Transcendentalist Literature and the Question of Slavery: An Examination of Transcendentalist Critiques Before and After the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

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1850 stands to this day as a seminal year in the history of American society and democracy. Henry Clay and Stephen Douglas, working under the auspices of a fracturing Union, drafted and passed into law the Compromise of 1850. This piece of legislation, a centerpiece in studies of American history, was one that attempted to unite the nation while simultaneously creating a divide that led to the Civil War. Beginning with the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which divided the nation into “free” and “slave” states, America debated the abolition of slavery. However, with the newest compromise of 1850, a new law was created – the Fugitive Slave Act of 1851. Under this legislation, citizens and officials in even the most ardently abolitionist states were required to transfer escaped slaves over to the proper authorities. The ideals of freedom and liberty began to crumble. It was at this point that Americans began to devolve into factions, divided along the lines of freedom and slavery. As is often the case in moments of extreme social strife and radical change, it was the role of the writer to emerge in cross-examination of the very nature of American law. The nation’s foundations of philosophy were largely confined to the realms of religion. However, branching off of their Unitarian beliefs, the Transcendentalists emerged as the first of our American philosophers. Early texts such as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and Henry David Thoreau’s magnum opus, Walden, spoke to themes of removal and self-enlightenment. The Transcendentalist goal was not to explicitly spur mass social change, but instead to advocate the independence and supremacy of the individual mind; they sought the mystical “One” and the greater truth, actively attempting to remove themselves from overt political debate. Even in Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” a text that explicitly tackled the dichotomy between a government and a subject, there is a certain reluctance displayed towards all democratic participation. Thoreau, discussing the act of voting, stated that, “even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail”.1 This oft-cited text, while certainly inflammatory at the time and inspirational in future Civil Rights struggles, was initially designed as a treatise in favor of personal liberty. However, Thoreau and his fellow Transcendentalists, by 1851, began their slow awakening from dormancy into a position of social activism. Liberty and justice, key aspects of their philosophy, were endangered. For thinkers such as Thoreau, Emerson, and Margaret Fuller, a necessity arose to speak and distance themselves from pragmatic stances of removal from society. In this awakening, they transitioned from thinkers to activists with distinct beliefs regarding not just democracy, but the role of the individual in such a state. Describing John Brown, convicted of treason for his raid on Harper’s Ferry, Thoreau stated that he was “a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles”.2 The Transcendentalists were once a force of philosophy and education. After 1850, the tides turned and the Transcendentalists assumed their most valuable role: a voice of reason and tolerance.

To fully understand the change in the role of the Transcendentalists in socio-political discourse, it is necessary to progress through a historical timeline of their essays and addresses. In doing so, not only is the progression elucidated, but the writers themselves emerge less as philosophers and more as citizens. At the center of this progression and debate are the giants of this literary movement: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Margaret Fuller. At the center of the argument are a series of addresses and essays, ranging from Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” in 1841 and “Emancipation in the West Indies” in 1844, to Thoreau’s 1854 essay “Slavery in Massachusetts”. While the seeds of changing discourse can be seen most clearly in Margaret Fuller’s review of The Narrative of Frederick Douglas in 1845, it is important to track this progression from its roots to a blossoming voice of political activism. As such, any examination must begin with a focus on Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and its relationship with Fuller’s writings on Frederick Douglass.

In 1845, five years before the Compromise of 1850, Margaret Fuller’s review of The Narrative of Frederick Douglas emerged as one of the first pieces of Transcendentalist commentary on the plight of the American slave. Prefacing an excerpt from the piece, literary critic Lawrence Buell explains that, “Fuller carefully distances herself here from abolitionist zealotry, almost as much as Emerson did in ‘Self-Reliance,’ and she carefully distinguishes her detestation for the institution of slavery from her attitude toward slaveholders”.3 Buell’s commentary is directed at early Transcendentalist rhetoric, before the more pragmatic turn over the following fifteen years towards overt socio-political commentary. Emerson sought to point to ideas of individuality and the necessity of individual removal from the dictates of a too-quickly evolving society. As Emerson stated in “Self-Reliance”:

This is the ultimate fact which we so quickly reach… the resolution of all into the ever-blessed ONE. Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms.3

Emerson’s stance in “Self-Reliance” emphasizes the self over society; this specific excerpt does not encompass the range of Emerson’s ideas, but it does illuminate his early views towards society and the self. Instead of involvement in what Emerson believed to be the trivial happenings of society, he advocated a search for Truth and the “One.” This truth, only to be found through self-exploration, was out of reach for those who overly involved themselves in political debate and social commentary. To find “the ONE,” it was necessary to remain vigilant in a stance of removal.

