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SELECTED ANTI-SLAVERY SPEECHES OF HENRY
DAVID THOREAU, 1848-1859: A RHETORICAL
ANALYSIS.

The Ohio State University, Ph.D., 1970
Speech

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SELECTED ANTI-SLAVERY SPEECHES OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU,
1848-1859: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

DISSERTATION

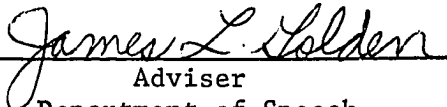
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A century ago Henry David Thoreau was considered by some to be merely a shadow of Ralph Waldo Emerson. In "A Fable for Critics," James Russell Lowell, for example, asserted that Thoreau even imitated Emerson's manner of walking, speaking and writing.¹ Scholars, however, have convincingly dismissed Lowell's claims,² and Thoreau is viewed today as one of the giants in the American Lambeth. Nature lovers find beauty and serenity in his works. Reformers, such as Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., seized upon his theory of civil disobedience as their most effective weapon, and critics of our time find him one of the outstanding satirists of our follies. Advocates of the rustic and simple life find in his philosophy the solution to some of the most imposing problems of our day.³

¹The Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell, III (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1890), pp. 41-42.

²See, for instance, Austin Warren, "Lowell on Thoreau," Studies in Philology, XXVII (July, 1930), pp. 442-461.

³Walter Harding, The Days of Henry Thoreau (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. vii.

Purpose

The pedestrian in the street probably knows that Thoreau went to Walden Pond to live and went to jail and most likely concludes that he spent half of his time doing the one and the other half doing the other. Yet, as Hubert Hoeltje has stressed,⁴ Thoreau the speaker has been ignored, his biographers and critics tending to concentrate on the writer and overlooking his other numerous activities. "If we are to fully understand the achievement of the 'Sage of Walden,' we cannot afford to neglect his work as a lecturer,"⁵ for in his own day Thoreau was probably as widely known as a speaker as he was a writer.

For all intents and purposes, Thoreau's defense of John Brown in 1859 was almost his final act before he became a dying man; it marked the end of more than twenty years as a speaker on the Lyceum platform and the culmination of increased resistance to the state as an institution. In "Civil Disobedience" his resistance was "peaceable" and consisted mainly of his refusal to pay taxes. In "Slavery in Massachusetts," his second major proclamation on the anti-slavery issue, Thoreau advocated violation of the Fugitive

⁴Hubert H. Hoeltje, "Thoreau as Lecturer," New England Quarterly, XIX (December, 1946), p. 485.

⁵Walter Harding, "The Lectures of Henry David Thoreau" (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Department of English, University of North Carolina, 1947), p. 38.

Slave Law. In his third statement, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau endorsed a man who openly had rebelled against the whole state, not just one law. Thoreau's anti-slavery remarks, then, will be considered more as a campaign than as isolated persuasive efforts. As Fotheringham indicated:

Persuasion is more typically a campaign through time rather than a one-shot effort. Exceptions can be found, as in mail-order or door-to-door persuasion, but generally an effort is seldom limited to a single message. A structured series of messages is more often developed, using varied media, message forms, and codes.⁶

The purpose of this study will be to determine in what manner Thoreau's unique qualities as a speaker were reflected in "Civil Disobedience," "Slavery in Massachusetts" and in defense of John Brown. The aim of this work, furthermore, will be to demonstrate how Thoreau's general philosophy of social reform was mirrored by speaking out on the issue that every man had to either confront or avoid: the peculiar institution of chattel slavery.

As Joseph Wood Krutch observed, 1847 marked a beginning of a change in attitude for Thoreau; no longer did he cling to an earlier faith which presupposed that a moral awakening of individual conscience would eventually destroy the institution of slavery. Rather, he appealed to citizens to denounce the political and social institutions which ensnared them. Finally, in 1859, Thoreau

⁶Wallace C. Fotheringham, Perspectives on Persuasion (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1966), pp. xvi-xvii.

extended his philosophy of reform to accommodate the "hero" of Harper's Ferry.⁷ Subtly, slowly, surely, the belief in justified "expedients"--including violence--had been capturing Thoreau's mind. Passive resistance was not enough in a state that had stopped recognizing human rights. The Thoreau of 1859 was hardly the same reformer he had been before 1847. It is this period of profound change in Thoreau's life, and the factors which motivated change, that will serve as the focal point for this work. To the student of public address, and any who are interested in what D. H. Lawrence would call "an aristocrat of the spirit," Thoreau's remarks are a cauldron of bold, original utterances. There is no study of Thoreau's anti-slavery campaign as it evolved from 1848 to 1859.

Method

Donald Bryant, in his celebrated discussion of the function and scope of rhetoric, assigned to rhetoric a four-fold status.

So far as it is concerned with the management of discourse in specific situations for practical purposes, it is an instrumental discipline. It is a literary study, involving linguistics, critical theory, and semantics as it touches the art of informing ideas and the functioning of language. It is a philosophical study so far as it is concerned with a method of investigation or inquiry. And finally, as it

⁷Joseph Wood Krutch, Henry David Thoreau (Toronto: William Sloane, Inc., 1948), pp. 230-236.

is akin to politics, drawing upon psychology and sociology, rhetoric is a social study, the study of a major force in the behavior of men in society.⁸

Anthony Hillbruner suggested that the job of the creative critic would be not only "to evaluate all or any factors dealing with the public speaking process and its relation to any facet of current society" but "to do it in an individual, articulate, moving and dynamic way"; essentially, the ideal rhetorical critic is a man who is persuasive in his analysis of persuasion.⁹ The scope of the critic reaches proportions of such magnitude that, as Marie Nichols lamented, there are times when he might want to throw his hands in the air in despair.¹⁰

This researcher will, nonetheless, attempt to construct a logical arrangement to bring before the reader a broad view of those elements responsible for helping to shape Thoreau's proclamations on the anti-slavery issue. Richard Gregg outlined three distinct operations which comprise the act of criticism. They include: the operation of historical reconstruction, the task of

⁸Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Functions and Its Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXIX (December, 1953), p. 424.

⁹Anthony Hillbruner, "Creativity and Contemporary Criticism," Western Speech, XXIV (Winter, 1960), p. 7.

¹⁰Marie Hochmuth Nichols, Rhetoric and Criticism (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963), p. 63.

explication and analysis, and the final act of judgment. Parrish and Hochmuth confirmed Gregg's observation in their discussion of rhetorical criticism.

