions of the South Carolina Representative as distinct from the conduct of members of the human family who have come to share specific feelings and cherish certain values.

Stowe’s shock over Brooks’s brutal actions is only compounded at the praise and heroic status it brought him in South Carolina and throughout the rest of the slaveholding

South: “Sentimental humanity then loudly declared her belief that the chivalry of South Carolina would repudiate the act. The chivalry of South Carolina presented the ruffian with a cane, bearing the inscription, ‘Hit him again;’… and the cowardly bully forced by public sentiment to resign his seat, has been, in insulting defiance of that sentiment, triumphantly returned by the citizens of South Carolina: and his act was openly vindicated by Southern members in their places in both houses of Congress.” She structures the South’s embrace and endorsement of Brooks’s actions as indicative of the disparity between the residents of that region and any clear sense of “sentimental humanity.” “After this,” Stowe implores her foreign readers, “who will doubt what the treatment of slaves has been, or is likely to be, in the hands of men educated under such influences?” In *Dred*, Stowe offers a polyphonic display of the character and quality of such influences, methodically weakening the reader’s confidence in the civility of Southern society and, as a result, challenging the possibility of peacefully resolving the political impasse over slavery within the dictates of a deliberative political system designed for sentimental humanity.  

As *Dred* confronts the South’s lack of adherence to the principles underpinning the modern American system, Stowe implies that a second (violent) revolution, not unlike the initial American Revolution of 1776, might be the only recourse for initiating the South into the modern era. The title-character Dred—a fugitive-slave, descendant of Denmark Vesey, and marauding prophet lurking in wait within the deepest and darkest confines of the Southern swamps for a celestial sign—hauntingly personifies one possible source of this potential violence. But the power of Dred’s presence and the impact of

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Stowe’s overall warning stems from the comprehensive force of the novel’s multi-faceted plot and penetrating characterization of a backwards and troubled South capable of producing the possibility that Dred’s rebellion might be the only hope for reform.

Clayton—whose “ideality colored every faculty of his mind, and swayed all his reasonings, as an unseen magnet will swerve the needle … urging him always to rise above the commonly-received and so-called practical in morals” (17)—becomes the primary foil against which Stowe measures the character of white Southern-slaveholding society. Stowe uses this model figure of America’s virtuous potential to distinguish and expose the apathy of the clergy, the inhumane application of antiquated laws by the judiciary, the restriction of free speech by community leaders, and a frightful willingness of slave owners to resort to intimidation and physical violence. Clayton’s ideality is immediately contrasted with that of his good natured but eminently shrewd and practical companion Frank Russel. Clayton’s complaint about the legal practice’s lack of any real search for truth being out of sync with his conscience prompts Russel to chide Clayton’s “crotchety conscience” as “always in the way of your doing anything like anybody else” (18). Clayton’s conscience and idealism further mark him as unfit not only for law, but also politics. Within this exchange Clayton and Russel both look back with longing on the state of the Roman republic, suggesting that the present circumstances prevent their reflecting that ancient model to the extent that they prohibit the best citizens from becoming civic leaders. Russel plans to eventually run for President of the United States, but explains Clayton as ill-suited for such an office despite his being “greatly superior to me in every respect.” Russel’s logic rests on his sense that “our national ship has to be navigated by second-rate fellows … simply because we are good in dodging and turning”
Such a discussion prompts Clayton to resign himself to believing that he “shall never be what the world calls a successful man” (22).

Such categorical descriptions evoke the distinction between Stowe’s sense of “the sophistries of worldly policy and those inspired by the sympathies of Christ” that Jane Tompkins picks up on in her reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Clayton’s assessment certainly fits this line of division. “As matters are going on now in our country,” Clayton tells Russel, “There is no path in life, that I know of, where humbuggery and fraud and deceit are not essential to success—none where a man can make the purity of his moral nature the first object” (22-23). This interaction between Russel and Clayton foreshadows Stowe’s principle-based indictment of slaveholding society, suggesting that societal and political circumstances may not only limit Clayton’s opportunities for worldly success, but also prohibit the possibility of his living a moral life within Southern slaveholding society altogether. The grounds for demonstrating this are established in Clayton’s determination to do “[w]hat any Christian man should do who finds four hundred odd of his fellow men and women placed in a state of absolute dependence on him. I’m going to educate and fit them for freedom. …The raising of cotton is to be the least of the thing. I regard my plantation as a sphere for raising men and women, and demonstrating the capabilities of a race” (24). While Russel respects Clayton’s determination, he expresses his sense of the impossibility of it all given local living conditions. “It's a pity, Clayton, you were born in this world,” Russel sympathizes, “It isn't you, but our planet and planetary ways, that are in fault.” Russel’s admiration for Clayton’s resolve does not detract from his sense that Clayton’s moral aspirations are

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fundamentally incompatible with the society they live within, which society does not seem to share Clayton’s commitment to benevolence and human flourishing.

Stowe’s critique of the civic circumstances vexing Clayton and Russel immediately extends to religious foundations, as Clayton’s morality is contrasted with Southern ecclesia. In response to Russel’s suggestion that he turn to the ministry with his ideals, Clayton reveals a similar lack of confidence in the ministry’s compatibility with freely following truth where it leads. “I could not gain a right to speak in any pulpit without some profession or pledge to speak this or that, that would be a snare to my conscience, by and by,” Clayton explains, “At the door of every pulpit I must swear always to find truth in a certain formula; and living, prosperity, success, reputation, will all be pledged on my finding it there. I tell you I should, if I followed my own conscience, preach myself out of pulpits quicker than I should plead out at the bar” (23). Ultimately, even the Church appears to Clayton as based upon adherence to a “certain formula” rather than following one’s conscience according to the principles of truth. Russel’s practical response to Clayton’s zealous morality is to again point out its incongruity with the way things are. “But, I tell you what it is, Clayton, such a conscience as yours is cursedly expensive to keep,” Russel ultimately laments, “I can't afford it. I've got my way to make. I must succeed, and with your ultra notions I couldn't succeed. So there it is. After all, I can be as religious as dozens of your most respectable men, who have taken their seats in the night-train for Paradise, and keep the daylight for their own business” (29). Stowe’s indictment of religion through Russel’s cynicism is an extension of her concern in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The concern rests on a failure in the religious imagination when it comes to reconciling immanent and transcendent existence,
resulting in an imagined disjuncture between the transcendent world of Paradise and the immanent world of business, politics, and livelihood.

This indictment is one strand of the novel’s collective interrogation of the corrupted and antiquated Christianity being offered in Southern churches. Stowe identified this pursuit directly in the British preface, writing: “It is also an object to display the corruption of Christianity which arises from the same source [slave labour]; a corruption which has gradually lowered the standard of the Church, North and South, and been productive of more infidelity than the works of all the Encyclopaedists put together” (iv). Stowe lauds Clayton’s commitment to his faith, remaining present in the world and attempting to contribute to its progress, despite the incongruity between his moral sense and not only worldly policy, but also what Southern ministers peddled as divine policy.

Stowe further develops the connection between supporting slavery and an archaic theological perspective in Frank Russel’s interaction with Reverend Titmarsh, which immediately following Clayton’s losing the appeal trial. “‘Clayton is behind the times. He is Jewish in his notions. Don't you think so, Mr. Titmarsh?’” Russel sarcastically interjects into Titmarsh’s ongoing conversation. “‘It strikes me that our young friend is extremely ultra,’” Mr. Titmarsh replies,

“I might feel disposed to sympathize with him in the feelings he expressed, to some extent; but, it having pleased the Divine Providence to establish the institution of slavery, I humbly presume it is not competent for human reason to judge of it.”

“And if it had pleased the Divine Providence to have established the institution of piracy, you’d say the same thing, I suppose!” said Frank Russel.

“Certainly, my young friend,” said Mr. Titmarsh. “Whatever is divinely ordered, becomes right by that fact.”

“I should think,” said Frank Russel, “that things were divinely ordered because they were right.”
“No, my friend,” replied Mr. Titmarsh, moderately; “they are right because they are ordered, however contrary they may appear to any of our poor notions of justice and humanity.” (356-357)

Here Stowe offers a fictionalized conversation illuminating the difference in perspective between someone like her and someone like Mary Eastman. Russel and Titmarsh’s different perspectives on the very basis of reality similarly lead to different assumptions about the structure of society. Mr. Titmarsh’s perspective, as previously hinted at in his dealings with Nina, suggests that society follows a complex divine ordering that mirrors God’s potentially arbitrary designations. Such a notion complicates any attempt of humans to organize society according to their own reasoning, as there is no guarantee that such reasoning is in line with God’s. The whole basis for ordering must come from some law decreed as it were outside of time, in a paleo-Durkheimian sense. In Russel’s line of questioning, with which Clayton identifies, divine ordering is acting in direct response to what is right, not the determining factor. By extension, the ordering focus of society becomes securing certain specified rights rather than mirroring a certain structure.

Titmarsh exits the conversation with Russel lamenting “How mournfully infidelity is increasing among the young men of our day!” while Russel leaves in exasperated shock: “And they expect really to come it over us with stuff like that! Now, if a fellow don't go to church Sundays, there’s a dreadful outcry against him for not being religious! And, if they get us there, that's the kind of thing they put down our throats! As if they were going to make practical men give in to such humbugs!” As Titmarsh stands in for the old guard of the Southern creed in lamenting the loss of youthful adherence to a paleo-Durkheimian sense, Russel’s bafflement and resistance expresses the incongruity that the modern generation recognizes between Titmarsh’s approach and a modern
society based on moral principles. Stowe contrasts these two perspectives to locate the source of slavery’s error—its basis in an antiquated theological notion of religion that consequently yields an archaic social and legal structure.

Fictionalizing the attempt to perceive slavery as an extension of divine ordering, Stowe reiterates her effort to contrast slavery with the master chord of Christianity and an individual’s ability to discern correct principles. This connects to the foundational question Stowe raises in her preface—“God in his providence is now asking the American people, Is the system of slavery, as set forth in the American slave code, *right*?” That Stowe posits this question as coming from God reveals her immediate opposition to the theological reasoning demonstrated by Titmarsh, who disregards sympathy for Clayton’s position on the assumption that God does not ask questions, but rather makes decrees, on slavery and everything else: “I humbly presume it is not competent for human reason to judge of it. …Whatever is divinely ordered, becomes right by that fact…however contrary they may appear to any of our poor notions of justice and humanity.” Discrediting human potential to determine right and wrong, Titmarsh, like Eastman, posits obedience to preexisting divine laws and hierarchy as ends ultimate in themselves. By contrast, Stowe’s identifying good-will to men as the master chord of Christianity asserts a moral standard according to which human reason can determine civic laws and shape cultural practices. Stowe implies that all things can be brought under scrutiny according to the extent to which they contribute to or detract from creating a spirit of human brotherhood.

This discussion between Titmarsh and Clayton occurs immediately following the legal decision overturning reparations for Milly’s physical mistreatment at the hands of
an overseer her owner rented her out to serve on a temporary basis. The ruling is overturned on the legal technicality of her not having any rights before the law, rather than on the basis of common good for those involved. Importantly, Clayton’s case is lost not on moral grounds—as he convinced nearly every one of the morality of his position, including the lower court, which originally ruled in his favor—but a legal technicality that seemingly no one agrees with. To overturn the technicality, as Clayton’s father and others point out, would begin to unwind the fabric of the whole slave-based system.

Clayton himself explains 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 to for any of these things. It consists in making a man a dead, inert substance in the hands of another . . . what you call reforming abuses, is abolishing slavery. (430)

The designation of an enslaved person as nothing but chattel before the law is framed here as a linchpin to the maintenance of the entire system. The minute a slave begins to granted human rights and privileges is the minute the absoluteness of the relationship between master and slave begins to breaks down. It is the beginning of a slippery slope that leads to abolition, as Clayton implies. Slavery becomes, therefore, the thorn in the side of societal morals: the abuse of slaves (demonstrated through Milly’s incident) is demonstrated to be clearly immoral, but there is no legal recourse to prevent it without undermining the nature of the entire institution. As a result, Southerners are compelled to go against their best moral judgment in order to maintain slavery.

While the consensus among nearly all involved was that Milly was treated deplorably, Stowe makes it clear that the question in any trial considering the rights of slaves concerns not the “good of the subject” but rather the limits of the law. As
Clayton’s father, himself a judge, remarked prior to the initial trial, watching Clayton’s victory would be witnessing “humanity triumph at the expense of law”—the precise irony that Stowe wants to illuminate (301). The initial trial establishes the consensus of Milly’s maltreatment, but the appeal trial—where Clayton’s father presides—displays the indifference of the law. Judge Clayton responds to the “monstrous injustice” with a reiteration of his role as judge: “I sit in my seat, not to make laws, nor to alter them, but to simply declare that they are. However bad the principle declared, it is not so bad as the proclamation of a falsehood would be” (350). In discussion with his father after losing the case and abandoning the legal profession, Clayton explains his desire to repeal and reform rather than execute an unjust system. In response to Judge Clayton’s assumption that this will necessitate uprooting the entire institution of slavery, Clayton passionately replies, “Fiat Justitia ruat cœlom” [Let justice be done though the heavens fall] (358). In his commitment to moral justice, Clayton comes to realize that the fight against slavery necessitated a complete political and theological overhaul. If old forms and structures were not securing the “good of the subject,” then they need to be torn down and replaced with structures that do.

Stowe reiterates this necessity by staging deliberative scenes that seek to expose the nefarious basis behind insisting that slavery extends from a divinely ordered system. The dining room discussion between Clayton, Jekyl, Tom Gordon and Nina early in the novel is particularly clear on this point. Jeykl seeks to assert the importance of teaching slaves religious principles to inform them of their true station. Tom bombastically disagrees, admitting that the only thing to teach a slave is that “you’ve got the power!—teach them the weight of your fist!” Clayton on the other hand, expresses his intent to
base religious instruction at his plantation “on the ground that every man and every woman must give an account of themselves to God alone.” The whole conversation might be read as a meta-commentary on the basis of slavery in relation to the American experiment and the creation of a direct-access society. The interaction yields three clear ideas of how society is organized—by divine ordering, by power, or by individual consent. While divine ordering is indicative of a past Paleo-Durkheimian society out of sync with modern morality, a power-based society is in constant fear of a swing in that power. Committed to the notion of individual consent and common flourishing that Clayton pursues, Stowe successfully communicates the shortcomings and hazards of either a divine ordering or power-based system through her characterization of Tom Gordon and the clear perils of giving such a man complete power over the welfare of others.

The novel constructs Tom Gordon, the villain, as the only character who is honest about the real basis of slavery. While Clayton’s logical soundness and moral character are continually complimented by nearly every character, he is constantly contrasted with Tom, whose immorality acquires a general consensus. Yet, it is the reprobate Tom Gordon who ultimately proves to be the source of leadership in the South. Those in Mr. Jekyll’s camp attempt to pathetically justify it, while those in Judge Clayton’s camp remain inert, recognizing the immorality but dismissing action on the basis of either hopelessness or apathy. The slaveholder apparently most aware of the conditions on which Southern society and government operate is Tom Gordon. He recognizes and embraces the facts—it is all about power.
To counteract Tom Gordon’s aggression and push the logic of a power-based approach to slavery, Stowe introduces the possibility of a slave-led resistance. When Harry Gordon, Tom’s enslaved half-brother, learns that, despite a signed contract guaranteeing his freedom, he is to be turned over to Tom’s ownership, he blasts Jeykl’s hypocritical attempts to convince him that slavery is “a dispensation of Divine Providence!” To Jeykl’s attempt to describe slavery as “a great missionary enterprise for civilizing and christianizing the degraded African,” Harry angrily retorts, “Wait till you see Tom Gordon’s management on this plantation … and you’ll see what sort of a christianizing institution it is!” Calling Jeykl, with his attempts as religious-based justification, “worse than the villains themselves, who don't pretend to justify what they do,” Harry addresses the power-based structure for what it is, and concludes, “Now, go, tell Tom Gordon—go! I shall fight it out to the last! I’ve nothing to hope, and nothing to lose. Let him look out!” (386-387). Depicting such an outburst, Stowe raises the harrowing implication of slavery’s lack of divine basis. If slavery, in the absence of enlightened religious justification, really is the power game that Tom admits, then the nation needs to be thinking about what might happen when the enslaved decide they have simply had enough—and emulate the same type of revolution that founded the modern American nation. What happens when they decide they are tired of others arguing on their behalf, or ignoring their needs all together, and take matters into their own hands?

**Dred’s Threat, Unstoppable Progress, and Reforming a Failed State**

To confront this question, Stowe gradually weaves a sub-plot into the novel that reaches beyond the Canema estate and into the shadows of the dismal swamp. “In life organized as it is at the South,” the narrator subtly reminds readers midway through the
novel, that has primarily focused on white protagonists, “there are two currents;—one, the current of the master's fortunes, feelings, and hopes; the other, that of the slave's” (337). *Dred* works to bring that second perspective to the forefront of the discussion of slavery like never before.

Part of this effort includes drawing attention to the inconsistencies and hypocrisies of the institution that a closer consideration of slave lives and circumstances makes obvious. Harry’s very existence entirely disrupts Jekyll’s sense of divine ordering. As the half-brother of Tom Gordon, Harry stands outside of the categories imposed by race-based notions of a divine hierarchy. Stowe’s lingering focus on Harry’s plight disrupts Louisa S. McCord’s “monstrous formation” label and her uncaring assumption that his happiest position “is probably in the slave States.”

Harry’s abject misery obviously refutes McCord’s assumptions, and his education allows him to both articulate and legitimate the case for reform. “I have studied the Declaration of Independence,” he tells Clayton. “If it were proper for your fathers to fight and shed blood for the oppression that came upon them, why isn't it right for us?” Citing the case of Denmark Vesey, Harry explains how “the Bible and your Declaration of Independence” set him on his course—“His history is just what George Washington's would have been, if you had failed.” Harry draws out the irony of Southerners insisting on the principle of “might makes right” when it comes to slaves, while their own nation is built on the collective rejection of that principle in favor of self-rule. Clarifying that the only difference between Vesey and Washington comes down to being physically outmatched, Harry also implies the tenuousness of the Southern position. If the South is going to insist on

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holding on to the vestiges of the old world, they are going to have to confront the consequences, which includes the constant threat of repeating the British Empire’s mistake in underestimating the strength and resolve of their subjects.

Stowe paints Dred—son of Denmark Vesey and Biblical visionary after the order of Nat Turner—into the novel as the harrowing embodiment of this threat. His entrance into the novel is so stunning because it comes right as the well-mannered Harry is in a particular state of hopelessness. “They are all leagued together!” Harry realizes. “No matter how right I am—no matter how bad he is! Everybody will stand up for him, and put me down; all because my grandmother was born in Africa and his was born in America. Confound it! I won’t stand for it!” (196). Dred enters the scene in the midst of this outburst and subsequent “bitter cursing.” He presents a much darker alternative than the one so often attributed to Stowe’s Uncle Tom, and so often encouraged by characters like Aunt Milly in this novel. “Be meek and lowly,” Dred facetiously encourages Harry, “that’s the religion for you” (199). “You are a slave!” he tells Harry, explaining, “But as for me. . . I am a free man! Free by this,’ holding out his rifle. ‘Free by the Lord of hosts” (199). Dred presents an alternative to Uncle Tom’s status as the epitome of Christian virtue. Hatchet on his belt and rifle over his shoulder, Dred suggests that if the Southern society is really structured on who has the power, its stability may need to be significantly reconsidered. Tom Gordon’s declaration of the uselessness of a Christian education for his slaves on that basis that they’ll never accept the master to slave relationship as divinely mandated (“They never think so,—they don’t and they can’t”), shines through in his brother Harry’s frustrated exasperation: “We are the people that are never to do wrong! …we must be models of Christian patience!” (146). Harry’s defiant
stance forewarns readers that even *models of Christian patience* might have a limit—not everyone can be expected to act like Uncle Tom all the time.

Nevertheless, the novel fails to discover the limit. The passionate rebels are brought back down to patience and perseverance at the last possible moment by Milly’s Christian imploring. So, the slaves are kept from pursuing this alternative option—*insurrection*—but only barely. Dred’s untimely and anticlimactic death coupled with Milly’s impassioned plea for greater Christian charity cuts short the portrait of a violent rebellion. But the very real possibility of such a rebellion lurks behind the novel’s rather peaceful conclusion. Ringing behind the narration of the fugitives’ eventual escape and departure to the North is Harry’s resounding response to his brother’s unjustifiable abuse: “He hasn’t got but one life, any more than I have. Let him look out!”

The novel’s conciliatory ending combined with political measures like the Fugitive Slave Law (designed to shore up the escape valve that Stowe relied on to provide her defiant characters a peaceful option) leaves the looming question: How long can Tom Gordon’s system—a system built on beating the other side into submission—really hold?

The novel ultimately seeks to convincingly illustrate the necessity of change in deference to the relentless nature of modern progress. Slavery’s basis in a “might makes right” theological and political notion that is indifferent to the “good of the subject” amounts to the very real threat of violent insurrection when such subjects decide they have had enough. “The only way, the only safeguard to prevent this is reform,” Clayton tells Russel. “They are a patient set, and will bear a great while; and if they only see that

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85 See Elizabeth Duquette on the significance of Milly’s role as “Republican Mammy,” “The Republican Mammy? Imagining Civic Engagement in *Dred*,” *American Literature* 80, no. 1 (January 1, 2008).
anything is being done, it will be an effectual prevention. If you want insurrection, the only way is to shut down the escape-valve; for, will ye nill ye, the steam must rise” (468). From Clayton’s point of view, attempting to stall the world’s inevitable progression is a sure way to explode the boiler. “You see, in this day, minds will grow,” he explains matter-of-factly. “They are growing. There's no help for it, and there's no force like the force of growth. I have seen a rock split in two by the growing of an elm-tree that wanted light and air, and would make its way up through it” (468). Here Stowe actually follows Thoreau’s signature move in citing the natural growth of the earth as a means of justifying social change and progress. Of all the aristocracies of Europe, Clayton tells Russel, only England avoided completely exploding under this force, and solely because “it knew when to yield; because it never confined discussion; because it gave way gracefully before the growing force of the people” (469). Depicting the Southern refusal to acknowledge the power of progress, Stowe works to demonstrate the South’s clear departure from England’s nation-saving path.

Furthermore, the novel asserts that instead of yielding to the growing force of the people and the wave of modern progress, the South stubbornly relies on the primeval virtue of physical violence, intent on bullying their way towards a distinctly different future. In response to Clayton’s warning about the real possibility of violent insurrection and the futility of resisting human progress, Russel responds,

This is all very true and convincing, no doubt; but you won't make our aristocracy believe it. They have mounted the lightning, and they are going to ride it whip and spur. They are going to annex Cuba and the Sandwich Islands, and the Lord knows what, and have a great and splendid slaveholding empire. And the North is going to be what Greece was to Rome. We shall govern it, and it will attend to the arts of life for us. The South understands governing. We are trained to rule from the cradle. We have leisure to rule. We have nothing else to do. The free states have their factories, and their warehouses, and their schools, and their
internal improvements, to take up their minds; and, 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. (469-470)

Russel’s frank articulation of the South’s ambition and imagined future obviously raises significant points of alarm for those arguing for the necessity of political Union as well as those who believe the American republic is destined to play a central role in peacefully ushering in an egalitarian millennium. The consistent effort throughout the early republic to compromise with the South on the question of slavery hinged on the appeal to their shared ideology and the good of the Union. While the young nation survived by maintaining, as Noll suggests, “flexible republican categories” that emphasized similarities and overlooked differences, Stowe set out in Dred to shore up those categories, emphasizing the different ideologies at play and why those differences mattered.86

To assert the plainness of the gap between the Northern and Southern idea of a republic, Stowe draws the distinction out matter-of-factly in deliberative scenes like the one between Nina, Clayton, and the rather docile Uncle John.

“Now, people may talk as much as they please of the educated democracy of the north,” said Uncle John. “I don't like 'em. What do working-men want of education? – Ruins 'em! I've heard of their learned blacksmiths bothering around, neglecting their work, to make speeches. I don't like such things. It raises them above their sphere.” (289)

This idea of separate spheres and the intention to keep people from progressing out of a given station is the precise point that Stowe wants the novel to ultimately make clear. Southern ideology leads to, even insists on, stagnation. Such a perspective looked at the progress the Northern states pursued as, in Uncle John’s words “constant confusion and

86 Noll, America’s God, 90-1.
hubbub.” “We have peace, down here,” John insists. “To be sure, our poor whites are in
a devil of a fix; but we haven't got ’em under yet. We shall get ’em in, one of these days,
with our niggers, and then all will be contentment.” John forthrightly agrees with Nina’s
facetious remark—“there's Uncle John's view of the millennium!”—claiming that “a
handsome, gentlemanly, orderly state of society” requires both “a well-behaved lower
class” and upper classes “instructed in their duties” to be “considerate and
condescending, and all that.” To this calm reiteration of the type of hierarchical structure
that republicans like Stowe hoped the American Revolution had done away with, the
exemplary Clayton replies, “Then you are no republican.” Uncle John defends himself
from such a remark, asserting that his idea of a republic is based “in the equality
of gentlemen, and the equal rights of well-bred people” (289). Stowe’s articulation of the
difference between Clayton and John is meant to intentionally drive a wedge though the
misleading notion that Southerners and Northerners share a common republican ideology.
By showing Southern republican ideology to be built on notions of hierarchical
heterogeneity antithetical to the idea of all men created equal, Stowe sought to unmask
the charade behind compromising efforts and reveal the South to be not just the sectional
or political rival of the North, but an enemy to the modern world and the progress of freedom.

Stowe accentuates this by showing how Clayton’s efforts to work towards reform
through deliberative means amounts to a fool’s errand. Clayton’s strategy hinges on the
authority of public opinion, positing the right to influence the public mind as one of the
chief characteristics of living in a republic, which he imagines to be a society that seeks
to make its own laws in accordance with moral principles rather than organize itself
according to the strongest fist or as a mimetic extension of some divine hierarchy.

Clayton is alerted to the singularity of his republican assumptions about Southern society when observing Father Dickinson’s violent treatment at the hands of Tom Gordon’s angry mob and the subsequent gag order that his fellow religious leaders encourage him to adopt alerts Clayton to the singularity of his republican assumptions. Stowe draws this out in an evocative scene where Clayton and Dickinson deliberate with other ministers.

“And I think, Mr. Dickson, if you must preach these doctrines, I think it would be best for you to leave the state. Of course, we don't want to restrict any man's conscience; but when any kind of preaching excites brawls and confusion, and inflames the public mind, it seems to be a duty to give it up.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Cornet, the elder, “we ought to follow the things which make for peace -- such things whereby one may edify another.”

“Don't you see, gentlemen,” said Mr. Clayton, “that such a course is surrendering our liberty of free speech into the hands of a mob? If Tom Gordon may dictate what is to be said on one subject, he may on another; and the rod which has been held over our friend's head to-night may be held over ours. Independent of the right or wrong of father Dickson's principles, he ought to maintain his position, for the sake of maintaining the right of free opinion in the state.”

“Why,” said Mr. Cornet, “the Scripture saith, “If they persecute you into one city, flee ye into another.”

“That was said,” said Clayton, “to a people that lived under despotism, and had no rights of liberty given them to maintain. But, if we give way before mob law, we make ourselves slaves of the worst despotism on earth.” (387-388)

Exasperated at the reasoning of these men, Clayton here is again ventriloquizing Stowe’s primary contention that to continue to give way to the slave power, and leave off debating and interrogating the issue, would be to abandon basic republican notions and accept mob law, making the entire nation “slaves of the worst despotism on earth.” Recognizing the stakes of the issue at hand, Clayton joins Father Dickinson in seeking to speak out against the issue and do his part to enact the necessary reforms that will help the South progress towards an improved understanding of human freedom.
Yet, Clayton’s own experience at the hands of an angry crowd only further unmaskst Southern pretense to republic ideals and casts doubt on the possibility of any change coming through the standard republican protocols for reform: education and peaceful deliberation. When Clayton’s community demands that he cease his efforts to educate his slaves on grounds of its exciting the public mind, Clayton admits that he thought laws against the education of slaves, “a mere relic of barbarous ages, which the practical Christianity of our times would treat as a dead letter” (529). “I began my arrangements in all good faith,” he explains, “not dreaming that there could be found those who oppose a course so evidently called for by the Spirit of the Gospel, and the spirit of the age.” After hearing he is entirely mistaken on that subject and that his neighbors are determined to not only forcefully maintain the institution of slavery, but also prevent him from carrying on his reforming efforts, Clayton is compelled to conclude: “Then, God have mercy on you! … for it is my firm belief that, in resisting the progress of human freedom, you will be found fighting against God” (534). This brings together Stowe’s whole indictment of America’s political crisis. The abolition of slavery is clearly the next step in the divinely sanctioned march of human freedom and moral order, but the South is adamant about stopping it, to the damnation of the whole county.

Continuing the work of staging the humanity, piety, and valor of those being enslaved, whilst documenting their suffering, Stowe builds on Uncle Tom’s Cabin by casting slavery as the stumbling block of the nation. It is not just the enslaved who suffer, she insists, but all involved. Having previously killed off Augustine St. Clare before readers have a chance to see what happens when he reforms himself and begins to free his slaves, Stowe gives her reform-minded Southern gentleman in Dred a chance to
do what Augustine intended. Like Sumner, Clayton ends up barely escaping with his life. Receiving his own caning “after the fashion of the chivalry of South Carolina,” Clayton eventually finds himself either hiding in the swamp with the fugitives or staring at the ashes of his burned down schoolhouse. The novel depicts a Southern society that drives nearly every vulnerable or admirable character into the great dismal swamp. When that society begins to eventually threaten to enter the swamp after these characters, there is no other recourse than to flee the geographical region all together.

This recourse is, importantly, the option that many of the leaders and influential (even “moral”) members of the Southern society recommend. Even the respected Judge Clayton, on hearing his son’s decision to give up the practice of law and protest slavery, consents, “This is undoubtedly the logical line. But you are aware that the communities do not follow such lines; your course, therefore, will place you in opposition to the community in which you live. Your conscientious convictions will cross self-interest, and the community will not allow you to carry them out.” At this point, even the judge, acknowledges that “conscientious convictions” are no match for the self-interests of a purely self-interested community. Clayton’s response is simple, “Then … I must, with myself and my servants, remove to some region where I can do this” (358). Yet, the simplicity of this response is what makes it haunting. Clayton’s moral position has been overwhelmingly supported by not only his own father, but also nearly every character that the narrator depicts as honest and moral. Still, the continual solution presented for him by each of these people is to leave the region—signifying that there this is no simply place for his high morals in the society and state he was born to.
The straw that seems to finally break the break of Stowe’s hope for the South is this sense that Southern society casts all moral judgment aside when it comes to the peculiar institution, including actually interfering with the most important feature of any republic—the inalienable right to influence the public mind through free speech. This result of seeking the suspension of this basic and fundamental feature of any democratic republic causes Stowe to reach her conclusion in one of the final discussions between Clayton’s sister Anne, the school teacher, and Frank Russel.

“I think,” said Anne, “we had better give up this miserable sham of a free government, of freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and all that, if things must go on in this way.”

“Oh,” said Frank Russel, “the fact is that our republic, in these states, is like that of Venice; it’s not a democracy, but an oligarchy, and the mob is its standing army.”