In 1844, Emerson’s rhetoric begins to change, albeit slightly. Ten years after the decision for the British Empire to emancipate all slaves in their colonies, Emerson delivered an address to the people of Concord. Today, this text is titled: “Emancipation in the British West Indies”. Emerson began his speech by directly addressing his peers in Concord:
Friends and fellow citizens: We are met to exchange congratulations on the anniversary of an event singular in the history of civilization; a day of reason; of the clear light; of that which makes us better than a flock of birds and beasts; a day which gave the immense fortification of a fact, of gross history, to ethical abstractions.4

Using direct language, Emerson celebrates that for ten years, the British Empire has declared slavery illegal in its colonies. This decision was one that has gone down in history as the beginning of the emancipation of African slaves across the world. Emerson does not speak of slaves or slavery; instead, he states that the event was momentous because of the “reason” that served as its backbone.

These first lines would seem to be an assault on slavery as an institution in America. Despite this, Emerson clings to his previous rhetorical stances—tempering his words and at times backpedaling to state that slave owners do not possess the entirety of the blame and are, to an extent, victims that must not be persecuted:

When we consider what remains to be done for this interest in this country, the dictates of humanity make us tender of such as are not yet persuaded. The hardest selfishness is to be borne with. Let us withhold every reproachful, and, if we can, every indignant remark. In this cause, we must renounce our temper, and the risings of pride.4

With this remark, the slaver is to some extent pardoned for his actions. The ownership of slaves becomes not the crime of the individual, but a crime of society itself. In positioning his argument to eschew blame from those who already possess slaves, Emerson distances himself from rabid abolitionists. While he may state that “The blood is moral: the blood is anti-slavery: it runs cold in the veins: the stomach rises with disgust, and curses slavery,” he refuses to lay blame on those who perpetuate a system of violence and forced servitude.5 Furthermore, he states that: “Many planters have said, since the emancipation, that, before that day, they were the greatest slaves on the estates. Slavery is no scholar, no improver”.4

The genius of the Saxon race, friendly to liberty; the enterprise, the very muscular vigor of this nation, are inconsistent with slavery. The Intellect, with blazing eye, looking through history from the beginning onward, gazes on this blot and it disappears. The sentiment of Right, once very low and indistinct, but ever more articulate, because it is the voice of the universe, pronounces Freedom. The Power that built this fabric of things affirms it in the heart; and in the history of the First of August, has made a sign to the ages, of his will.4

With his final words, Emerson recedes once again. This element of advancement and retraction is common throughout the early works of Emerson and his fellow Transcendentalists. They sought to promote a greater good and a pursuit for truth and reason, but did not wish to take a role in the forefront of social commentary. In 1844, their rhetoric was still focused inwards, on the self and how it interacted with nature. They sought a perfection of the intellect and freedom from oppression. By condemning the treatment of African slaves in British colonies, Emerson positions his argument abroad. Any condemnations of slavery are indirect and seek to prevent the enslavement of free Massachusetts citizens who journey into southern slave states. Moving back and forth from moderation to condemnation was their great tool; by critiquing only up to the point of mild controversy, the Transcendentalists eschewed the negative opinion of the general public and were allowed to remain free to focus on their own intellectual pursuits.