Since the purpose of a speech is to work persuasion upon an audience, we cannot properly explain or evaluate it until we have learned a great deal about the occasion which called it forth, the speaker's relation to the occasion, the resources available to him, and the climate of opinion and current events amidst which he operated. Particularly do we need to know the nature of the audience for whom the speech was intended so that we may understand why certain things were said and certain others omitted, and so that we may judge whether the speaker has wisely and skillfully adapted his ideas and methods to those for whom they are intended.¹¹

The first duty of the rhetorical critic, historical reconstruction,

. . . requires that the critic understand the nature and intent of the discourse he is examining as manifested within the historical context which gave birth to the discourse. What series of events led to the composition and delivery or writing of the discourse? What events historical, contemporary, or future are mirrored in the discourse? What forces, physical and mental, combined to produce the various reactions to the discourse? What factors external to the rhetorical transaction, or an integral part of it, acted to limit the response a discourse received, or conversely, to heighten its impact?¹²

¹¹Wayland M. Parrish and Marie Hochmuth, American Speeches (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1954), pp. 5-6.

¹²Richard B. Gregg, "The Study of Rhetorical Criticism," The Communicative Arts and Sciences of Speech, ed., Keith Brooks (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1967), p. 40.

A rhetorical criticism can be meaningless, then, without an understanding of the historical environment in which a speaker lived. Social, economic and spiritual characteristics will be emphasized because Thoreau the speaker and philosopher were products of an intellectual and moral renaissance. Without the ferment in New England, Thoreau may not have spoken about "Civil Disobedience" or "Slavery in Massachusetts." Without the transcendental stimulus of Emerson's circle, Thoreau may never have spoken in behalf of John Brown. As Nichols indicated, a speech should be considered as

an act bearing the marks of a culture at a particular time: the person doing the talking will have been conditioned by the culture of which he is a part; in purpose, matter and manner the act will be a manifestation of the period of which it is a product. In fact, it will be the speaker's peculiar way of responding to the times.¹³

This study, then, will deal with the history of the times and of Thoreau's life as it is necessary to elucidate his speaking career.

Within such an historical framework, Hochmuth discussed the second operation involved in rhetorical criticism--explication and analysis.

The criticism of speeches, like the criticism of all art, involves both analysis and synthesis. It is concerned with naming and identifying its objects, locating its connections with the culture of which it is a part, and seeing it in relation to other similar phenomena.¹⁴

¹³Marie Hochmuth Nichols, History and Criticism of American Public Address, III (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1955), pp. 4-5.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 6.

The critic, in other words, must

examine the discourse to gain an understanding of its constituent parts in relation to its overall structure. He must discern the explicit and implied nature of its message expressed through the vehicle of language, and then he must try to gauge the quality of its appeals and sense the full panoply of human ideas and feelings that might be evoked by the discourse.¹⁵

Within this phase of his task, the critic reacts to what some rhetoricians choose to term intrinsic factors of a discourse.

Thonssen and Baird further emphasized that the principles of oratorical criticism "cannot properly be divorced from considerations relating to the speaker, the audience, subject and occasion"¹⁶; consequently, these elements are to be treated in the study.

The third and final operation is one of judgment in which the critic appraises the discourse. So far as the speaker is concerned, rhetorical criticism must consider his general and specific preparation for speaking, his knowledge of the subject, his place in the (abolitionist) movement for which he is speaking, and the sources of his ethical impressions. The critic, furthermore, should judge the merit of ideas and material in the discourse. Are the ideas and the implications worthy of consideration? Is the

¹⁵Gregg, loc. cit.

¹⁶Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird, Speech Criticism (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1949), p. 15.

viewpoint expressed reasonable and constructive or irrational and detrimental to society?

So far as the audience is concerned, rhetorical criticism must study the general thought trends of the time in order to understand and evaluate the influence of events upon the speech and of the speech upon events. Since a speech, moreover, is intended to produce an effect--adoption, continuance, deterrence or discontinuance¹⁷--a critic ought to consider whatever impact a discourse had on attitudes and actions of the immediate audience and how the speaker motivated or failed to motivate his listeners. In analyzing the rhetorical situation, the circumstances which called forth the utterance, the critic must consider, to paraphrase Bitzer, what conditions the speaker sought to improve (exigence); whether or not the audience consisted of persons who could have been mediators for change; and what limits (constraints) were placed upon the speaker.¹⁸ Finally, the critic needs to determine the long-range effect of a discourse, if any.

So far as the oration itself is concerned, rhetorical criticism involves judging the intrinsic features of the discourse. The critic determines what forms of proof--ethical, pathetic and

¹⁷Fotheringham, p. 33.

¹⁸Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, I (January, 1968), pp. 1-14.

logical--were used and to what extent and in what manner. Rhetorical criticism also considers the organization of the speech. In addition, the style and delivery of the speech are subjects of consideration; they are the skin and flesh on the skeleton of organization.¹⁹

An approach to rhetorical criticism, such as the one already outlined, provides the critic with a rather complete methodology for critical analysis. The strength of such an analysis, however, is also its weakness; and depending upon which critic one chooses to cite, the list of objections against the classical approach will vary in length and emphasis. Gregg's conclusion probably echoes that of many when he cautioned:

by starting his task with a predetermined methodology, the critic may see the discourse only in terms of artificial and arbitrary categories, not as the holistic-dynamic instrument of persuasion that it actually is. Instead of explicating the discourse on its own terms, it is forced into the mold of the predetermined system which may cause its true nature to be distorted or lost.²⁰

Hillbruner, further, observed:

he / Wichelns/ accomplished his purpose of rejuvenating public address criticism too well One effect was to force a pattern of criticism--largely the Aristotelian

¹⁹A. Craig Baird, American Public Addresses 1740-1952 (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 10-14.

²⁰Gregg, p. 43.

one--on speech scholars thereby hampering the latent creativity of a diversity of approaches to criticism.²¹

The contemporary critic, then, should be cognizant of traditional methods of criticism and, while fully appreciative of them, be ready to modify or add to these methods in order to render judgments relevant and valuable for the society in which he lives. Consequently, in accordance with Wayne Thompson's view, I believe that experimental study can be a valuable tool for a "revised rhetoric."²² Empirical research indicated, for instance, that typically there is a blending of the traditional modes of proof, that what appears to be "rational" to one listener seems "irrational" to another,²³ and that the intrusion of emotional factors sometimes overshadows the importance of probative evidence.²⁴

It seems clear that no one critical method can hope to exhaust or account for all the variables inherent in the process of

²¹Anthony Hillbruner, Critical Dimensions: The Art of Public Address Criticism (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 4.