“And you call this liberty!” said Anne, indignantly…

“These are certainly agreeable myths,” said Russel, “but these things will not bear any close looking into. Liberty has generally meant the liberty of me and my nation and my class to do what we please; which is a very pleasant thing, certainly, to those who are on the upper side of the wheel, and probably involving much that’s disagreeable to those who are under.”

“That is a heartless, unbelieving way of talking,” said Anne, with tears in her eyes. “I know there have been some right true, noble souls, in whom the love of liberty has meant the love of right, and the desire that every human brother should have what rightly belongs to him. It is not my liberty, nor our liberty, but the principle of liberty itself, that they strove for.”

“Such a principle, carried out logically, would make smashing work in this world,” said Russel. “In this sense, where is there a free government on earth? What nation ever does or ever did respect the right of the weaker, or ever will, till the millennium comes?” (534-536)

Stowe insists that the South’s refusing deliberation—not allowing the discussion of the principles and merits of slavery, but repressing it with physical violence—reveals their incongruence with the principles of a modern republic and ultimately makes deliberative solutions untenable. Southern slavery is simply too formidable a foe for Lyman Beecher’s vision of peaceful progress through a persuasion-based Christian republic.
Although Stowe wanted *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to end deliberation on slavery, she wanted that end to come deliberatively—through clear articulation of her points, complete refutation of opposing positions, and the changing of minds. In *Dred* she illustrates the problems hindering such a stance. Unable to convince his neighbors to hear him out, Clayton—courageous, intelligent, and possessing “ideality to a fault”—ultimately recognizes that he lives in a failed state incapable of fostering or protecting the moral virtue of its citizens. The abrupt and sudden ending of the novel—Clayton’s move to Canada—amounts to a vote of no confidence in the South’s ability to eventually progress under the current circumstances. The unabashed censoring of deliberative exchange cuts off the fundamental that agent of change in a republic, leaving Clayton no choice but to seek the prospect of real progress elsewhere.

The Claytons of the world are, of course, not the only ones forced into exile as the lone recourse from a broken system. Like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the novel directs attention to the “multitudes who follow the triumphal march of life only as captives” (337). From Harry down to Aunt Milly, such captives are also compelled to eventually leave the swamp and flee the region to escape the oppressed fate awaiting them in the South, carrying Tiff and the poor white children along with them, in hopes of sparing them the dastardly fate of their mother who lived on the outskirts and leftovers of slaveholding society. Yet, unlike *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the novel dwells long and hard on the fact that these escapees seriously considered an alternative option—an option embodied in the heroic Dred.

The novel works to show that such skewed priorities make slavery not only the stumbling block to the progress of the nation, but also the potential fuse of its destruction.
If taking goodwill to man as the highest law lights the path to peace, then taking slavery as the highest law casts a perpetual shadow of unrest. As Frank Russel explained to Clayton,

Those among us who have got the power in their hands are determined to keep it, and they are wide awake. They don’t mean to let the first step be taken because they don’t mean to let down their power. …They’ll die first. …Then, there’s the niggers. Those fellows are deep…and so comes up that old fear of insurrection. That’s the awful word, Clayton! That lies at the bottom of a good many things in our state, more than we choose to let on. These negroes are a black well; you never know what’s at the bottom. (465)

If the South is going to insist on being governed according to antiquated notions of power by physical fore, then it must live with the instability that accompanies building on such marshy foundations. At any moment, another son of Denmark Vesey might be lurking in the dismal swamp, hatchet on his belt, rifle over his shoulder, Bible in his hand, waiting for the time to strike. If, as Stowe seems to infer, slavery is really being held on the basis of power only, the South can expect trouble ultimately sustaining it, particularly if the Christian progress spanning the earth is indeed against it.

As things worsened throughout the decade, Stowe joined the nation in losing all patience with Southern obstinacy on the question of slavery. January 1, 1860, the first day of the new year of the new decade, found Stowe on a tour of Italy, looking at America in the context of the progress and problems of the Atlantic world.

In a letter that would be published on the front page of New York’s The Independent a little over a month later, she wrote, “When we hear from home we find that in America the same demons of slavery are trembling and quailing before some advancing power.” The most recent manifestation of that power was not a biting editorial or a political victory, but the actions of a “a brave good man who calmly gave his life up
to a noble effort for human freedom, and died in a way that is better than the most successful selfish life.” All the troops that gathered to guard him were not, she insisted, “able to the tremor caused by his great spirit.” “John Brown is a witness slain in the great cause which is shaking Hungary, Austria, Italy, France,” she declared, “and his death will be mightier for that cause than even his success. The cross is the way to the throne.”

Clearly, at the turn of yet another decade with little progress to be shown in terms of abolishing slavery, the Christian spirit through which Stowe hoped to bring an end to slavery would need to assume its most radical form. The road to the millennium that her father hoped would be plowed with peaceful republican principles would need to be lined with crosses yet. If national unison with the master chord would not be achieved by words, Stowe, in the end, consented to enforcing it with bullets. Real progress, she decided, can require real sacrifice. In attacking the arsenal at Harper’s Ferry in an attempt to light the tinderbox that would finally send the slave system to hell and right the nation’s path, John Brown did—by Stowe’s lights—"more than any man yet for the honor of the American name."88

Abraham Lincoln’s apocryphal greeting of Harriet Beecher Stowe as the “little woman who wrote the book that made this great war” celebrates the popular assumption of literature’s political power. Stowe’s writing influenced the public mind to the point of driving the nation to war. The inherent and often overlooked assumption in this sequence of events is that Stowe convinced the nation that slavery was worth ending at all costs.


She helped create such a compelling picture of reality that the nation ended up bypassing its own republican principles of persuasion to bring that reality to pass. While *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is typically thought of in terms of illustrating that reality, Stowe’s second anti-slavery novel, *Dred*, illustrated persuasion’s inadequacies to move the nation towards it. In contrast to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s presumed confidence in the political system, *Dred*, offered a bleaker view of the situation, diagnosing slavery as a disease rooted in an antiquated social order and unlikely to be cured by the morals and standards of modern political action. Brooding on the South’s incompatibility with the ideals of a modern nation state, especially the intolerance for an open public sphere, *Dred* inferred the possibility that the only way of dealing with an antiquated society might be resorting to antiquated means of diplomacy, or as she would frame it in the case of John Brown, the higher path of martyrdom.
PART II

“WIDER VIEWS OF THE UNIVERSE”

HENRY DAVID THOREAU’S RESPONSE TO THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW
INTRODUCTION

On April 2, 1852—the day after the final installment of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* appeared in *The National Era*—Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal:

It appears to me that to one standing on the heights of philosophy mankind and the works of man will have sunk out of sight altogether. Man is altogether too much insisted on. The poet says the proper study of mankind is man—I say study to forget all that—take wider views of the universe—That is the egotism of the race. What is this our childish gossiping social literature—mainly in the hands of the publishers? When the poet says that the world is too much with us—In the promulgated views of man—in institutions—in the common sense there is narrowness & delusion. It is our weakness that so exaggerates the virtues of philanthropy & charity & makes it the highest human attribute—The world will sooner or later tire of philanthropy—and all religions based on it mainly. They cannot long sustain my spirit.¹

Whether or not Thoreau wrote this in direct response to the frenzy surrounding the serial conclusion of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or its book-form publication less than two weeks earlier, it is hard not to read this entry as a manifesto of the difference in approach between Thoreau and a writer like Harriet Beecher Stowe. “Look at our literature what a poor puny social thing seeking sympathy,” he continues. “I do not value any view of the universe into which man & the institutions of man enter very largely & absorb much of the attention—Man is but the place where I stand & the prospect (thence) hence is infinite.”² Awake to such infinite prospects, Thoreau clearly bristled at the narrowness of fashioning a *master* chord out of an anthropocentric imperative like “goodwill to man.”

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² PEJ, 4:419-20.
In the spring of 1851, while Stowe responded to the Fugitive Slave Act by crafting a sympathy-packed story for the *National Era*—assiduously exaggerating the “virtues of philanthropy & charity” as “the highest human attribute”—Thoreau crafted a lecture for the Concord Lyceum. Although received with significantly less fanfare than *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Thoreau’s lecture, which he would continue delivering and revising over the course of the decade, eventually became, in the words of Laura Dassow Walls, “the single greatest statement of his philosophy of life.”³ While typical genealogies of Thoreau’s antislavery discourse tend to move from “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849) straight to “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854), this study reads Thoreau’s 1851 lecture, “Walking or the Wild,” as a comprehensive response to the Fugitive Slave Law. A few days prior to delivering the lecture, Thoreau wrote in his journal, “Much as has been said about slavery, I think that commonly we do not yet realize what slavery is.”⁴ Stowe, of course, came to this same exact conclusion. “These men and Christians cannot know what slavery is,” she wrote when explaining what motivated her to write *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. “And from this arose a desire to exhibit it in a *living dramatic reality*.”⁵ Although Stowe and Thoreau both confronted the ignorance that surrounded slavery in 1851, the exhibitions of *reality* they each offered in response took markedly different directions.

Thoreau shared Stowe’s prioritizing of goodness and harmony, but conceived it in broader terms that took “wider views of the universe.” From his perspective, “goodwill

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⁴ PEJ, 3:204.
“to man” was too limited to be the master chord, not because goodwill was not enough, but because the universe includes so much more than man. Ensuring that humans lived in harmony with one another touched on only one aspect of a broad existence. Genuine common flourishing necessitated living in tune with the whole of the living world.

Because Thoreau recognized the universe as alive and wild, constantly changing and developing, he felt that living harmoniously in it required an expansive perspective and a dynamic understanding. He criticized the way human institutions tend to “enter very largely and absorb much of the attention,” obscuring the potential for such harmony to the extent that they stagnate human understanding of the wider universe and distort humanity’s relationship to it. Thoreau’s quest at Walden Pond was an attempt to discover the vital reality beneath the fossilized layers of traditions and institutions that grounded society. “Let us settle ourselves,” he wrote in the earliest version of Walden, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin having a point d’appui, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer, that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gathered from time to time.\(^6\)

Thoreau sought to confront the world with fresh, unfettered eyes, so that he could live in accordance with it: “I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear.”\(^7\)

Determining reality—“the essential facts of life”—was crucial to Thoreau’s concept of

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\(^7\) Thoreau, *Walden*, 394.
the good, because harmonious living required a proper understanding of the universe’s interrelations.

Misunderstanding or misconstruing these interrelations led to prejudice and injustice, which bred discord. “Herein is the tragedy,” Thoreau wrote in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, “that men doing outrage to their proper natures, even those called wise and good, lend themselves to perform the office of inferior and brutal ones. Hence come war and slavery in; and what else may not come in by this opening?”

Thoreau’s wish to “live deliberately” was a push back against the hasty conclusions, strained deliberations, and devotion to expediency that drove the United States to sanction slavery or make war with Mexico. He enacted this critique most profoundly while living at Walden Pond, when he consented to go to jail rather than pay taxes to support the nation’s unjust endeavors. “Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South,” he later explained in “Civil Disobedience,” “but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, cost what it may.”

Like Stowe, Thoreau prioritized the good above all else, “an individual, must do justice, cost what it may.” Thoreau’s invitation to take “wider views” was a call to step outside of narrow

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and expedient thinking and break free from outmoded institutions and traditions to confront the actual demands of common flourishing.

While Stowe sought to paint a living dramatic reality that depicted the relationships between humans and how slavery prohibited common human flourishing, Thoreau expanded the lens to describe a live and dynamic universe, hoping that “wider views” would lead to a sense of increased connectivity. Goodwill, or justice remained the master chord, but achieving true harmony required living fully in a wide and wild world. The plea to “take wider views of the universe” was an invitation to recognize the interconnectivity of all things and construct a sense of flourishing that extended beyond human to human interactions.

Remapping the trajectory of Thoreau’s political discourse, the next two chapters contribute to an expanding critical tradition intent on countering what Rebecca Solnit termed the “Thoreau Problem”—the frequent compartmentalizing of Thoreau’s political activism as distinct from his environmental study. While many continue to overlook the way “nature and culture, landscape and politics, the city and the country are inextricably interfused” in Thoreau’s thought, there have certainly been, as Solnit acknowledges, a few who “have been able to find Thoreau’s short, direct route between them.”11 One useful entry into this route has been to approach Thoreau as less of a “nature writer” and more of a proto-ecologist. As Robert McGregor puts it, “Thoreau’s unique blend of science and sympathy was bringing him to an ecological world view—years before the

word was invented.”

McGregor notes how applying such a label to Thoreau can lead to trouble from ecological scientists on account of the “transcendental thing,” or Thoreau’s investment in moral questions “lying outside the purview of hard science.” Such categorical concerns might seem to warrant adding an asterisk to Thoreau’s ecological perspective, as reflected in Robert Schneider’s description of Thoreau’s work as “human ecology,” but this terminology is misleading to the extent that it construes human ecology as distinct from non-human ecology. Such nomenclature risks mischaracterizing Thoreau’s fundamental vision, his journey away from bifurcation and towards an encompassing worldview that embedded humans within the cosmos.

To avoid such confusion, I follow James Finley in approaching Thoreau’s response to the national crisis over slavery in terms of what Timothy Morton calls “ecological thinking.” According to Morton, while environmental or nature writing centers on “Nature” with a capital N, ecology “can do without a concept of a something, a thing of some kind, ‘over yonder,’ called Nature.” Claiming that ecological thinking


13 McGregor, A Wider View of the Universe, 5.


15 For a comprehensive discussion of Thoreau as an “empirical holist” enacting a Humboldtian program of “explore; collect; measure; connect;” see Walls, Seeing New Worlds, especially chapter 4, “Cosmos: Knowing as Worliding.”


has “as much to do with the humanities wing of modern universities as with the sciences … with factories, transportation, architecture, and economics,” Morton frames ecology as “all the ways we imagine how we live together.”\textsuperscript{18} In this sense, ecological thought “is the thinking of interconnectedness … a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral.”\textsuperscript{19} While Thoreau is well-known for such thinking, the “Thoreau Problem” stems from the failure to recognize such a practice as inherently political. Political in the reactionary sense Lance Newman describes—that “in choosing to write about it at all he was responding to the turbulent social history of Jacksonian America”—but also in the sense that thinking about how beings interact and connect with other beings is the very essence of political activity.\textsuperscript{20} The “thinking of interconnectedness” is ultimately political, and even democratic, to that extent that it asks, “What would a truly democratic encounter between truly equal beings look like, what would it be—can we even imagine it?”\textsuperscript{21} Understanding “Walking, or the Wild” as Thoreau’s response to the Fugitive Slave Law requires engaging Thoreau’s political perspective at this ecological scale.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{18} Timothy Morton, \textit{The Ecological Thought}, 4.

\textsuperscript{19} Timothy Morton, \textit{The Ecological Thought}, 7.

\textsuperscript{20} Lance Newman, \textit{Our Common Dwelling}, 189.

\textsuperscript{21} Timothy Morton, \textit{The Ecological Thought}, 7.

\textsuperscript{22} Shannon Mariotti has described this as Thoreau’s “uncommon understanding of democratic politics, where a sense of loss motivates activities such as walking and huckleberrying that aim to recover and recuperate the critical qualities we must have to be real democratic citizens.” “Instead of highlighting all the ways that Thoreau is a round peg who does not comfortably fit in the square hole of conventional democratic politics,” she suggests, “we should appreciate that Thoreau tries to reshape the hole itself” (6). This chapter and the next focus on fostering such appreciation. See Shannon L. Mariotti, \textit{Thoreau’s Democratic Withdrawal: Alienation, Participation, and Modernity} (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2010).
Over the course of the next two chapters, I argue that Thoreau responds to the Fugitive Slave Law by indicting the narrow lens through which his contemporaries approach the political world and inviting his countrymen to develop a broader, what would today be called “ecological,” perspective. Rather than trivialize humanity in the face of Nature’s majesty or escape into Nature to flee the turmoil of the civilized world, Thoreau insisted that taking “wider views of the universe” could reveal the relationship of its various parts in a way that might reorient a broken world. Like Stowe, Thoreau thought the key to solving the national crisis was aligning the nation with a fuller vision of reality. The glaring difference, which chapter 3 and chapter 4 work in tandem to elucidate, is that Thoreau’s vision of reality “was not fixed and determinate but fluid and open-ended.”

This expansive vision made Thoreau an explorer, who sought to balance his detailed observations of the world with a wide scope. Too narrow of a focus, he believed, would distort the bigger picture: “The habit of looking at things microscopically as the lichens on the trees & rocks really prevents my seeing aught else in a walk.” Thoreau applied this same caution to a focus on social politics, which could equally absorb attention to the point that it “shut out a great part of the world.” The Fugitive Slave Law certainly posed such a threat. In the summer of 1850, during the interim between the great compromise’s failure as an omnibus bill and ratification as separate resolutions, Thoreau wrote in his journal, “Man & his affairs—Church & state & school

23 Walls, Seeing New Worlds, 212.
25 PEJ, 4:378.
trade & commerce & agriculture—Politics for that is the word for them all here today—I am pleased to see how little space it occupies in the landscape—it is but a narrow field—that still narrower highway yonder leads to it.”

Throughout the fall and into the spring, Thoreau worked harder than ever to situate this “narrow field” within the broader landscape—a feat reflected in his evolving journal practice that experimented with ways to capture and communicate his experience walking through the woods on the outskirts of town.

The Fugitive Slave Law, however, proved itself a constant irritant to this endeavor. The Boston arrests of fugitive slaves Shadrach Minkins in February 1851 and Thomas Sims in April flare into his journal entries like a back injury, suddenly consuming all of his attention. The Thomas Sims episode especially captured his attention, paired as it was with the perfunctory memorialization of Concord’s celebrated fight for freedom on April 19. Thoreau penned a fierce indictment of slavery, the nation, and his home state. “A government which deliberately enacts injustice—& persists in it!—It will become the laughing stock of the world,” he seethed into his journal.

Leading up to his scheduled lecture on April 23, these thoughts read not like personal or introspective venting, but rather prepared remarks for an audience. At certain points, he even addresses that imagined audience: “Why gentlemen even consistency though it is much abused is sometimes a virtue.” Yet, Thoreau refrained from including any of this

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26 PEJ, 3:103.

27 PEJ, 3:204.

28 PEJ, 3:204.
material in his lecture, which focused instead on the art of walking and the idea of
wildness.

It was not until 1854, after the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and Boston’s
dramatic surrender of the fugitive slave Anthony Burns, that Thoreau returned to the fiery
thoughts he had prepared in 1851 but left in his journal. He went public with his
frustrations in a pungent address delivered at an antislavery rally in Framingham,
Massachusetts. Immediately circulated under the title “Slavery in Massachusetts” in The
Liberator, and reprinted by other publications, Thoreau’s speech earned the moniker
“Words that Burn,” and publically marked him among the fiercest of slavery’s critics.29

In response, the annual statement for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society recorded,
“We had the pleasure, on the Fourth of July to welcome HENRY D. THOREAU to the
public advocacy of our cause.”30 Direct, unabashed, and publically celebrated, “Slavery
in Massachusetts” has been understandably approached as Thoreau’s preeminent reply to
the Fugitive Slave Law, especially as it includes, nearly wholesale, the clear and fuming
passages that Thoreau filled his journal with in the days directly preceding his 1851
lecture.31 Nevertheless, this 1854 address was, by Thoreau’s own account, more of a last
resort than an initial or comprehensive assessment.

Thoreau had an opportunity to deliver such a response in the spring of 1851, and
possessed, as mentioned, some sharp and fully-formed remarks. He had further

29 Bradley P. Dean and Ronald Wesley Hoag, “Thoreau’s Lectures before Walden: An Annotated

30 Quoted in Dean and Hoag, “Thoreau’s Lectures Before Walden,” 221.

31 For the composition of “Slavery in Massachusetts” out of the journal, see Sandra Harbert
Petrulionis, “Editorial Savoir Faire: Thoreau Transforms His Journal into ‘Slavery in Massachusetts,’”
Resources for American Literary Study 25, no. 2 (October 1, 1999): 206-231.
opportunities to share such thoughts in the eleven other lecturing opportunities he had between the spring of 1851 and summer of 1854. \(^{32}\) But he chose not to do so. The question is, why? Why did he wait so long to join the public advocacy against the Fugitive Slave Law? What prevented him from delivering a scorching antislavery address in the same season that Stowe first introduced Uncle Tom?

Thoreau opened his 1851 lecture with a direct answer to such questions. That answer began with an apology:

I feel that I owe my audience an apology for speaking to them tonight on any other subject than the Fugitive Slave Law on which every man is bound to express a distinct opinion,—but I had prepared myself to speak a word now for Nature—for absolute freedom & wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture simply civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of nature—rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one—for there are enough champions of civilization—the minister and the school committee—and every one of you will take care of that. \(^{33}\)

This short preface to the lecture carries the same sentiment that colored his above-mentioned thoughts on sympathetic literature, which he would jot in his journal a year later in 1852. Here, in 1851, with this first public comment on the Fugitive Slave Law—the only public comment he would provide for the next three years—Thoreau deliberately separates himself from “champions of civilization,” a designation unquestionably applicable to the likes of Stowe and civic endeavors like Uncle Tom’s Cabin. \(^{34}\) Pitting

\(^{32}\) See Dean and Hoag, “Thoreau’s Lectures Before Walden.”

\(^{33}\) Dean and Hoag, “Thoreau’s Lectures Before Walden,” 199.

\(^{34}\) Although he would deliver variations of this lecture at least ten times over the course of the decade—keeping it out of publication because it kept growing and evolving—only the initial delivery included his prefatory apology directly referencing the Fugitive Slave Law. See Dean and Hoag, “Thoreau’s Lectures Before Walden,” 198.
“absolute freedom & wildness” against “a freedom and culture simply civil,” Thoreau announced his attempt to champion a priority beyond civilization.

In positing an alternative context for man, as “part and parcel of nature—rather than a member of society,” he challenged imagined authority structures and common ontological assumptions, including the postmillennialist sensibilities of his contemporaries. While a writer like Stowe could announce the casting off of slavery as evidence of progress towards unison with the great master chord of Christianity and the inevitable Second Coming of the Lord, Thoreau turned to no such narrative. Like Stowe, he advocated for a sustained consideration of national priorities, but instead of locating those priorities within a readymade scheme, he sought to widen the scope within which his contemporaries approached human society. He did this by encouraging them to simply take a walk “to see how little space it occupies in the landscape.” In “Walking, or the Wild,” Thoreau articulated an antidote to the “narrow field” in which politics were discussed. He offered walking, or “stepping westward,” as a “rallying cry” and means of rescaling perspectives to realize the “absolute freedom & wildness” of the universe.

From this vantage point, “Slavery in Massachusetts” actually stands out as more of a despairing exception to Thoreau’s comprehensive response to slavery rather than a culminating triumph. In June 1854, Thoreau found himself unable to stay focused on the “rallying cry” he had offered three years before. His journaling reflects this struggle to maintain “wider views,” shifting abruptly back and forth between recording his

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35 PEJ, 3:200-01.

36 Prefacing his 1851 lecture with lines from Wordsworth’s poem, Thoreau noted, “The sentences from my journal which I am going to read this evening, for want of a better rallying cry, may accept these words ‘stepping westward’” (Dean and Hoag, “Thoreau’s Lectures Before Walden,” 199).
observations of the Concord woods and his anger at the state over slavery. “The remembrance of the baseness of politicians spoils my walks,” he admitted on June 16, “my thoughts are murder to the state—I trust that all just men will conspire.”

37 “Man & his affairs,” narrow though they may be, were spoiling the landscape, or at least crowding out attempts to properly behold it. The desperation of Thoreau’s words suggests a perceived sudden lack of options. “I dwelt before, perhaps, in the illusion that my life passed somewhere only between heaven and hell,” he would tell his Framingham audience, “but now I cannot persuade myself that I do not dwell wholly within hell.”

38 With such language, Thoreau clearly adopted, as Robert Richardson suggests, “for the time and the cause, the rhetorical style of William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Frederick Douglass.”

39 Such borrowing indeed reflected a change in Thoreau’s strategy as these were not new figures or newly introduced styles for Thoreau.

A full decade earlier, Thoreau had been included in a lecture series dedicated to reform that featured both Garrison and Phillips. Having just returned from a failed attempt to become a professional writer in New York, the occasion would have presented an opportune time for Thoreau to begin making a name for himself as an antislavery activist. But Thoreau avoided that path just as he turned away from an opportunity months earlier to join the reform endeavors at Brook Farm.

40 In 1844, Thoreau—as his

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37 PEJ, 8:200.


40 Thoreau stopped off, as Walls recounts, in Brook Farm for a few days on his return from New York, see Walls, A Life, 161.
retreat to Walden Pond a year later would make clear—felt as though he had his own ideas about reform and his own trail to blaze. In 1851, he avoided the traditional path of the reformer yet again, leaving “narrow” concerns to the “champions of civilization” while he continued blazing a trail toward more profound reform. By 1854, however, he clearly felt a bit less free, as the “baseness of politicians” closed in upon him. Slavery had become a cloud so dark that it shadowed the dazzling world he had been inviting his neighbors to pay more attention to and muddied the alternate path of reform he had been pursing.

In this sense, “Slavery in Massachusetts” acted as a necessary means towards accomplishing an ultimately higher end—like washing the windows to let in greater sunlight. The higher end was the vision he offered in “Walking, or the Wild,” which itself was an extension of the collective project he began in his retreat to Walden. While Thoreau joined the “champions of civilization” in directly articulating his opinion on the Fugitive Slave Law in 1854, his overarching goal was speaking “a word for nature.” A fuller understanding of “man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of nature—rather than a member of society,” would bring, he believed, the greater reform the nation ultimately needed.

Reframing “Slavery in Massachusetts” as the exception to this ongoing project, chapter 3 remaps the trajectory of Thoreau’s antislavery discourse to situate his spring 1851 lecture as not only a reply to the Fugitive Slave Law, but also a seminal moment in the reform path he had been on since the 1840s. It examines the way Thoreau, rather than dedicate his attention solely to slavery, one layer of the “alluvion which covers the globe,” consistently focused instead on a more encompassing search for “a hard bottom”
or “point d'appui, below freshet and frost and fire” on which the nation might construct comprehensive reform.”

Ultimately, the chapter shows how Thoreau’s efforts to speak “a word now for nature” were less about avoiding or circumventing the murky bog of slavery and more about working and wedging downward towards a clearer vision of the hard bottom, or reality, it obscured and that true reform depended on.

Chapter 4 traces Thoreau’s career trajectory after 1851 as he tried to awaken his neighbors to the vision of reality he articulated in “Walking, or the Wild.” Detailing Thoreau’s constant struggle to connect with his audience, the chapter examines the way he reconsidered his rhetorical strategy when returning to the Walden manuscript to foreground the type of approach he articulated in “Walking, or the Wild.” It also considers the toll that the reinforcement of slavery took on his own commitment to reforming the nation through “wider views.” Ultimately, the chapter describes how Thoreau’s insistence on a life of principle at all costs motivated his effort to recast John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry from a dark tragedy to the first light of a new dawn.

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41 Thoreau, Walden, 400.
CHAPTER 3

WALKING TO REFORM:

THOREAU, SLAVERY, AND THE FRAMEWORK OF THE UNIVERSE

Mr. Thoreau is a keen and delicate observer of nature—a genuine observer—which, I suspect, is almost as rare a character as even an original poet; and Nature, in return for his love, seems to adopt him as her especial child, and shows him secrets which few others are allowed to witness.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1842

When Thoreau abandoned the New York literary scene and returned home to Concord in December 1843, he committed himself to an unconventional career path. The lecture that Thoreau delivered at Boston’s Amory Hall three months later provided an early indication of the direction that path would lead. Delivered in the middle of the twelve week series, and thus preceded and followed by an array of impassioned reformers, Thoreau’s lecture, like the one Emerson delivered a week before, sought to trouble rather than simply encourage reformatory sensibilities. Thoreau’s lecture wasted no time in carving a position outside the dichotomy drawn in his title, “The Conservative and The Reformer.” Both are sick, he announced at

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2 “Where other lecturers at Amory Hall were speaking to the already converted,” Linck Johnson notes, “Emerson and Thoreau sought to convert the congregation of reformers yet again, turning their attention from society’s ills to the resources of the self, the only realm where true liberation might be gained,” (“Reforming the Reformers: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Sunday Lectures at Amory Hall, Boston,” Emerson Society Quarterly, no. 145 [1991], 237).
the start of his lecture. The conservative is “already convalescent” while the reformer “is still taking his bitters and quack medicines patiently and will grow worse yet.” While reformers saw their work as salvatory, eradicating inert institutions that conservatives foolishly sought to preserve, Thoreau pointed to the way reformers simply replaced institutions for institutions, “seeking to establish and give permanence to that which will not perpetuate itself.” In his estimation, conservatives and reformers both erred in their commitment to establishing society, as true associations between people were inherently dynamic, involving “the instantaneous establishment of good institutions and the annihilation of all bad ones.” Thoreau’s indictment of reformers centered on this sense of too quickly getting swallowed up in associations: “But when we seek a man often times we find instead a society.” Forms and associations could not replace the need for individual attention to one’s own self: “It is not the worst reason why the reform should be a private and individual enterprise that perchance the evil is private also.” In a letter to his sister Helen the previous October, Thoreau similarly lamented how reformers “mistake their private ails for an infected atmosphere, but let any one of them recover for

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3 Thoreau, “The Conservative and the Reformer,” (1844), page 1, as quoted in Linck Johnson, “Reforming the Reformers: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Sunday Lectures at Amory Hall, Boston,” *Emerson Society Quarterly*, no. 145 (1991): 235-289. In the absence of current access to this text, I am relying on the extracts of the text Johnson provides in “Reforming the Reformers,” and using page numbers that correspond to the manuscript itself.


a moment, and right his particular grievance, and he will no longer train in that company.”

Rather than turning to and casting individual troubles on society—an artificial and static construction—Thoreau recommended increased attention to the real and vibrant world. Calling the sun “a great reformer of all animate and inanimate nature,” Thoreau suggested a division, as Linck Johnson articulates, “not between the reformer and the conservative but between both breeds of social beings and those who turned to nature, which offered the only model for true reform.”

Here, at age twenty seven, in his first real lecture outside of his home lyceum, Thoreau forcefully articulated the beginnings of the bold approach to reform that he would adhere to for the rest of his life. And in this early call for individual and unbridled reform, Thoreau acknowledged that his commitment to the authority of the natural world surpasses all other considerations, even religious duties. There are, he claimed, “fairer emblems than the cross.”

Thoreau cautioned against being too quick to settle on a determined highest good, even when it came to love, the master chord for Stowe and so many other reformers. “We have already proceeded from humanity to kindness—from kindness to love,” he notes, “but what purer and more entire humanity lies beyond!”

This is the kind of idea that made Thoreau a genuine radical, and to his mind, a real reformer. It is also the idea that separates him from the approach taken by others, including Stowe. Rather than

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8 HDT to Helen Thoreau, (October 18, 1843) in The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau ed. by Walter Harding and Carl Bode (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1974), 147.


doubt or discredit the virtue and power of love, Thoreau held in perspective the magnitude of the universe and the small space humans occupy in it. In that sense, Thoreau’s talk of potentially proceeding beyond love is less a blaspheming of humanity’s cardinal virtue and more a reverencing of the universe’s undiscovered possibilities—“the fact of miracle and the supernatural,” to which “all charities—all humanities—all wit and wisdom—must yield.”