By the next year, this theoretical stance began to decay as the eclectic philosophy of Transcendentalism evolved. Margaret Fuller, a member of the movement and one of the first American feminists, was often one of the most outspoken writers of her peers—whether in consideration of American or foreign affairs. Her commentary on the existence of slavery in America and abroad proved to be one of her more radical stances, especially considering the state of the Union in 1845. During that year, Fuller reviewed Frederick Douglass’s autobiography and described the former slave turned writer as “an excellent speaker” who, in “exposing himself to obvious danger,” sets “the seal on his deep convictions as to the religious need of speaking the whole truth.” Using a strategy similar to that used by Emerson a year before, she moved from moderation to a more outspoken strategy of persuasion and editorial opinion. By describing Douglass as such, she seeks to elevate him from the position of a former slave to that of a talented man of rhetoric, unafraid of the dangers that he may be exposed to because of his writing. Tying Douglass to the merits of mixed race and widely read authors like Dumas and Soulie, Fuller wrote of African descent not as a curse or an impediment, but simply as a facet of a man.

The apex of the piece lies in her description of the slaveholder and those in favor of the continuation of slavery:

...blindness is but one form of that prevalent fallacy which substitutes a creed for a faith, a ritual for a life. We have seen too much of this system of atonement not to know that those who adopt it often begin with good intentions, and are, at any rate, in their mistakes worthy of the deepest pity. But that is no reason why the truth should not be uttered, trumpet-tongued, about the thing.3

It is central to the examination of this excerpt that the temperance of rhetoric is acknowledged. Fuller is careful to refrain from any clear denunciation of slaveholders or defenders of slavery. The key to her view is her utilization of “good intentions” and “the truth.” Much as Emerson hesitated to denounce slaveholders, Fuller uses blindness as a substitute for consideration. Instead of outright persecution of slaveholders, she advocates for a view of them as ignorant of a greater truth; perhaps the same truth that Transcendentalists so often pursued. However, beneath the tempered rhetoric, there is a clear criticism. According to Fuller, slaveholders were blind to the failings of their stance, and blind to the fact that those of African descent are equal in ability and intellect. Instead of denouncing the blind, Fuller advocates re-education. Echoing earlier thinkers such as Bronson Alcott, Fuller believed that the solution to the problem was not outright judgment, but the endeavor to correct ignorance.

By the end of the 1840s, the Transcendentalist movement changed its strategies towards dealing with the problem of slavery. Instead of advocating understanding of ignorance, they began to directly denounce slavery and slaveholders, pointing out the fact that the African and the slave was no further removed from truth and reason than the white man or the slaveholder. Thoreau’s 1849 essay “Civil Disobedience” was among the first to shed a negative light on slavery and is canonized as a signal of a changing mindset among Thoreau’s peers and Americans as a whole. Though he wrote “Civil Disobedience” in 1849, several years after Fuller’s initial words on slavery, Thoreau was
the first to explicitly address the problem of slavery. In this seminal text, admired by Civil Rights leaders since its publication, Thoreau states that:

In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.1

Witnessing the effects of slavery in a “free” state such as Massachusetts, Thoreau was pulled from his seclusion in the woods surrounding Concord and became one of America’s most outspoken activists for civil liberty. Massachusetts being a member of the Union, it was bound to the laws of the Constitution. The great problem for both Thoreau and, as he saw it, America as a whole, was that the same document that created democratic liberty was also used to uphold the atrocities of slavery. With this in mind, Thoreau distanced himself from the timid inaction of his fellow Transcendentalists and demanded change. In his essay, he references what he perceives as the injustices of the Mexican-American War and ties this same mentality to America’s role as a slave-holding nation. He speaks of rebellion and revolution, but neither of these terms was meant to encourage violence. Instead, Thoreau’s rebellion and revolution was one of mindfulness, in which he encouraged the American populace to stand for American ideals and refuse to acquiesce to a government that supported slavery.

Impactful as the essay may have been—both in contemporaneous discourse and 20th century movements towards civil rights—it was also inspired by a stint in jail after refusing to participate in public elections or pay his taxes. Conversely, Emerson remained aloof, waiting to display public judgment until another address in Concord on May 3, 1851. Today, this address is referred to as “The Fugitive Slave Law”, taking its name from the law that outraged Emerson. In this essay, he illuminates an evolved mindset towards American slavery, stating: “I do not often speak to public questions—they are odious and hurtful, and it seems like meddling or leaving your work…My own habitual view is to the well-being of students or scholars.”2 Referencing his seminal works such as “Self-Reliance” and “The American Scholar,” these remarks may be seen as excuses for inaction; however, it is more likely that Emerson saw these words as an explanation for time he used to fully form a previously uncertain stance.