²²Wayne N. Thompson, "A Conservative View of a Progressive Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLIX (February, 1963), p. 1.

²³Randall C. Ruechelle, "An Experimental Study of Audience Recognition of Emotional and Intellectual Appeals in Persuasion," Speech Monographs, XXV (March, 1958), pp. 49-58.

²⁴Geräld R. Miller and Murray A. Hewgill, "Some Recent Research on Fear-Arousing Message Appeals," Speech Monographs, XXXIII (November, 1966), pp. 377-389.

communication. As Black stated, "We simply do not know enough yet about rhetorical discourse to place our faith in systems, and it is only through imaginative criticism that we are likely to learn more."²⁵ Consequently, this researcher hopes to broaden classical precepts by incorporating communication theory in an analysis of major anti-slavery speeches by Thoreau. A promising approach to a "revised rhetoric" is through the identification of strategies, defined as the rules, devices or patterns that were intended to bring the speaker and auditor together in common accord.²⁶ Strategies of discourse, then, such as those outlined by Irving Rein, Thomas Scheidel, Howard Martin and Kenneth Andersen, will be used to explain how Thoreau attempted to modify the behavior of his listeners. Since we have not evolved any comprehensive system of rhetorical criticism, "but only at best, an orientation to it,"²⁷ it is with an admittedly traditional orientation, and a respect as well as appreciation for contemporary communication research, that I begin an analysis of selected anti-slavery speeches by Thoreau.

²⁵Edwin Black, Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 177.

²⁶Irving J. Rein, "The New England Transcendentalists: Philosophy and Rhetoric," Philosophy and Rhetoric, I (Spring, 1968), p. 105.

²⁷Black, loc. cit.

Sources

Thoreau's Journal, along with his Writings, provide the best clue to the character of his thinking as well as an understanding of his whole philosophical significance. Writings of his intimate friends--Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ellery Channing and Frank Sanborn--as well as contemporary critical and biographical works will be consulted for information. Standard historical works, such as those by Morison and Commager, Parrington, Nevins, Cash and Schlesinger will be surveyed; in addition, the writings of contemporary historical scholars like Boorstin, Filler, Duberman, Dumond, Crowe and Dillon will be examined. There will be an attempt to gather a balance of opinion. Much of the material quoted, moreover, will be taken to its primary source. Several trips were taken to the Boston and New York Public Libraries, as well as to the Concord and Worcester (American) Antiquarian Societies in order to examine primary documents. Essentially, this study will be an historical and rhetorical research project, necessarily eclectic in method, from which critical interpretations will be drawn.

Organization of the Dissertation

The story of Thoreau's attempt to make the greatest possible contribution toward the overthrow of slavery without compromising his "principles" becomes a major theme of this work.

Chapter I sets forth the purpose of the study and its critical method. Chapter II will be devoted to a general background of Thoreau's age. It will be in no way comprehensive; rather, it will serve to focus upon the reforming impulse in New England which was so characteristic of the period. An attempt will be made to present the humanitarian impulse as it probably appeared to Thoreau.

Chapter III will deal with the "formative" years of Thoreau, which extended from 1817 to 1848. Attention will be paid particularly to Thoreau's early exposure to anti-slavery and transcendental influences. Like each of us, he was the product of a unique culture in time, and these movements are the principal fountainheads for Thoreau's anti-slavery utterances.

Chapters IV, V and VI will be devoted to a rhetorical analysis of the speeches. Chapter VII will review the dissertation and evaluate Thoreau's major anti-slavery speeches from 1848 to 1859. Thoreau's reputation, higher today than it has ever been, rests to a large extent upon his social philosophy. Nowhere are Thoreau's qualities as a speaker or the reforms which he advocated better represented than in his anti-slavery speeches.

CHAPTER II

FERMENT IN NEW ENGLAND: 1830-1860

Since history, as Mosse suggests,¹ is fundamentally human nature reacting to environment, any discussion of a speaker's development would be incomplete without consideration of the impressions he received from his social, political, economic and religious environments. Some of the most interesting years of the American experiment occurred from the 1830's until the outbreak of the Civil War. That era witnessed the beginning of an incredible expansion toward material prosperity, paralleled by an outburst of spiritual and intellectual fervor. The crust of Puritanism shattered, and new ideologies emerged. A part of the nation became humanitarian, turning the moral force of Puritan or Quaker heritage toward the perfectibility of man; another part divorced itself from all the old disciplines in a race for the dollars that began to roll; a third part, aware that the country had become a continent, began to amass economic power. Outwardly stable in the settled East and South, inwardly it was bubbling with conflicts between

¹George Mosse, The Culture of Western Europe (New York: Rand McNally and Co., 1961), pp. 4-5.

idealism and materialism, abolitionism and slavery, zeal and common sense, religion and the gospel of success.² The thirties, forties and fifties were the years of maturity for Henry Thoreau, with the economic, intellectual and spiritual climate of New England as varied, distinctive and in some ways more distinguished than that of America generally.

It was no accident that the center of American seafaring adventure became the headquarters of adventure in manufacturing. The New England system of manufacturing, destined to become the American system, points up the relationship between social values and environment and their economic consequences. The American system of manufacturing in the mid-nineteenth century--more precisely, the New England system--prized generalized intelligence, literacy, adaptability and willingness to learn. As the machinery or production became more complex, working men were expected to be more alert and more adaptable. Open minds were prized far more than trained hands.³ Ironically, Boorstin concludes, ignorance kept Americans out of the old grooves. Important experiments and innovations were made simply because Americans did not know any better;⁴

²Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager, The Growth of the American Republic, I (New York: Oxford Press, 1962), pp. 541-562.

³Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 34.

⁴Ibid., p. 21.

for example, improved techniques of moving and placing granite actually produced a new architectural style.