As a result of such boundless possibilities, Thoreau warned against checking “the progress of man by any institution of our own,” and concluded his lecture by encouraging his audience to “not repeat this old error—but leave life as free to those who are to come after—as we complain it was not left to us.” “I never heard any man’s scheme under the sun,” he warns, “even the wisest and most perfect—from Plato to Fourier, though it thrilled me with joy—which I did not know before many summers would certainly have passed away.” The finitude of such schemes, beautiful and thrilling though they may be, made them inevitably limiting foundations: “So rich is the treasury of God! So various and variegated is life. New things are constantly arriving. Let us not hold fast to any of the old nor any of the new—But let the gods take care of what they have created—even of ourselves.”

At a pivotal moment in his life—fresh off professional failure and surrounded by reform movements that attracted and enticed his close friends—Thoreau publically affirmed his commitment to the natural world and articulated the beginning of a grand, if personal, vision of reform.

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This chapter traces the trajectory of that vision, noting its development in relation to the most pressing reform issue of the day—slavery. While Thoreau had the kernel of his reform strategy in 1844—“Hemlock boughs, they reform me”—he would spend the next decade plumbing the depths of that assertion and testing its possibilities.\(^{14}\)

**The Path to Walden Pond is Paved with Abolitionists**

Although clearly miles away from communal reform projects like Brook Farm and already headed in the direction of Walden Pond, Thoreau nevertheless found himself unable to avoid the most pressing reform issue of the day—slavery. Yet, if Thoreau, as Johnson suggests, found it far more difficult to resist “the appeals of the abolitionists” than utopian calls to association, much of that difficulty had to do with both the character of the appeal and the impression made by those offering it. When Stowe took her pen in 1851 and wrote the most famous novel of the century, in hopes of ending the bewildering deliberations by “men and Christians” over the proper response to the Fugitive Slave Act, she did so with a distinct idea of how righteous men should respond to the crisis. Thoreau felt he had read and heard the words of such righteous men a half-decade earlier, and it significantly influenced his own reformatory course.

The final issue of *The Dial*, which came out a month after his Amory Hall lecture, included Thoreau’s review of the abolitionist publication *Herald of Freedom*, edited by Nathaniel P. Rogers. Wendell Glick notes that while it is unclear when Thoreau started reading the abolitionist publication, the first of the six quotations he includes in his review comes from a July 1838 issue, published a month after Rogers took over as

\[^{14}\text{Thoreau, “The Conservative and the Reformer,” 49-50.}\]
Thoreau’s review primarily highlights Rogers, celebrating his editorial vision and writing style. Claiming “neither room, nor inclination to criticize this paper, or its cause, at length,” Thoreau sets himself to reviewing “in the free and uncalculating spirit of its author.”16 “Mr. Rogers seems to us to occupy an honorable and manly position in these days, and in this country,” he contends, “making the press a living and breathing organ to reach the hearts of men, and not merely ‘fine paper, and good type,’ with its civil pilot sitting aft, and magnanimously waiting for the news to arrive.”17 While Rogers’s boldness brought him opposition, and even lost him control of his paper for a time, Thoreau loved his lack of restraint and defiance of orderly expectations: “Who can help sympathizing with his righteous impatience, when invited to hold his peace or endeavor to convince the understandings of the people by well ordered arguments?”18 While others found Rogers extravagant, Thoreau paid him the highest compliment he knew: “The present editor is wide awake.” “Unlike most reformers,” Thoreau informed readers of The Dial, “his feet are still where they should be, on the turf, and … he looks out from a serener natural life into the turbid arena of politics.”19 This stance—looking at politics only whilst firmly grounded in “a serener natural life”—was precisely what Thoreau had called for in his discourse to the would-be reformers assembled in Boston.


Thoreau’s very next publication, almost exactly a year later, was a glowing review of an antislavery activist that again focused less on the message and more on the virtue and orientation of the one who delivered it. Published in The Liberator on March 28, 1845, “Wendell Phillips Before the Concord Lyceum” reviewed Phillips’s third, and not uncontentious, visit to the Concord stage on March 11. Similar to the way he opened his Dial review praising the “free and uncalculating spirit” of Rogers, in this review Thoreau admires the “consistency” of Phillips: “We must give Mr. Phillips the credit of being a clean, erect, and what was once called a consistent man.”

Such consistency, according to Thoreau, makes him neither responsible for “the hypocrisy and superstition of the Church, nor the timidity and selfishness of the State; nor for the indifference and willing ignorance of any.” It also—and this is what Thoreau seems to specifically admire—left him “so distinctly, so firmly, and so effectively, alone.”

Echoing the claims he made in Boston, Thoreau insists, “One honest man is so much more than a host that we cannot but feel that he does himself injustice when he reminds us of ‘the American Society, which he represents.’” Thoreau writes as though witnessing the embodiment of the vision of reform that he had articulated at Amory Hall. He could sense that Phillips was not a representative of a particular antislavery society any more than he was a representative of American society. Phillips was simply, first and foremost, “a consistent man.” “He unconsciously tells his biography as he

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22 Thoreau, “Wendell Phillips Before the Concord Lyceum,” 60.

23 Thoreau, “Wendell Phillips Before the Concord Lyceum,” 60.
proceeds,” Thoreau declares, “and we see him early and earnestly deliberating on these subjects, and wisely and bravely, without counsel or consent of any, occupying a ground at first, from which the varying tides of public opinion cannot drive him.”24 Thoreau was enamored by Phillips’s fierce independence and brave, come-what-may commitment to the ground he occupied.

Not quite twenty eight years old, Thoreau dreamed of taking such a stance. As Walls writes, “Thoreau didn’t want to merely hear Phillips. …He wanted to be Phillips, to stand alone before the million with just such dignity, courage, and integrity.”25 Indeed this is exactly where Thoreau eventually arrives, becoming—especially in the aftermath of Harper’s Ferry—more like Phillips than he probably ever imagined. When Thoreau became the first to publicly speak out in defense of John Brown’s 1859 raid, he actually scooped Phillips himself for the distinction by about 24 hours.26 Although the esteem Thoreau expresses for Brown in the stirring eulogy he delivered at the Concord Town hall echoes the admiration he held for Phillips in 1845, delivering the address itself most fully enacted the isolated resolve he praised in both men. Emerson recorded that Thoreau, in response to doubts about the wisdom of his speaking out in favor of Brown, replied, “I did not send to you for advice but to announce that I am to speak.”27 Occupying his own ground “without counsel or consent of any,” Thoreau became, surely in that moment as much as any time before, every bit the reformer he admired in print

24 Thoreau, “Wendell Phillips Before the Concord Lyceum,” 60.

25 Walls, A Life, 186.


nearly a decade and a half earlier. But in the spring of 1845, much like he would in the spring of 1851, Thoreau held back from that role, avoiding the commotion surrounding abolition, pursuing instead wider views and exploring “what purer and more entire humanity lies beyond!”

In March 1845, what enamored Thoreau about Phillips was “much more than words”—it was the way he secured “the genuine respect of his audience” through “unquestionable earnestness and integrity.” This stemmed, in Thoreau’s view, from the scope through which he approached his work. “We would fain express our appreciation of the freedom and steady wisdom, so rare in the reformer,” Thoreau commended, “with which he declared that he was not born to abolish slavery, but to do right.” This stated orientation to the issue ignited Thoreau, as it reflected the precise view on reform that he had tried to communicate the year before at Amory Hall: institutions and organized causes could not be the goal, for the real goal was constant allegiance to doing right in the present moment. The question was, what is right? Slavery was obviously wrong, but in Boston he had encouraged greater attention to the potential reasons why, suggesting reformers not get too hasty in settling on master chords. Phillips’s visit seems to have influenced Thoreau’s decision to more fully explore those potential reasons, what he would describe as a quest “to drive life into a corner.” Thoreau began construction on his future home at Walden Pond within the month.

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29 Thoreau, “Wendell Phillips Before the Concord Lyceum,” 60.
31 Thoreau, Walden, 394.
Once settled on the banks of Walden Pond, surrounded by hemlock trees and a host of other reforming influences, Thoreau felt himself truly commencing the expansive yet individual reformatory project he had been imagining—but slavery was still on his mind. On July 6, less than four months after Phillips’s lecture and two days into his sojourn, Thoreau wrote in his journal:

I wish to meet the facts of life—the vital facts, which where the phenomenon or actuality the Gods meant to show us,—face to face, And so I came down here. Life! Who knows what it is—what it does? If I am not quite right here I am less wrong than before—and now let us see what they will have. The preacher, instead of vexing the ears of drowsy farmers on their day of rest, at the end of the week … should teach them with a thundering voice—pause and simplicity.32

Thoreau’s palpable excitement at the expansive possibilities before him reflects the earnestness of his quest. He writes like someone who, if not on the perfect course, fully expects to discover something significant. In reflecting on this, he quickly turns to defining his quest in relation to antislavery efforts, adding “I wonder men can be so frivolous almost as to attend to the gross form of negro slavery—there are so many keen and subtle masters, who subject us both.”33 This line (a version of which makes it to the final draft of Walden34) anticipates the heart of 1854’s “Slavery in Massachusetts,” but it also echoes a passing though crucial comment he made in his recent review on Phillips. Recounting Phillips’s own recounting of Frederick Douglass’s plan to communicate “his purpose of writing his life, and telling his name, and the name of his master, and the place

32 PEJ, 2:156.

33 PEJ, 2:156.

34 In the earliest version of Walden, the line reads, “I sometimes wonder how we can be so frivolous, almost, as to attend to the gross form of Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both north and south. It is bad to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are yourself the slave-driver.” It remains unchanged through the 1854 publication, see Walden: A Fluid-Text Edition, Version A, para. 8.
he ran from.” Thoreau joins Phillips in lamenting the audience’s reaction—“‘He had better not!’”—and the political conditions that legitimate such a response. Yet, in this same instance Thoreau also discreetly refers to Douglass as “a fugitive slave in one more sense than we.” 35 The strides towards freedom that Thoreau sought at the pond and recorded in Walden make, as Robert Richardson notes, “an interesting parallel to Douglass’s account of his liberation, which was published and reviewed in June 1845.”36 Drawing inspiration from Douglass—as Stowe had in her own way—Thoreau similarly set to communicating “his purpose of writing his life, and telling his name, and the name of his master, and the place he ran from.” Of course, Thoreau neither sought freedom from the physical slavery Douglass endured, nor overtly contributed to Douglass’s campaign against it, as Stowe would do. Thoreau—seeking wider views—joined Douglass in a journey of self-emancipation.

While Thoreau’s inward turn in the face of external human suffering has been met with criticism, the response reflects the type of consistency that he felt necessary to arriving at a wider, fuller vision of reality. “The Great spirit of course makes indifferent all times & places,” he wrote in his journal the next day, “We had allowed only near-lying and transient circumstances to make our occasions—But nearest to all things is that which fashions its being. Next to us the grandest laws are being enacted and administered.”37 In going to the woods, Thoreau turned to the fashioner of being, choosing to seek the grander laws that would make the world right rather than focusing

37 PEJ, 2:157.
solely on fighting against the laws that clearly made it wrong. “One emancipated heart & intellect,” he wrote with hope as much as certainty, “It would knock off the fetters from a million slaves.” Holding this hypothesis out against all other efforts of reform, Thoreau launched his Walden experiment.

Writing Scripture and Liberalizing the Faith of Men

If Thoreau headed to the woods solely for outward observation, inward reflection, and the type of personal emancipation that would lead to genuine reform, it might seem rather bizarre that the first lecture he gave after moving to Walden was on the famed British writer Thomas Carlyle. Thoreau noted in his journal his own neighbor’s puzzlement at this decision. But Carlyle’s work provided a vivid foil for the work he went to Walden to produce. As much as Thoreau wished “to meet the facts of life” and learn “pause and simplicity,” he also wanted time and space to write about such things. Thoreau was no hermit; he was an activist and, importantly, a writer, who intended to share his reformatory vision. Engaging an intellectual and literary titan of the day was one way to clear the brush and lay the groundwork for the contribution he had been tinkering with since 1839, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.

38 PEJ, 2:156

39 Later that winter, when preparing another lecture he assumed he would give later that season (but did not give until the following year), Thoreau wrote: “When I lectured here before this winter I heard that some of my townsmen had expected of me some account of my life at the pond—this I will endeavor to give them tonight” (PEJ, 2:142). For more information on this see Dean and Hoag, “Thoreau’s Lectures Before Walden,” 147-151.

40 Linck Johnson tracks the beginnings of the manuscript back to 1839, Thoreau’s Complex Weave: The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, with the Text of the First Draft (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1986), 270.
Thoreau’s portrait of Carlyle—which became the published first fruits of his time at Walden—featured the kind of admiration he offered in his two previous publications, but balanced such praise with significant criticism, which effectively pointed out the gaps his own work would soon fill.\(^{41}\) To Thoreau’s mind, Carlyle blended Rogers’s “free and uncalculating spirit” and Phillips’s brave standing of a ground “from which the varying tides of public opinion cannot drive him,” but his writing stopped short of the breadth to which Thoreau aspired.\(^{42}\) Although a “rare preacher, with prayer, and psalm, and sermon, and benediction,” Carlyle was “enslaved by a particular mode,” which prevented his work from reaching “a depth which is beyond education and prejudice.”\(^{43}\) From Thoreau’s perspective, such provinciality did not invalidate his work as much as render it ephemeral. Although his works are “in some degree true natural products,” they “serve but for a single occasion,” like the “faint blushes of the morning” or “the ripest fruit in the public garden.”\(^{44}\) Satisfied with the blossomed fruit at the ignorance of the blossoming tree, Carlyle’s work offers “a swift satisfaction” but no genuine or lasting understanding. “The difference between this flashing, fitful writing and pure philosophy,” Thoreau warns, “is the difference between flame and light.”\(^{45}\) The tumultuous history of humanity includes a tendency to settle on flames at the expense of

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\(^{43}\) Thoreau, “Thomas Carlyle and His Works,” 181.

\(^{44}\) Thoreau, “Thomas Carlyle and His Works,” 182.

\(^{45}\) Thoreau, “Thomas Carlyle and His Works,” 180.
brighter light: “But many a time, we confess, in wintery weather, we have been glad to
forsake the sun-light, and warm us by these Promethean flames.”46 Such flames offer
some insight, but no genuine or comprehensive illumination of “truths infinite and in
harmony with infinity.”47 This is the precise problem Thoreau has been identifying in the
reform movements that surround him. Facing “wintery weather,” they content
themselves with the concerns of man only, neglecting a greater light that animates all
things. Although he commends Carlyle’s “practicable wisdom” and consistent invitation
“to act,” Thoreau nevertheless emphasizes that his vision is partial and incomplete.48

Thoreau implicitly extends this same critique to his countrymen and mentor,
Emerson, when he describes Carlyle and Emerson “to a certain extent, the complement of
each other.”49 Revealing the gap between them that he himself hopes to fill, Thoreau
delineates Carlyle as a critic who deals with “men of action” while Emerson deals with
“the thinkers.”50 “The one,” as a result, “has more sympathy with the heroes, or practical
reformers, the other with the observers, or philosophers.” Both, in other words, offer
their own limited perspective. Although Thoreau suggests that combining the historical
subjects that each critic covers might offer a “pretty fair representation of mankind,” he
makes the point that none yet speaks to the condition of the “Man of the Age, come to be
called working-man,” because there is not a speaker “yet in his condition.” “It is even a
note-worthy fact, that a man addresses effectually, in another, only himself still,” Thoreau

50 Thoreau, “Thomas Carlyle and His Works,” 190.
writes, “and what he himself does and is, alone can he prompt the other to do and to become. Like speaks to like only; labor to labor, philosophy to philosophy, criticism to criticism, poetry to poetry.”51 Only the comprehensive working-man, who encompasses both thought and action, can truly address the Man of the Age. “There is poetry and prophecy to cheer him and advice of the head and heart to the hands,” Thoreau writes, “but no very memorable cooperation, it must be confessed, since the Christian era, or rather since Prometheus tried it.” This lack of fluid cooperation between head, heart, and hands prevents thinking “the universal thought” and speaking in the “universal language of men.”52 Unable to facilitate such cooperation, reformers never broach universal significance, and, thus, never enact the revolution they hope for.

Reformers, in Thoreau’s perspective, need to dream both bigger and freer. “To live like a philosopher,” he claims, in reference to the broad origin of the designation, “is to live, not foolishly, like other men, but wisely and according to universal laws.” “In this, which was the ancient sense,” Thoreau continues, “we think there has been no philosopher in modern times. The wisest and most practical men of recent history, to whom this epithet has been hastily applied, have lived comparatively meagre lives, of conformity and tradition, such as their fathers transmitted to them.”53 If Thoreau, as Walls suggests, smarted a bit following Emerson’s 1844 claim to “look in vain” for a genuine poet, Thoreau here goes almost out of his way to respond to his mentor—and

52 Thoreau, “Thomas Carlyle and His Works,” 181.
former ally at Amory Hall—by implicitly extending the critique to Emerson. 54 While Thoreau insists that “such distinctions as poet and philosopher, do not much assist our final estimation of a man; we do not lay much stress on them”—which feels like a direct retort to Emerson—he comes to this conclusion only after clearly stating the absence of such men. More than a pithy reply to Emerson’s earlier sleight, however, this also acts as Thoreau’s subtle declaration of independence, offered as Thoreau embarks on his own literary career and reformatory experiment. Thoreau clearly lays out the type of philosopher that modern times is missing, while taking strides to fulfill that very role.

It is not insignificant that after providing this essay on Carlyle, Thoreau turned down Horace Greeley’s invitation for additional reviews of America’s literary figures like Emerson and Hawthorne. 55 His last three published pieces had been reviews of other people, and he was ready to put his review days behind him. Intent on avoiding Carlyle and Emerson’s shortcomings, Thoreau set out to be man-working, and not just write, but write “SCRIPTURE, for that is WRITING, par excellence,” that which remains after “time has sifted the literature of a people.” 56 To offset the provincial and ephemeral gospels penned by reformers, Thoreau determined to be “the most free and catholic observer” and write scripture in “the universal language of men.” 57

While Walden has come to epitomize Thoreau’s canonical contribution, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers was the initial scripture that Thoreau retreated to

54 Walls, A Life, 170.
55 Walls, A Life, 244-245.
57 Thoreau, “Thomas Carlyle and His Works,” 186.
the woods to write. A pensive narration of a boat trip he took with his brother John, the book experiments with time and form, folding a two week journey into one and organizing the chapters according to the days of the week. Compiling the best of his ideas and journal entries, Thoreau set out to use the journey as a vehicle for articulating the comprehensive vision of reform that he felt the world both lacked and desperately needed—a portrait of “working-man” both thinking and doing. He spent years crafting it, shopping a draft to publishers in 1847 and then revising it for another two years after finding no success. Recognizing that this book intended to be much more than a typical excursion narrative, Emerson’s pitch to a potential publisher, on Thoreau’s behalf, took care to point out the intentionality of Thoreau’s experimenting with structure and form. “The narrative of the little voyage, though faithful, is a very slender thread for such big beads & ingots as are strung on it,” he wrote to Evert Duyckinck. “It is really a book of the results of the studies of years.”58 As publishers ultimately passed on the book, unconvinced that it would sell, Thoreau came to terms with James Munroe, who required reimbursement for every book that did not sell.59 In the spring of 1849, Thoreau finally got his book out to readers on the integrity of his own credit.

Unfortunately, many of those readers found Thoreau’s book irreverent, incoherent, or both, and the sharp response of the dissatisfied cut through the stack of otherwise generally positive reviews.60 In a passing, but portentous moment in “Carlyle

58 Ralph Waldo Emerson to Evert Augustus Duyckinck, 12 March 1847, quoted in Sandra Petruilionis, Thoreau in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life (Iowa City, IA: U of Iowa P, 2012), 17.


60 Fink, Prophet in the Marketplace, 242-253.
and His Works,” Thoreau insists that restricting the freedom of expression in deference to the proprieties of religious dogma ends up limiting truth more than preventing error.

“The attitude of some, in relation to Carlyle’s love of heroes, and men of the sword,” he writes,

reminds us of the procedure at the anti-slavery meetings, when some member, being warmed, begins to speak with more latitude than usual of the Bible or the Church, for a few prudent and devout ones to spring a prayer upon him, as the saying is; that is, propose suddenly to unite in prayer, and so solemnize the minds of the audience, or dismiss them at once; which may oftener be to interrupt a true prayer by the most gratuitous profanity. But the spring of this trap, we are glad to learn, has grown somewhat rusty, and is not so sure of late.61

From Thoreau’s perspective, the impulse to immediately dismiss roaming or unorthodox thoughts in the name of solemnity tends to actually halt the sanctification process. Optimistic about the decrease of such snaring tendencies, Thoreau either knowingly set out to test that trap’s level of rust or simply overestimated it when deliberately speaking with “more latitude than usual” in A Week. Either way, his work ended up generating a response similar to the kind that heated antislavery activists received. “His philosophy, which is Pantheistic egotism vaguely characterized as Transcendental, does not delight us,” New York’s Daily Tribune reviewed. “It seems second-hand, imitative, often exaggerated—a bad specimen of a dubious and dangerous school.”62 “Mr. Thoreau’s treatment of this subject seems revolting alike to good sense and good taste,” the review continues. “We would have preferred to pass the theme in silence but our admiration of his book and our reprehension of its Pantheism forbade that course. May we not hope that he will reconsider his too rashly expressed notions on this head?” The rashness of

61 Thoreau, “Thomas Carlyle and His Works,” 199.

Thoreau’s expression, as much as the ideas themselves, had several reviewers seeking to “solemnize the minds of the audience” in response. Thoreau’s disinterest, if not disdain, for the revered institutions of man, struck readers as particularly curious given his clear reverence for the natural world. An 1849 reviewer from *Literary World* explained:

> He is patient of the most minute investigations of insects and fishes; can be reverent over an arrow head turned up from an old Indian field, or respect a voracious pickerel newly taken from the river which runs through it. Yet, when this writer, so just, so observant, and considerate, approaches what civilized men are accustomed to hold the most sacred of all, he can express himself in a flippant style which he would disdain to employ towards a muscle [mussel] of a tadpole . . . Apart from the pertness and flippancy against which we would warn our readers, Mr. Thoreau’s is a readable and agreeable book.63

Ultimately finding much to praise in the book, the reviewer did not know how to account for the unseemly dissonance between Thoreau’s hostile attitude towards civilization and respect towards nature. Yet, complaints about such dissonance only validate Thoreau’s central contention—society’s ephemeral institutions and mannerisms obscure a grander view of the universe. Thoreau’s provocative language intentionally combatted this skewed perspective. He sees little reason to privilege or maintain failed institutional standards or schematic assumptions in the face of a world that does not adhere to or substantiate them. Reverencing such structures may prolong their existence, but it does not make them any more applicable nor give them any more vitality.

This lack of reverence and commitment to lifeless institutions set Thoreau distinctly apart from even those who pursued a similar vein of thought. Linck Johnson describes *A Week*’s religious commentary as “Thoreau’s contribution to the controversy

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initiated by Brownson’s *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church* and continued in Emerson’s ‘Divinity School Address’ and Parker’s ‘Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity.’”

Yet, these men, as Barbara Packer notes, “were still speaking as Christians eager to rescue congregations from wretched preaching or the Scriptures from mythological encrustations; they were clerical, passionate, and serious.”

Unlike Emerson or Theodore Parker, and in a certain sense Orestes Brownson, Thoreau is neither preaching a sermon nor speaking directly to a Christian audience from within a Christian context or framework. In place of such allegiance, Thoreau approached Christianity’s shortcomings, to borrow Packer’s phrase, “with insouciance.”

Taking up the ideas of Brownson, Emerson, and Parker from outside Christianity allowed Thoreau the freedom to follow their ideas to what he perceived as their full realization, without being unnecessarily held back. “Christianity only hopes,” he writes.

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66 Brownson’s critique comes in a book entitled *New Views on Christianity, Society, and the Church*. In the preface to that publication Brownson claims, “However widely I may dissent from the Christianity of the Church, what that of Christ I am content to stand or fall, and I ask no higher glory than to live and die in it and for it” (Brownson, *New Views on Christianity, Society, and the Church* [Boston: James Munroe, 1836], v. Emerson’s address was delivered to a graduating class of soon-to-be ministers. Although expressing his immense dissatisfaction with Christianity, Emerson positions the problems facing young new ministers as a problem he also shares, “And now let us do what we can to rekindle the smouldering, nigh quenched fire on the altar. The evils of the church that now is are manifest. The question returns, What shall we do?” (Emerson, “Divinity School Address” [1838], in *Emerson: Essays and Poems* [New York: Library of America, 1996], 91). Parker’s 1841 sermon was delivered to a Boston congregation on the occasion of a new ordination. Including himself in the concerned camp, Parker concludes his sermon, “Such, then, is the Transient, and such the Permanent in Christianity. What is of absolute value never changes; we may cling round it and grow to it forever. No one can say his notions shall stand. But we may all say, the truth, as it is in Jesus, shall never pass away” (Parker, “Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity. Preached at the Ordination of Mr. Charles C. Shackford, in the Hawes Place Church In Boston, May 19, 1841” [Electronic Texts in American Studies], 166).

It has hung its harp on the willows, and cannot sing a song in a strange land. …The mother tells her falsehoods to her child, but, thank Heaven, the child does not grow up in its parent’s shadow. Our mother’s faith has not grown with her experience. Her experience has been too much for her. The lesson of life was too hard for her to learn.

Like the scoff of a wiseacre teenager or sharp elbows of a young literary critic, the condescension with which Thoreau communicated his relationship to Christianity certainly reflected both his own adolescence and the extent to which he wanted to make his lack of restraints known. Yet, the adolescent quality of Thoreau’s entry into the conversation distracts readers, then and now, from the way he was indeed poised to move an aging conversation forward in unprecedented ways. It is not insignificant that an iconoclastic publication like *The Liberator*—somewhat accustomed to blasphemy—ran a review noting that Thoreau had “his own sphere in which to move, and his own mission to consummate.”

Starting from a place separate and distinct from Emerson and many of the other prominent transcendentalists and reformers—who were trained as Christian ministers and grounded in religious discourse—granted Thoreau the freedom of possibility, as he was not trying to square his observations and experience in the world with any commitments to a preexisting scheme. As David Robinson notes, “While he was not generally inclined to think in the categories of theology or to use theological terminology, he was deeply engaged by the kind of poetic and anti-doctrinal religious and ethical speculation that

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Emerson had instigated. But his orientation was by no means ecclesiastical.”70 While many of his contemporaries’ reform efforts were fundamentally Christian, Thoreau deliberately pushed the conversation outside of doctrinal or ecclesiastical commitments, with his words appearing in a book readers expected to be a travel narrative. In troubling such expectations, Thoreau’s formal decisions significantly influence the character and impact of his overall message.

Critics who suggest that Thoreau’s critique of Christianity is simply imitative of that of Brownson, Emerson, or Parker overlook the location or context of Thoreau’s remarks as part of a travel narrative, and in so doing make a mistake similar to the one Michel Bakhtin accuses Dostoevsky scholars of making. “The majority of critical and historico-literary studies on [Fyodor Dostoevsky],” Bakhtin writes, “still ignore the uniqueness of his artistic form and seek this uniqueness in his content—in themes, ideas, individual images, extracted from the novels and evaluated solely from the point of view of real-life content. But in so doing the content itself is inevitably impoverished—it loses the most essential new thing that Dostoevsky had glimpsed. Without understanding this new form of visualization, one cannot correctly understand that which was seen and unveiled in life for the first time with the help of that form.”71 Critical of those scholars who judged Dostoevsky’s content apart from the form in which that content was presented, Bakhtin argues for the essential role form plays in communicating content. “Artistic form,” he continues, “correctly understood, does not shape already prepared and


found content, but rather permits content to be found and seen for the first time.”

This sentiment suggests the significance of Thoreau offering his critique of religion as part of his travel narrative. Contrasting opinions about Christianity and the divinity of Jesus may have become a household topic, but Thoreau’s critique appearing in a literary form previously thought unconnected to such discourse suddenly put that contemporary discussion into a new and unfamiliar context, which illuminated the radical implications of previously-trod content in a way that made it, at least for some, “found and seen for the first time.”

For example, within the narrative itself, before launching into a particularly divisive reflection on religion, Thoreau carefully sets himself, within the narrative, in contrast to churchgoers:

As we passed under the last bridge over the canal, just before reaching the Merrimack, the people coming out of church paused to look at us from above, and apparently, so strong is custom, indulged in some heathenish comparisons; but we were the truest observers of this sunny day.

As the churchgoers look down on Thoreau from the heights of a human construction, Thoreau asserts the virtue of his lower position on the river, closer to nature. Narratologically, Thoreau contrasts the freedom of his meandering cruise down the river, scrupulously surveying the natural world, with attending church meetings and listening to the minister preach. Literally and figuratively, drifting down the Concord River

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73 One of the boarders in Thoreau’s own house reported such a confrontation with Thoreau’s mother Cynthia: “I had a very serious conversation with Mrs. T., in which I told her my views and feelings respecting the Saviour. She said her views were the same, yet acknowledged that she could not see how he was Divine. She could not receive Him as such. I told her I saw a vast difference between her views and mine.” (See Robert Gross, “Faith in the Boarding House: New Views of Thoreau Family Religion,” The Thoreau Society Bulletin, 250 [Winter 2005], 3).

74 Thoreau, A Week, 52.
immersed in the natural world made him the “truest observer” of the sunny Sabbath, when compared to the mediated experience of attending a church service.

Thoreau takes the opportunity, at this moment in the narrative, to expound upon and further develop this separateness from Christianity. “It is necessary not to be Christian to appreciate the beauty and significance of the life of Christ,” he continues. “I know that some will have hard thoughts of me, when they hear their Christ named beside my Buddha, yet I am sure that I am willing they should love their Christ more than my Buddha, for the love is the main thing, and I like him too.”\textsuperscript{75} Although this may indicate a certain flippancy on Thoreau’s part, it does effectively signal Thoreau’s departure from a sense of Christianity as the encompassing system from within which he is seeking to make sense of the world.

In setting this scene, before offering this critique, Thoreau reframes Parker’s discussion of “what is \textit{Transient} in Christianity, and what is \textit{Permanent} therein.”\textsuperscript{76} Thoreau moves the discussion of the \textit{permanent} in Christianity entirely outside of its context within the \textit{category} of Christianity. That is, seeing it not only as the permanent \textit{in} Christianity, but simply as the permanent—present in Christianity, Buddhism, and, most fully, the natural world. Distinct from reformers—like Emerson, Parker, Brownson, or even Stowe—who try to envelop such permanence within a Christian ideal, Thoreau sets himself not only outside Christianity, but also in direct contrast to it, when necessary. Designating himself as clearly outside Christianity does not, however, infer Thoreau’s sole or complete allegiance to Buddhism or any other organized religious scheme, for

\textsuperscript{75} Thoreau, \textit{A Week}, 55.

