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HENRY DAVID THOREAU, ABOLITIONIST

NICK AARON FORD

IN his provocative biography of Thoreau, Henry Seidel Canby wrote, "Thoreau was never an Abolitionist, although at last, and somewhat reluctantly, he associated himself with the Abolitionist organizations."¹ It is the purpose of this essay to test Mr. Canby's verdict by submitting it to critical analysis and by comparing it with the recorded thoughts and activities of Thoreau with respect to Negro slavery. The evidence brought to light in such a review seems to prove conclusively that Mr. Canby's position is indefensible.

What is an Abolitionist? Is he not one who speaks and actively works for the doing away with slavery? Can one who risks bodily assaults and imprisonment for his opposition to slavery be truly described as not an Abolitionist? Membership in an Abolitionist society is certainly not a proper criterion. John Brown was not a member of any society. Would one on that account hesitate to call him an Abolitionist?

Mr. Canby apparently found support for his opinion in three statements in Thoreau's *Journals*: (1) Thoreau told the Temperance Society that he was too transcendental to join societies for reforming other men. (2) His tone was skeptical when he did mention Abolitionists.² (3) He made no sharp distinction between African slavery and other kinds less frequently condemned by his neighbors.³ These statements constitute the slight proof which has persuaded Mr. Canby to declare that Thoreau was "never an Abolitionist."

¹ *Thoreau* (Boston, 1939), 338.

² "I was glad to hear the other day that Higginson and . . . were gone to Ktaadin; it must be so much better to go to than a Woman's Rights or Abolition Convention." *Journal* (Boston, 1906).

³ "It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are yourself the slave-driver. I wonder man 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. Self-emancipation . . . of a man's thinking and imagining provinces . . . one emancipated heart and intellect! It would knock off the fetters from a million slaves." *Journal*, I, 362-363.

The underlying philosophy implicit in the fourteen volumes of Thoreau's *Journal* is more significant than two or three scattered statements. Moreover, when there is a possibility of more than one interpretation of a man's words, is not the interpretation that fits more truly with the individual's personality and conduct more likely to be the correct one? To conclude that Thoreau is not an Abolitionist because he told someone he was too transcendental to join a Temperance Society for reforming others is as unjustifiable as remarking that a man is an atheist because he refuses to join a church. The fact that Thoreau believed the meetings of Abolitionist societies to be dull is no evidence that he was not an Abolitionist. Is a Democrat any less a Democrat for saying that Democratic conventions are dull?

Mr. Canby's final contention that Thoreau's failure to distinguish sharply between African slavery and other kinds is proof that he was not an Abolitionist is even more indefensible. Is there really a sharp distinction that can be made between kinds of slavery? Isn't it true that "the gross form of Negro slavery" in America resulted from the moral and intellectual slavery of the white man? It is certainly not an acknowledgment of callousness toward physical slavery to say that "self-emancipation . . . of a man's thinking and imagining provinces . . . one emancipated heart and intellect!" is greater than the release of a slave from physical bondage. Such a statement reveals a greater perception of the basis of Negro slavery than was possessed by the average Abolitionist. It admits that the biggest problem of the Abolitionist is to emancipate the heart and mind of the white man from the idea of slavery, the position taken by Lowell in his second series of *Biglow Papers*. The emancipation of the white man's heart and intellect, Thoreau implies, "would knock off the fetters from a million slaves." To say that peace is better than war is not the same thing as saying we will not fight the war that is upon us.

But all this is negative argument. What positive evidence is there to show that Thoreau was interested in the abolition of

slavery during his early years and that he was an Abolitionist at last? Knowing the background and philosophy of Thoreau, one can hardly see how he could escape being an Abolitionist. In the first place, his whole family was actively opposed to slavery. Canby admits, "His home, however, from a very early period was a nest of Abolitionists, one of those household centers of agitation of which the South complained. . . . All of them, including Henry, read *The Liberator*, Garrison's paper, . . . and (the women at least) talked Abolition incessantly." Frank Sanborn, biographer and friend of Thoreau, recalled that as early as 1832 a Mrs. Ward, widow of a colonel in the Revolution and an active member of the Anti-Slavery Society of Concord, was an intimate friend of both branches of the Thoreau family.⁴ Henry was then fifteen years old, and if he had not already begun to look upon slavery as an intolerable evil, he could hardly be expected to escape indoctrination by this close friend of his family. Although Thoreau prided himself, even at an early age, on his independence of thought, he was not free to ignore the problem of Abolition. Theology maintains that even God is not free to be unjust or wicked.