Opportunity provided the catalyst for Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century to practice the virtues of industry, sobriety and frugality as necessary means to economic growth. Needing a versatile as well as an intelligent populace, New Englanders reshaped school systems in order to foster the cult of the "self-made man." Moreover, because of religious affiliations, education served to perpetuate the "Protestant ethic," which encouraged the belief that each man controlled his own destiny and that success or failure was determined by the individual--with God acting as referee. The power of education to "bend twigs" was transcended only by the family. To the majority of New England families, making money was synonymous with achievement. The idea of accumulating wealth was ingrained early in life in the minds of most boys, both by the family and the church.⁵

It must be concluded, however, that although the Protestant ethic instilled the habits of industry, zeal and frugality in the faithful, mercantile success was achieved at the expense of Puritanism. English emigrants during the middle of the seventeenth century had little sympathy for the Calvinist doctrine. The price

⁵Stuart Bruchey, The Roots of American Economic Growth, 1607-1861 (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 42-57, 195-198.

of land was not too high for the settlers, and they were eager not only to be self-sufficient but to carve out in the New World "a niche out of which they had been washed by the economic and social currents of the old day."⁶

The parade of material progress in Thoreau's day awakened sympathetic applause in hearts which knew no acute tension between the claims of religion and the attraction of a commercial civilization. Merchants were eager to take advantage of the opportunities the Northeast presented; their actions were not limited by time-honored methods. Beside the expanding markets, family partnerships and ability to make calculated risks, merchants were keen to take advantage of political and social "connections," and their economic prowess owed little to the Protestant ethic. Also, the offspring of early Calvinists tended to be absorbed into the expanding mercantile world where status was determined, in Gabriel Kolko's words, "more by accumulated wealth than theological niceties."⁷

It would, however, be misleading to emphasize the limitations of Puritan ethics without emphasizing their contribution to social progress. The virtues of enterprise, diligence and thrift

⁶Ibid., p. 64.

⁷Gabriel Kolko, Wealth and Power in America (New York: Praeger Co., 1962), p. 78.

form part of the indispensable foundation of any complex and healthy civilization. It was Puritanism which transformed those virtues from eccentricity into a habit and way of life. Holding as their first assumption that the ultimate social authority was the will of God, Puritans allowed taking such profits as the market offered, but insisted on the obligations of good conscience and forbearance in economic transactions. Even as the tenets of Puritanism weakened or disappeared and the optimism of New England Unitarianism became fashionable, these qualities, along with the admiration of them, remained.⁸

Industrialization and social reform were contemporary developments. The generation of New England Americans before the Civil War participated in reform movements which ranged over the whole spectrum of social change. One might, for example, have joined in the movements for temperance, abolition of slavery, prison reform, peace, educational reform, equal rights for women, poor relief, education of the deaf and mute, outlawing of gambling or matrimonial reform. If a New Englander were interested in temperance, for instance, he could have chosen among the American Temperance Society, The American Temperance Union, The Congressional

⁸R. H. Tawney, "From Religion and the Rise of Capitalism," in American Economic History, Stanley Coben and Forest Hill ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1966), pp. 11-17.

Temperance Society, The National Temperance Society, The Sons of Temperance in North America or The Friends of Temperance. Even if he were a "no-organization" man, but his desire to share in some group effort was very strong, he might have compromised and joined the organization dedicated to the destruction of organizations, the Come-Outers.⁹ And if he could find no society devoted to his interests, he might establish one. Above all, in that ferment of reform the more courageous were ready to come to grips with the slavery question.

Abolition--a movement which sought freedom for the slave and recognition of his rights as a human being--was a compelling force in a world awakening to new concepts of humanity. Indeed, the chief characteristic of the period was the insistence upon the inherent rights of all men. The right to the pursuit of "life, liberty and happiness" was no longer viewed as the privilege of those who had estates of a certain value or those who were strong enough mentally and physically to win their own way. "Democracy was coming into its own, and expressing itself rather in terms of the brotherhood of human beings than in those of abstract equality in political rights and obligations."¹⁰ In the whole humanitarian

⁹James Truslow Adams, New England in the Republic: 1776-1850 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1926), pp. 351-376.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 367.

movement of the times, abolition of slavery was the central target. The country was obliged to listen to crusaders such as Garrison and the Grimkes, Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips. These men and women were:

members of a family of minds that had appeared in all the Western countries, in Italy, in Germany, in France, to defend the religion of liberty, Brothers of Mazzini, heirs of William Tell, men of the world themselves and men of culture, they roused the indifferent minds of the thinking masses and made the American anti-slavery movement a part of the great world struggle of darkness and light.¹¹

The New England abolitionists were exceptionally interesting men and women. They were outspoken, tenacious and unsparing in attack. They were continually charged with being social incendiaries, atheists, socialists and anarchists; yet, Parrington convincingly argues, "as a matter of sober historical fact, they were the kindest of men, with generous sympathies and disinterested motives."¹² There was no money to be made or power to be had by preaching abolitionism; rather, the only payment received by men such as Samuel May, Theodore Parker, Thomas Higginson and Henry Ward Beecher was social ostracism and intimidation.¹³

¹¹Van Wyck Brooks, The Flowering of New England, 1850-65 (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1936), pp. 393-394.

¹²Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, II (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927), p. 351.

¹³Ibid., pp. 350-351.

Two Roads of Reform: Radical
and Conservative

There were two fundamental ideas which comprised the rationale of the abolitionist movement. On the one hand, there was the method of the "radicals," whose goal was to reform man by "moral suasion," that is, by appeals to the individual conscience and the "moral sense." The method was based upon a firm belief in the worth and dignity of the individual and upon his free moral spirit. Opposed to this position was the method of the "conservatives," who insisted that regeneration of the individual could best be achieved by changing the environment. Assuming that man was a creature of circumstances, the conservative approach manifested itself in political action. For example, petitions for the abolition of slavery were sent by the thousands to Congress in the 1840's; and when neither major political party would grapple with the question of slavery in the territories, the conservatives established the Liberty Party.¹⁴

William Ellery Channing (the elder) clearly outlined the point of departure of both factions when he addressed another movement engaged in reform, the Massachusetts Temperance Society.

¹⁴Merton L. Dillon, "The Abolitionists as a Dissenting Minority," in Explorations in the History of American Radicalism, Alfred Young, ed. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. 96.