\textsuperscript{76} Parker, “A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,” 137.
“love is the main thing.” The reformation he has in mind is not a Christian one, nor is it calling for a large-scale conversion to Buddhism. Thoreau wants to reach beyond the borders of Christian discourse and ecclesiastical categorization in general. This is a new approach that presents new possibilities.

He elaborates on this comprehensive ideal later in the “Monday” chapter whilst comparing different scriptures. “The New Testament,” he writes, “is remarkable for its pure morality; the best of the Hindoo Scripture, for its pure intellectuality.” Thoreau identifies and assigns individual strengths to these two religious schemes, in as much as they offer glimpses of what he is ultimately after in the universe—congealing of practical morality and intellectual thought. Thoreau continues,

It would be worthy of the age to print together the collected Scriptures or Sacred Writings of the several nations, the Chinese, the Hindoos, the Persians, the Hebrews, and others, as the Scripture of mankind. The New Testament is still, perhaps, too much on the lips and in the hearts of men to be called a Scripture in this sense. Such a juxtaposition and comparison might help to liberalize the faith of men. This is a work which Time will surely edit, reserved to crown the labors of the printing-press. This would be the Bible, or Book of Books, which let the missionaries carry to the uttermost parts of the earth.

This is the sentiment that begins to mark Thoreau as pursuing the discussion began by his contemporaries to its fullest realization. According to Thoreau, there is no need for the New Testament to be more on the lips than any other religious scheme that has equal claim to a portion of the permanence that Parker identifies within Christianity. Thoreau’s hope to “liberalize the faith of men” is a continuation of Parker’s logic. If the primary concern is the permanent within Christianity, there is no need for undue allegiance to

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77 Thoreau, *A Week*, 110.
Christianity’s transient forms. Thoreau wants the permanence of Christianity as well as the permanence of all other religious schemes in as much as those schemes also capture the permanence or laws of the universe. The New Testament, Thoreau writes, “treats of man and man's so-called spiritual affairs too exclusively, and is too constantly moral and personal, to alone content me, who am not interested solely in man's religious or moral nature, or in man even.” Thoreau wants permanence without unnecessarily separating and categorizing that permanence with a particular text, practice, place, location, or system.

Thoreau’s issues with organized religion, as expressed in A Week, come down to this sense of its enforcing restrictions when it should be ensuring and encouraging the unbridled pursuit of truth. Yet, on that point, Thoreau seemed optimistic. “Society has relaxed a little from its strictness, one would say,” Thoreau notes, “but I presume that there is not less religion than formerly. If the ligature is found to be loosened in one part, it is only drawn the tighter in another.” Here, Thoreau makes a play on the etymology of religion—reliquis, to bind—not, as Linck Johnsons suggests, to assert that “religion is a trap for the unwary,” but rather to emphasize how relaxing institutional strictness can bind an individual to God and the universe tighter than ever before, as individual freedom facilitates the discovery of “the infinite extent of our relations.”

Though articulating his disdain for prohibitive strictness of religious institutions, Thoreau’s overall impulse in A Week was to draw nearer and develop an expansive

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79 Thoreau, A Week, 60.
80 Thoreau, A Week, 53.
orientation to God, self, and world. Fully invested in exploring the “extent of our relations,” while ever mindful to avoid the strictness of social institutions, Thoreau approaches common religious ideas, but from an infidel perspective. Infidel, here, in the sense of unfaithful: Thoreau claims no religious loyalties and clings to no dogma. Ultimately, Thoreau wants a more encompassing vision, with no differentiations of knowledge or authority. “Anciently the faith of a philosopher,” he reflects, “was identical with his system, or, in other words, his view of the universe.”

A Week records Thoreau’s attempt to return to the perception of these philosophers. He wants to align his view of the universe with his faith. Or rather, he wants his view of the universe to be his faith, which is why any religious allegiance that distracts from the actual perception of the world misses the whole point.

Thoreau is not, in the end, that different from a writer like Stowe. Believing “goodwill to man” the master chord, Stowe assesses religious practice and behavior according to that standard. Similarly, Thoreau, believing in the undiscovered possibilities of the universe, assesses religious behavior and practice according to the extent to which they allow for and explore such possibilities, without imposing limits and segregating categories. Thoreau is after the kind of consistency he admired in Wendell Phillips—fidelity to universal truth over any and all provincial concerns or religious constructions. He is also after the type of higher focus he admired in Nathaniel Rogers, when returning to update his Herald of Freedom review in wake of Rogers’s passing in 1846. Along with heaping further praise upon Rogers, Thoreau added a brief anecdote:

When, on a certain occasion one said to him, “Why do you go about as you do, agitating the community on the subject of abolition? Jesus Christ never preached

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82 Thoreau, A Week, 295.
abolitionism:” [Rogers] replied, “Sir, I have two answers to your appeal to Jesus Christ. First, I deny your proposition, that he never preached abolition. That single precept of his—‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them’—reduced to practice, would abolish slavery over the whole earth in twenty-four hours. That is my first answer. I deny your proposition. Secondly, granting your proposition to be true—and admitting what I deny—that Jesus Christ did not preach the abolition of slavery, then I say, “he didn’t do his duty.”

Rogers’s first response reflects the same master chord that Stowe enunciated and that abolitionist activism, from the Germantown document forward, was built on, including Thoreau’s. Rogers’s second answer, however, waded in to the controversial waters in which Thoreau swam freely in A Week. Rogers’s willingness to go beyond Jesus, if necessary, captivated Thoreau in the same way as Phillips’s willingness to do right at all costs. The goal, in Thoreau’s mind, is to similarly do right in any circumstance, developing a consistency throughout all things. “The expedients of the nations clash with one another,” Thoreau writes in A Week, “only the absolutely right is expedient for all.”

While a writer like Stowe might have appreciated this same sentiment, pursuing that logic to the point of potentially superseding Jesus breeched another level. Judging by the reactions to A Week, many of Thoreau’s readers seemed hesitant to approach that level, possessing what Thoreau might consider undue allegiance to the provinciality of their Christian perspective.

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83 Thoreau, “Herald of Freedom,” in Reform Papers, 294. These paragraphs started as notes in 1846 that Thoreau drafted into prose in 1848, which were eventually incorporated into the version of “Herald of Freedom” that was republished in 1866. See Glick, Reform Papers, 294.

84 Thoreau, A Week, 108.
Cut and Dried Schemes and the Framework of the Universe

In Thoreau’s quest for consistency, it is not just religion that poses a challenge, but anything that bifurcates the bigger picture. According to Thoreau, “Nothing will dignify and elevate science while it is sundered so wholly from the moral life of its devotee, and he professes another religion than it teaches, and worships at a foreign shrine.” Indeed, Thoreau sees his perception of the world as a type of science: “The whole body of what is now called moral or ethical truth existed in the golden age as abstract science.” Science here functions in the same broad level as “one’s philosophy” or the comprehensive aspect of religion in terms of referring to a transcending orientation to the universe. Viewing science as one authority and religion another—to make categorical distinctions—undermines the holistic authority of the universe. Categorizing the features of the universe into religion, science, art, or mathematics—into separate spheres—breaks up the totality of that authority and prevents any inclusive comprehension of the central facts. “I should say that the most prominent scientific men of our country, and perhaps of this age,” Thoreau writes, “are either serving the arts and not pure science, or are performing faithful but quite subordinate labors in particular departments. They make no steady and systematic approaches to the central fact.” A Week, in contrast, attempts to record Thoreau’s systematic, yet encompassing, approach towards discovering the central facts of the universe.

85 Thoreau, A Week, 295.
86 Thoreau, A Week, 295.
87 Thoreau, A Week, 295.
Failure to grasp the scope of Thoreau’s project—its deliberate corrective to narrow and differentiated views of the universe—led many contemporary reviewers of *A Week* to criticize what they perceived as an incoherent form. As an 1849 review in the *Universalist Quarterly* succinctly put it, “All sorts of subjects, foreign to the general drift of purpose implied in the title and running through the work, are treated in it,—the Christian religion, the church and its usages, poetry, history, great names of the past, philosophy, character, friendship, and many other topics connected with the various experiences of life.”\(^{88}\) For the reader who came to *A Week* expecting a travel narrative, stumbling upon Thoreau’s assorted thoughts had a destabilizing effect that readers responded to differently.

James Russell Lowell’s review, which appeared in the December 1849 issue of Theodore Parker’s *The Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, is a prime example of how expectations and loyalty to preconceived standards prevents an openness to new possibilities. Lowell approaches Thoreau’s book as an attempt at nature/excursion writing. Situating Thoreau’s work as a potential elixir for a world of charted territory, Lowell asserts the great service Thoreau might perform:

> We have played Jack Horner with our earth, till there is never a plum left in it. Since we cannot have back the old class of voyagers, the next best thing we can do is to send poets out a-travelling. These will at least see all that remains to be seen, and in the way it ought to be seen. These will disentangle nature for us from the various snarls of man, and show us the mighty mother without paint or padding, still fresh and young, full-breasted, strong-backed, fit to suckle and carry her children. …Mr. Thoreau is clearly the man we want.\(^{89}\)

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Yet, Lowell’s consideration of Thoreau as “the man we want” to “disentangle nature” and see the world “in the way it ought to be seen” comes with a few qualifications and some stark criticism:

As long as he continues honest Boswel, his book is delightful, but sometimes he serves his two rivers as Hazlitt did Northcote, and makes them run Thoreau, or Emerson, or, indeed, anything but their own transparent element. What, for instance, have Concord and Merrimack to do with Boodh. …We have digressions on Boodh, on Anacreon, (with translations hardly so good as Cowley,) on Persius, on Friendship, and we know not what. We come upon them like snags, jolting us headforemost out of our places as we are rowing placidly up stream or drifting down. …We could forgive them all especially that on Books, and that Friendship, (which is worthy of one who has so long commerced with nature and with Emerson,) we could welcome them all, were they put by themselves at the end of the book. But as it is, they are out of proportion and out of place, and mar our Merrimacking dreadfully. We were bid to a river-party, not to be preached at.90

With this pointed criticism, Lowell clarifies that Thoreau is “the man we want” only “as long as” he sticks to a particular method or follows accepted mannerisms. Yet Lowell underestimates Thoreau’s project, or expects something that Thoreau does not seem to be offering. Expecting the poet who will “disentangle nature for us from the various snarls of man,” Lowell encounters Thoreau’s thoughts on Boodh, Friendship, or Books as “out of place” in the narrative of a river journey. Lowell would welcome these “digressions,” if “put by themselves at the end of the book,” but he does not want them accompanying the “river-party” that, he feels, A Week promises to provide. Other reviewers shared Lowell’s confusion: “These portions of the volume should be separated from the rest, and, if it be thought that the world needs them, published by themselves.”91 The

91 A—R, “Review 5,” The Universalist Quarterly and General Review 6 (Oct 1849): 422. The text here continues: “They would form a book, full alike of merits and of faults; interesting from its freshness and variety; worthy of perusal for being unusually packed with the fruits of observation, reading and meditation; composed in a rich, oracular style, showing, too evidently, both in substance of idea and in form of statement, imitative traces of the author’s great neighbor; abounding in beautiful images happily caught at first hand from nature, in striking aphorisms, in really valuable original thoughts, and in
consensus among such reviews is that Thoreau errs in combining his poetic and beautiful descriptions of his voyage with “all sorts of subjects.” The problem here is not necessarily the content of the digressions themselves, but the location—the river-party is not the place to be preached at. Many of Thoreau’s readers want, or at least have come to expect, river journeying separate from sermons.

Lowell’s expectations for nature writing, as a genre, reflect his own orientation to the world in the same way that Thoreau’s intentional transgressing of the genre reflect his own. Lowell assumes that seeing nature “in the way it ought to be seen” requires a disentanglement from man, or rather, a clear division—man being one thing, nature being another. To describe nature, in Lowell’s perspective, is to hold up “a very smooth mirror,” and if Thoreau errs in his depictions of nature in *A Week* it is because “now and then, he shows us his own features in the glass.” Thoreau, however, has an entirely different perspective of nature, and the form of *A Week* reflects that perspective. The assumption that the assortment of subjects discussed in *A Week* are “foreign to the general drift of purpose implied in the title” overlooks the declaration Thoreau is making about nature by including these subjects in the journey. Hastily dismissing *A Week*’s assortment of subjects as a stylistic fault prevents a deeper recognition of the vision that the structure and form of the book communicate.

suggestive hints; but, on the other side, interspersed with inexcusable crudities, with proofs of carelessness and lack of healthy moral discrimination, with contempt for things commonly esteemed holy, with reflections that must shock every pious Christian, with the transcendental doctrines of the new-light school, with obscurities of incomprehensible mysticism, with ridiculous speculations, moon-struck reveries and flat nonsense,—without moral purpose in the writing, and without practical results in the reading” (422-3).

By its very form, the book offers an orientation to the world that collapses the presumed distance or distinction between Buddha and American rivers like Concord or Merrimack. Thoreau, as mentioned previously, sets out to complicate and challenge conclusions that his contemporaries commonly set on nature and the world. “Most people with whom I talk, men and women even of some originality and genius, have their scheme of the universe all cut and dried,” he writes, “which they set up between you and them in the shortest intercourse; an ancient and tottering frame with all its boards blown off.”93 The cut and dryness of any system—including literary genres—does not appeal to Thoreau. “I never came across the least vestige of authority for these things,” he continues, “They have not left so distinct a trace as the delicate flower of a remote geological period on the coal in my grate.”94 Signaling the transience of human constructions, Thoreau indicates where he believes the authority for any such system should come. Any scheme of the universe should come with some type of natural evidence or adhere with observations of the universal in the natural world. “Your scheme must be the framework of the universe,” he declares, “all other schemes will soon be ruins.”95 In contrast to the cut and dried “everlastingly settled schemes” that most people impose on the universe, Thoreau articulates the starting point for his orientation to the world around him, and that starting point is the world around him. Any collision between old schemes and newly encountered novelties is settled in favor of the unlimited possibilities of the universe.

93 Thoreau, A Week, 57.
94 Thoreau, A Week, 57.
95 Thoreau, A Week, 58.
Thoreau represents his journey, his week (or two) on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, as part of his own effort towards learning the universe’s framework. “We thus worked our way up this river, gradually adjusting our thoughts to novelties,” he writes, “beholding from its placid bosom a new nature and new works of men, and, as it were with increasing confidence, finding nature still habitable, genial, and propitious to us; not following any beaten path, but the windings of the river, as ever the nearest way for us.”

Thoreau’s journey on the river is a continually revelatory experience, one of “gradually adjusting our thoughts to novelties.” Rather than attempting to fit the universe into any preconceived scheme, Thoreau’s scheme is created by and adjusts to the universe as he discovers it through journeying on the river.

Instead of disentangling man from nature, which Lowell assumed to be the implicit goal of nature writing, Thoreau’s journey becomes a process of entangling. “Books of natural history aim commonly to be hasty schedules, or inventories of God's property, by some clerk,” Thoreau complains in A Week, anticipating assumptions like Lowell’s. “They do not in the least teach the divine view of nature, but the popular view.”

As a book that sought to “teach the divine view of nature,” A Week’s very form reflects the attempt to encompass as much as possible. Books, fish, friendship, etc. all fit beside each other in Thoreau’s book. Nothing is reverenced more than another in Thoreau’s attempt to make the universe his scheme of the world. “To the virtuous man, the universe is the only sanctum sanctorum,” Thoreau writes, “and the penetralia of the temple are the broad noon of his existence. Why should he betake himself to a

96 Thoreau, A Week, 89.
97 Thoreau, A Week, 79.
subterranean crypt, as if it were the only holy ground in all the world which he had left unprofaned.”

Sacred places, sacred things, and the religious schemes that create these designations, are, from Thoreau’s perception, constructions—categories imposed on the world by cut and dry schemes. Thoreau learns his scheme from the universe, and the universe comes with no such categories.

Thoreau’s project in A Week is to collapse such categories—whether they are dividing man from nature, religious from unreligious, sacred from profane—and move beyond the designations human schemes create to a larger, more encompassing vision of the world—one that includes everything. As Thoreau’s work rejects a view of nature and the universe that is neatly categorized, the final product of A Week appears to include all “sorts of subjects foreign to the general drift of purpose implied.” But such foreignness is only determined as such by expectations and assumptions—artificial standards.

Seemingly anticipating the undue loyalty to such standards that readers might bring to his work, Thoreau contends, “We hear it complained of some works of genius, that they have fine thoughts, but are irregular and have no flow. But even the mountain peaks in the horizon are, to the eye of science, parts of one range. We should consider that the flow of thought is more like a tidal wave than a prone river, and is the result of a celestial influence, not of any declivity in its channel.” Implicitly defending the irregular flow of his river tale, Thoreau points to the nature of celestial influence. A Week’s form deliberately reflects the way inspiration and knowledge of the universe comes—less like

98 Thoreau, A Week, 253-254.

99 Thoreau, A Week, 83.
the steady and gravity-driven river and more like celestially powered tidal waves traveling towards an ultimate and expansive destination.

Yet, as A Week’s structure mirrors the form of such inspiration, the narrative explicates the necessary setting for such inspiration. “Much is said about the progress of science in these centuries,” writes Thoreau, “I should say that the useful results of science had accumulated, but that there had been no accumulation of knowledge, strictly speaking, for posterity; for knowledge is to be acquired only by a corresponding experience.”\(^{100}\) Narrating his voyage on the Concord and Merrimack, Thoreau exemplifies the type of experience through which knowledge of the universe is obtained. Here, again, Thoreau furthers the logic of Parker’s notion of the permanent and transient in Christianity. “We never are Christians as he was the Christ,” Parker sermonizes, “until we worship, as Jesus did, with no mediator, with nothing between us and the Father of all.”\(^{101}\) Parker, of course, delivers these claims against the necessity of mediation at a pulpit, in a church, interpreting scripture for the congregation. Like Christ in the Sea of Galilee, Thoreau delivers his Sunday Sermon from a boat on the Concord River with nothing standing in the way of him or the world around him. Parker’s insistence on removing all mediators—nothing in between us and the Father of all—leaves little case for maintaining Christianity’s transient formalism, as Emerson contended in resigning from the pulpit in 1832 over his refusal to administer the Lord’s Supper. Relocating Parker’s sermon to the moving river, whilst passing by stationary church goers, Thoreau gives new perspective and energy to Emerson’s challenging the effectiveness of Christian

\(^{100}\) Thoreau, A Week, 296.

\(^{101}\) Thoreau, A Week, 162.
forms. If the goal is to have no mediator, Thoreau replies, “we were the truest observers of this sunny day.” Indeed Thoreau seeks to revitalize the means and sources where his contemporaries search for truth. “We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life,” writes Thoreau, “When the common man looks into the sky, which he has not so much profaned, he thinks it less gross than the earth, and with reverence speaks of the ‘Heavens,’ but the seer will in the same sense speak of ‘the Earths,’ and his Father who is in them.” Thoreau is calling for a complete collapse of his reader’s distinctions between heaven and earth. Cease to look only heavenward for sacred truth, he says, and turn to the sacred sanctorum that is the universe—make that universe your scheme.

Significantly, Thoreau’s contemporary readers who accepted A Week on its own terms seem to have glimpsed the reformatory power of its vision. In an April 1850 article in People’s Journal entitled, “Literature of American Individuality,” the British writer and radical reformer Sophia Dobson Collet approached A Week as part of a larger literary movement discarding “the usual formulas of belief and society.” Praising Thoreau’s attention to the “infinity of meaning that dwells in everything existent,” Collet marked A Week as of special interest to those studying “the problems of to-day in the deepest significance and freest aspect.” A July 1849 review in the New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette similarly praised Thoreau’s attention to meaning in the natural world. “The title is very unpretending and gives but a faint idea of the contents of the work,” the reviewer notes, “Few men think as much as they should. …The author of the work before

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102 Thoreau, A Week, 310.

us, is a man of thought … looking upon objects around which meets his senses, he reads lessons of wisdom. To him the very stones preach sermons and the reeds become eloquent. The thread of the narrative is very simple, but upon it he has strung pearls.”

Expressing Lowell’s same surprise at the conflict between the title and content of *A Week*, this reviewer, by contrast, accepts the book on its own terms, without measuring its merits on the basis of it fitting into a preconceived category. Embracing the uneven structure of *A Week*, the reviewer also stays open to the content it seeks to communicate, and thus better grasps the totality of Thoreau’s vision:

He discourses to us about the old inhabitants—describes the genius of the fishes—hears the ‘church-going bell’ and talks about modern religion and its inconsistencies … in fine, gives utterance to a thousand beautiful thoughts upon the material and immaterial earth, air and heaven, until on closing the book we find ourselves in love with the author, satisfied with ourselves and at peace with the world.

After completing the book, the author explicitly describes a harmonious orientation to both self and world. One has to imagine that this is the precise type of response Thoreau was after—what would bring more genuine reform in the world then that kind of a reaction?

Reviewers like Collet and the author of this *Gazette* review suggest that Thoreau may have had a larger audience with ears to hear, but *A Week* simply did not find enough of them. After encountering trouble finding a publisher, Thoreau’s decision to self-finance the publication ended in disaster. As he famously wrote later in his journal, “I

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have now a library of nearly 900 volumes over 700 of which I wrote myself.”\textsuperscript{106} The tragedy for Thoreau, as Walls notes, is that \textit{A Week}’s failure can be attributed to a lack of marketing as much as anything—the printer neither marketed nor distributed the book beyond his Boston-based shop.\textsuperscript{107} In the face of such commercial failure, Thoreau’s plan to publish \textit{Walden, or Life in the Woods}—advertised on the last page of \textit{A Week} as something of a soon-to-be released sequel—was indefinitely postponed.

It is, of course, noteworthy that Thoreau’s most renowned work emerged in the midst of this great failure. His time at Walden included a significant moment of overt political activism, when Thoreau opted to be jailed rather than pay a roll tax. In an 1848 lecture initially titled “The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government,” Thoreau sought to explain the significance of that protest.\textsuperscript{108} When, a year later, Elizabeth Peabody requested permission to print that lecture in the inaugural issue of her journal \textit{Aesthetic Papers}, Thoreau distractedly agreed, noting that he was too focused on finalizing \textit{A Week} to revise the lecture significantly. The published text, titled “Resistance to Civil Government,” is a preliminary manifesto of the personal conviction and shrewd political stance that would appear in “Slavery in Massachusetts.” “I cannot for an instant,” Thoreau wrote, “recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave’s government also.”\textsuperscript{109} Embroiled by the war with Mexico and the impending question of slavery’s expansion in its aftermath, Thoreau uses the lecture to

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{107} Walls, \textit{A Life}, 266.
\bibitem{108} Dean and Hoag, “Thoreau’s Lectures Before Walden,” 154.
\end{thebibliography}

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explore and tease out options for effective political dissent. Yet, as his hurried reply to Peabody indicates—"I have so much writing to do at present, with the printers in the rear of me, that I have almost no time left"—this burst of direct political activism inevitably took a back seat to the larger project he had been crafting for years.\textsuperscript{110} When \textit{Aesthetic Papers} folded after the inaugural issue, the essay faced the same circulation fate as \textit{A Week}, but a posthumous republication in 1866 rescued it from obscurity, setting the course of its current fame as "Civil Disobedience." The essay’s international life and influence is staggering, but especially given Thoreau’s alternative focus in 1849. As the decade came to a close and Thoreau finally produced his carefully-crafted call for wider views, he surely did not imagine \textit{A Week}'s comparatively slender place in his literary legacy.

Thoreau’s plan to share his comprehensive vision in a one-two punch of \textit{A Week} and \textit{Walden} stalled just as the nation seemed to need a reformatory vision more than ever. The month after Lowell’s review of \textit{A Week} appeared, Henry Clay stood before the United States Senate to announce a series of resolutions, including stricter regulations for capturing fugitive slaves. Two months later, Daniel Webster, New England’s heroic statesman, dramatically supported the resolutions in the name of the constitution—a move that sent Northern abolitionists and reformers reeling. A few days later, William H. Seward articulated this dissenting opinion, refuting Webster by claiming "a higher law than the constitution.” Such conversation included the essence of the claims Thoreau had

\footnote{\textsuperscript{110} HDT to Elizabeth Peabody (April 5, 1849), in \textit{The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau}, 242.}
made in “Resistance to Civil Government,” but failed to pursue those claims to the extent he had pointed towards in *A Week*—“all other schemes must be ruined.”

**Walking, Reality, and Reform**

With the failure of *A Week*, his first genuine attempt at articulating a grand vision of reform, Thoreau found himself again at a crossroads in the wake of professional literary defeat. The book’s inability to gain any traction and the mound of debt Thoreau had heaped upon himself in self-financing the publication certainly would have created space to explore new literary subjects and professional opportunities. In the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Law’s passing, Thoreau might have more fully embraced the political discourse he offered in “Resistance to Civil Government” and pulled together a career as a political writer or activist. Indeed, the law’s September passing proved to be a watershed moment for American reformers as tensions over the relationship between individual rights and government authority hit a boiling point, and pastors throughout the North preached sermons with titles like, “The Duties Men Owe to God and to Governments,” “God's Laws Paramount to the Laws of Men,” “The Duty of Disobedience to Wicked Laws,” “The Religious Duty of Obedience to Law,” and “The Law-Abiding Conscience and the Higher Law Conscience.”

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discourse swung in the precise direction of Thoreau’s previous political commentary, rather than join the ranks of the narrowly-focused reformers, Thoreau instead remained fixated on the broader world, settling in to professional life as a land surveyor and turning deeper into his journal than ever before.

Thoreau’s significant change in journaling practice around this time is a well-known occurrence. Robert Sattelmeyer, in the historical introduction to Thoreau’s journal, explained, “Some time around 1850, when Thoreau realized that his works were destined for no very great popular success, he turned increasingly to the Journal to record both his thoughts and the details of his study of New England natural history, and gradually it became the major document of his imaginative life.”

Laura Walls has been even more precise in locating this change on a specific date. “Until November 7, 1850, he had treated the date as incidental,” Walls explains, “Starting on November 8, 1850, he treated the day and the date as essential to its artistry. The date, and what he can write of his life on that one day, is no longer incidental to some larger quest—it is the quest.”

Thoreau’s heightened attention to the date of his journaling includes an interest in historical accuracy—making a record of precise observations—as well as an interest in developing a mode for recording his comprehensive approach to the world. The dated journal increases in detailed observation as well as poetic musing, documenting both his specific findings and his philosophical reflections. Rather than separate science out from the spiritual or the spiritual out from the natural—by keeping a scientific notebook and a

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113 Walls, A Life, 304.
philosophic notebook—Thoreau deliberately sought to forge a comprehensive document that captured the whole of reality as he experienced it.

Framing this shift to a more robust journaling practice purely in response to the failure of *A Week*—“when Thoreau realized that his works were destined for no very great popular success”—aligns with the popular portrait of Thoreau as a resigned hermit, but it obscures the potential significance of the more immediate circumstances that accompanied the change in the fall of 1850. Thoreau’s heightened investment in the natural world and experimentation with innovative writing practices came at a moment of national reckoning. Though Walls suggests that Thoreau’s sudden new journaling practice “defies calculation or explanation,” it is certainly worth noting that Thoreau commenced the exercise at the precise time Northerners were trying to orient themselves to a post-Fugitive Slave Law America. The above-mentioned sermons, which passionately engaged civil obedience and loyalty to a higher law, were preached within weeks of Thoreau’s first journaling innovations in the fall of 1850, in cities as disparate as Boston, Fort Wayne, Brooklyn, and Buffalo. On November 17, the week after Thoreau commenced enhancing his journaling practice, a pastor in West Bridgewater, Massachusetts painted a picture of the charged national situation for his congregants: “Slave-catchers have already appeared in our Northern cities, and in other parts of the country, and many of the proscribed race are fleeing to the frozen regions of Canada, and to countries beyond the sea, to escape a fate, which to them is worse than death.”

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114 Sattelmeyer, “Historical Introduction,” 446.
is the immediate context in which Thoreau explored the woods and carefully jotted down his thoughts. This West Bridgewater pastor declared in that same sermon, “I feel that it behooves every Christian pulpit in this land to speak out, in tones of righteous condemnation, of this wicked law.”\textsuperscript{117} Although Thoreau likely did not hear that call, and remained vehemently uninterested in plodding down the well-trod path of the Christian reformer, he similarly determined that silence was simply not an option.

A few months earlier, in the summer of 1850—a year after \textit{A Week’s} abysmal premier and immediately following the failure of Clay’s great compromise as an omnibus bill, but just prior to its eventual passing as individual resolutions—Thoreau reiterated his unwavering commitment to a life of consistency: “As to confirming outwardly—and living your own life inwardly—I have not a very high opinion of that course. I have no doubt it will prove a failure. Just as successfully can you walk against a sharp steel edge—which divides you cleanly.”\textsuperscript{118} Seeking to be the Man of the Age, Thoreau had no interest in severing his inward thoughts from his outward actions. “What is peculiar in the life of man consists not in his obedience to his instincts but his opposition to his instincts,” Thoreau wrote that same summer, “in one direction or another he strives to live a super natural life.” Reiterating the central imperative of \textit{A Week}, Thoreau jotted down his remedying alternative: “Be native to the universe.” Any attempt to live above nature or defer to alternative laws constituted, in Thoreau’s mind, a fool’s errand. A fool’s errand that created a marshy mess.

\textsuperscript{117} Forman, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 5.

\textsuperscript{118} PEJ, 3:99.
Witnessing the political bog that formed in the aftermath of the war with Mexico, even Thoreau found himself longing for a bit more cultivation: “Though the city is no more attractive to me than ever—yet I see less difference between a city & a some dismallest swamp than formerly—It is a swamp too dismal & dreary even for me. …I prefer even a more cultivated place—free from miasma & crocodiles.” As the rising stench and circling predators of the civilized world forged an atmosphere oppressive enough to rival “the dismallest swamp,” Thoreau recognized the impermanence of it all. “The moment I begin to look,” he explained, “these men & institutions get out of the way that I may see. I see nothing permanent in the society around me—& am not quite committed to any of its ways.” Taking care to really look cut through the opacity of the dismal swamp that civilization constructed, while also illuminating the ephemerality of society and revealing oneself not as a citizen of a city, state, or nation, but a native of the universe, whose highest loyalty fell to eternal laws.

Baffled by the preoccupation with minute and ephemeral matters, Thoreau’s awareness of higher concerns immediately led to an interrogating of public priorities. He went on in the above journal entry, to immediately question the focus of civic legislation:

The heaven-born Numa or Lycurgus or Solon gravely makes laws to regulate the exportation of Tobacco. Will a divine legislator—legislate for slaves or to regulate the exportation of Tobacco—What shall a state say for itself at the last day in which this is a principal production? What have grave—not to say divine legislators—Numas-Lycurguses-Solons—to do with the exportation or the importation of Tobacco?119

Challenging the type of isolated focus on economic production that would lead to regulating something like tobacco, Thoreau suggests that the concentration of a state’s

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119 PEJ, 3:98
attention reflects the character of the state itself. Surely, he implies, legislators have higher priorities—surely they are interested in producing more than just herbs. By including slavery in this interrogation, Thoreau lumps slavery in with tobacco as a legislative priority that seems far beneath the dignity and higher purpose of a serious, not to say supposedly divine, state. In Thoreau’s mind, state-sanctioned slavery, and similarly crass legislation is symptomatic of the state’s skewed perspective and gross inattention to more enduring and universal priorities. With a keen awareness of the state’s many failings, Thoreau turned to the woods neither in self-absorbed resignation nor in heedless pursuit of private and mundane interests. In tumultuous times, when transient concerns absorbed the nation, Thoreau sought direction and permanence.