In the second place, the political conditions of the times were such as to encourage him to take sides with the Abolitionists. When he was three years old the Missouri Compromise was enacted by Congress, an Act which cast its shadow athwart the whole life of the nation. Thoreau was twenty when Elijah P. Lovejoy was killed by a pro-slavery mob in Alton, Illinois, and when Wendell Phillips made his first anti-slavery speech in protest. He was twenty-nine when the Mexican War, undertaken primarily to extend the boundaries of slavery, began. He was thirty-three when the ominous Fugitive Slave Law was passed, an act which made it a criminal offense for any American not only to fail to assist a slave-catcher to apprehend runaway slaves, but to withhold knowledge which he might possess of any chance meeting with the fugitive. He was thirty-seven when the Kansas-Nebraska Bill nullifying the Missouri Com-

⁴ Frank B. Sanborn, *The Life of Henry D. Thoreau* (Boston, 1917), 191.

promise was passed, and forty-one when John Brown raided Harper's Ferry. It is difficult indeed to imagine that a man as sensitive to the demands of freedom as was Thoreau could remain neutral in the face of such flagrant violations of freedom.

Furthermore, the outstanding authors of Thoreau's age were devoting much of their talent to the cause of Abolition. In addition to his friend Emerson—who said of the Fugitive Slave Law “I will not obey it, by God!”—there were John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe, James Russell Lowell, and Frederick Douglass. Whittier, like Thoreau, knew nothing concrete about slavery when, under the influence of Garrison, he became an Abolitionist. However, he had accepted certain general principles about human relationships, and to those principles he devoted the best efforts of his life. To him, man was a spiritual being and consequently possessed too much dignity to be subjected to any human master. He believed that slavery was an anomaly in a democratic country and that all just men were duty bound aggressively to oppose it. His best-known poems were written as broadsides against the evils of slavery. In his “Massachusetts to Virginia” he represents Massachusetts as renouncing the obligation of returning fugitive slaves, a position that Thoreau heartily advocated in his address on “Slavery in Massachusetts.”

Harriet Beecher Stowe occupied a position similar to Whittier's in her literary efforts against slavery. Her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* began as a serial in the *National Era* in 1851, the same year in which Thoreau wrote in his journal the first entry criticizing Negro slavery. Whether or not Thoreau was influenced to speak out by Mrs. Stowe's hard-hitting narrative is difficult to determine.

Lowell became corresponding editor of the *National Anti-slavery Standard* in 1848, and later published the *Biglow Papers* dealing with the Mexican and Civil Wars. Like Thoreau, Lowell opposed the Mexican War because it involved the extension of slavery and the strengthening of Southern influence in the Union. In his treatment of the Civil War he urged the

Northern people to prosecute the war unitedly because their cause was just, and to accept the task of emancipating not only the Negroes from physical slavery but the whites from the desire to enslave their darker fellow men.

Negro writers were expressing themselves during this period, mostly in autobiographies. Frederick Douglass, the most famous Negro author before emancipation, was born a slave in the same year of Thoreau's birth. The first edition of his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, appeared in 1845. He began the publication of his newspaper *North Star* in the same year. Ten years later the second edition of his autobiography was published under the title *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

Beset by such a "cloud of witnesses," Thoreau could hardly escape commitment to this ideal of human freedom without doing violence to his own nature as well as to his philosophy of life. Although it is doubtful that Thoreau was familiar with all the anti-slavery productions of these authors, he could not be ignorant of the general currents set in motion by them. We do know that he refused to vote when he reached the age of twenty-one. Though we have no conclusive proof that his refusal was due to his Abolitionist sympathies, we do have grounds for making the assumption. He announced in his later writings that so long as Massachusetts, even passively, sustained the national toleration of slavery he would neither vote nor pay taxes to uphold such a government. His refusal to vote at the early age of twenty-one, therefore, could have been due to his opposition to slavery.