There are two modes of action. To rescue men, we must act on them inwardly or outwardly. We must either give them strength within to withstand the temptations to intemperance; or we must remove the temptations without. We must increase the power of resistance, or diminish the pressure which is to be resisted.¹⁵

The conservatives favored "diminishing the pressure which is to be resisted." Although believing in "progress," they preferred to achieve it by a gradual evolution rather than by more explosive and, they felt, more revolutionary methods. The institutions of society might not be perfect, but they could be perfected; and once this was achieved, the good life for every individual would be forthcoming. Since the conservatives assumed that the environment determined what the individual would be, they politely asked for a better government "soon," whereas Thoreau was to demand in Civil Disobedience "not at once no government, but at once a better government."¹⁶

It was not, however, the conservatives who set the tone of the period. Although they were a force in bringing about the changes for which both they and their more radical fellow-reformers

¹⁵William E. Channing, An Address on Temperance (Boston: n. p., 1837), p. 31. Delivered at the request of the council of the Massachusetts Temperance Society, February 28, 1837.

¹⁶Henry David Thoreau, The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, X (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1893), p. 133. Referred to hereafter as Writings.

were seeking, it was the more vocal and zealous spirit of the radicals which was to determine the light by which the age would later be viewed.¹⁷ Passion and excitement, not calmness and deliberation, marked the age. While significant roles in the abolitionists' struggle must be awarded to men like Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Parker Pillsbury, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Weld, as well as to those individuals already mentioned, one necessarily agrees with Louis Filler that William Lloyd Garrison emerges as the seminal figure in the conflict.¹⁸ A 25-year-old Massachusetts man, Garrison possessed the fanatical heroism of a martyr with the crusading ability of a successful demagogue. In 1831, he founded the Liberator, a newspaper that became a rostrum from which he poured vitriolic editorials upon the slaveholders and their practices. The first issue of the Liberator on January 1, 1831, marked the path he was to follow for thirty-five years:

Assenting to the "self-evident truth" maintained in the American Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights--among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," I shall strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population. . . . I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for

¹⁷See, for instance, Alice Tyler, Freedom's Ferment (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944).

¹⁸Louis Filler, The Crusade Against Slavery (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. xiii.

severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation . . . urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest--I will not equivocate--I will not excuse--I will not retreat a single inch--and I WILL BE HEARD.¹⁹

Conservative "equivocation" enraged Garrison. To his way of thinking, it was as bad to work for the right thing in the wrong way as it was to work openly for an evil cause. The end, in other words, did not justify any means. It was this difference of opinion on how slavery should be abolished that separated the reformers into factions which spent as much time and effort quarreling among themselves as in assaulting the slaveowners they mutually professed to hate. There was another fundamental difference of opinion over the question of how inclusive reform should be. The conservatives were "gradualists" and willing to reform society one piece at a time. In general, they felt that an anti-slavery organization should limit itself to the abolition of slavery and avoid attacks against intemperance, social inequality of women or political and religious injustices of other kinds. A temperance society, after all, limited itself to attacks on liquor interests, and peace societies focused on war.

The radical abolitionists, however, insisted that their reform movement should be all-inclusive and comprehensive. They

¹⁹Liberator, January 1, 1831, p. 1.

wanted to regenerate the whole man, and programs which were directed against only one "evil" were unacceptable. There was little to be gained, they reasoned, in freeing man from the restrictions of the church while leaving him enslaved by the state or in convincing him that slavery should be abolished while leaving him prey to intemperance. If man's moral fiber were to be renewed, then it would have to be completely renewed. It was foolish to think that an individual could be moral in one matter and immoral in another.

The transcendental basis of such radical thought seems evident. The transcendentalist movement was a revival, couched in the language of philosophy and literature, that attempted to clarify the relationships of man to nature and man to God. It stipulated that there were great moral truths that were a priori and that go beyond sensory proof. There was, furthermore, a hierarchy of truths of which the most important were that nature is beneficent, God is charitable and man divine. There was, however, nothing really new about these concepts; they were products of the Enlightenment. As William Henry Channing stated when outlining the history and indebtedness of transcendentalism to other movements:

Transcendentalism was an assertion of the inalienable integrity of man, or the imminence of Divinity in instinct. In part, it was a reaction against Puritan orthodoxy; in part, an effect of renewed study of the ancients, or Oriental Pantheists, of Plato and the Alexandrians, or Plutarch's Morals, Seneca, and

Epictetus; in part, the natural product of the culture of the place and time. On the somewhat stunted stock of Unitarianism--whose characteristic dogma was trust in individual reason as correlative to Supreme Wisdom--had been grafted German Idealism, as taught by masters of most various schools--by Kant and Jacobi, Fichte and Novalis, Schelling and Hegel, Schleiermacher and DeWette, by Madame deStael, Cousin, Coleridge and Carlyle; and the result was a vague yet exalting conception of godlike nature of the human spirit.²⁰

The new spark to these ideas was their subjective and a priori authentication. It followed that if these transcendental tenets were true, then any secular transgression of them was in disobedience to God's wishes. If man were truly perfectable, and at least potentially divine, then it was a crime against God that man should be subjected to the ravages of moral corruption. In other words, if the law of conscience comes into conflict with the law of the land, one is obligated to follow one's conscience.

²⁰William Henry Channing, Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli, I (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1851), pp. 12-13. New England transcendentalism is conceded to be difficult to explain. Some critics claim that it failed to establish a firm philosophical base. Commager said, "This reform movement was, to an astonishing degree, not the product of philosophy--but of a dominant and pervasive view of the nature of Man and the relation of Man to Nature and to God, . . ." The Era of Reform: 1830-1860, Henry Steele Commager, ed. (Princeton: Princeton Press, 1960), p. 8. For an additional discussion of this problem of definition, see Herbert W. Schneider, History of American Philosophy (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 242. In both Commager's and Schneider's analysis of transcendentalism, it is considered, rather than a philosophy, to be a faith, an enthusiasm or a ferment. This position is accepted here because the central figures of the movement rarely were in complete agreement. At its most awesome moments, transcendentalism was individualistic.