Speaking once more to an audience of his neighbors and peers, Emerson said, “The one thing not to be forgotten to intellectual persons is, not to know their own task, or to take their ideas from others”.3 He believed that his previous public removal from the debate surrounding American slavery and abolition was justified by his lack of personal knowledge about these institutions. By 1851, Emerson saw the effects of slavery and the necessity for freedom, as Concord was often a place of passage for escaped slaves. Speaking from a sense of horror upon seeing the extensive reach of the new law, Emerson remarked that,

I have lived all my life without suffering any known inconvenience from American Slavery. I never saw it; I never heard the whip; I never felt the check on my free speech and action, until the other day, when Mr. Webster, by his personal influence, brought the Fugitive Slave Law on the country.4

Emerson is loyal to previous addresses such as “Emancipation in the West Indies”, explaining that his lack of knowledge had halted any direct action against American slavery as a whole. Finally, he refuses to remain inactive and describes the atrocities of slavery in America. Witnessing firsthand the effects of the Fugitive Slave Law, Emerson quite literally saw the chains of slavery rattling past his window. These images served as a catalyst, inserting Emerson directly into the debate surrounding abolition. Describing his internal struggle, Emerson asked the following of his peers:

Are you for man and for the good of man, or are you for the hurt and harm of man? It was the question whether man shall be treated as leather? Whether the negro shall be, as the Indians were in Spanish America, a piece of money? Whether this system, which is a kind of mill or factory for converting men into monkeys, shall be upheld and enlarged?5

Emerson positioned liberty at the heart of his argument, capitalizing on foundational American rhetoric. The imagery of abuse is reinforced through comparisons to the Spanish Empire and natives. Most importantly, the slave is described as a man and not a beast. By making such a statement, Emerson firmly stood in clear opposition to slavery. Speaking to the nobility of liberty, Emerson compared it to “the Crusade of all brave and conscientious men, the Epic Poet, the new religion, the chivalry of all gentlemen,” and indeed it was for both Emerson and his peers.6 Ultimately, it was the liberty and the injustice, finally brought to clear light on their doorsteps, that pulled these thinkers from their self-imposed exile into the forefront of the abolitionist debate.

By 1854, Thoreau’s rhetoric had moved even closer towards a clear stance in favor of abolition. The key difference between Thoreau and Emerson was the same vitriol used in “Civil Disobedience.” In what is now known as “Slavery in Massachusetts,” Thoreau spoke directly to those who remained indifferent to the debate, stating that, “there is not one slave in Nebraska; there are perhaps a million slaves in Massachusetts.” Thoreau posits that slavery is not simply confined to the plight of those in chains, but also to those who are chained to ignorance. He believed that the citizens of a state that deemed itself “free” did not hold a moral advantage over those in a “slave” state. Instead, Thoreau saw citizens who remained passive as being guilty of all crimes of slavery. Further, the ignorance that led to indifference towards or support for American slavery was a form of slavery itself. This harkened back to years of writing on individuality and truth. With these claims, he aimed to both antagonize and show his fellow citizens that their indifference and ignorance left them as slaves to the government. For Thoreau, the only way to escape these chains was to take action and a firm stance against slavery as an accepted institution. Any reluctance to act was blindness towards the irony that America, land of the free, was simultaneously the land of slavery and bloodshed. To spur feelings of patriotism, he offered a comparison of citizens of Concord in 1775 and 1851, exclaiming, “as if those three millions had fought for the right to be free themselves, but to hold in slavery three million others”.7 This statement emphasized the difference between the ideas that gave birth to democracy and the ideas that sought to maintain it in Massachusetts. Thoreau saw compliance with the Fugitive Slave Act as hypocrisy—citizens of Concord were pleased to glorify their past but refused to see the crimes of their own time. He builds upon this idea by demanding that Concord “let the State dissolve her union with the slave-holder…she can find no respectable law or precedent which sanctions the continuance of such a union for an instant. Let each inhabitant of the State dissolve his union with her, as long as she delays to do her duty”. Echoing the ideas of the first American patriots, Thoreau explicitly dared those in his audience to remain blind to the injustice of American democracy. Stirring multi-generational passion, he asked them to live up to their reputations
as the descendants of revolutionaries.