Of course, all the evidence presented so far is circumstantial. Without additional support it is not sufficient merely to assert Thoreau's interest in Abolition. For someone may protest that Hawthorne was subject to the same milieu, yet he never became an Abolitionist. Although such a comparison is similar to saying that because a total abstainer could pass a dispensary without being tempted to buy liquor, a drunkard could do so too, it still possesses enough relevance to cause the truth-seeker to pause. But when Thoreau's recorded thoughts and activities

in connection with slavery are added to the circumstantial evidence, the case for Abolition becomes clear and unmistakable.

The first concrete evidence we have of Thoreau's attitude towards slavery is presented by Sanborn in connection with his account of the appearance of Wendell Phillips as lecturer at the Concord Lyceum.⁵ Thoreau was twenty-two when he became secretary of the Lyceum, which promoted an annual series of lectures in the town of Concord, one being delivered each year by Thoreau himself. When it was announced in 1842 that Wendell Phillips would be the next lecturer and that his subject would be the Abolition of slavery, some of the older members protested; but the Abolitionists, including the Thoreau family, voted with the majority to hear Phillips. He came and pleaded the cause of Abolition so well that he was invited to return the following year. Thoreau was so pleased with the speaker's views that he reported the speeches to the press. This voluntary act on the part of Thoreau at the age of twenty-six does not fit well with the contention that he never became an Abolitionist, and only "reluctantly" associated himself with the Abolitionists at last (we assume that Mr. Canby means the last few years of Thoreau's life).

Thoreau began keeping a journal in 1837, when he was twenty years old; but the first entry concerning slavery does not appear until July 6, 1845, when he charged that his fellow-citizens are subject to a slavery far worse than the gross aspect of Negro slavery, for they are subject to the slavery of the heart and the intellect.⁶ Thereafter he wrote fifteen different entries concerning slavery in eight of the fourteen volumes of his journal. Also eighty-six pages in *Cape Cod and Miscellanies* are devoted to the subject, and six of his letters refer to some aspect of it. One must not assume, however, that because Thoreau does not mention slavery in his journal until 1845 that he was not earlier interested in Abolition. His silence may be very well accounted for on the grounds that ideas taken for granted by all

⁵ *The Life of Henry D. Thoreau*, 469-475.

⁶ *Journal*, I, 362-363.

liberal-minded people need not be recorded in his journal. To Thoreau, surrounded by a family, friends, and a considerable number of literary acquaintances, all of whom had a common attitude toward Abolition, there was no necessity for mentioning in his journal his obvious agreement with these principles. Only when he had an unusual thought about slavery that was not already evident to his circle of friends and acquaintances did he find it necessary to make an entry concerning the subject. In 1846 opportunity came for such an entry.

In 1845 Thoreau went to Walden to build his house and to live alone. The following year, while in Concord on business, he was arrested and spent the night in jail because he refused to pay poll tax. In his journal he wrote, "I was seized and put to gaol because I did not recognize the authority of a state which buys and sells men and women and children at the door of its senate-house." This revolutionary protest against slavery by the twenty-nine-year-old Thoreau is certainly the act of an Abolitionist, and one can hardly believe that it was the result of a sudden impulse. His hatred of slavery must have been festering in his mind for many years. It seems as if the experience at Walden, where he had gone to face the essentials of life, had taught him the necessity of actively engaging in the fight for Abolition.

In *Walden* Thoreau wrote, "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one." It is evident from his later actions that one of the lives to which he referred was that of an Abolitionist. James MacKaye⁷ suggests that Thoreau emphasized two kinds of freedom: (a) freedom from coercion originating in one's personal necessities, and (b) freedom from coercion originating in the will of others, including that embodied in the customs of society. The former is illustrated in his insistence upon living the simple life, in his cultivation of easily satisfied desires. The lat-

⁷ James MacKaye, editor, *Thoreau: Philosopher of Freedom* (New York, 1930).

ter is evident in his denunciation of slavery and his advocacy of a philosophy of extreme individualism.

For October 5, 1851, Thoreau made an entry in his journal concerning the aid he rendered a fugitive slave named Henry Williams, who had escaped from Stafford County, Virginia. The fugitive brought a letter to the Thoreau family from Garrison. The Negro lodged at Thoreau's home until the funds necessary to send him to Canada could be raised. Thoreau made two trips to the depot before buying the fugitive's ticket. When he first went to the ticket-window, he saw a man who looked like a Boston policeman, so he decided it would be wiser not to buy the ticket at that time. This entry substantiates the fact that Thoreau took a part in the Abolitionists' activities of his family.