One of the lesser prophets of the transcendental movement, C. A. Bartol, offered a statement of faith that deserves to be recalled in its entirety:

Transcendentalism relies on those ideas in the mind which are laws in the life. Pantheism is said to sink man and nature in God; Materialism to sink God and man in nature; and Transcendentalism to sink God and nature in man. But the Transcendentalist at least is belied and put in jail by the definition which is so neat at the expense of truth. He made consciousness, not sense, the ground of truth Is the soul reared on the primitive rock? or is no rock primitive, but the deposit of spirit--therefore in its lowest form alive, and ever rising into organism to reach the top of the eternal circle again, as in the well one bucket goes down empty and the other rises full? The mistake is to make the everlasting things subjects of argument instead of sight Our soul is older than our organism. It precedes its clothing. It is the cause, not the consequence, of its material elements; else, as materialists understand, it does not exist What is it that accepts misery from the Most High, defends the Providence that inflicts its woes, espouses its chastiser's cause, purges itself in the pit of its misery of all contempt of His commands, and makes its agonies the beams and rafters of the triumph it builds? It is the immortal principle. It is an indestructible essence. It is part and parcel of the Divinity it adores. It can no more die than he can. It needs no more insurance of life than its author does. Prove its title? It is proof of all things else. It is substantive, and everything adjective beside. It is the kingdom all things will be added to.²¹

That these were moral imperatives of New England transcendentalism is undeniable. Commager concluded from their philosophic base an obligation to reform. The transcendentalist asked, "Why is man born

²¹Quoted by O. B. Frothingham, Transcendentalism in New England (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1876), pp. 342-343.

but to be a reformer--to remove impediments, to recase institutions, to make over man himself?"²² Paraphrasing Emerson, Commager continued, "Let us bring freedom to the slave, learning to the ignorant, enlightenment to the superstitious, prosperity to the poor, health to the sick and crippled; let us give to women, to children, to workingmen, to the perishing and the dangerous classes, all those rights and privileges and opportunities and benefactions that God and Nature intended they should enjoy!"²³ The crux of the issue was the way in which this purifying and regenerating of man's spirit was to be accomplished. After all, God would not have made nature benevolent and man divine if He had not intended perfection. But what were the means? O. B. Frothingham, who provided the only serious history written by a man who was deeply involved in the movement and who yet lived long enough to view matters from a distance, supplied the answer. The transcendentalist was a radical reformer whose method for inducing change was

individual awakening and regeneration, and was to be conducted through the simplest ministries of family, neighborhood, fraternity, quite wide of associations and institutions. He was less a reformer of human circumstances than a regenerator of the human spirit.²⁴

²²Commager, p. 3.

²³Ibid., p. 39.

²⁴Frothingham, p. 153.

In this context, then, transcendentalists were unalterably opposed to any reform that fell short of complete moral regeneration.

It should be noted that Emerson, rather than advocating gradual reform as Commager indicated in his paraphrase, called for total regeneration and not for excessive social and civil legislation. Indeed, the transcendentalist was opposed to any concept that implied any form of centralization and consorted effort. When man was wise enough to achieve the perfect state, he could shed the limitations of formal government. As Emerson argued:

Hence the less government we have the better, the fewer laws, and the less confided power. The antidote to this abuse of formal government is the influence of private character, the growth of the I individual; . . . to educate the wise man the State exists, and with the appearance of the wise man the State expires. The appearance of character makes the State unnecessary. The wise man is the State.²⁵

Children of an age given over to new hope, transcendental dreamers were arch-romantics. The greatest miracle was the daily rebirth of God in the individual soul--every day was a new day and every act a fresh wonder. "Mine is a certain brief experience," said Emerson in The Transcendentalist, "which surprised me in the highway or in the market, in some place, at some time,--whether in the body or out of the body, God knoweth,--and made me aware that I

²⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Politics," in Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, III (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903-1904), p. 206.

had played the fool with fools all this time, but that law existed for me and for all; that to me belongs a trust, a child's trust and obedience, and I should never be fooled more."²⁶ Essentially, radical social action was an expression of transcendental faith, which glorified consciousness and free will. The Unitarians had pronounced human nature to be excellent; transcendentalists declared it divine. They endowed it with great potentialities, discovered the secret voice of the Most High in the buried life that men call instinct, refused to heed any other command except the inner voice of conscience.²⁷

Such an attitude readily fostered criticism, for idealism rarely generates complacency. The transcendentalists were honest, intelligent and severe critics of their generation; the real value of the movement rests in its reminder that the individual is still the center of importance in the world. Radical abolitionists were no less caustic in their criticism but felt obliged to form committees and organizations in order to fight against the "kingdoms of darkness." It is to a consideration of the way in which they carried out their mission, and the eventual eruptions in their ranks, that we now turn.

²⁶Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Stephen Whicher, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), p. 203.

²⁷Parrington, II, p. 382.

Radical Abolitionism in New England,
1830-1860

The abolitionist crusade of the 1830's, as indicated earlier, was an outgrowth of the whole humanitarian ferment. It was not, however, a new cause. A spurt of abolitionist sentiment had occurred around the turn of the eighteenth century, spearheaded mainly by Quakers, but by 1820 it had almost completely died out. In the winter of 1816-17 the American Colonization Society had been organized; the function of the Society was the deportation and re-settlement of free Negroes in Liberia. Leading members of the Society, such as James Monroe, James Madison and John Marshall, who served the Society as presidents, supported the theory of biological inequality and racial inferiority of the Negroes. "It was inevitable that men should have considered the possibility of their removal before entering upon the more difficult task of orientation which their continued presence would entail."²⁸ America, after all, was preordained to be white! Negroes, both in the North and South, were excluded from schools, segregated in cities, denied the franchise to vote, forced into less desirable work, denied freedom of assembly and conditioned by the legal inequities of slavery.

²⁸Dwight L. Dumond, Anti-Slavery Origins of the Civil War in the United States (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 10.

The program offered by the American Colonization Society, prudent though it may have been in light of the racial prejudices that flourished in America, could never have succeeded. Even if there had been a popular commitment to its goal, the tasks of freeing and transporting the entire Negro population--two million slaves in 1830--were beyond the resources of the nation.²⁹ Colonists, moreover, accepted prejudice as inevitable and catered to it, thereby probably stimulating it. In passages that are extremely embarrassing today, Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia portrayed the Negro and his potential in most unflattering terms.³⁰ And there is little reason to suppose that his opinions were not generally shared at that time and long afterwards; they were repeated often and by prestigious men. As Dillon observed, Southerners rehearsed the inferiority argument until it became gospel, and many Northerners accepted it in much the same way.³¹ Not without cause did the British abolitionist, Charles Stuart, write:

Truly your country . . . is making itself more and more a spectacle equally disgusting and ridiculous to all independent and manly intelligences--applauding liberty, yet keeping slaves! Calling the slave trade piracy

²⁹Ibid., p. 11.

³⁰Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, William Peden, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), pp. 138-141.