As pastors called for “every Christian pulpit in this land to speak out, in tones of righteous condemnation, of this wicked law,” Thoreau contemplated the role his journal might play. In fact, the very day before the West Bridgewater pastor’s figurative call to arms, Thoreau ended a long passage in his journal with his own declaration,

My Journal should be the record of my love. I would write in it only of the things I love. My affection for any aspect of the world. What I love to think of. I have no more distinctness or pointedness in my yearnings than an expanding bud—which does indeed point to flower & fruit to summer & autumn—but is aware of the warm sun & spring influence only. I feel ripe for something yet do nothing— cant discover what that things is. I feel fertile merely. It is seed time with me—I have lain fallow long enough.120

These thoughts do not seem to reflect the mind of a man uninterested in making a mark on the world. On the contrary, they reveal a man poised to genuinely dedicate himself to something for the first time—stirring words from someone who spent two years, two months, and two days living alone on the banks of a pond. Yet, these words also reflect a

120 PEJ, 3:143-145.
greater personal application of the insights he offered in the already-published product of the Walden experiment. “Now that we are casting away these melon seeds, how can we help feeling reproach?” Thoreau wrote in *A Week*.

He who eats the fruit, should at least plant the seed; aye, if possible, a better seed than that whose fruit he has enjoyed. Seeds! there are seeds enough which need only to be stirred in with the soil where they lie, by an inspired voice or pen, to bear fruit of a divine flavor. O thou spendthrift! Defray thy debt to the world; eat not the seed of institutions, as the luxurious do, but plant it rather, while thou devourest the pulp and tuber for thy subsistence; that so, perchance, one variety may at last be found worthy of preservation.121

Seeking to plant “a better seed than that whose fruit he has enjoyed,” Thoreau himself determined, in this midst of significant social upheaval, to repay his debt to the world in a distinct way. As Christian ministers called for righteous condemnation, Thoreau teemed with creative energy and felt “ripe for something,” but unsure about what that would turn out to be. Avoiding the seeds of institutions, Thoreau sought to add to the variety of seeds being planted and contribute something worthy of preservation—something different because it would last. “But unless we do more than simply learn the trade of our time,” he wrote in *A Week*, “we are but apprentices, and not yet masters of the art of life.” Guided by a broad yearning to work towards a brighter day, and seeking to master life, Thoreau sought to push past neophyte chores and instead confront universal problems and reveal more lasting truths.

Looking for a way to contribute to the world and improve his home, rather than flee from it, Thoreau’s new journaling technique was much more than a signal of resignation or surrender in the wake of *A Week*’s failure. The journal reflects the progressive innovation of his project, as he experimented with how to best hone wider
views of the world. “To one who habitually endeavors to contemplate the true state of things,” Thoreau wrote in *A Week*, “the political state can hardly be said to have any existence whatever. It is unreal, incredible, and insignificant to him, and for him to endeavor to extract the truth from such lean material is like making sugar from linen rags, when sugar-cane may be had.”\(^{122}\) Going elsewhere for answers—searching outside the political state—Thoreau explored alternate models of improvement and sources of truth, namely those provided by the natural world. Forging his journal into a master document that recorded his holistic experience, rather than a middle space to merely draw from, Thoreau essentially set to creating a more organic version of *A Week*. The open and deliberately encompassing format of the journal invited free and flowing thoughts, capturing Thoreau’s wide-ranging and wandering excursion experiences in a more immediate and authentic way. In this sense, his journaling practice, which went hand in hand with a vigorous commitment to walking, became the next evolution of the literary experiment he began at Walden.

Thoreau definitely had grand ambitions for his journal project, attempting, as several critics over the past generation have noted, to record his personal accounting of the universe’s schemes. Yet, as Thoreau’s frequent and deliberate walks in the Walden woods took the place of his permanent residence on the pond’s shores, they also ritualized the type of experience he sought on the Concord and Merrimack, creating, as Walls notes, “a form of meditation, a spiritual as well as physical discipline.”\(^{123}\) Recording this physical and spiritual practice, Thoreau’s journaling reflected his broad

\(^{122}\) Thoreau, *A Week*, 102-105.

\(^{123}\) Walls, *A Life*, 304-305.
orientation to life: “Walking became a form of thinking, which took shape as writing.”  

The journal itself, in other words, became the message—not so much for its contents, but its function as a free-flowing and comprehensive record of one’s exploratory thoughts and expeditions. Take, for example, a journal passage from November 13, 1851: “I see snow on Peterboro hills reflecting the sun.” “It is pleasant thus to look from afar into winter,” he continued. “We look at a condition we have not yet reached.” Observing snow on the far off mountains leads him to reflect on his own connection that at first seems distant. Although it seems far and remote, the mountain snow manifests what will soon arrive at his own feet. He continues on to note other connections that burst out of this same moment of deliberate observation: “There is a great gap in the mountain range just south of the two Peterboro hills—methinks I have been through & that a road runs there.” Recognizing that he has actually passed through these distant, weather-predicting mountains, Thoreau further notes his connection to them. “And seen in the horizon I know of nothing more grand & stupendous than this great Mt gate or pass,” he realizes.

A great cleft or sinus in the blue banks as in a dark evening cloud—fit portal to lead from one quarter of the earth to another—where the children of the Israelites may file through what a sublime gap he is passing—You would almost as soon think of a road to wind through and over a dark evening cloud. This prospect of the mts from our low hills—is what I would rather have than pastures on the mt sides aye than townships at their base. Instead that I drive my cattle up in May I turn my eyes that way. My eyes pasture them & straight-way the yearling thoughts come back. 

125 PEJ, 3:183.  
126 PEJ, 3:183.  
127 PEJ, 3:183.
While Thoreau’s journal would at times be much more technical, including temperatures, noting specific plant species, and recording certain measurements, the above passage reflects its operating function, as a record of the thoughts and connections he makes on his walks—slowly composing the world, not as a dead or distant thing to be studied, but a living process to be experienced. This is not an outward description of nature—that thing out there—but rather a recording of mind in nature, an experiment in ecological thinking, which lent itself to ecological writing. He moves from snow, to mountains, to roads, to pasturing cattle, but rather than just describe these things, he connects them to the looming future, the mythic past, economic vitality, and imaginative possibilities. The journal reflects ecological thought happening in real time, with Thoreau exploring the universe one observation after another and one connection to the next.

Positing such continual exploration as a personal necessity, Thoreau asserted an oblique but radical political remedy. He recognized that walking—as a practice—became a means of re-focusing individual perspective, which could consequently lead to changes in national perspective. His turn to walking has long associated him with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, especially the later Rousseau of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*.

Writing about the political implications of reverie, Peter Sloterdijk posits Rousseau’s encounter with complete individual sovereignty—while drifting alone, idly in the middle of the lake—as a primal scene in the development of a new concept of freedom.

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Framing society as “a community of concern set in vibration by media-induced stress topics,” Sloterdijk describes a nation as “a collective that succeeds in jointly keeping uncalm” and claims that “a constant, varying intense flow of stress topics must ensure the synchronization of consciousnesses in order to integrate the respective population into a community of concern and excitation that regenerates from day to day.”130 The reverie that Rousseau discovers—“a state of exquisite unusability in which the individual is entirely with themselves”—fundamentally disrupts this community of concern by providing a complete escape from the shared stress topics that hold society together. “In the freedom of reverie,” Sloterdijk writes, “the individual is far removed from ‘society,’ but also detached from their own person as woven into the social fabric. They leave both things behind: the world of collective themes of concern and themselves as part of it.”131 Rousseau’s reverie, in other words, fundamentally reinscribes his individual relation and attachment to society by asserting an independent existence, separate from his utility within or usability as part of that collective.

Thoreau similarly turned to walking as a means of liberation, a process of untangling himself from the confines and stresses of society. As Thoreau noted in his journal at the end of November,

I feel alarmed when it happens that I have walked into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit. I would fain forget all my morning’s occupation—my obligations to society. But sometimes it happens that I cannot easily shake off the village—the thought of some work—some surveying will run in my head and I am not where my body is—I am out of my senses. In my walks I would return to my senses like a bird or beast. What business have I in the woods if I am thinking of something out of the woods.132

130 Sloterdijk, Stress and Freedom, 34, 6-7.
131 Sloterdijk, Stress and Freedom, 22.
132 PEJ, 3:150.
In pursuing a sense of detachment, Thoreau’s turn to walking reinscribes—both physically and mentally—his individual connection to society’s concerns and stresses. Inhabiting his immediate presence in the isolated woods provided an escape from the stress topics entrenching the constructed collective he existed within. This desire to escape went hand in hand with a repugnance for society’s values, priorities, and attention. “Almost all that my neighbors call good, I believe in my soul to be bad,” he journaled in January, “If I repent of anything it is of my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well.” Thoreau is not contesting the idea of morality, but rather lamenting his previous conformity to a stale moral system. Freedom from such a system, he recognized, required a willingness to depart from prevailing expectations: “You may say the wisest thing you can—old man—you who have lived seventy years not without honor of a kind— I hear an irresistible voice, the voice of my destiny which invites me away from all of that.” Walking, like reverie, typifies such a departure. “I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art [of] taking walks daily,” Thoreau journaled a few days later, “not exercise—the legs or body merely—nor barely to recruit the spirits but positively to exercise both body & spirit—& to succeed to the highest & worthiest ends by the abandonment of all specific ends.” Abandoning specific ends in search of higher and worthier ends, the art of walking includes liberating body and mind from all expectations and obligations.

133 PEJ, 3: 173.
134 PEJ, 3: 173.
135 PEJ, 3: 176.
But the journey is circular, rather than linear. Walking is, importantly, not a one-way departure from civilization, but an excursion out and then back. As Shannon Mariotti explains, “By turning to the swamp, Thoreau is not turning away from politics as such, but is actually using this withdrawn space to become the kind of critical thinker whose thoughts are not manufactured for him to fit the needs of his society and his state: such a Reformer; a walker can ‘save’ the town.”\(^{136}\) As Thoreau neared his spring lecture at the Concord Lyceum, rather than crafting a detailed assessment of recent political turmoil, he prepared to share the wisdom and perspective he brought back from his walks.

He also prepared to explain his walking as much more than a personal escape. His journal entries leading up to the lecture reflect his deliberate attempt to craft his personal habit into a virtuous and adoptable practice infused with political significance. “The chivalric & heroic spirit which once belonged to the chevalier or rider only seems now to reside in the walker,” Thoreau writes. “To represent the chivalric spirit we have no longer a knight—but a walker errant.”\(^{137}\) In framing the errant walker as the modern iteration of a knight, Thoreau cedes the walker a degree of political power. In the essay that would come out of his eventual lecture, Thoreau added to this passage a reference to the walker errant as “a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People.”\(^{138}\) Stepping outside of social institutions and concerns, the walker trod a path of individual liberation that Thoreau worked to align with comprehensive well-being. “I think that I

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137 PEJ, 3: 176.

cannot preserve my health and spirits,” he went on, “unless I spend four hours a day …

sauntering through the woods and over the fields, absolutely free from all worldly

e engagements.”

Extoling the type of freedom that Rousseau finds in reverie and labeling the errant walker the new symbol of the chivalrous spirit, Thoreau sketches his pastime into a heroic feat—a civic virtue worthy of emulation. Sloterdijk articulates the important role such characterization can play in the transition from individual independence to political revolution:

The reverie of the one provokes the reverie of the other. The manifest freedom of the one involuntarily addresses the other's potential for freedom—especially when the attractiveness of that state is illustrated effectively in literary media. As soon as the complete dissolution of stress takes place in one exemplary individual, its infectious declaration via literature leads many others to ask themselves about the state of dissolution in their own cases.

This type of exemplary-led resistance to the stressors of society seems to resonate with Thoreau’s broader literary project. Designed as a “History of Myself” and described as “the flower of autobiography,” Thoreau’s writing models a new way of being and experiencing the world. His goal in his April lecture—as much as his other writing projects—was not only to offer his own perspective and experience, but also to deliberately, as he notes in Walden—“wake my neighbors up.”

In “Walking, or the Wild,” Thoreau delineates his practice of physically and mentally detaching from the overwhelming confines of society, and invites his audience to take their own steps towards similar liberation.


140 Sloterdijk, Stress and Freedom, 33.

While this impetus on breaking “absolutely free from all worldly engagements” resonates with Rousseauian reverie, Thoreau’s walks extend beyond mere detachment. Walking for Thoreau is a means not only of independence, but also connection, observation, and exploration, acting on what he described in February as a “perennial & constant” desire “to commune with the spirit of the universe.” Offering walking as a response to political turmoil and a path towards genuine liberation, Thoreau framed the practice as a process of repositioning “man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of nature—rather than a member of society.” Walking and watching in the woods provided an exercise in decentering human society from the focal point of the universe, a liberated state from within which to both interrogate the concerns of society and explore the “infinite extent of our relations.” Previously, in *A Week*, Thoreau invited readers to take a step back from all-too-consuming human concerns. “It is a great pleasure to escape sometimes from the restless class of Reformers,” he wrote,

What if these grievances exist? So do you and I. Think you that sitting hens are troubled with ennui these long summer days, sitting on and on in the crevice of a hay-loft, without active employment? By the faint cackling in distant barns, I judge that dame Nature is interested still to know how many eggs her hens lay. The Universal Soul, as it is called, has an interest in the stacking of hay, the foddering of cattle, and the draining of peat-meadows.\footnote{142 Thoreau, *A Week*, 102-105.}

The cause and care of the reformer, in other words, is but one of many causes, actions, or concerns in the universe. On the one hand, this might seem like a callous response, lacking acknowledgment for the magnitude of the reformers concern and empathy for those impacted. On the other hand, however, it reflects a certain strategy, inviting reflection and perspective to approach the concern with a suitable scale and scope: how
does this concern fit into the larger existence of the universe? In the aftermath of A Week’s publication and in the tumultuous fall of 1850, Thoreau began to delineate walking as a means of escaping the limited perspective of reformers and arranging human concerns on a larger, more permanent scale.

Instead of fleeing to nature seeking merely personal consolation, rest, and escape from society, Thoreau seeks connection with something more comprehensive and enduring. Fostering animalistic instincts—“In my walks I would return to my senses like a bird or beast”—walking is a process of really looking that illuminates the provinciality of human concerns and institutions while also revealing the permanent and universal. Aligning nature—which he sought to “speak a word for”—with “absolute freedom & wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture simply civil,” walking became a means of both detaching from the community of concerns and exploring the universe that extended significantly beyond that collective.

Thoreau’s exploratory instinct thus sets him in stark contrast with the contented “unusuability” that Sloterdijk identifies in Rousseauian reverie. Thoreau did not see freedom purely in contrast to society, but rather as unrestrained access to the broadest views of the universe. “I felt my spirit rise when I had got off the road into the open fields & the sky had a new appearance.” Thoreau remarked on a January walk. “Before I walked in the ruts of travel—now I adventured.” In such walks, Thoreau abandons “all specific ends” not simply to relish the static freedom of detachment, but rather to

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143 “Although Rousseau enjoys losing himself in the surface of nature,” as Melissa Lane explains, “nature is only one of several possible sources of reverie. . . What is important is not the experience of nature. . . but rather the experience of freedom and independence achieved” (Thoreau and Rousseau: Nature as Utopia, 351).

144 PEJ, 3:174.
experience the dynamic liberation and solace that accompanies new discoveries.

Thoreau’s ideal walker, in other words, was errant, but not idle. “They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds;” Thoreau adds to his description of knight-like walkers, “but they who do go there are saunterers in the good sense, such as I mean.” The difference between saunters and mere vagabonds, adventurers and mere escapees, comes down to their active searching for the Holy Land as opposed to their arrival at an inert detachment or aimless wandering.

This search, in Thoreau’s perspective, headed in one direction: “Westward is Heaven or rather heavenward is west.” Evoking the imagery of the old and new world as well as the rising and setting sun, Thoreau referred to the west as an orienting ideal that distinguished walking from pedestrianism. The type of sauntering he had in mind led not eastward “retracing the steps of the race,” but “westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure.” As such, the west became a synonym for unbridled possibility, a point Thoreau made overtly in connecting the two main sections of his lecture: “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the World.” This connection between wildness and the preservation of the world marks the key point at which Thoreau’s lecture shines brightest as a direct response to the Fugitive Slave Law

146 PEJ, 200.
148 While no collected copy of the 1851 lecture exists, according to Dean and Hoag’s discussion of the extant pieces, “the earliest version of ‘Walking, or the Wild’ seems to have had the two-part structure of the essay ‘Walking,’ with the first part dealing with ‘Walking’ and the second part dealing with ‘The Wild’” (“Thoreau’s Lectures Before Walden,” 199).
and other political problems. By heading west, into the wild, Thoreau is not simply avoiding the problem or retreating into the ambivalence of the natural world, but rather seeking to preserve the world by liberating it from the staleness of tradition and the restraints of the past and present, opening the door to the possibilities that should accompany all that remains unknown.

Opening his April lecture with lines from Wordsworth—“Stepping westward seemed to be / A kind of heavenly destiny”—Thoreau designated “stepping westward” the rallying cry for the words he would share. This short rallying cry—both inviting action and offering direction—swiftly communicates the dynamic progress that Thoreau had been articulating since 1844, when he chastised the inevitably conservative impulse of both reformers and conservatives alike, who cannot help but replace institutions with other institutions. This unsurmountable fixation on institutionalization, which breeds immobilization, is what, Thoreau suggests in *A Week*, makes reform a necessity:

Undoubtedly, countless reforms are called for, because society is not animated, or instinct enough with life, but in the condition of some snakes which I have seen in early spring, with alternate portions of their bodies torpid and flexible, so that they could wriggle neither way. All men are partially buried in the grave of custom, and of some we see only the crown of the head above ground. Better are the physically dead, for they more lively rot. Even virtue is no longer such if it be stagnant. A man’s life should be constantly as fresh as this river. It should be the same channel, but a new water every instant.¹⁴⁹

By 1851, Thoreau had come to embrace walking as a spiritual and physical exercise that provokes this constant movement, “a new water every instant.” The walker, like a flowing river, actively heads west towards potential exploration and discovery. In a certain sense, the walker bridges the gap between “men of action” and “the thinkers” that

Thoreau identified in reformers like Carlyle and philosophers like Emerson. Neither purely practical, nor lost in philosophic reflection or Rousseauian reverie, the walker typifies “man-working”—physically and mentally engaged, both thoughtfully observing and actively exploring. The whole goal of walking is to keep moving, escaping the ruts and blazing new paths, and in so doing embrace the wildness inherent in the universe. Thus, though Thoreau pitches walking as a regular habit, even ritual, the dynamic nature of the rite—walking as the act of constantly exploring possibility (wildness)—evades the dangers of institutionalization that Thoreau cites in all other reformers.

On April 19, when Thoreau stood before the Concord Lyceum, and rather than share the fiery thoughts he had on the Fugitive Slave Law spoke a word for nature, inviting his neighbors to take a walk, he was not suggesting they try to escape from the world, but join him in seeking to inhabit it more fully. Instead of a path to anarchy, Thoreau provided a transportable practice that he hoped would enact a perspectival shift.¹⁵⁰ “I wish my neighbors were wilder,” he wrote, in preparation for that lecture, “A wildness no civilization could endure.” Such wildness indeed inferred a lawlessness, but only in the sense of law as restrictive rather than liberating: “Obey the law which reveals and not the law revealed.” If laws are not opening further possibilities and greater freedoms, then they are devoid of their very purpose. “That is active duty,” Thoreau quotes from the “Vishnu Purana,” “which is not for our bondage; that is knowledge which is for our liberation: all other duty is good only unto weariness; all other

knowledge is only the Cleverness of an artist.”\textsuperscript{151} This relationship between freedom and duty is precisely what Thoreau has in mind when claiming that “He who lives according to the highest law is in one sense lawless.”\textsuperscript{152} “We may study the laws of matter at and for our convenience, but a successful life knows no law,” he explains, “It is an unfortunate discovery certainly, that of a law which binds us where we did not know before that we were bound.”\textsuperscript{153}

In the months leading up to the spring of 1851, and in the years thereafter, law—especially the staggeringly unjust—were certainly on Thoreau’s mind. “Do we call this the land of the free?” he wrote on February 9, “What is it to be free from King Geo. the IV. and continue the slaves of prejudice? What is it to be born free & equal & not to live.”\textsuperscript{154} Interested in what living free might really look like, Thoreau resisted a narrow engagement with spectacularly unjust laws, and instead set out to imagine the holy land that truly free individuals might create. “Above all, we cannot afford not to live in the present,” he wrote at the conclusion of his essay.

He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past. Unless our philosophy hears the cock crow in every barnyard within our horizon, it is belated. That sound commonly reminds us that we are growing rusty and antique in our employments and habits of thoughts. His philosophy comes down to a more recent time than ours. There is something suggested by it that is a newer testament—the gospel according to this moment. He has not fallen astern; he has got up early and kept up early, and to be where he is to be in season, in the foremost rank of time. It is an expression of the health and soundness of Nature, a brag for all the world—healthiness as of a spring burst

\textsuperscript{151} Thoreau, \textit{Walking}, 250.
\textsuperscript{152} PEJ, 3:201.
\textsuperscript{153} Thoreau, “Walking,” 254.
\textsuperscript{154} PEJ, 3:194.
forth, a new fountain of the Muses, to celebrate this last instant of time. Where he lives no fugitive slave laws are passed.\textsuperscript{155}

A philosophy that hears the cock crow in every barnyard on the horizon would suggest a radical presence, and complete freedom that acknowledged no allegiance to belated traditions and institutions. Living in the sunshine of the moment, in tune with the most recent discoveries, would be to live with an absolute freedom incompatible with stated restrictions, and thus entirely loath to the redundancy of fugitive slave laws, legal bonds designed to enforce physical bonds on the would-be free. “The merits of this bird’s strain,” Thoreau says of the morning rooster, “is in its freedom from all plaintiveness.”\textsuperscript{156}

In speaking a word for nature, and explicating walking as a spiritual and physical practice, Thoreau attempted to take strides that would usher in such freedom. Framing walking as a means of more fully inhabiting and exploring the wild freedom of the universe, Thoreau asserted the inevitable ruin of all schemes that attempted to limit or confine such freedom.

The wide views articulated in “Walking” connect back to Thoreau’s sojourn at Walden Pond, but extend beyond that to his frustration with reformers and conservatives alike and the motivations that led him there. From 1844 onward, Thoreau’s response to slavery is to think bigger than slavery, to approach it in the context of the larger scheme of the universe. The notable departures from this wider view, which will be discussed more directly in the next chapter, should not distract from recognizing the depth of Thoreau’s engagement with the issues of his time. While neither the best-seller nor the

\textsuperscript{155} Thoreau, “Walking,” 254.

\textsuperscript{156} Thoreau, “Walking,” 254.
cultural touchstone that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* would become, “Walking, or the Wild” similarly battled the Fugitive Slave Law with a sharp interrogation of priorities. The master chord that Thoreau asserted—“possibilities untold”—was simply much broader.\(^{157}\)

\(^{157}\) *PEJ*, 3:229.
CHAPTER 4

“What Institutions of Man Can Survive a Morning Experience”: Thoreau’s Struggle to Wake the World

_He has no troublesome memory, no wake, but lives ex tempore, and brings today a new proposition as radical and revolutionary as that of yesterday, but different._

_Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1844_

A month after delivering “Walking, or the Wild,” Thoreau read the work of Harvard botanist Asa Gray, and noted “a perfect analogy between the life of the human being and that of the vegetable.” The analogy centered on Gray’s explanation of two sorts of plant organs, “those of _vegetation_, which are concerned in growth,” and “those of _Fruitification_ or _Reproduction_, which are concerned in the propagation of the species.”

“So is it with the human being,” Thoreau explained,

_I am concerned first to come to my Growth intellectually & morally; (and physically, of course, as a means to this, for the body is the symbol of the soul) and, then to bear my _Fruit_-_do my _Work_—_Propagate_ my kind, not only physically but _morally_—not only in body but in mind._

The analogy neatly captures the approach to reform Thoreau had been pursuing since 1844. Just as the development of healthy branches and leaves depends on the strong

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3 PEJ, 3:224-5.
roots of the plant stem, Thoreau believed that healthy human moral and intellectual development required an individual to be firmly rooted. “The mere logician,” he expounded, “the mere reasoner who weaves his arguments as a tree its branches in the sky—not being equally developed in the roots, is overthrown by the first wind.”  

The “growing man,” in contrast, “penetrates yet deeper by his roots into the womb of things.” For Thoreau, individually plugging into that life-giving source was the key to the moral and intellectual development that reform efforts pursued. Believing that genuine change would only occur at this root level, Thoreau’s prescription for the nation’s overwhelming ills entailed breaking free from such parasitical thinking and putting roots “into the wombs of things.” In the wake of his personal sojourn at Walden and having developed an unmediated connection to the universe through the art of walking, Thoreau felt as though he had put down such roots and come to his own “Growth intellectually & morally.” It was time to propagate.

As the first fruits of the “planting season” that he had announced the previous November 1850, “Walking, or the Wild” captured the heart of Thoreau’s philosophy, but delivering it did not dissipate his frustration at the way his countrymen celebrated the American Revolution with ringing bells and cannon fire whilst Thomas Simms sailed south in chains. “Now a days men wear the fools cap and call it a liberty-cap,” he wrote in his journal three days after the lecture. “The joke could be no broader if the inmates of the prisons were to subscribe for all the powder to be used in such salutes & hire their

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4 PEJ, 3:226.
5 PEJ, 3:226.
jailors to do the firing & ringing for them.” From Thoreau’s perspective, the institutionalized celebration of one successful liberating moment distracted his contemporaries from their continued imprisonment. The revolution was not something that happened once, but something that needed to keep happening if the American people—North and South, black and white, native and immigrant—were ever to be truly free. “A sane & growing man revolutionizes every day,” he journaled a month later. “What institutions of man can survive a morning experience[.] A single-nights sleep—if we have indeed slumbered & grown in our sleep—puts them behind us like the river Lethe. It is no unusual thing for him to see the kingdoms of this world pass away.” As the morning experience illuminated the novelty of each new day, it correspondingly revealed the futility of yesterday’s institutions. Anxious to see the kingdom of slavery pass away from America’s shores, like the kingdom of England before it, Thoreau would spend the remainder of the decade struggling for the words that would wake his neighbors to the revolutionary demands of each new dawn. Yet, he eventually found himself, at the close of the decade, jolted awake by an “angel of light.” Illuminating what seemed to be the only path left for “what was once called a consistent man,” John Brown woke Thoreau to the futility of deliberating with a people who would recognize no principle.

At the start of the decade, however, Thoreau still held out hope for the potential of his writing and the possibilities of peaceful reform. This hope inspired him to revisit his own awakening at Walden and gamble once again with the ignominies of the literary

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6 PEJ, 3:209.

7 PEJ, 3:234.
market. Within a year of delivering “Walking or the Wild,” Thoreau would dust off his shelved Walden manuscript and begin a revision process that steadily continued, more or less, until the book’s 1854 publication.

The Trouble with Readers, Returning to Walden and Recording Truth

Thoreau’s journey back to the Walden manuscript included a persistent wrestling with his role as a writer in relation to an audience. Although A Week’s failure likely stung anew with every survey or odd job he scraped together in an effort to pay it off, he continued to appreciate its strengths. At the end of June 1851, Thoreau noted in his journal,

I thought that one peculiarity of my “Week” was its hypaethral character—to use an epithet applied to those Egyptian temples which are open to the heavens above—under the ether—I thought that it had little of the atmosphere of the house about it—but might wholly have been written, as in fact it was to a considerable extent—out of doors. It was only a late period in writing it, as it happened, that I used any phrases implying that I lived in a house, or lead a domestic life. I trust it does not smell of the study & library—even of the Poets attic, as of the fields & woods.—that it is a hypaethral or unroofed book—lying open under the ether—and permeated by it. Open to all weathers—not easy to be kept on a shelf.

Proud of the way the book captured a sense of undomesticated freedom, with all its sustaining and redemptive potential, Thoreau remained perplexed by his contemporaries’

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8 Thoreau, as Steven Fink notes, often defined himself in opposition to his audience, even as his literary ambitions prevented him from being completely dismissive (“Thoreau and His Audience,” The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau [New York: Cambridge UP, 1995], 89; see also Prophet in the Marketplace: Thoreau’s Professional Development as an Author [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992]). As this chapter considers the evolution of this complex dynamic, it challenges arguments like those of Richard Dillman, who identifies in Thoreau’s relationship to his audience an “emphasis on self over community” (Richard Dillman, “Thoreau’s Philosophy of Audience,” Bucknell Review 31.2 [1988], 84). Continuing the project of the previous chapter, this chapter contextualizes Thoreau’s relationship to his audience within his developing “ecological thought.”

9 PEJ, 3:279.
seeming lack of openness to such liberty. “The fathers and the mothers of the town would rather hear the young man or young woman at their tables express reverence for some old statements of the truth—than utter a direct revelation themselves,” he wrote in November of that same year. “So far as thinking is concerned—surely original thinking is the divinest thing.”\(^{10}\) Frustrated with the fervent honoring of the past at the expense of appreciating both the possibilities and urgencies of the present, Thoreau continued to insist on the value of individual experience and perspective. “Let me not be in haste to detect the universal law, let me see more clearly a particular instance,” he wrote while watching the sunset on Christmas day.\(^{11}\) “Much finer themes I aspire to—which will yield no satisfaction to the vulgar mind—not one sentence for them—Perchance it may convince such that there are more things in heaven & earth than are dreamed of in their philosophy. Dissolve one nebula—& so destroy the nebular system & hypothesis.”\(^{12}\) Thoreau’s reminder to himself to not let a universalizing impulse obscure attention to the particular gently checked his own mechanical interests and scientific leanings. “What sort of science is that which enriches the understanding but robs the imagination,” he asked.\(^{13}\) Thoreau wanted to do more than write about common things for the common mind. He wanted to plumb the depths of his own subjectivity, anticipating Copernican discoveries that held the potential to revolutionize the whole system. “Do not speak for other men—Speak for yourself,” he encouraged. “Speak though your thought presuppose

\(^{10}\) PEJ, 4:189.

\(^{11}\) PEJ, 4:222.

\(^{12}\) PEJ, 4:223.

\(^{13}\) PEJ, 4:222.
the non existence of your hearers.”\textsuperscript{14} Despite the failure of \textit{A Week}, Thoreau clearly had no intention of reining himself in to the appetites and interests of his readers. The goal was not to share common thoughts, but reveal higher truths: “We look upward for inspiration.”\textsuperscript{15}

Thoreau’s Christmas insistence on the authenticity of his own thoughts did not, however, stem from the assumption that all his ideas were enduring truths, but rather that higher truths existed. “I wish to be translated to the future,” he wrote on the first day of the New Year, “& look at my work as it were at a structure on the plain, to observe what portions have crumbled under the influence of the elements.”\textsuperscript{16} Conceiving his writing as an endless construction project, Thoreau builds with as much integrity as he can, aware that his own emotions and limited perspective will influence durability. Yet, his interest in how his work would withstand the elements reflects his ultimate criteria. He built structures to satisfy the universe, not the limited perspective and opinions of his fellow humans. “I see that to some men their relation to mankind is all important,” he wrote a few weeks later, “It is fatal in their eyes to outrage the opinions and customs of their fellow men. Failure and success are therefore never proved by them by absolute and universal tests.”\textsuperscript{17} Thoreau’s willingness to flout the “opinions and customs” of his contemporaries in deference to “absolute and universal tests” reflects his embrace of the same higher law discourse that antislavery activists like Stowe evoked at this time.