In April of the same year he made extended comments in his journal⁸ violently condemning the Fugitive Slave Law as "not at the level of the head or the reason." He wrote that freedom-loving men should not obey the law. "Its natural habitat is in dirt. It was bred and had its life only in the dust and the mire, on the level with the feet; and he who walks with freedom, unless he avoids treading on every venomous reptile, will eventually tread on it, and so trample it under foot." He asserted that the courts never give justice in cases involving Negro slaves. But his eloquence reached a climax in his comparison of the inhabitants of Concord who assembled with arms at a bridge April 19, 1775, to enforce their right to tax themselves and to participate in the making of laws to govern themselves with a similar group who had assembled with armed protection April 12, 1851, not to enforce the principles of liberty their fathers had fought and died for, but to send back into slavery an innocent man.

One immediately thinks of Swift's *Modest Proposal* when he reads in Thoreau's *Journal*, "If I were seriously to propose to Congress to make mankind into sausages, I have no doubt that most would smile at my proposition, and, if any believed me

⁸ *Journal*, II, 175-178.

to be in earnest, they would think that I proposed something much worse than Congress had ever done, but, Gentlemen, if any of you will tell me that to make a man into a sausage would be much worse—would be any worse—than to make him into a slave—than it was then to enact the Fugitive Slave Law—I shall here accuse him of foolishness, of intellectual incapacity, of making a distinction without a difference. The one is as sensible a proposition as the other.” Strong sentiments these! Can anyone deny they are the sentiments of a true Abolitionist?

When Simms, the sixteen-year-old runaway slave whose plight called forth the foregoing remarks, was sent back to Georgia by the State of Massachusetts, the news wholly unfitted Thoreau for any work. He could not rest until he had expressed his protestations in writing. He did not offer empty words, but set forth a concrete plan for Abolitionists. He must have considered himself one of them; otherwise, his advice would have been presumptuous. He blamed the press to a large extent for a lack of strong political sentiment against slavery and urged the Abolitionists to make an earnest, vigorous assault upon the press as they had already made, with good effect, upon the church. “The church has decidedly changed within a year or two,” he wrote, “but the press is, almost without exception, corrupt. I believe that in this country the press exerts a greater and a more pernicious influence than the church. . . . We do not read the Bible, but we do read the newspaper. . . . *The Commonwealth* and the *Liberator* are the only papers which make themselves heard in condemnation of cowardice and meanness, such as the returning of the slave by the Boston authorities.”⁹ He therefore urged the free men of New England to kill such cowardly newspapers as the *Advertiser* and the *Transcript* by withholding their subscriptions.

On May 22, 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which destroyed the Missouri Compromise and opened two more states to slavery, became law. Two days later Anthony Burns, a runaway slave who had been working in Boston for about a month, was

⁹ *Journal*, II, 179-180.

arrested by the civil authorities with the intention of sending him back to slavery. The populace was indignant. Members of a rescue party broke into the Negro's cell to wrest him from the officials, but they were thwarted in their bold adventure. It was decided that Burns must be tried before the court of Commissioner Loring. The trial lasted for three days, but before it was over Burns' Virginia master had agreed to free him for a \$1,200 fee, which the citizens of Boston had raised. This plan was nullified, however, when the United States Attorney, acting upon advice from Washington, decreed that Burns must be convicted and sent back to slavery. This was done, it was believed, because President Franklin Pierce did not want the Southerners to *lose face*. Although Burns soon returned to Boston a free man, after \$1,300 had changed hands, the shameful proceedings had given the Abolitionists new ammunition with which to attack the rising power of slavery.

The Abolitionists celebrated the Fourth of July that year at a picnic in Framingham, Massachusetts, where Garrison burned a copy of the Constitution, crying, "So perish all compromises with tyranny! And let all the people say Amen!"¹⁰ A great shout of approval went up from the three thousands gathered there, and standing among them, as strong a fighter for Abolition as any, was Henry David Thoreau, the main speaker for the occasion. His was a stirring address, made up largely from entries in his journal written at the time of the surrender of Simms in 1851 and during the discussion of the Anthony Burns affair in May and June, 1854. In regard to the court that sent Burns back to slavery Thoreau said: "The judges and lawyers, and all men of expediency consider not whether the Fugitive Slave Law is right, but whether it is what they call constitutional. They try the merits of the case by a very low and incompetent standard. Pray, is virtue constitutional, or vice? . . . While they are hurrying Christ off to the cross, the ruler decides that he cannot constitutionally interfere to save him. The Christians, now and always, are they who