Thoreau’s long analogy of the water-lily was meant to remind Americans of the beauty of democracy and the supremacy of the individual. He believed that, “it suggests what kind of laws have prevailed longest and widest, and still prevail, and that the time may come when man’s deeds will smell as sweet.” It is nature that Thoreau uses to remind Americans of the promise of the first democracy. Unsurprisingly, he believed that nature displayed the purity of heart through which democracy could be born. Laws written on paper are not those that have lived the longest; instead, the laws of morality, liberty, and freedom prevail as eternal. The water-lily is beautiful because it is born beautiful. These qualities are akin to the ideas of liberty and freedom — eternal and forever just. He continues with the analogy by stating that, “it reminds me that Nature has been partner to no Missouri Compromise. I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the water-lily.” The Missouri Compromise and the Fugitive Slave Act, both spearheaded by a coalition of representatives who sought to find a middle ground, proved to be the most egregious of insults to Thoreau’s idea of the Union. A Union, for Thoreau, was not to be an entity that chose the least controversial actions to its doorsteps. Emerson himself, though long an advocate for the importance of self-existence over society, stated that, “it is the genius and temper of the man which decides whether he will stand for right or for might.” Speaking against the Fugitive Slave Law, he spoke against his own long-held philosophies, admitting that he had to take a stand. Fuller and Thoreau, though often lost in the shadow of Emerson, came to define the activist themes of American literature, changing fiction, history, and philosophy. Their eclecticism would carry on in their changing fiction, history, and philosophy. The passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, their rhetoric changed and our original American philosophy became one of social activism. Much as they wanted to remain lost in their thoughts about nature and truth, they were forced into action once slavery presented itself on their doorsteps. Emerson himself, though long an advocate for the importance of self-existence over society, stated that, “it is the genius and temper of the man which decides whether he will stand for right or for might.”

Thoreau positions slavery and servility (whether they are manifested in the form of physical chains or the herd mentality of an indifferent populace) as decay and rot. These disturbing facets of society obscure the truth of America, hiding the reality of the life of a slave, as well as the fact that the nation could survive without slavery. The water-lily grows wild, without the assistance of mankind in a garden. Simply by its own biology, the flower is self-sufficient. Thoreau considered slavery and servility to be blockades before a free mind and, thus, a free man. Thoreau was just as aware that slavery had always been a facet of civilization, but he also believed that it could be eradicated. The abolition of American slavery was just as much a possibility as the abolition of English rule in America. Democracy, much like the flower, was able to flourish once it was not lost in the foul scent of a dictatorship. And with the abolition of slavery, so could America flourish once more.

The unfortunate nature of this allegory is that the foul scent continued, obscuring the smell of the water-lily. No matter the efforts of abolitionists, slavery would not end without war. But the Transcendentalists, writing between the years of 1845 and 1854, sought a reclaimed America, one that was not buried beneath the filth of slavery. The importance of this decade was paramount for the legacy of the Transcendentalists. Their first statements regarding slavery had been tempered and refused to take a stand against Americans. Emerson first tackled the subject in a criticism of slaveholders in the West Indies. Fuller discussed slaves as men instead of objects, and Thoreau used slavery as a term for the ignorance of mankind. But with the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, their rhetoric changed and our original American philosophy became one of social activism. Much as they wanted to remain lost in their thoughts about nature and truth, they were forced into action once slavery presented itself on their doorsteps. Emerson himself, though long an advocate for the importance of self-existence over society, stated that, “it is the genius and temper of the man which decides whether he will stand for right or for might.”

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“Slavery in Massachusetts” ends with a proclamation that, slavery and servility have produced no sweet-scented flower annually, to charm the senses of men, for they have 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.

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References