\textsuperscript{14} PEJ, 4:223-4.
\textsuperscript{15} PEJ, 4:224.
\textsuperscript{16} PEJ, 4:235.
\textsuperscript{17} PEJ, 4:257-8.
Such discourse directly contradicted the compromise rhetoric of the politicians passing bills like the Fugitive Slave Law. Daniel Webster, for example, in referring to the support of the Union as a “great practical subject,” encouraged disunionists to “take a large and comprehensive view of it; to look to its vast results, and to the consequences which would flow from its overthrow.” Thoreau, by encouraging an even wider view, seems intent on outdoing Webster at his own game. Webster, however, mocks this scale as essentially imperceptible. “No common vision can discern [a higher law],” he told a Virginia audience the previous spring, “no conscience, not transcendental and ecstatic, can feel it; the hearing of common men never listens to its high behests; and therefore one should think it is not a safe law to be acted on, in matters of the highest practical moment.”\textsuperscript{18} Six months later, Thoreau journaled what reads like a direct response: “It is unsafe to defer so much to mankind & the opinions of society—for these are always & without exception heathenish & barbarous—seen from the heights of philosophy.”\textsuperscript{19}

These two contrasting claims reveal diametrically opposed assessments of what will secure the safety and security of the American people. The question that Webster posed was not insignificant. If no “common vision” can discern a higher law and “the hearing of common men never listens to its high behests,” what good can it do to speak of a higher law? In response, Webster frames his own push towards practicality in terms of a lack of alternative options. It makes little sense to talk of what exists “above the highest peaks of the Alleghany” if people are simply unable or unwilling to perceive it. Thoreau recognizes the limited vision of his contemporaries, but rather than settle down to that


\textsuperscript{19} PEJ, 4:257-8.
level, and work within those constraints, he instead remained committed to “absolute and universal tests” and sought to elevate their vision. Thoreau’s commitment to such tests can hardly be considered untried naiveté at this point in his career. Less than three years earlier, he self-financed 1,000 copies of a book that took him years to write and sold less than two hundred of them. The financial burden altered the course of his life. Rather than shrink under that failure, or pursue a path of easier literary success, he instead chose to keep writing with a universal scale and criteria in mind, seeking to raise his contemporaries’ understanding by widening their gaze.

At this very moment, in the early weeks of 1852, determined to speak for himself and dedicated to a higher loyalty than human opinions, Thoreau returned to Walden. On January 21, he recorded the ant battle that eventually formed a portion of “Brute Neighbors.” Describing with excited detail two dueling ants, Thoreau notes, “I was myself excited somewhat even as if they had been men—The more you think of it—the less the difference. And certainly there is no other fight recorded in Concord that will bear comparison with this. I have no doubt they had as just a cause—one or even both parties as our forefathers—& that the results will be as important & memorable.”

Contextualizing this ant battle alongside Concord’s famous role in the War for Independence, Thoreau hearkens back to his frustration with the celebration of the Revolution the previous spring while also detailing the scale at which he is trying to live. This comparison between dueling ants (whom Thoreau stumbled upon by chance) and Concord’s pivotal battle in the Revolution decenters the concerns of humanity by

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21 PEJ, 4:272.
signifying the similar struggles that play out at every level of being. In his journal, Thoreau ended his narration of the ant battle, with the assertion, “To record truths which shall have the same relation & value to the next world. i.e. the world of thought and soul—that political news has to this.” Reiterating the message of “Walking, or the Wild,” this statement conveys the impetus under which he would revise the Walden manuscript over the next two years. Instead of focusing on the political news of this world, Thoreau sought to “record the truths” that mattered on a larger scale.

The ant battle comparison reveals Thoreau experimenting with ways to communicate those truths. Reinscribing a hallowed historical moment in mundane terms, the episode continues the same irreverent rhetoric that previously got him in to trouble with reviewers, but avoids the jarring feeling of A Week. However hyperbolic the comparison, the careful and detailed description of the ants makes his incisive commentary a bit more palatable. Later in the month, when thinking about his journaling practice, Thoreau notes, “The world have always loved best the fable with the moral. The children could read the fable alone—the grown up read both. The truth so told has the best advantages of the most abstract statement—for it is not the less universally applicable.” Thinking through his journaling practice, while in the midst of revising Walden, Thoreau contemplates the fable’s importance to the communication of the moral: “Cut off from Pilay & Aesop the moral alone at the bottom—would that content you?” This reflection on fables in comparison to untethered abstract statements shows Thoreau

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22 PEJ, 4:273.
23 PEJ, 4:297.
24 PEJ, 4:297.
considering how to best communicate the truths he has to share. Ultimately, he decides, “There will be no more rambling through the aisles of the wood, with occasional vistas through which you see the pond.” While this line is eventually included in “The Ponds” in literal relation to deforestation, its initial appearance in the midst of this journal reflection on fables foreshadows some of the changes he would make to the *Walden* manuscript. As the book expanded, the natural setting transitions, as Lawrence Buell notes, from “a theater for the speaker to exercise his cabin-craft in” to the source of wisdom and discovery. The shift reflects an improvement on his approach in *A Week*. In that text, Thoreau organized his many ramblings around occasional vistas through which readers occasionally saw the river. The narrative was, as Emerson noted, “a very slender thread for such big beads & ingots as are strung on it.” As Thoreau returned to the *Walden* manuscript for the first time after *A Week’s* failure, he seemed more open to the central role narrative and setting play in illuminating truth: “The crystal never sparkles more brightly than in the cavern.”

Thoreau’s reflection on how to best communicate truth did not, however, signal any new willingness to pander to his audience. “I lose my respect for people who do not know what is good and true,” he wrote at the end of January, “I know full well that

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25 PEJ, 4:297.


28 PEJ, 4:296-7.
readers and hearers with the fewest exceptions, ask me for my 2\textsuperscript{nd} best” (304).

Undaunted by the expectations of readers and hearers, Thoreau wanted to share truth more than he wanted to win over an audience. If the audience failed to recognize the “good and true” in what he shared, the “hearers and listeners” had a problem that he felt his second best would not help. Yet, he realized that this set him apart, since his contemporaries seemed all too willing to oblige their audiences at every turn. “It is remarkable that among all the teachers and preachers,” he wrote at the start of March, “I find the prophets & preachers employed in excusing the ways of men.” “My most reverend seniors Doctors deacons & the illuminated—tell me with a smile betwixt an aspiration & a shudder not to be so tender about these things,” he continues. “It is not worth the while for you to undertake to reform the world in this particular—They tell me not to ask how my bread is buttered—it will make me sick if I do—& the like.”

Thoreau’s short patience with the prevalence of this line of “practical” reasoning caused him to question the prevailing narratives of his day, which asserted the progressive moral trajectory of the world. “We are told today that civilization is making rapid progress—the tendency is ever upward—substantial justice is done even by human court—You may trust the good intentions of mankind,” he summarizes. “We read to-morrow in the newspapers that the French nation is on the eve of going to war with England to give employment to her army,” he counters. “Does the threatened war between France & England evince any more enlightenment—than a war between two savage tribes—the Iroquois & the Hurons? Is it founded in better reason?”

The names of new conflicts

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29 PEJ, 4:373.

30 PEJ, 4:365.
might change overtime, he suggests, but the reasoning remains as limited as ever.

Unconvinced by the supposed rapid progress, Thoreau claims to be surrounded by people more fully engaged in ignoring the obvious troubles. “What is the influence of men of principle—or how numerous are they?” he asks. “How many have I heard speak with warning voice? Utter wise warnings? The preacher’s standard of morality is no higher than that of his audience. He studies to conciliate his hearers & never to offend them.”

Thoreau’s desire to connect with his audience has nothing to do with a desire to concede to strained times or obstinate hearers. He sought clarity and connection, not compromise or conciliation. The issue for him is not avoiding offense, but communicating truth and affecting change. The continual struggle, of course, is how to accomplish that.

Thoreau recognized that conciliating hearers is much easier than challenging them, and speaking to their somnolent understanding much less work than trying to wake them. “It is discouraging to talk with men who will recognize no principles,” he wrote on March 5.

How little use is made of reason in this world! You argue with a man for an hour—he agrees with you step by step—you are approaching a triumphant conclusion—you think that you have converted him but ah no he has a habit—he takes a pinch of snuff—he remembers that he entertained a different opinion at the commencement of the controversy—and his reverence for the past compels him to reiterate it now. You began at the butt of the pole to curve it—you gradually bent it round and planted the other end in the ground—and already in imagination saw the vine curling round this segment of an arbor-under which a new generation was to recreate itself—but when you had done just when the twig was bent it sprang back to its former stubborn and handsome position like a bit of whalebone.

31 PEJ, 4:365.
32 PEJ, 4:372-3.
This lament and vibrant analogy further reflect the extent to which Thoreau thought about his audience and wondered how to deal with the common ignorance of principle. His exasperation reflects Stowe’s similar frustration over those who would not prioritize principles. In this context, it is significant that Thoreau moved directly from journaling this diatribe to adding lines to the ant-battle scene he penned in January:

Concord Fight! Two killed on the patriots’ side, & Luther Blanchard wounded—! Why here every ant was a Buttrick,—“Fire! for God’s sake fire!”—and thousands shared the fate of Davis and Hosmer—I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not to avoid a three-penny tax on their tea.  

Wrestling with those who will recognize no principle, Thoreau decides to frame “principle” as the crux of the illustrative analogy he had been developing. As the analogy already weaves the ant story in with the Revolution in an effort to illuminate the universality of all such struggles, this addition construes the universal struggles as hinging on principles. Whatever the specific details, such battles are never, Thoreau suggests, really about tea or taxes, but the principle at stake in the dispute. Using a story to express this point reflects Thoreau experimenting with how to help his contemporaries best grasp such a lesson—how to turn whalebones into the supple poles of a vine-sustaining arbor.

As Thoreau grasped the difficulty of attempting reasoned discourse with an audience that will recognize no principles, he also seemed to develop greater awareness of how his audience might respond to his self-righteous rhetorical posture. “Now if there is any who think I am vain glorious—that I set myself up above others—and crow over their low estate,” Thoreau wrote in February, “let me tell them that I could tell a pitiful...
story respecting myself as well as them—if my spirits held out to do it, I could encourage them with a sufficient list of failures—& could flow as humbly as the very gutters themselves.”

Thoreau’s openness to admit his own failures reflects a sense of perspective and wisdom, while also reiterating his highest concern. His ultimate goal was never to declare himself good or bad before his readers, but to wake them up to a broader vision of the world. Indeed, *Walden* was always about waking. In the earliest version of what became “Where I Lived and What I Lived For,” Thoreau plainly stated, “Moral reform and improvement are the effort to throw off sleep.”

“We must learn to reawaken and hold ourselves awake,” he added in the 1849 version, “not by mechanical aids but by an infinite expectation of the dawn which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep[.] I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.”

While the early *Walden* set out to matter-of-factly model such a “conscious endeavor” with the narrative of his heroically Spartan life, as Thoreau returned to the manuscript, his inclination to “brag as lustily as a chanticleer” ran up against his desire to actually raise his neighbors from their slumber. He seemed to rethink the effectiveness of “crow[ing] over their” low estate. This reconsideration is in keeping with the decision he made the previous April, of speaking “a word now for nature” even though he had a journal full of fiery comments he could have crowed at his

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34 PEJ, 4:340.


37 Thoreau added this famous line—which was eventually used as the book’s epigraph—during his 1852 expansion and revision of the “Where I Lived and What I Lived For” chapter, signaling a new awareness of the way his early material struck such a tone. See Thoreau, *Walden: A Fluid-Text Edition*, Version D, para. 7.
audience. The changes he would make to the *Walden* manuscript extend this same strategy, seeking to replace a view of “the universe into which man & the institutions of man enter very largely & absorb much of the attention” with a wider view “in which man is but as a grain of sand” and “his institutions like toad-stools by the way-side.”

**Expanding and Revising *Walden* to Wake the World**

The composition and revision of *Walden* has been a subject of much study, especially the changes in relation to the pre- and post-1852 material. Stephen Adams and Donald Ross suggest that Thoreau’s post-1852 changes to the text reflect his decision “to go beyond the idea of the Walden experience as a social protest, and beyond the manuscript’s main rhetorical function as an answer to local critics and doubters.”

Robert Sattelmeyer similarly describes Thoreau’s changes as “less insistent upon addressing the outward conditions of humanity,” and reflecting a new inclination “to regard his experience at Walden less as an example to misguided reformers and more as a personal quest involving doubt and uncertainty as well as discovery.” “However much he was aware of its exemplary potential for his contemporaries,” Sattelmeyer suggests, “[he] did not yet realize what the experience signified for himself.”

While the revisions to the manuscript certainly reflect Thoreau’s own growth and the evolving significance of the experience for him, the changes should not necessarily be equated with a disinterest in social concerns and reform. Thoreau’s turn to the journal as an “autonomous

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38 PEJ, 4:419-20.


composition” in the 1850-1852 interim period between Walden drafts may have taught him, as Sharon Cameron argues, “what he could never have learned in a work that had to answer to others (specifically the others of an ‘audience’),” but the very process of carefully transforming those journal passages into Walden reflects his persistent social investment. Much like the decision to deliver “Walking, or the Wild,” the later revisions to the Walden text signal less an abandonment of social protest, and more a reconsideration of how to best elicit real change. Discouraged by men who will recognize no principle, Thoreau returned to the manuscript thinking about how he might wake them. In doing so, he drew upon a more profound sense of his own awakening, and how it happened.

Walden was always connected to Thoreau’s experience in this way. Pointing to passages that appear in Thoreau’s journal both before and after his stay at the pond, Lyndon Shanley notes that “from the time [Thoreau] first wrote at the pond, Walden was an imaginative re-creation and not an attempt to give a literal account of his life in the woods.” While much of Walden indeed came directly out of Thoreau’s journals, composing the book was a process of deliberately organizing and crafting his ideas into a composite text. Whether or not the early manuscript contained an inchoate version of the published text’s ultimate message, it unquestionably lacked the development and craft of the later text. After starting with a narrative exposition of the experiment and a manifesto on social and economic reform, the manuscript drifted, not unlike A Week, into a series of

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fragmented essays on different and not clearly related topics.\textsuperscript{43} Shanley suggests that the decision to structure it around the seasons helped pave the way towards expansion, as it gave him an opportunity to “fill out his account of the progress of the seasons and describe the changes they had brought to his daily affairs and thoughts.”\textsuperscript{44} Indeed, attentive observations of the natural world cycling through the seasons gradually become the subject of the latter half of the book. Sattelmeyer points to this new organization as the tool Thoreau needed to tell a proper story, rather than simply offer critique. “Now,” Sattelmeyer explains, “with the annual cycle developed and amplified, there exists for the first time a ‘story’ with a kind of plot: the journey or quest of the narrator passing through various changes marked by the progress of the seasons and advancing toward some kind of self-knowledge.”\textsuperscript{45} Moving from the opening manifesto to a gradual tracking of the seasons, the narrator shifts in emphasis from crowing critic to careful observer. The application of the seasonal plot further signals the construction and inherent fictionality of the text. As Laura Walls explains, “what we are seeing when we see Thoreau within the pages of \textit{Walden} is not the author who so carefully staged the book, but the book’s protagonist, who, in the course of the year and a day, is utterly changed by the experience.”\textsuperscript{46} The expanded structure and plot facilitated the enhanced development of a hero and story with climaxes and falls. Acknowledging such staging is crucial for understanding how the text reflects not only new insights Thoreau came to while


\textsuperscript{44} Shanley, \textit{The Making of Walden}, 67.

\textsuperscript{45} Sattelmeyer, “The Remaking of Walden,” 64.

reconsidering his life in the woods, but also his process of thinking about how to best break through to his readers.

In considering the 1852 restructuring of the manuscript, Adams and Ross suggest that the Baker Farm chapter, which includes the Field episode, constitutes the first climax of the book, along with “The Ponds,” which proceeds it, and “Higher Laws,” which follows it.\footnote{Interestingly, while the Field episode has been recognized as playing a central role in Walden’s restructuring, the manuscript record of it is actually incomplete. The earliest version of Walden includes Thoreau’s departure and request for a drink, but the preceding pages are missing. It is possible that these pages were discarded as final revisions made them obsolete. Lyndon Shanley mentions this as a general possibility, noting that “the greatest losses occur at points where he revised his work most radically,” (The Making of Walden, 14). Without those pages, it is unclear how developed the encounter was or how it changed along with the manuscript.} The Field episode, they explain, recapitulates the social doctrines of “Economy” and perhaps expresses Thoreau’s fears for the success of his book.\footnote{Adams and Ross, Revising Mythologies, 185.} Laura Walls has similarly described the episode as the “central crisis of Walden.”\footnote{Laura Dassow Walls, “‘As You Are Brothers of Mine’: Thoreau and the Irish,” The New England Quarterly 88, no. 1 (2015): 7.} “The structural positioning of the Fields episode,” she writes, “suggests its function in driving forward Walden’s primary purpose: to globalize the American slave narrative.”\footnote{Walls, “‘As You Are Brothers of Mine,’” 18. For a reading that challenges Thoreau’s universalizing of the Irish in this way, see Helen Lojek, “Thoreau’s Bog People,” The New England Quarterly 67, no. 2 (1994): 279–97.} Walls points to the role the Irish play throughout the text in signifying “the Northern laboring classes who have been victimized by the same slave-driving global capitalism that has instituted Southern chattel slavery.” Thoreau uses the Irish, in this sense, to illuminate the way all his readers “unconsciously collude in capitalism’s enslavement of us.”\footnote{Walls, “‘As You Are Brothers of Mine,’” 18-19.} The quiet desperation of the Irish represents the same quiet desperation of the masses. Walls
notes how Thoreau’s shakedown of John Field—“For I purposely talked to him as if he were a philosopher, or desired to be one”—recaps “the entire first half of his book, then deliberately stages its utter and ignominious collapse, to confront us unequivocally with the true sources of evil in our own well-meaning desire to improve ourselves by working hard, buying more stuff, and rising in the world, just as we have been told to do.”

“That is, we are also John and Mary Field,” Walls explains, “and we are just as ‘boggy’ and deluded as they. And, worse, our inability to change our boggy ways perpetuates the very economy that enslaves us all.” Walls claims that displaying this spectacular failure prepares readers for the alternative approach he pursues in the latter half of the text: “if he cannot reason us out of our boggy ways, he will try to reorient us by stealthier means.”

Reading the Field episode as a carefully staged, direction-altering failure, coheres with the common critical observation that the latter portion of the book “is more introspective, meditative, and descriptive and contains fewer passages of sustained satire,” but also challenges the assumption that this altered tone should be understood as a sudden irrevocable change in the author’s perspective, as if he can no longer quite stomach his early critical self. Sattelmeyer, for example, suggests, “When there is a

52 Henry David Thoreau, Walden (1854) (New York: Library of America, 1985), 486. All other references to this edition of Walden will hereafter be cited parenthetically; Walls, “‘As You Are Brothers of Mine,’” 20.

53 Walls, “‘As You Are Brothers of Mine,’” 20.

54 Walls, “‘As You Are Brothers of Mine,’” 21. Robert Cummings similarly approaches this scene as “a comic airing of the author’s own anxieties over his role as dispenser of potentially unwelcome theoretical advice,” but argues that this anxiety “should be viewed in the light of the conflict between environmental activism and agricultural practice” (“Thoreau’s Divide: Rediscovering the Environmentalist/agriculturalist Debate in Walden’s ‘Baker Farm,’” Nineteenth-Century Prose 31, no. 2 [Fall 2004], 206). Following Walls, I argue here that Thoreau approaches John Field as a person more generally rather than a farmer specifically.

brief return to the themes of ‘Economy,’ as in the account of the Irishman John Field and his family in ‘Baker Farm,’ Thoreau’s criticism is muted by sympathy, and the family is presented in such homely detail and with such particularity that, like their chickens, they become too humanized to roast well.”

When recognized as a moment of failure, however, it is not the sudden recognition of their humanity that alters their roasting, but the narrator’s recognition of how absolutely entrenched they are in the cultural perspective he sought to dismantle in “Economy.” Hence the famously jarring exclamation, “But alas! the culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe” (486). It is not the Irishman that the narrator wants to undertake “with a moral bog hoe,” but “the culture of an Irishman.” The “alas!” that precedes this declaration registers how much work need be done to redeem the Field family from the culture they have inherited. The seeming hopelessness of the Fields’ circumstance leads the narrator to momentarily question the efficacy of his entire endeavor. His observation of how the Fields “take life bravely, after their fashion, face to face, giving it tooth and nail” invites introspective wondering about the valor of his own chosen course. As he leaves the Field shanty to go fish in the pond now that the rain subsided, the narrator notes that his haste to return to his tranquil life of haunting savage places “appeared for an instant trivial to me who had been sent to school and college” (488). The bravery of the Field family casts doubt on the wisdom of his counter-culture decision. “But as I ran down the hill toward the reddening west, with the rainbow over my shoulder, and some faint tinkling sounds borne to my ear through the cleansed air,” he recounts, “from I know not what quarter, my Good Genius seemed to say—Go fish and hunt far and wide

56 Sattelmeyer, “The Remaking of Walden,” 63.
day by day—farther and wider—and rest thee by many brooks and hearth-sides without misgiving. Remember thy Creator in the days of thy youth. Rise free from care before the dawn, and seek adventures” (488). The narrator’s steadfast conversion to this path of exploring “far and wide day by day—farther and wider” ultimately brings him back to a sense of pity for John Field. “Poor John Field!” he concludes, “thinking to live by some derivative old country mode in the primitive new country” (489). The sympathy that the narrator experiences stokes a new awareness of the potential ineffectiveness of his words for those existing in such a condition.

In this scene, Thoreau seems to stage the same recognition he came to in the journal, where his aversion to the popular author who “troubles himself with his readers” ran up against questions about whether “crow[ing] after their low estate” would prove any more effective in helping people “see this world slumbering” (419). If the narrator thought that by offering himself up as a direct and practical example of successful reform he would break the chains that bound such people to their mean labor, his encounter with the Field family jolted him awake. For all of his reasoned talk of “light shoes and thin clothing, which cost not half so much,” John Field only “heaved a sigh” in response “and his wife stared with arms a-kimbo” (487).

As Thoreau cedes the ineffectiveness of his reasoned and principled discussion, he stages a breakdown in the proficiency of deliberative discourse, that hallmark and lifeblood of democracy. The interaction with John Field shows the narrator falling for the same trap that his contemporaries in politics fall for: the trap of unsuspectingly thinking that simply explaining a principle clearly enough will effect change. The debate surrounding the Fugitive Slave Law clearly manifested the naivety of such a notion, as
principle-based opposition was met with an unwillingness to entertain making the necessary alterations that adhering to such a principle required. Henry Clay, for example, was incredulous that Southerners were expected to give up their whole way of life in response to abstract moral arguments against slavery. “In one scale we behold sentiment, sentiment, sentiment alone,” he argued, “in the other property, the social fabric, life, and all that makes life desirable and happy.” The subsequent passing of the Fugitive Slave Law proved the success of Clay’s argument, revealing the common reluctance to resist the entrenched way of life on behalf of abstract sentiment, however reasonably presented.

In response to that political catastrophe—and repeated interactions with John Field types and other seemingly lithe poles who prove themselves incorrigible whalebones, stubbornly snapping back into their former place—Thoreau reconsiders his whole approach. The failure is assuming that merely exemplifying a life of simplicity and principle, showing how cheaply and self-sufficiently one can live, will bring true reform. Thoreau’s failure resonates with that of Stowe’s idealistic though naïve character Clayton, who “could not believe that anything, except ignorance and inattention, could make men upholders of deliberate injustice” and “thought all that was necessary was the enlightening of the public mind, the direction of general attention to the subject.” While Clayton represents the type of untried optimism Stowe brought to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Dred as a whole works to approach the problem from a new angle. Thoreau returned to Walden with similar reorienting intentions. If displaying or modeling a different way to

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58 Stowe, Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp (Chapel Hill: U of NC P, 2000), 392. For more on this, see chapter 3 of this dissertation, section IV.
live will not stoke the necessary change, perhaps he can teach his readers a different way to see.

Pivoting the focus of his readers from “material failure to spiritual success,” or rather convincing them that spiritual success transcends material failure, became Thoreau’s primary reorienting objective.59 This pivoting of priorities is an essential revaluing of what ultimately matters, the precise move that Stowe makes in her fiction. Thoreau’s invitation to wider views is an invitation to consider a higher criteria of value, by recognizing the ephemerality of the current “social fabric” being construed as essential to “all that makes life desirable and happy.”

Just as he responded to the Fugitive Slave Law incidents a year earlier with “a word now for nature,” Thoreau responds to the dependable imprudence of his neighbors by dedicating the rest of the text to an extended explication of “man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of nature—rather than a member of society.”60 The “stealthier means” Walls refers to consist of a fundamental rescaling of readers’ perspectives, encouraging a wider view of the lives they live. If the people cannot reason their way out of their serfdom, perhaps expanding their view to behold the ephemerality of the cultural priorities and social institutions they hold on to will help. Just as he invited his Concord neighbors to take a walk, so he sensed that John Field would not “rise in this world, he nor his posterity, till their wading webbed bogtrotting feet get talaria to their heels”—or, in other words, until they abandon their “boggy ways” and walk on higher paths (489).

59 Walls, “As Ye are Brothers of Mine,” 21.

It is at this point in the text that the Spartan exemplar, heretofore describing the kind of heroic, representative life that Emerson or Carlyle might praise, takes off his armor and admits his own place in the process of continual development and discovery. Instead of offering answers to his readers, the narrator critic shares his own weaknesses, detailing the common challenge that unites all humanity: the struggle to live a truly moral life. The wrestle that he depicts in “Higher Laws,” which directly follows “Baker Farm,” is, perhaps, the most vulnerable that the narrator gets in the whole book. The internal wrestle between competing desires is on full display. Rather than triumphantly arriving at a harmony with these higher laws, the narrator illustrates the grappling they require.61 “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men,” he admits, “and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both” (490). There is a new openness in this discourse, which reflects the significant challenge awaiting those who try to rise to the level of perspective the narrator details. “Perhaps there is none but has cause for shame on account of the inferior and brutish nature to which he is allied,” he suggests (498). Yet, despite admitting the ubiquity of allegiance with such inferior nature, the narrator continues to consider a Websterian sense of practicality simply insufficient. The difficulty of higher living is no excuse not to seek a higher life: “Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome” (498).

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61 When Thoreau returned to the next chapter, “Brute Neighbors,” in late 1852, he originally penned, and then crossed out an opening connection line: “But practically I was only half-converted to my own arguments, for I still found myself fishing at rare intervals” (Thoreau, Walden: A Fluid-Text Edition, Version E, para. 1). Cutting that line likely indicated the extent to which he felt he had adequately communicated such reservations in the previous chapter.
At the conclusion of the chapter, John Field rematerializes as John Farmer—more financially comfortable, as Walls points out, but still unable to “shake his longing for something.” Farmer hears the “notes of the flute”—the narrator’s message effectively composed (Thoreau himself played the flute)—and it “suggested work for certain faculties which long slumbered in him” (499). Rather than chastise Farmer, these notes “gently did away with the street, and the village, and the state in which he lived,” giving him a broader perspective of his existence. Entranced by this expanded vision of the world, Farmer hears the voice: “Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you?” (499). This is indeed the same question posed to John Field, but in a much different register. Awake to the possibility of higher living, Farmer proceeds to ask himself the precise question that Thoreau wants all of his readers to ask themselves, “But how to come out of this condition and actually migrate thither?” The narrator answers, “All that he could think of was to practice some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect” (499). The new austerity involves “letting his mind descend into his body,” animating it, redeeming it from mechanization—the feeble existence of a cog in the machine. It instills an ever “increasing respect” for the marvel that is human life, a respect that would never tolerate enslavement, either of mind, body, individual, or another. This respect comes from a new realization of the scale at which life unfolds. Having lost the previous sense of “the world,” John Farmer awakes to the “infinite extent

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of our relations.” The very next chapter paves the way for the further consideration of these relations that will continue into the final chapters.

At the start of “Brute Neighbors,” following the hermit’s decision to leave his meditative moment and return to the world, the narrator asks “Why do precisely these objects make a world?” (502). This question sparks the deeper reflection on the composition of the world and the place of humans in it. The chapter proceeds with a narrative sequence observing several supposedly brute neighbors, including the battling ants from the journal. “I suspect that Pilpay & Co. have put animals to their best use,” he writes at the start of these observations, drawing on his journal consideration of fables, “for they are all beasts of burden, in a sense, made to carry some portion of our thoughts” (502-503). Indeed the narrator uses these beasts to carry his thoughts on the relation of all things. He describes the friendliness of the mouse, and the homeliness of the Phoebe, the violence of the ants, and the evasiveness of the loon—each description coming with its own connection. In conclusion, he describes the tendency of ducks to “hold the middle of the pond,” and wonders, “but what beside safety they got by sailing in the middle of Walden I do not know, unless they love its water for the same reason that I do” (511). In drawing out these connections, the narrator rescales his perspective to illuminate all the life that indeed makes the world, repositioning humanity’s relation to it all in the process.

The narrator continues over the next few chapters to describe his life in nature, and finally determines, “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads” (547). The

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63 This famous line was added to the penultimate version of the manuscript between 1853 and 1854 (See Thoreau, *Walden: A Fluid-Text Edition*, Version F, para. 2d).
“what-how-when-where” questions he “had been endeavoring to answer in my sleep” are answered when he awakes “to nature and daylight,” which “seemed to say, Forward!” (547). Given the constant forwardness of nature, answering such questions indeed becomes “morning work,” a process of living fully in the possibilities of each new day. This morning work involves embracing the relentless forward propulsion of the universe, constantly discovering more laws than those currently understood. “Our notions of law and harmony are commonly confined to those instances which we detect,” he explains, “but the harmony which results from a far greater number of seemingly conflicting, but really concurring, laws, which we have not detected, is still more wonderful. The particular laws are as our points of view, as, to the traveller, a mountain outline varies with every step, and it has an infinite number of profiles, though absolutely but one form” (554). Endless revolutions in perspective occur with each step towards the mountain; every step forward brings new possibilities, just as spring brings new life. Watching life “springing into existence” on the railroad bank in the final climax of the book, the narrator realizes the “principle of all the operations of Nature” (568). “There is nothing inorganic,” he declares. “What is man but a mass of thawing clay?” (567). To recognize man as a mass of thawing clay emphasizes the provinciality of humanity in the context of a wide world and universe, but also points to the way humans are interconnected with all things, “surrounded by the literal ground of being.”64 “The earth is not a fragment of dead history … but living poetry like the leaves of a tree,” and “the institutions upon it are plastic like clay in the hands of the potter” (568). Humans are not antithetical to the

64 Philip Gura, The Wisdom of Words (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1981), 137.
natural world—standing apart, undaunted—but rather part and parcel of this constant regeneration process.