¹⁰ Henrietta Buckmaster, *Let My People Go* (New York, 1941), 236.

obey the higher law, who discover it to be according to their constitution to interfere. They at least cut off the ears of the police; the others pocket the thirty pieces of silver.”¹¹

Of the effect upon his life of this shocking capitulation of the government to the slaveholders, Thoreau said: “My old and worthiest pursuits have lost I cannot say how much of their attraction, and I feel that my investment in life here is worth many per cent less since Massachusetts last deliberately sent back an innocent man, Anthony Burns, to slavery. I dwelt before, perhaps, in the illusion that my life passed somewhere only between heaven and hell, but now I cannot persuade myself that I do not dwell *wholly* in hell.”¹²

He had already recorded in his journal sixteen days before this famous speech an uncompromising challenge to the civil authorities of his state. “There is no such thing as accomplishing a moral reform,” he had written, “by the use of expediency or policy. . . . Let the judge and the jury, and the sheriff and the jailer cease to act under corrupt government—cease to be tools and become men.”¹³

Although Thoreau actively befriended many slaves and assisted them to find a haven in Canada, and although he made many valuable statements which helped to clarify for the American people the true character of slavery, Sanborn suggests that his chief service to the cause of Abolition was in the effective championship of the slandered character of John Brown who led a bloody insurrection against slavery.

On October 31, 1859, Thoreau wrote a letter¹⁴ to Harrison Blake, of Worcester, informing him that he had spoken to the people of Concord the previous night on “The Character of Captain John Brown in the Clutches of the Slaveholder,” and asking him to arrange a speaking engagement in Worcester in order that he might discuss the same subject there. Bronson Al-

¹¹ *Cape Cod and Miscellanies* (Boston, 1906), 201-202.

¹² *Cape Cod and Miscellanies*, 405.

¹³ *Journal*, vi, 313.

¹⁴ *Familiar Letters* (Boston, 1895), 413.

cott, in his diary under date of November 4, 1859, wrote, "Thoreau calls and reports about the reading of the lecture on John Brown at Boston and Worcester. He has been the first to speak and celebrate the hero's courage and magnanimity. . . . The men have much in common—the sturdy manliness, straightforwardness, and independence."

The address¹⁵ to which the foregoing references were made was first read at a meeting of citizens of Concord, October 30, 1859. It was taken almost entirely from notes in his journal, which had been written during the days immediately following John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, October 16 of that year. When Brown lay in prison, Thoreau did not wait for a public meeting to be called by constituted authority, but, like a true Abolitionist, went among his neighbors, summoning them to come together to hear what he had to say. In this stirring address he declared that Brown's raid was the best news that America had ever had. It had already quickened the feeble pulse of the North, he announced, and had infused more generous blood into her veins and heart than any number of years of what is called commercial and political prosperity ever could. Many a man who was lately contemplating suicide, he continued, has now something to live for. "I foresee the time," he said, "when the painter will paint that scene, no longer going to Rome for a subject; the poet will sing it; the historian will record it; and, with the Landing of the Pilgrims and the Declaration of Independence, it will be the ornament of some future gallery."

He attributed to John Brown, more than to any other agency, the making of Kansas into a free state. To him, Brown was braver than the patriots who met the enemy at Lexington and Bunker Hill. Those men had the courage bravely to face their country's foe, but this man had the courage to face his country herself when she was in the wrong. He classed Brown as a man of rare common sense, Transcendentalist above all, and a man of ideas and principles.

¹⁵ *Cape Cod and Miscellanies*, 409-440.

No man in America, he said, had ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of all. He could not be tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist.

When we look back over the whole life of Thoreau, we see him as an active champion of all kinds of freedom. He waged war against all social conditions that tended to make men machines. It was his doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder in order to rescue the slave. He was willing to strike no compromise with slavery. He demanded that his native state dissolve its union with a national government that condoned human slavery. "We have used up all our inherited freedom," he said. "If we would save our lives, we must fight for them." These are the acts and words of a true Abolitionist.