³¹Dillon, pp. 90, 91.

if practiced in Africa, but ready to wade thro' blood to honor and sustain it in America! Boasting of freedom, yet trampling upon free and generous discussion! Pretending to be brave, yet skulking like cowards from the light of truth! Professing religion, yet grasping . . . to atrocious abhorrence of a colored skin! The spires of its churches, pointing heavenward thro' the land; and the interior arrangements of its churches, proclaiming not only without shame but boastfully, the dominion of Satan within. The Ministers of its churches raging for doctrine, and contending with the zealot's zeal for their tithings of mint, anise and cummin, but contemptuously trampling upon the weightier matters of law, judgment and faith! What a loathsome and portentous spectacle! What a jest to demons! What a grief to Angels, if Angels can mourn.³²

Contrary to the aims of the Colonization Society, abolitionists rejected all schemes which encouraged Negroes to leave the country. In order to combat colonization, as well as racial prejudice and the institution of slavery, the need was felt for abolitionist societies. In 1832, Garrison established the New England Anti-Slavery Society. The new Society was uncompromising, defying all the legal guarantees protecting the slavery system and insisting upon immediate abolition without compensation to slaveholders. Garrison's policy was to hold up the most repulsive aspects and exceptional incidents of Negro slavery to public view: miscegenation, separation of families, cruel punishments and

³²Charles Stuart to Theodore and Angelina Weld, February 21, 1842, in Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke, 1822-1844, Gilbert Barnes and Dwight Dumond, eds., II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 928-929. Stuart's observations would have been even more applicable ten years earlier.

barbarous treatment of fugitives.

A combination of evangelical zeal and New England idealism prompted the organization of a national body called the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1832. It was never known precisely how many societies or members belonged to the Society. In 1835, for example, 328 societies were reported, claiming 27,182 members. By 1838, the national Society could officially claim 1,350 societies, with a membership of about 250,000 persons. In 1837, it claimed 145 Garrison-led societies in Massachusetts alone, and there was never any question but that Garrison was the leader of abolitionism in New England.³³

Excluding one fanatic, John Brown, no abolitionist attempted to incite a slave insurrection, as the South had claimed following the Turner uprising in August, 1831. Rather, the abolitionists confined their activities primarily to the written and spoken word--with a possible exception to the "underground railroad." But the mere existence of the Anti-Slavery Societies, and especially Garrison's fierce denunciations in the Liberator, aroused the nation, North and South, to a fiery pitch of anger. By 1835 the South was demanding legislation to curb the tongues and pens of the abolitionists. The South, furthermore, openly threatened the North

³³Lois Mathews, The Expansion of New England, 1620-1865 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909), pp. 34-39.

with secession if slavery were touched and warned the North, particularly Massachusetts, that severe economic retaliation would be leveled against Northern businessmen if they did not limit discussion of the slavery question. Essentially, the North was told to suppress free speech.³⁴ It should be added that Northern businessmen needed no such threatening; they were as angrily anxious to suppress the agitators as were the slaveholders themselves. "The same men who gave as an excuse for not reducing the hours of labor of their own employees to ten a day, to do so would give them so much leisure as to ruin their morals, could have no great compunction as to what Southern friends and business correspondents might or might not do with their slaves."³⁵

The acts of violence perpetrated on the abolitionists were "all directed against them by the proslavery parties North and South."³⁶ Were one to recount the details of every mobbing of anti-slavery workers, it would require volumes. On October 21, 1835, for example, Garrison was paraded around Boston with a rope around his neck by what was called a "broadcloth mob."³⁷ On the same day an

³⁴Dumond, p. 60.

³⁵Adams, p. 405.

³⁶Ibid., p. 412.

³⁷John J. Chapman, Garrison (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1898), p. 119.

anti-slavery meeting of about thirty women in Faneuil Hall was dispersed by a mob of "very respectable gentlemen" led by a congressman and a judge.³⁸ Boston was far from unique in this respect. Theodore Weld was refused permission to lecture in the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches in Circleville, Ohio, and forced to use an empty room in a store. On March 2, 1835, he wrote:

Stones and clubs flew merrily against the shutters. At the close as I came out, curses were showered in profusion. Lamp black, nails, divers pockets full of stones and eggs had been provided for the occasion, and many had disguised their persons, smeared their faces, etc., to avoid recognition Next evening the same state of things, with increase in violent demonstrations. The next, such was the uproar that a number of gentlemen insisted upon forming an escort and seeing me safe to my lodging, which they did. This state of things lasted till I had lectured six or seven times.³⁹

Weld's travels, in fact, could be traced from one end of the country to the other by similar outbursts. Elijah Lovejoy, a young Presbyterian minister who persisted in printing an abolitionist paper, had his press twice thrown into a river and in 1837 was murdered by a mob in Alton, Illinois. Abolition had its first martyr. Philadelphia abolitionists were scheduled to hold a protest meeting in Pennsylvania Hall, but a mob burned it down.⁴⁰

³⁸Dumond, p. 58.

³⁹Theodore Weld to Elizur Wright, Jr., March 2, 1835, Weld-Grimke Letters, I, p. 207.

⁴⁰Morison and Commager, p. 556.

Ironically, because of the unjust and physically violent methods of its adversaries, the abolition cause gained some recruits among men of social and business standing. Following the Lovejoy murder, for instance, Boston abolitionists asked for the use of Faneuil Hall for a meeting to defend the rights of free speech. After permission was reluctantly granted, the meeting was packed to a great extent with proslavery advocates, and the Attorney-General of Massachusetts denounced Lovejoy instead of his murderers. It was at this point that Wendell Phillips made his first appearance as an anti-slavery orator. He was so aroused by the condemnation that he took the platform and delivered a passionate appeal to the audience.⁴¹ From this point onward Phillips abandoned social position and a legal career for the prospects of serving the cause of abolition. Such turbulent meetings--and mobbings--gained converts for the abolition movement.