Importantly, awaking to this organic reality is a reason for hope, not dismay, which makes the *Walden* text a morning call rather than “an ode to dejection” (389). The first sparrow of spring notes, according to the narrator, “The year beginning with younger hope than ever” (569). “As every season seems best to us in its turn,” he explains, “so the coming in of spring is like the creation of Cosmos out of Chaos and the realization of the Golden Age” (572). This is the exact opposite tone from Webster, who also recognized that “human structures, however strong, do not stand upon the everlasting laws of nature,” but, in response, maintained that such fragility placed the onus on citizens to develop “an intelligent regard for such institutions, a great appreciation of their benefits, and a spirited purpose to uphold and maintain them.”

As long as the people maintained “our political system under a United Government and National Constitution,” he declared, “We are in no fear of perpetual darkness, or the return to Chaos.” Fearing past chaos, Webster placed his faith in the previous dispellers of darkness. “I wish to be in the spirit of Washington and Madison, Wythe and Pendleton, and the proscribed patriots of Massachusetts, Hancock and Samuel Adams,” he announced in defense of his political career. “If these and other great founders of our liberty and fathers of our Constitution erred, then have I erred.” When the institutions they built “crumble and fall,” he warned, “the political catastrophe will resemble that which would happen in the

65 Webster, *Speech of Mr. Webster at Capon Springs, Virginia*, 7.

66 Webster, *Speech of Mr. Webster at Capon Springs, Virginia*, 7.

67 Webster, *Speech of Mr. Webster at Capon Springs, Virginia*, 6.
natural world were the sun to be struck out of heaven.” Thoreau’s own imagery is dedicated to the exact opposite point. To focus wholly on the past, the narrator of *Walden* remarks in contrast, is to “loiter in winter while it is already spring,” overlooking the constant revolution of the sun, which moves forward from day to night to day and season to season (573). “We should be blessed if we lived in the present always,” he writes, “and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the influence of the slightest dew that falls on it; and did not spend our time in atoning for the neglect of past opportunities, which we call doing our duty” (573).

Dutifully attending to the past, he suggests, keeps us from enjoying the inspiration of the present—“the dew of heaven.” To clench existing human institutions as the only protection against chaos is to sleep through the dawn of the new day and cut oneself off from a universe of possibilities.

The conclusion of the book hinges on such possibilities, even if they remain unseen. “The universe is wider than our views of it,” the narrator announces, accentuating the perspectival shift that has been the goal all along (577). At the start of the book, he asked, “Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?” (338). At the conclusion, this insight is applied to the question that shadowed Thoreau’s return to the *Walden* manuscript in January 1852: “But Why I changed—? Why I left the woods?” “Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one,” came the published reply.

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68 Webster, *Speech of Mr. Webster at Capon Springs, Virginia*, 7.


70 PEJ, 4:275.
It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear, that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! (579).

This response encapsulates Thoreau’s attempt to communicate how arbitrary human institutions appear when seen from a broader perspective. As chosen paths, repeatedly taken, wear their way into minds as well as earth, hurried travelers all too easily lose sight of alternative routes and the endless potential trails yet to be blazed. “I learned this, at least, by my experiment,” the narrator surmises,

that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. (580)

The laws and boundaries that institutions and traditions place upon the world do not, he suggests, hold off the descent into chaos, but rather prevent higher living. Putting “some things behind” may actually reveal new laws, not only avoiding past chaos but also reorienting current understanding of assumed ills to the point that solitude, poverty, and weakness will become different from what they now seem. Such re-orientation is the very process that Stowe undertakes in arguing for institutions that are organized around and prioritize “the master chord” above all else. Thoreau demands such re-orientation not only in deference to a known higher law like “goodwill to man,” but any future
undiscovered laws. The goal is a life that flexes and bends in response to the discoveries that accompany nature’s never-ceasing forward motion.

Given the rigid structure of society, the required changes that accompany such discoveries might sound at first like idealistic fantasies, but they could very well be exactly what the world needs. “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be,” the narrator encourages, “Now put the foundations under them” (580). On this point the narrator circles back to the limitations of an unprepared audience and his frustration at those who dismiss living out the implications of a principled life as foolishly building castles in the air. “It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they can understand you,” he affirms (580). John Field or Daniel Webster’s inability to grasp the truth neither discredits its existence nor diminishes the value of declaring it. After exploring different means of breaking through to the audience, the narrator concludes, “No face which we can give to a matter will stead us so well at last as the truth. … Say what you have to say, not what you ought. Any truth is better than make-believe” (583).

Having reinforced this commitment to living in accordance with the highest truth, the narrator briefly recapitulates the whole of the text, directly positioning his philosophy in contrast with Webster. “They tell me of California and Texas, of England and the Indies, of the Hon. Mr.—of Georgia or of Massachusetts, all transient and fleeting phenomena, till I am ready to leap from their court-yard like the Mameluke bey,” he writes, reiterating his frustration at the “transient and fleeting” focus of political discourse (584). “I delight to come to my bearings, he responds, “not walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to walk even with the Builder of the
universe, if I may—not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by.” This attempt to gain bearings in the midst of trivialities summarizes the motivation for the Walden endeavor. “What are men celebrating?” he asks in confusion. “They are all on a committee of arrangements, and hourly expect a speech from somebody. God is only the president of the day, and Webster is his orator. But God is president of the eternal universe” (584). Thoreau suggests that society’s celebration of itself—especially the kind he witnesses every April 19—reflects a narrow perspective that limits the president of the eternal universe to the president of a single day. Webster’s orations—intent on preserving the institutions that April 19, 1775 helped make possible—might suffice for the day, as practical compromises intended to stitch things together just a little longer, but they will not hold up to the standards of eternity. “I love to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most strongly and rightfully attracts me,” Walden’s narrator asserts in contrast, “not hang by the beam of the scale and try to weigh less—not suppose a case, but take the case that is; to travel the only path I can, and that on which no power can resist me” (583-4). This declaration of uncompromising allegiance to that which “rightfully attracts me” is a refusal to operate ambivalent of truth—as if truth were either undecided or undecipherable. From this perspective, Webster’s compromising efforts to quell the tension of the day leave him “shipwrecked on a vain reality.” To “spring an arch before I have got a solid foundation,” the narrator explains, not only affords no satisfaction, but it also constitutes playing “at kittly-benders,” foolishly scooting across on thin ice (585).
In the end, the narrator never deviates from the initial quest for a hard bottom, “which we can call reality.” “There is a solid bottom everywhere,” he confirms, even as he also admits and reiterates the struggle that it will take to find it:

We read that the traveller asked the boy if the swamp before him had a hard bottom. The boy replied that it had. But presently the traveller's horse sank in up to the girths, and he observed to the boy, “I thought you said that this bog had a hard bottom.” “So it has,” answered the latter, “but you have not got half way to it yet.” So it is with the bogs and quicksands of society; but he is an old boy that knows it. (585)

This is Thoreau’s ultimate assessment of the quagmire that society has created. The depth of the swamp is hard to determine, and the bottom difficult to reach, obscured and concealed as it is by “boggy ways.” Arriving at it may not be as easy as simply wading your horse into the swamp; thus the narrator’s early call to “work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe” (400). But pushing past that muck, discovering that bottom, and building on that foundation is the beginning of a real life, more stable and secure than any structure built on a swampy footing. The wondrous possibilities such a real life entails will ultimately sustain those who achieve it and validate the work required to push past and dig through all of the boggy distractions that lie in the way. “Rather than love, than money, than fame,” the narrator expounds, “give me truth” (585).

No matter how he puts it, or whether or not his readers can finally grasp it, truth is all the narrator can offer. “I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all of this;” he writes in the concluding paragraph, “but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn” (587). Only when people realize the “incessant flux of novelty into the world,” and no longer “tolerate incredible dullness,” will the
“beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society” come forth “to enjoy its perfect summer life at last!” (587). Here, the central point of “Walking, or the Wild” echoes especially loud—“we need the tonic of the wildness … to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander” (575). If readers recognize the inherent wildness of the universe, and wake to the novelty of each new day, they will hopefully loosen their untenable insistence on outmoded institutions built on boggy bottoms and wake to the new dawn. The realization of new possibilities will trouble the certainties of the past, triggering new revolutions that will do away with things that are dead and things that are killing us. Things like slavery, and the Fugitive Slave Law.

The Trial of Massachusetts and the Test of Wider Views

In the spring of 1854, just as Walden headed to the press—packed with revisions and additions that could be traced back to Thoreau’s 1851 address in the aftermath of the last significant Fugitive Slave incident—disaster struck once again. On May 24, two days after the passing of the Kansas Nebraska Act, authorities arrested Anthony Burns, an escaped slave working in Boston, and placed him under heavy guard while he awaited trial. Having just completed his magnum opus, Thoreau found himself in the exact same position again following the Thomas Simms incident three springs earlier. He turned again to his journal in frustration, but also in search for solace. On May 28, he wrote, “It would be worthwhile to ask ourselves weekly—Is our life innocent enough? Do we live inhumanely—toward man or beast—in thought or act? To be serene & successful we
must be at one with the universe.”

This desire to be one with the universe above all else would color his thoughts over the next few weeks as he processed recent events and sought to avoid letting the “narrow field” of politics take up too much space in the landscape of his thoughts. The spectacularly guilty verdict in the trial of Massachusetts, as Thoreau came to consider the incident, would challenge his resolve to patiently advocate for wider views while his home state plunged down the path of a vain reality.

As he reflected more directly on the trial, he questioned the capacity of Judge Loring to legislate reality. “Does anyone think that Justice or God awaits Mr Loring’s decision?” he asked. “I see the court house full of armed men holding prisoner & trying a man to find out if he is not really a slave,” he continued, musing that it could be “a question about which there is great doubt.” “It is really the trial of Massachusetts,” he declared in adamant response, “every moment she hesitates to set this man free—she is convicted.” After all, the court and people need to align with the universe, and not the other way around. Truth is not decided on the Senate floor or the courthouse, he insists. “Will mankind never learn that policy is not morality—that it never secures any moral right but always considers merely what is ‘expedient’—chooses the available candidate—who is always the Devil.” Thoreau sharply denounced the ambivalence to truth he finds reflected in compromising policies, judicial action, and individual civic participation.

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71 PEJ, 8:160-1.
72 PEJ, 3:103.
73 PEJ, 8:163.
74 PEJ, 8:164.
75 PEJ, 8:164.
76 PEJ, 8:165.
“The men of the North—and of the South & east & west—are not men of principle,” he derides. “If they vote—they do not send men to congress on errands of humanity—but while their brothers & sisters are being scourged and hung for loving liberty,” he continues, “it is the mismanagement of wood iron & stone & gold which concerns them.” For Thoreau, any state that supports, condones, or tolerates the treatment of Anthony Burns, especially while concentrating intently on economic matters, has its priorities entirely askew.

Thoreau extended his critique beyond those who ambivalently supported slavery as a matter of practicality to include his activist antislavery neighbors as well. He directly challenged those who approach the issue having decided, “I will peaceably pursue my chosen calling on this fair earth until perhaps one day I shall have persuaded you to relent.” Having just completed what may reasonably be considered the prototypical text of a peaceable pursuit on the earth in hopes of eventual persuasion, Thoreau’s appeal to more aggressive, even directly violent action, is particularly jarring. “Rather than consent to establish hell upon earth—to be a party to this establishment,” he asserts, “I would touch a match to blow up earth & hell together. As I love my life I would side with the Light & let the Dark Earth roll from under me—calling my mother & my brother to follow me.” This call to end the established compact supporting slavery aligns Thoreau with outspoken Northerners like William Lloyd Garrison, who had been trumpeting disunion for years, and the violent imagery he invokes registers their same

77 PEJ, 8:165.
78 PEJ, 8:165.
79 PEJ, 8:165-6.
heightened level of intensity. The Anthony Burns incident clearly hit a nerve that caused Thoreau to further rethink the extent of his toleration.\(^\text{80}\)

Yet, instead of dwelling in these fiery thoughts, and letting them engulf all his attention, Thoreau sought to practice what he preached. In the wake of the failed attempt to free Burns from the Boston Courthouse—which he describes as a “heroic attack” more deserving of praise than the Boston Tea Party—and the June 2\(^{nd}\) extradition of Burns to the South by way of Boston harbor, Thoreau maintained his walking practice and described his excursions into nature. “I have come to this hill to see the sun go down—to recover sanity & put myself in relation with Nature,” he writes of a sunset walk on June 5th, “I would fain drink a drought of Nature’s serenity—Let deep answer to deep.”\(^\text{81}\)

Intent on alleviating his frustration by observing and connecting to the natural world, Thoreau’s journaling over the next several days included thoughts on the state interwoven with close observations of the woods. On June 16, he rejoices in the scent of the white water lily, which announced the arrival of “a season I had waited for.”\(^\text{82}\) “It is the emblem of purity & its scent suggests it,” he explains, “growing in stagnant & muddy—it bursts up so pure & fair to the eye & so sweet to the scent—as if to show us what purity & sweetness reside in & can be extracted from the slime & muck of earth.” “What confirmation of our hopes,” he continues, “is the fragrance of the water lily. I shall not so soon despair of the world for it notwithstanding slavery—& the want of principle of the

\(^{80}\) Thoreau’s heightened rage, as Sandy Petrulionis notes, mirrored the broader tenor of emotion in New England, especially Massachusetts, following the Burns incident—as displayed most spectacularly at the Framingham rally with William Lloyd Garrison’s dramatic burning of the U.S. Constitution (Petrulionis, “Editorial Savoir Faire,” 208-209).

\(^{81}\) PEJ, 8:176.

\(^{82}\) PEJ, 8:195.
North—It suggests that the time may come when men’s deeds will smell as sweet.”

The water lily represents the beginning of a new time, and hope for the future. He fixates on it like the answer to the question that has been haunting him. “If Nature can compound this fragrance still annually,” he determines, “I shall believe her still full of vigor—& that there is virtue in man too who perceives & loves it.”

Thoreau recognizes in the lily a lesson about nature’s ability to extract “from the slime & decay of the earth” that which is “pure & sweet & virtuous,” and present it in a flower. Such a natural marvel suggests one dependable process—“The resurrection of virtue!” “It reminds me that Nature has been partner to no Missouri Compromise,” he revels, “I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the white-water lily.”

Thoreau, in this moment, seems to find solace by living his philosophy, taking a wider view of humanity’s place in the universe and observing what wisdom the natural world has to offer. “It is these sights & sounds & fragrances put together that convince us of our immortality,” he concludes, “This fragrance assures me that though all other men fall one shall stand fast—though a pestilence sweep over the earth, it shall at least spare one man.”

Like the water lily, a person of “purity & courage” may still spring from the “foul slime” that is the “sloth & vice of man.”

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83 PEJ, 8:195.
84 PEJ, 8:195.
85 PEJ, 8:195.
86 PEJ, 8:195.
87 PEJ, 8:195.
88 PEJ, 8:196.
89 PEJ, 8:196.
As profound as this insight might be, however, it did not pacify or appease him entirely. His efforts to resume his natural observations, even that very day, did not distract him from the state of the country. After noting the lily and its hopeful implication in the journal, he returned to his journal again in the afternoon, circling back to his same frustrations and constructing a significant portion of the speech that would propel him into the realm of public antislavery activism. In this afternoon deluge, he complains that the turmoil of the state “has not merely interrupted me in my passage through court-street on errands of trade—but it has to some extent interrupted me & every man on his onward & upward path in which he had trusted soon to leave Court street far behind.”90 “But what signifies the beauty of nature when men are base?” he questions, in seeming disregard for his transcendent moment with the water lily earlier in the day.91 The apparent disappointment of an uninspired, because distracted, afternoon walk shines bright as his entry continues:

We walk to lakes to see our serenity reflected in them—When we are not serene we go not to them. Who can be serene in a country where both rulers & ruled are without principle? The remembrance of the baseness of politicians spoils my walks—my thoughts are murder to the state—I trust that all just men will conspire.92

The wrestle here reflects a serious internal conflict concerning the effectiveness of the very approach he has been pursuing now for years. Can he take wider views and “speak a word for nature,” trusting such matters to other “champions of civilization”?93

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90 PEJ, 8:190.
91 PEJ, 8:190.
92 PEJ, 8:200.
93 Dean and Hoag, “Thoreau’s Lectures Before Walden,” 199.
The stakes are high for Thoreau as he finds himself struggling to prove his own philosophy. “For my part my old & worthiest pursuits have lost I cannot say how much of their attraction,” he admits in reference to the events surrounding Burns. “I dwelt before in the illusion that my life passed somewhere only between heaven & hell but now I cannot persuade myself—that I do not dwell wholly within hell,” he continues. “The site of that political organization called Mass. is to me morally covered with scoriae & volcanic cinders such as Milton imagined. If there is any hell more unprincipled than our rulers & our people—I feel curious to visit it.”

Thoreau revised *Walden*, as discussed, with an acute awareness of the lack of principle among his contemporaries. He was far from enamored with the state of things. Nevertheless, the realization that things may be much worse than he previously suspected seemed to genuinely startle him. Significantly, this recognition came while *Walden* was already at the printer. Given the extent to which the manuscript changed in the years following the Thomas Simms incident, it is possible that, had the manuscript not already been at the printer, *Walden* might have been reimagined further and publication delayed even longer. His journaled remarks certainly suggest a turn to more overt activism this time around, an inclination vindicated by his actual delivery of these remarks at an antislavery rally in Framingham, Massachusetts on July Fourth, rather than leaving them in the journal. Instead of mounting the stage with an apology for not speaking on the Fugitive Slave Law, Thoreau reversed course and directly attacked the law, even including in that address his previous journal notes from the spring of 1851.

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94 PEJ, 8:198.

However, rather than unleash the full heat contained in the fire-filled passages of the journal, he delivered a carefully ameliorated, though still scorching, adaptation for the occasion. Editing his remarks for the crowd at Framingham is often understood as a gesture that manifested a desire “to be taken seriously as a social critic reformer and moral reformer,” with Walden’s impending publication looming large in his mind. In her extensive comparison of the journal passages with the delivered address, Sandra Petrulionis suggests that “Thoreau wanted to be regarded as a credible and an important author, probably more than at any other time in his maturation as a writer.” Petrulionis notes how this caused him to remove “the most inflammatory remarks about Christ and religious and government officials, statements that would have reflected negatively on the man who uttered them.” Strategizing to specifically earn the ear of the audience clearly reflected a measured approach from that pursued in A Week, or even “A Yankee in Canada,” which Thoreau pulled from Putnam’s Monthly in 1853 because the editor silently deleted his irreverent language without any mention to Thoreau—an editorial annoyance that would also put James Russell Lowell on the outs with Thoreau in years to come. Given Thoreau’s consistent refusal to censor irreverent opinions, Petrulionis

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99 In the case of “A Yankee in Canada,” the offending lines included, “I am not sure but this Catholic religion would be an admirable one if the priests were quite omitted.” In the later run in with Lowell, it was over the deletion of a line referencing the immortality of a pine tree. See Walls, A Life, 302, 422.
suggests that, in taking “pains to accommodate the public’s sensitivities,” Thoreau extended to his Framingham audience “a courtesy that he denied his editors throughout much of his career.”

Yet, Thoreau’s willingness to revise his words in an effort to help his audience embrace his message certainly precedes this Independence Day address. The proximity of this “courtesy” to the book’s looming publication reflects less a clever marketing strategy or single inconsistency and more of the same awareness and stance he displayed in revising *Walden*. As discussed, in returning to *Walden* Thoreau worked to balance his determination to speak the truth with his desire to break through to his audience. He did not want his audience to simply sigh heavily in response or stare at him “with arms akimbo,” nor did he want them to throw the baby out with the bath water, as some of the reviewers of *A Week* did in response to the precise type of irreverent language that he left behind in the private journal when preparing the public speech. But he did want to rouse them, and the differences between the journal and the published address clearly reflect him trying to walk that same balance. Moncure Conway, a fellow speaker at the rally, recalled the success with which Thoreau toed that line, insisting on living up to a higher truth without appearing to “crow over their low estate.” Conway remembered how Thoreau opened his address by stating his sympathy for the cause: “You have my sympathy; it is all I have to give you, but you may find it important to you.” “It was impossible to associate egotism with Thoreau,” Conway explained. “We all felt that the time and trouble he had taken at that crisis to proclaim his sympathy with the

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‘Disunionists’ was indeed important. He was there a representative of Concord, of science and letters, which could not quietly pursue their tasks while slavery was trampling down the rights of mankind.”

Having circumvented the charge of egotism, Thoreau seems to have effectively conveyed his message that blatant atrocities, like the Fugitive Slave Law itself, and slavery for that matter, magnified human concerns in a way that obscured the pursuit of higher tasks and more “just & proper business.”

Conway further recollected how Thoreau evoked the higher law that ultimately determined the humanity of Anthony Burns, regardless of Loring’s decision, with “such serene unconsciousness of anything shocking in it that we were but mildly startled.”

Such an unassuming assertion of truth that transcended political deliberation and policy echoed the confident tone of Walden’s conclusion.

Indeed, while the journal reflects the extent to which the Anthony Burns situation tried his patience, Thoreau’s speech affirmed his commitment to his ongoing project and trust in the orienting and redeeming power of wider views. In fact, the lecture adapts the very structure of Walden itself, intentionally juxtaposing his most lethal criticism with his pacifying encounter with the water lily. In the journal for June 16, he discovers the lily at the start of the day, and comes back from his afternoon walk still bemoaning the “baseness of politicians” spoiling his walk. In his address, however, he intentionally structures the text to conclude on the lily image, as a final image of hope and a testament to nature’s ability to spring new life from “the decay of humanity.”

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102 Conway, Autobiography Memories and Experiences, 184-5.

103 PEJ, 8:199.

104 Conway, Autobiography Memories and Experiences, 185.
incisive and biting critique, the text transitions to a word for nature and invitation to trust and heed the redemptive and hopeful lessons she offers. The address even settles finally on a similar charge to cast off dead things: “Slavery and servility have produced no sweet-scented flower annually, to charm the senses of men, for they have no real life: they are merely a decaying and a death, offensive to all healthy nostrils. We do not complain that they live, but that they do not get buried. Let the living bury them: even they are good for manure.”

Ultimately reiterating the message from “Walking, or the Wild,” and previewing the essence of Walden, “Slavery in Massachusetts” offered an invitation to cast aside the traditions, laws, and compacts of the past to let new life grow and spring forth. If, in revising his journal in preparation for the speech, he did not quite enact the “desire to speak somewhere without bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments,” the positive response to what remained a rather radical speech—dubbed “Words that Burn” by The National Anti-slavery Standard—suggested that he might yet lead his audience toward their morning work.

**Returning to the Reformers and Really Living**

Although Thoreau followed his loud splash into the public world of antislavery activism with a turn back to nature—composing soon after a new lecture on “Moonlight” and reworking “Walking, or the Wild” into two separate lectures—he did not entirely exit the arena of overt social reform. In October 1854, while preparing for an anticipated lecture tour in conjunction with the release of the new book, Thoreau received an

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invitation to deliver a lecture of “a reformatory character” as part of a lecture series on reform held in Providence, Rhode Island. Ten long years after delivering “Conservatives and Reformers” at Amory Hall, Thoreau had another opportunity to directly wade into the national conversation on reform. His willingness to accept the invitation with only six weeks of preparation time, in the midst of what was already a very busy schedule preparing for other planned lectures, is certainly “a measure of his resolve to satisfy the public's demand for his lectures in the months after the publication of Walden,” as Brad Dean suggests, but it also indicates his willingness to step back into that specific arena. With Walden, Thoreau had finally published his report of the reform experiment he had launched in the wake of his 1844 address at Amory Hall, and he wanted to expound on his results. This time, rather than merely reforming the reformers, Thoreau tried on their shoes, offering a diagnosis of society’s “infected atmosphere” that he felt went beyond his own “private ills” or “particular grievance.”

“What Shall it Profit?” ended up being a collection of journal passages from the past few years—Walden leftovers in that they were written while he significantly reworked the book, but not incorporated into the text. In the context of the lecture, Thoreau made no apologies for the blunt nature of such thoughts. “I take it for granted, when I am invited to lecture anywhere,” he warned his audience at the start, “that there is

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107 A. Fairbanks to HDT (October 14, 1854) in The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau ed. by Walter Harding and Carl Bode (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1974), 345.

108 Bradley P. Dean, “Reconstructions of Thoreau’s Early ‘Life Without Principle’ Lectures,” Studies in the American Renaissance, (1987), 287. Dean’s reconstruction project is the most extensive and thorough study of this lecture, both in historical context and textual development. Below citations from “What Shall It Profit?” refer to Dean’s reproduction of the early lecture, which is included in his article.

109 Harding and Bode, The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau, 147.
a desire to hear what I think on some subject, though I may be the greatest fool in the country,—and not that I should say pleasant things merely, or such as the audience will assent to; and I resolve, accordingly, that I will give you a strong dose of myself.”\textsuperscript{110}

Replacing the sympathy he offered his Framingham audience with this obdurate introduction positioned his Providence audience as the potential subject of his critique. He had been invited to deliver a lecture of “\textit{reformatory} character” and he would do so—implicating his audience in the process simply signaled the extent to which his words had successfully found their mark. To further emphasize that he hoped to speak \textit{to} his audience and \textit{not} for them, he related his experience of declining a previous lecture invitation upon discovering that the group expected “seven-eighths of the lecture to be theirs, and only one-eighth mine.”\textsuperscript{111} Thoreau came out of the gate at Providence clarifying that he had no interest in such a charade. He felt he had worked hard to put down roots “into the womb of things” and came to offer the audience the fruit of his labors, however singular or sour they might be.\textsuperscript{112}

Just as the Framingham rally provided the right outlet for pointed thoughts on the Fugitive Slave Law that had lain dormant in his journal since 1851, this lecture opportunity provided an outlet to share additional pointed thoughts he had accrued over the last few years of living in Fugitive Slave Law America. As a sort of B-Side version of his late \textit{Walden} material, the lecture captured the familiar refrain of \textit{Walden} and “Walking, or the Wild” while more directly attacking the avarice and mixed up priorities


\textsuperscript{111} Thoreau, “What Shall It Profit?” 312.

\textsuperscript{112} PEJ, 3:226.
of society. Inspired by Mark 8:36—“What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”—it decried “the infinite bustle” and lack of leisure in a world dedicated to “work-work-work” as simply short-sighted.113 “If a man walk in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer,” Thoreau laments, “but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen. As if a town had no interest in its forests but to cut them down!”114

He draws out this irony by relying on his trusty critical move—zooming out to a wider perspective. Prioritizing industry for the sake of industry reflexively champions the work of cutting down forests, in comparison to loafing through them, without ever considering the many other purposes a forest might serve. By inferring such alternative purposes, Thoreau challenges the premise behind prioritizing industry and provokes a broader consideration of a forest’s highest ends.

Pushing past a not-so-oblique defense of his own cherished practices, Thoreau extended this same critique to the political sphere. “America is said to be the arena on which the battle of freedom is to be fought,” he explains. “But surely it cannot be freedom in a merely political sense that is meant. Even if we grant that the American has freed himself from a political tyrant, he is still the slave of an economical and moral tyrant.”115 In the same way he questions the multiple uses of the forest, he similarly interrogates the many meanings of freedom. “What is it to be free from King George and

continue the slaves of King Prejudice?” he questions, pulling in a journal passage from February 1851, written the day after the arrest of the fugitive slave Shadrach Minkins. “What is it to be born free and not to live free? What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom?”  

Here, again, he summons a broader consideration of what freedom might ultimately mean—the highest ends to which it refers. He contends that the failure to engage in this type of broader thinking is stagnating the nation. “We are provincial, because we do not find at home our standards,—because we do not worship truth, but the reflection of truth,” he explains, “because we are warped and narrowed by an exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture and the like, which are but means, and not the end.”  

From Thoreau’s perspective, this is the problem truncating the nation: a focus on the means at the expense of the ends. There is no consideration or consensus on what he calls the “object of living.” What are we bustling and working for? The extent of legislative attention dedicated to producing tobacco or breeding slaves reflects deficient priorities, narrowly focused on vulgar means and ignorant of higher ends. “When we want culture more than potatoes, and illumination more than sugar plums,” he declares, “then the great resources of a world are taxed and drawn out, and the result or staple production, is, not slaves, nor operatives, but men, those rare fruits called, heroes, saints, poets, philosophers, and redeemer.”  

This is his great call to reform—a call to worry

less about the efficiency with which things are produced and more about the character of the lives being lived.

As part of this reformatory message, Thoreau included his standard clarification that producing “heroes, saints, poets, philosophers, and redeemers” involves recognizing that all human thoughts, traditions, and customs are neither universal nor eternal, and need to be jettisoned as necessary. Once again, he frames the task of bringing his contemporaries to understand this process as a constant struggle. “Most with whom I endeavor to talk,” he explains, “soon come to a stand against some institution in which they appear to hold stock, that is some particular way of viewing things, theirs not being a universal way. They will continually bring their own low roofs, or at least their own narrow sky-lights, between you and the sky—when it is the unobstructed heavens you would view.”120 Clutching investments in obsolete institutions against all reason inevitably impedes a clear vision of reality. “Get out of the way with your old cob-webs,” Thoreau again insists, “wash your windows.”121 The problem, he reiterates, is that the “great majority are strictly men of society,” and as a result live an untethered existence:

They live on the surface and are interested chiefly in the transient. They are like drift wood on the flood. They ask forever and only the news—the froth and scum of the eternal sea. They use policy and make up for want of matter with manner. Wealth and the approbation of man are to them success. The enterprises of society are something final and sufficing to them. The world advises them and they listen to its advice. It is of prime importance to them who is the president of the day.122

This encapsulates the real meat of Thoreau’s reformatory message, which circles back to alternative scales of perspective and the possibility of a deeper existence. A wider view provides a comprehensive perspective that illuminates the tenuousness of society and reveals the extent to which cherished policies or institutions are no more than “drift wood on the flood” in the context of the universe. Living on such a scale turns the routine questions posed to a lecturer, “when did I come—when am I going” into the more pertinent question, “What does he lecture for?”—a question Thoreau admitted, “made me quake in my shoes!” Answering such questions leads from a focus on the superficialities of society to a broader focus on one’s purpose in the universe.

This shift in perspective captures a turn from “mankind & the opinions of society” reflected in legislative policies to the higher truth of the universe reflected in the natural world as “seen from the heights of philosophy.”

“Communication from Heaven is a journal still published,” he explains, “which never re-prints the President’s Message, but rather the higher law.” Recalling his own distractions with such limited affairs, which filled his walks, he offers the warning, “If you chance to live and move and have your being in that thin stratum in which the events that make the news transpire,—thinner than the paper on which it is printed,—then these things will fill the world for you; but if you soar above or dive below that plane, you cannot remember nor be reminded of them.”

In the end, the lecture fundamentally communicates Thoreau’s primary invitation—the

call to soar above to a higher plane or dive below to a deeper one. “Really to see the sun rise or go down every day, so to relate ourselves to a universal fact, would preserve us sane forever,” he maintains. “Nations! What are nations? Tartars, and Huns, and Chinamen! Like insects, they swarm. The historian strives in vain to make them memorable.”

His encouragement to “Read the Eternities” rather than “the Times” refers back to this sense of interpreting the happenings of the present day by the light of eternal truth. “Even the facts of science may dust the mind by their dryness,” he explains, “unless they are in a sense effaced each morning, or rather rendered fertile by the dews of fresh and living truth.” Such a contention reveals the transcendental character of Thoreau’s reformatory vision. “Knowledge,” he clarifies, “does not come to us by details, but in flashes of light from heaven.” In the end, he offers his audience a picture of, what he previously described to Thomas Wentworth Higginson as, “Reality rather transcendentally treated.”

Because knowledge and truth come from a heavenly place, Thoreau views himself, and every individual, “as a musical instrument,” made of “sound timber” and needing to be “kept tuned always” so that “when the bow of events is drawn across him, he may vibrate and resound in perfect harmony.” As a reformer, Thoreau identifies the current state of discord, but also invites his audience to take the path of wider views that leads towards future harmony. “A sensitive soul,” he concludes, “will be continually trying its strings to see if they are in tune.”

129 Harding and Bode, The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau, 279.
hearing the sound of “the notes of the flute” at eventide, a sensitive soul will not be lulled
to sleep by transient concerns, but will wake to the dawn of each new day.

Although this direct and reformatory-minded address would eventually turn out to be the most frequent lecture he would give, Thoreau quickly found himself doubting its effectiveness and questioning whether it was worth the effort it took to pull it together. “Winter has come unnoticed by me, I have been so busy writing,” he admitted in his journal the day after the address.132 “This is the life most lead in respect to Nature,” he eerily realized, “How different from my habitual one hasty, coarse, and trivial, as if you were a spindle in a factory. The other is leisurely, fine, and glorious, like a flower. In the first case you are merely getting your living; in the second you live as you go along.”133 Despite Thoreau’s vision for a grand lecture tour after the Walden release, he had not made it even halfway through the lecture season before he began to doubt his suitability for life as a lecturer and overt spokesman of reform. “After lecturing twice this winter I feel that I am in danger of cheapening myself by trying to become a successful lecturer, i.e., to interest my audiences,” he reflected, “I am disappointed to find that most that I am and value myself for is lost, or worse than lost, on my audience.”134 Thoreau’s disillusionment with the lecturing life certainly related to the sacrifice of his more leisure time that it required, but it also manifested the same persistent struggle to come to terms with his seemingly unmoved audience. “I fail to get even the attention of the mass,” he wrote. “I should suit them better if I suited myself less. I feel that the public demand an

133 J, 7:80.
134 J, 7:80.
average man,—average thoughts and manners,—not originality, nor even absolute excellence. You cannot interest them except as you are like them and sympathize with them.” Thoreau found the sympathy he displayed at Framingham unsustainable, as he was continually trying to reform his audience rather than voice their opinion. “I would rather that my audience come to me than that I should go to them, and so they be sifted,” he declared, “I would rather write books than lectures. That is fine, this coarse. To read to a promiscuous audience who are at your mercy the fine thoughts you solaced yourself with far away is as violent as to fatten geese by cramming, and in this case they do not get fatter.” Not too far removed from his July address and already he had come to doubt the idea of capturing the expansiveness of a text like Walden in a lecture. He doubted whether he could bring his thoughts and the thoughts that solaced him to others, if they were not in search of such solace themselves. The struggle remained the same—how to entice people to take up that search, how to get them to “see this world slumbering.”

As Thoreau faced such doubts, and found the life of the lecturer “hasty, coarse, and trivial,” his plans for a lecture tour to Canada and the Midwest never materialized and he returned to his “leisurely, fine, and glorious” life in the Concord woods a bit sooner than he probably expected. Yet, despite his misgivings, he persisted in delivering “What Shall it Profit?” over the next few years, finding himself continually

135 J, 7:79.

136 J, 7:79-80. Thoreau circles back to the same troubled realization Emerson had in 1831: “Truth is not crammed down the throats of men, but is something to be understood. Until it is understood, it is not truth to the mind” (JMN, 5:89).

137 J, 3:419.

frustrated by the response of his audience. “Many will complain of my lectures that they are transcendental,” he wrote after delivering the lecture to the Concord Lyceum, where his townsfolk responded to his words with comments like “Can’t understand them” and questions like “Would you have us return to the savage state?” “And true criticism enough, it may be, from their point of view” he conceded. “But the fact is, the earnest lecturer can speak only to his like, and the adapting of himself to his audience is a mere compliment which he pays them.”\(^{139}\) As the decade dragged on and the nation marched closer towards Civil War, Thoreau was short on such compliments. “If you wish to know how I think, you must endeavor to put yourself in my place,” he explained. “If you wish me to speak as if I were you, that is another affair.”\(^{140}\) Committed to giving his perspective, Thoreau diligently carried on despite his persistent defeats. On October 9, 1859, he delivered “What Shall it Profit?” at Theodore Parker’s church under the new title, “Life Misspent.” While dropping the biblically allusive title on the occasion of an actual church sermon is characteristic of Thoreau’s counter-culture ethos, the new title also effectively emphasizes the tragedy of a life lived without principle, connecting the lecture back to the fear expressed early in *Walden*—the fear of coming to die only to discover that he had not lived.\(^{141}\) The very next Sunday, events at Harper’s Ferry would reveal what, to Thoreau’s mind, really living looked like.

\(^{139}\) *J*, 7:197.

\(^{140}\) *J*, 7:197.

\(^{141}\) As Thoreau prepared the lecture for publication from his deathbed, he settled on the title “Life Without Principle,” but only after Ticknor and Fields, who were editing the *Atlantic* at the time, rejected his initial suggestion of “The Higher Law” (Dean, “Reconstructions of Thoreau’s Early ‘Life Without Principle’ Lectures,” 302).
John Brown, Violence, and America’s Morning Experience

On the morning of October 17, 1859, Thoreau recorded in his journal, “A smart frost this morning. Ground stiffened. Hear of ice in a tub.” What he had not yet heard, however, was that same frosty morning, John Brown and his men had launched their attack on Harper’s Ferry, with hopes of instigating a slave-revolt that might ripple throughout the South. Thoreau would not hear about it until the nineteenth, a day after recording in his journal, “Why can we not oftener refresh one another with original thoughts?” Brown’s actions certainly stirred Thoreau towards some original thoughts, which he seemed immediately intent on sharing. He poured these thoughts into his journal over the next few days, composing the address that he would share in the vestry of the First Parish Meetinghouse less than two weeks later. Despite the harrowing realization of the seeming inevitability of violence, Brown’s raid ushered in the real possibility of a new dawn, and Thoreau was more anxious than ever for his neighbors to wake to it.

It was originally reported that Brown died, and news of his death struck Thoreau as a sudden and insuppressible revelation. “When a government puts forth its strength on the side of injustice, as ours (especially to-day) to maintain slavery and kill the liberators of the slave, what a merely brute, or worse than brute, force it is seen to be!” he wrote, “I see this government to be allied with France and Austria in oppressing mankind.” This, for Thoreau, was the last straw. In response to the Anthony Burns affair, he had

142 J, 12:396.
143 J, 12:399.
144 J, 12:400.
recorded in his journal, “The discovery is the manner of men your countrymen are.”145

The Burns incident confirmed the government’s willingness to forcefully defend the institution of slavery—sending a free man back to bondage under heavy military protection—and now Brown’s death crystallized the government’s willingness to execute those who would resist and attempt to rescue the enslaved—something Massachusetts previously avoided in dropping the legal charges against those who tried to spring Burns free in June 1854.146 If exerting martial force to ensure injustice was the pinnacle of “oppressing mankind,” the government revealed itself unambiguously culpable and Thoreau felt the state needed to be held accountable.

Thoreau dismissed the notion that either the violence of Brown’s actions or his lack of success did anything to diminish the virtue of his actions. “It galls me to listen to the remarks of craven-hearted neighbors who speak disparagingly of Brown because he resorted to violence, resisted the government, threw his life away!” he fumed. “What way have they thrown their lives, pray?—neighbors would praise a man for attacking singly an ordinary band of thieves or murderers.”147 “Such minds are not equal to the occasion,” Thoreau decides, for they clearly lack the broader perspective to see how they “preserve the so-called peace of their community by deeds of petty violence everyday.”148 This failure to zoom out and interrogate the basis of the violence holding slavery together was Thoreau’s whole point—why sanction the violence that secured

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145 PEJ, 8:199.

146 Earl Martz, “The Fate of the Rescuers,” in Fugitive Slave on Trial: The Anthony Burns Case and Abolitionist Outrage (U of Kansas P, 2010), 100-107.

147 J, 12:401-2.

slavery and rebuke the violence being used to end it? The distinction came down to the
limits of a human law that, from Thoreau’s perspective, lacked roots in “the womb of
things” and instead survived on the basis of a public willingness to both compromise on
principle and enforce the results of that compromise with marital power. “When you
have caught and hung all of the human rebels, you have accomplished nothing but your
own guilt,” Thoreau seethed into his journal, “for you have not struck at the
fountainhead.”149 Killing off those who regard a higher law than the constitution—which
regard renders them treasonous—does nothing to touch the genuine authority their
treason is based on, “the power that makes and forever re-creates man.”150 Asserting the
inherent injustice of slavery, Thoreau points to the futility of any legislative attempt to
alter that injustice, regardless of what ammunition or arsenal the government employs in
support of that endeavor: “Can all the arts of the cannon-founder tempt matter to turn
against its maker?”151 “There sits a tyrant holding fettered four millions of slaves,” he
explains of the United States government. “Here comes their heroic liberator; if he falls,
will he not still live?”152 For Thoreau, Brown’s actions and choice to respond with
violence to an institution solely maintained by violence hardly invalidated the virtue of
his effort. If all other more peaceful options proved ineffective, what other response does
a man of principle have? Violence was being done, whether Brown acted or not. His
decision to turn to violence reflected his refusal to let an individual aversion to one evil
permit others to continue enacting that same evil to degenerate ends. If “might makes right” was going to be the ruling ethos of the day, Brown determined to throw his might behind what he believed to be right. His complete willingness to die in defending such beliefs proved him “a man of ideals and principles,” what Thoreau construed as “a Transcendentalist above all.”\(^\text{153}\)

What haunted Thoreau most as he ruminated on Brown’s commitment to principle was his neighbors’ inability to recognize it. As Thoreau later reflected in a funeral sermon for Brown read in absentia at his graveside on the Fourth of July, “For my own part, I commonly attend more to nature than to man, but any affecting human event may blind our eyes to natural objects. I was so absorbed in him as to be surprised whenever I detected the routine of the natural world surviving still, or met persons going about their affairs indifferent.”\(^\text{154}\) While Brown’s action struck Thoreau like lightning from heaven, his neighbors treated it like an odd cloud that briefly disturbed an otherwise sunny day. Dismissing Brown as “undoubtedly insane,” they “proceed to live their sane, and wise, and altogether admirable lives,” Thoreau caustically noted in his journal. He cringed at the utter backwardness of such a response. “What is the character of that calm which follows when the law and the slaveholder prevail?” he asks. “A government that pretends to be Christian and crucifies a million Christ’s everyday.”\(^\text{155}\) Thoreau, thus, arrives at the same place as Stowe in marking the “Christian” nation’s protection of slavery as the pinnacle of hypocrisy, but keeps his emphasis directed toward the larger

\(^{153}\) J, 12:420.


\(^{155}\) J, 12:404.
problem such hypocrisy reveals—not just a lack of true Christian faith, but a total lack of life, “universal woodeness (both of head and heart), the want of vitality, of man,—the effect of vice, —whence are begotten fear and superstition and bigotry and persecution and slavery of all kinds.”

For Thoreau, anyone who can rejoice in the calm that follows Brown’s failure is neither awake nor alive.

Like the aftermath of the Burns affair, Thoreau extends this charge to those who oppose slavery, suggesting that they make a mere idol of the cause, “which at length changes the worshipper into a stone image himself.” One can only deliberate for so long without it going anywhere. In this sense, Thoreau’s endorsement of John Brown came with the same message that Stowe had for America when she came to write Dred. Where the caning of Charles Sumner and sacking of Lawrence, Kansas caused Stowe to reconsider the limits of peaceful resolution with a seemingly belligerent people, the response to Brown’s raid both confirmed Thoreau’s doubts following the Anthony Burns episode and extinguished his hope in a peaceful and reasoned approach to ending slavery. Just as Stowe balanced her portrait of Uncle Tom’s meekness with the vivid description of Dred’s vehemence, Thoreau balanced the beauty of the water lily with the price that it took to blossom. In “Slavery in Massachusetts,” Thoreau remarked that he sensed “no compromise in the fragrance of the water-lily,” claiming it to be no “Nymphaea Douglasii”—a reference to the architect of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Stephen Douglas. Learning of Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, Thoreau seemed to have finally “scented a
white water-lily, and a season I had waited for.” Water lilies were those, like John Brown, who stood up to oppression and refused to yield until they finally blossomed, however long and whatever it took. As Brown’s actions represented the possibility of new life and peace emerging from the “sloth and vice of man,” they also signaled what that blossoming required.

Thoreau refused to let notions of propriety obscure the brilliance of the recent lightning strike. His own combativeness following the raid was on display in his response to those who doubted the prudence of his decision to speak to the town: “I did not send to you for advice but to announce that I am to speak.” Much like Stowe who characterized Clayton as “ideal to an excess” in an effort to accentuate how his leaving to Canada reflected the extent to which the United States left no home for the most moral of its citizens, Thoreau set to work coloring John Brown by the same lights in an effort to drive home the same point. The nation had reached the point of killing its best sons, and Thoreau wanted to make sure his contemporaries understood that sending men like Brown to the gallows was “the greatest compliment this country could pay them.”

This insight became the linchpin of his public address. “I regard this event as a touchstone designed to bring out, with glaring distinctness, the character of this government,” he emphasized to his audience. The declaration pivoted his speech from contending with how individuals and newspapers covered the raid, towards an

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interrogation of the systematic nature of the problem the necessity of the raid highlighted. “We talk about a representative government,” he scoffs, “but what a monster of a government is that where the noblest faculties of the mind, and the whole heart, are not represented.” Just as the case of Anthony Burns ultimately proved to be a trial of Massachusetts, so John Brown’s raid proved to be a trial of the nation. The government’s violent resistance to and eventual execution of John Brown, which Thoreau likely and rightly assumed to be all but decided at this point, revealed a government who stopped representing the most noble of its citizens, and stalked “over the earth, with its heart taken out and the top of its brain shot away,” like a “semi-human tiger or ox.”

From Thoreau’s perspective, it is not the number of represented men that makes a government virtuous, but rather a consistent devotion to the most virtuous principles. “The only government that I recognize,” he explains, “is that power that establishes justice in the land, never that which establishes injustice.” Justice, in this sense, is not determined by courtroom judges or deliberating senators. Because truth exists independent of humanity, for Thoreau, it is something that must be discovered rather than decided upon. The light of revelation eclipses the work of deliberation. Brown’s words and acts constitute “the best news that America has ever heard” because of the extent to which they reflect that understanding. Thoreau rejoiced that Brown had “already quickened the feeble pulse of the North, and infused more and more generous blood into her veins and heart, than any number of years of what is called commercial and political

Thoreau latched on to Brown as the embodiment of the reformatory power of one individual. Brown validated the hunch that launched his Walden experiment, proving how “one emancipated heart & intellect” could “knock off the fetters from a million slaves.” In his later funeral sermon, he further praised Brown’s raid and subsequent death as typifying the revolution and perspectival shift towards higher understanding that he expounded at the end of Walden. “Commonly, men live according to a formula,” he reflected, “and are satisfied if the order of law is observed, but in this instance they, to some extent, returned to original perceptions, and there was a slight revival of old religion. They saw that what was called order was confusion, what was called justice, injustice, and that the best was deemed the worst.” Advancing “in the direction of his dreams” putting “some things behind” and eventually passing “an invisible boundary” as “new, universal, and more liberal laws” began “to establish themselves around and within him,” Brown approached the point where “the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness” (580). Brown finally enacted the vision and philosophy Thoreau had spent years articulating.

In the spring of 1851, Thoreau wrote, “A sane & growing man revolutionizes every day. What institutions of man can survive a morning experience.” While those who “cannot conceive of a man who is actuated by higher motives than they are” may

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166 PEJ, 2:156.
168 PEJ, 3:234.
“pronounce this man insane,” Thoreau, in “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” positioned him as the only individual in the country who seemed to be truly awake. Thoreau believed that Brown’s sanity and growth would set the wheels of America’s morning experience in motion. “Men have been hung in the South before for attempting to rescue slaves, and the North was not much stirred by it. Whence, then, this wonderful difference?” Thoreau later asked in the funeral sermon, reflecting back on the months since Brown’s death. “We were not so sure of their devotion to principle,” he answered. “We made a subtle distinction, forgot human laws, and did homage to an idea. The North, I mean the living North, was suddenly all transcendental. It went behind the human law, it went behind the apparent failure, and recognized eternal justice and glory.” Thoreau sensed that a new morning was finally about to dawn in America, and it would be a more glorious morning then the nation had ever known. The new attitude that emerged in the wake of Brown’s raid “suggested a more intelligent and generous spirit than that which actuated our forefathers, and the possibility, in the course of ages, of a revolution in behalf of another and an oppressed people.” It took Brown’s replicating the battle of Concord—a meager band of citizens bravely standing up to oppressors in the name of principle—to bring about the next phase of the Revolution that the nation so desperately needed. The type of revolution that Thoreau had been calling for but his neighbors refused to wake up to.

Thoreau recognized that Brown’s raid could be the thing that finally wakes the nation, even if the light bursting from this “angel of light” initially “puts out our eyes.” “Only that day dawns to which we are awake,” and Brown might finally be the morning bird that does the job of stirring. On the day of Brown’s death, in an address at town hall in Concord, Thoreau described Brown’s “transcendent moral greatness” as “universal and widely related” to the point of being “nearly identical with greatness every where and in every age.”¹⁷² Those who took wider views of the times, in other words, would find their hero not in those compromising to save the union, but those sacrificing everything to make the union a nation worth saving. Brown, like Clayton, would be the touchstone of a broken nation for white America, but he would also, like Dred, foreshadow what seemed like the only available response for moral America. As Thoreau wrote in his journal on October 21, 1859, “I do not complain of any tactics that are effective of good, whether one wields the quill or the sword, but I shall not think him mistaken who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave. I will judge of the tactics by the fruits.”¹⁷³ Thoreau’s wrestle to wake the world revealed just how hard the brutal nature of humanity can be to overcome, while also reflecting his conviction that she must be overcome. If Thoreau’s neighbors would not be roused by the bragging chanticleer, they would have to endure a more violent morning experience. For only that day dawns to which we are awake, and whether or not the nation would recognize it, Thoreau saw that there was more day to dawn.


EPILOGUE
THE END OF DELIBERATION AND THE BATTLE FOR A BETTER WORLD

The way to mend the bad world, is to create the right one.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1860

In his 1859 State of the Union Address, two months after John Brown’s attack on Harper’s Ferry, President James Buchanan located the “chief importance” of the attempted uprising not in the violent actions themselves, but “the apprehension that they are but symptoms of an incurable disease in the public mind, which may break out in still more dangerous outrages and terminate at last in an open war by the North to abolish slavery in the South.” The future Buchanan feared was a long time in the making. In 1850, during the early flames of the debate over the Fugitive Slave Law, Moses Stuart similarly warned that “if heated enthusiasts on both sides, will listen to no caution, and brook no delay of their measures,” the next step was “a war compared with which, the horrors of St. Domingo are but a faint image.” Although Brown’s raid portended the imminence of the dreary future that Stuart imagined at the start of the decade, Buchanan followed standard protocol in doggedly seeking to redirect the national ship towards

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calmer waters and the stabilizing anchor of constitutional authority and public opinion.

Encouraging the nation “to cultivate the ancient feelings of mutual forbearance and good will toward each other,” Buchanan called for renewed faith in the American way:

We ought to reflect that in this age, and especially in this country, there is an incessant flux and reflux of public opinion. Questions which in their day assumed a most threatening aspect have now nearly gone from the memory of men … Such, in my opinion, will prove to be the fate of the present sectional excitement should those who wisely seek to apply the remedy continue always to confine their efforts within the pale of the Constitution. If this course be pursued, the existing agitation on the subject of domestic slavery, like everything human, will have its day and give place to other and less threatening controversies. Public opinion in this country is all-powerful, and when it reaches a dangerous excess upon any question the good sense of the people will furnish the corrective and bring it back within safe limits.4

Responding to non-sanctioned violence by asserting the sovereignty of public opinion, Buchanan delegitimized Brown’s raid as incongruent with the nation’s tried and true political process.

The President went on to directly connect the incident at Harper’s Ferry with the danger of higher-law discourse. “Those who announce abstract doctrines subversive of the Constitution and the Union,” he explained, “must not be surprised should their heated partisans advance one step further and attempt by violence to carry these doctrines into practical effect.” Buchanan hoped that events at Harper’s Ferry would increase the people’s “resolve that the Constitution and the Union shall not be endangered by rash counsels.”5 His insinuation echoed Stuart’s fears that making a supreme authority out of “a conscience wholly subjective” would leave the nation to the mayhem of individual “passions and prejudices.” But Buchanan’s own description of the “incessant flux and


reflux of public opinion” located the same potential lawlessness in the nation’s “all-powerful” authority. The number of consciences did not circumvent the problem of subjectivity or competing passions and prejudices, it merely magnified the scale. Buchanan, however, trusted public opinion—the collective mind of the people—to eventually settle the matter.

Deferring to public opinion and keeping things in “the pale of the Constitution” had, however, done little over the last seventy years to remedy the slavery crisis. The founding document’s ambivalence on the question of slavery proved a critical crack that the “good sense of the people” failed to mend. As reliable as deliberative discourse within the confines of the Constitution might have been in remedying other issues, slavery presented an incorrigible problem that dangerously divided the public mind. The Fugitive Slave Law exacerbated the danger by illuminating the distance between competing perspectives on slavery and accentuating the concessions that coexistence required.

This dissertation has tracked Stowe and Thoreau’s efforts to legitimate the fight against slavery by establishing an authority that transcended the Constitution. Unwilling to follow Orestes Brownson in turning individual agency over to the dictates of an ostensibly divine institution and dispense with the freedom of private judgment altogether, Thoreau and Stowe affirmed the individual capacity to discern truth, but sought to identify a higher authority that could guide their opinions and decisions. Their call to observe a higher law was not, as Stuart feared, an inward appeal to the virtue and knowledge of an isolated conscience, but rather a plea to live in accordance with the highest truth and not let undue allegiance to existing structures hinder that effort.
To guide the public mind’s processing of slavery and other future problems, Stowe and Thoreau both asserted transcendent standards. While their realometers had the same function—marking and ordering reality—they were calibrated differently. Drawing on the millennial vision fostered by her father’s generation, of a Christian republic preparing the way for Christ’s return, Stowe prioritized “goodwill to man” as the essence of the Christian message and master chord to national harmony. Instead of organizing society in reflection of some divine hierarchical structure, Stowe sought to align society with the same eternal principles that God prioritized. God’s divinity, from Stowe’s perspective, rested not in his supreme intrinsic power, which would allow him to simply declare what is right, but his adherence to eternal principles. As the master chord of such principles, goodwill became the realometer for gauging how well society was legislated and organized. Asserting humanity’s collective progress towards greater unison with this gauge, Stowe approached slavery as the latest obstacle that needed to be overcome for the nation to fulfill its divine destiny of preparing the world for the millennium.

While Stowe sought to assert the universality of the Christian tradition and contextualize the transatlantic abolition of slavery within the increased Christianization of the world, Thoreau, in contrast, asserted Christianity’s provinciality in the context of an expansive universe and the dynamic history of the world. Turning from such provinciality, Thoreau encouraged his contemporaries to take wider views that would reveal humanity as part and parcel of nature. His declaration that “the universe is wider than our views of it” was an invitation to recognize the authority of the universe. Rather than starting with a notion of truth or hierarchal order and attempting to fit the universe into it, Thoreau started with the universe and sought to understand the relationship
between things as he observed them. Determining truth, in this sense, became an ongoing process of observation and discovery that required previous understanding to be continually adjusted in accordance with new revelations. Trouble occurred, according to Thoreau, when humans halted the process of discovery and institutionalized premature conclusions. Despite previous understanding of how humans related to one another, Thoreau insisted that any human fully awake and attuned to the surrounding world would recognize that “there are modes by which a man may put bread into his mouth which will not prejudice him as a companion and neighbor.” For Thoreau, to continue asserting the necessity of prejudice in spite of clear alternative options engendered a vain reality. Instead of applying a revealed abstract law to the universe, he sought to understand and live in accordance with the laws the universe revealed.

Stowe’s principle-based Christian approach to reality and Thoreau’s observation-based comprehensive approach to reality appealed to different authorities and imagined different futures, but they shared a common enemy in slavery. While Buchanan considered Brown’s attack on Harper’s Ferry evidence of “an incurable disease in the public mind,” both Stowe and Thoreau saw it as a desperate attempt to finally cure a disease that had been ravaging the nation under the protection of the Constitution. As this study has shown, the course of both Stowe and Thoreau’s literary careers in the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Law reflects a steady trajectory of diminished confidence that existing political protocols were going to meet the moral demands of the realities they imagined or create the better world the American Revolution promised. “We have

used up all of our inherited freedom,” wrote Thoreau. “If we would save our lives we must fight for them.” Thoreau and Stowe were not simply writing to end slavery; they were writing to mend the world by ensuring it was built on a solid foundation, rather than a vain reality.

While they hoped their writing could change minds and awaken their readers to a clearer picture of reality, the events of the 1850s clouded the possibilities of reform through democratic deliberation by revealing the strength of opposing positions. In 1844, someone like Margaret Fuller could still write,

> Though the national independence be blurred by the servility of individuals; though freedom and equality have been proclaimed only to leave room for a monstrous display of slave dealing and slave keeping. still it is not in vain, that the verbal statement has been made, ‘All men are born free and equal.’ There it stands, a golden certainty, wherewith to encourage the good, to shame the bad. The new world may be called clearly to perceive that it incurs the utmost penalty, if it rejects the sorrowful brother. And if men are deaf, the angels hear. But men cannot be deaf. It is inevitable that an external freedom, such as has been achieved for the nation, should be so also for every member of it.8

Fuller’s death two months, almost to the day, before the Fugitive Slave Law passed kept her from providing a sustained response to the stunning challenge the law posed to her sense of inevitable freedom. Stowe answered with Fuller’s confidence that “men cannot be deaf,” only to find over the course of the decade that they can surely be silenced. For Thoreau, the North’s acquiescence to the law revealed the nation’s permanent residence in a hell he, along with Fuller, previously mistook for purgatory. Settling on Fuller’s

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contention that at least “the angels hear,” both Stowe and Thoreau posited John Brown as a harbinger of glad tidings, if not divine reckoning.

Stowe and Thoreau learned that any “golden certainty” of the nation’s inevitable egalitarian future ran up against the strength of alternative visions of reality. In 1861, Mary Chestnut, a Southern diarist who believed slavery a generous institution that supported a naturally servile people, lumped Stowe and Thoreau together alongside Horace Greeley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Charles Sumner, as common culprits in poisoning the public mind against the South’s benevolent intentions. “In nice New England homes—clean, clear, sweet-smelling—shut up in libraries, writing books which ease their hearts of their bitterness to us, or editing newspapers—all [of] which pays better than anything else in the world,” Stowe, Thoreau, and their companions practiced the “the cheapest philanthropy trade in the world.” “Easy,” she insisted, “as setting John Brown to come down here and cut our throats in Christ’s name.”9 The harder task, she declared, was daily interacting with, supporting, and nurturing a primitive race. “We take our chance, doing our duty as best we may among the wooly heads,” she explained. “The slave-owners, when they are good men and women, are the martyrs.”10 Chestnut’s perspective clearly flips Stowe and Thoreau’s entire script, manifesting the complexity of the slavery dispute and the trouble with assuming the peacefulness of its inevitable resolution. Her reference to Brown’s attack as the “easy” option equally complicates the Northern exultation of his actions.

10 Chestnut, “November 27, 1861,” 246.
Chestnut legitimately questioned the fanatical willingness to eschew political protocols and go straight to taking lives, but Stowe and Thoreau both decided that they could neither live in nor cooperate with the reality that she asserted. After years of frustration, using might to help make the world right seemed like the only remaining option. “Some men,” as the narrator of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* remarked upon George Shelby’s thumping of Simon Legree, “are decidedly bettered by being knocked down.”

While Chestnut considered Brown’s actions easy—bypassing the troubles of the deliberative democratic process and enacting change by simply cutting the throats of those who disagreed with him—Stowe and Thoreau celebrated them as the difficult first step in renovating a failed state. They tried to write their way to a better world one word at a time, but the ineffectiveness of the system and the urgent stakes of their struggle finally led them to prioritize ends over means. Words might have been the preferred weapon, but the ultimate objective was curing the body politic of a debilitating disease and aligning the nation with the highest truth. “The one great rule of composition,” Thoreau wrote, “is, to speak the truth. This first, this second, this third; pebbles in your mouth or not.”

Words, like the central tenants of the American political process, proved only as good as the results they produced. The time had not yet arrived, they both decided, where righting the world could be achieved with words alone.

In the end, for Stowe and Thoreau the moral demands of reality transcended political structures and existing allocations of power. John Brown did “more than any

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man yet for the honor of the American name” because he fought for truth in the face of civic opposition.\textsuperscript{13} This is a dangerous ideal to valorize, as everyone from Moses Stuart to Daniel Webster to James Buchanan to Mary Chestnut recognized. But the willingness to sacrifice and fight, even die, for the reality you believe is unquestionably a hallmark of American virtue. It is, after all, the heart of the nation’s origin story. George Washington and his fellow patriots fought their overlords for the sake of inalienable rights they believed to be theirs. Their American Revolution broke open a world of new possibilities, but came with no guarantees—as Stowe and Thoreau’s generation learned. The turbulent 1850s played a particularly spectacular role in dissolving dreams of America’s inevitable future and illuminating the need for further battles.

This dissertation has tracked how Stowe and Thoreau fought from separate foundations to direct the course of America’s future away from slavery and in a more egalitarian direction. While the authorities they appealed to gained greater traction in the wake of the Civil War, and continue to resonate in the present day, neither of them, as this dissertation has detailed, were unequivocally accepted without incident or struggle. Building the future on such authorities was and continues to be a creative and destructive process of planting new ideas and destroying old ones. As writers and activists continue to fight for a world built on certain foundations rather than others, the potential of compromise and discourse to ensure peaceful coexistence remains an open question. The Civil War stands as an ominous warning of what can happen when the problems created by colliding perspectives and opposing portraits of reality are not deliberatively resolved.

\textsuperscript{13} Harriet Beecher Stowe to John Brown Paton, March 2, 1860 (Stowe’s emphasis), as cited in David Reynolds, \textit{Mightier than the Sword} (NY: Norton, 2011), 164.
But it also stands as a reminder that some realities need to be opposed at all costs—some truths are worth fighting and even dying for. Should the battle for a better world again reach such a desperate point, let us hope that the nation throws its might behind the right reality.


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