Although anti-slavery sentiment had made significant gains in all New England by the late 1830's, certain dissensions had become evident in its ranks. The dispute over female membership and Garrison's antagonism to participation in politics were chiefly responsible for a division of forces. Owing perhaps to Quaker participation in the movement, Garrison favored permitting women to

⁴¹Carlos Martyn, Wendell Phillips: the Agitator (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1890), p. 96.

address meetings and serve on committees; moreover, he was thoroughly opposed to a separate political party for the advancement of the anti-slavery forces. In 1840, Garrison's opponents withdrew from the New England Society and organized the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society; it soon perished, however, for lack of funds. The Garrisonian branch formed what was called the "Old Society."⁴²

From the day of its inception, the American Anti-Slavery Society was doomed to dissension. Although its members were earnest men and women who were unanimous in their hatred of slavery, they were divided into the radical and conservative camps already described. Initially, the strength and influence of the conservative majority was sufficient to prevent an open rupture. Arnold Buffum, the Society's first president, Gerrit Smith, Oliver Johnson, the Tappans and others, all men of restraint and moderation, were able to temporarily curb Garrison and the more radical members. But Garrison was not the sort to be shackled for long. The Liberator, which he used for thirty years as a vehicle for his ideas, was at his disposal; and this springboard the conservatives could neither silence nor counteract. The schism of 1840 in the abolitionists' ranks, then, divided the organization into those who wished to confine the efforts of the Society to abolition, using gradual,

⁴²Dumond, pp. 47-48.

moderate methods, and those, led by Garrison, who were interested in reforming everything under the sun and who would tolerate no delay. Yet, there were still differences of opinion among the radicals; hardly had the divorce taken place before quarreling factions were splitting the "Old Society" down the middle again.

Abolitionist agitation became increasingly comprehensive after the division in 1840, with Garrison devoting less of his energy to the moral principles he championed. Now the undisputed leader of the radicals, he took an active interest in the question of extending slavery into the Texas territory and had much to say in the Liberator about the qualifications of candidates for various national, state and local offices. Consequently, when Mrs. Lydia Maria Child, the distinguished editor of the National Anti-Slavery Standard from 1841-43, considered the direction that Garrison and radical abolitionism were taking, she concluded that it was time for a restatement and reemphasis of the principles on which the reform movement was based.

Child felt that radical abolitionists were becoming too inclined to lose sight of "absolutes" in their preoccupation with particulars. Differences of opinion over which agency should collect revenues, how the Liberator should be supported, or who should be elected to positions of leadership in the Society, for instance, were petty matters in the long run. What the abolitionists needed, she argued, was to get back to basic issues. If only they

regained their perspective, all such minor matters and the hard feelings they caused would resolve themselves. In issue after issue of the Standard, her appeals were trumpeted. What was needed, in the final analysis, was a fixed point of reference--a North Star--to which a person could always look to find his bearings. By way of an anecdote, Child related her philosophy:

A German drawing-master once told me of a lad, who would fain have learned to sketch landscapes from nature. In order to teach him the necessary rules of perspective, he had told him the first object was to choose a fixed point of view, from which all his lines could diverge, as from a common center. The sagacious youth chose a cow, grazing beneath the trees; but his fixed point soon began to wander hither and thither, according to the sweetness of the pasturage, and his lines fell into strange confusion; insomuch that all objects toppled and tumbled, and nought stood in its place.⁴³

The obvious advantage to the moral "fixed point of view" was that it never changed; it was always trustworthy and always perceived. She urged all radical abolitionists to rivet their eyes upon it:

In all ages, reformers have simply been men who strove resolutely to look at the fluctuating tide of things by the unchanging light of truth, as revealed in their own souls.⁴⁴

Child's insight into the basic premises of nineteenth century American radicalism, in this context, was remarkably acute and clear. She hit solidly upon the assumptions about man and the

⁴³"A Moral Standard," National Anti-Slavery Standard, October 14, 1841, p. 19.

⁴⁴Ibid.

universe which Garrison, Thoreau and most of the radical reformers of the period accepted as basic to their philosophies of life and reform. When Child launched her editorial reassessment of the radical position, she had in mind the a priori, transcendental truth which described the universe as a moral one, governed by a system of spiritual absolutes as unchanging as the laws which ruled the physical universe. In other words, the reform effort would succeed, she predicted, so long as reformers accepted the "fixed laws" of the moral universe as they had learned to accept the law of gravity. She wrote in the Standard:

The engineer never dreams of departing from fixed laws. He has tried them a thousand times, and he has never failed in their application--simply because he conforms to them. He is not so silly as to try to make them conform to his own notions. Let the moralist do likewise.

Why should we forsake the laws of Nature? Why should we be dissatisfied, if those laws are always immutable through endless changes of time?⁴⁵

It was surely a real consolation for Child to look in times of stress to a system of moral absolutes which was never affected by schisms of the sort that seemed constantly to plague the radical cause. Indeed, backed by such a system one could discount the prospect of failure: Principles were indestructible. Garrison capsulized this belief when he wrote in the "Declaration of Sentiments" of

⁴⁵"Patience," National Anti-Slavery Standard, October 8, 1840, p. 18.

the American Anti-Slavery Society at Philadelphia in 1833 the assurance: "We may be personally defeated, but our principles never!"⁴⁶

The Moral Law was not only absolutely fixed but was absolutely valid and right. It was the court of final appeal; it was a trustworthy measure of every notion which passed through the mind of man. Nothing was true or ever would be true, regardless of the number of people who believed it, if it came into conflict with the Moral Law. Was a particular law passed by Congress, for example, valid? These later-day transcendentalists reasoned that one could not get an answer by referring the law to the Supreme Court, for the Court could pass only on its constitutionality, and the Constitution was an inadequate standard for determining the right or wrong of a proposition because a law could be constitutional and still be morally wrong. What, for instance, of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850? According to the Court's interpretation, the law was constitutional. But did the Court, the radical abolitionists contended,

⁴⁶Wendell and Francis Garrison, William Lloyd Garrison: The Story of His Life Told by His Children, I (New York: Century, 1885-1889), p. 412. Referred to hereafter as Garrison. Since complete files of the Liberator are rare, I cite instead wherever necessary this work, which is little more than a collection of Garrison's correspondence and Liberator editorials. The sons' evaluation of their father is--expectedly--biased, and I use only primary source materials which they quoted and none of their interpretations. I have discovered no reason to doubt their accuracy in transcribing their primary materials.

have any jurisdiction in a matter involving the "natural rights" of free men? If the Court had referred to the Moral Law rather than to the Constitution, it could not have escaped the conclusion that the Act violated the most fundamental rights that mankind enjoyed.⁴⁷

The Moral Law, furthermore, was more than immutable and authoritative; it guaranteed the inalienable freedoms of thought, speech and action.⁴⁸ It conferred upon all men equal "natural rights" which could not be limited by any authority on earth. Whenever Garrison and his followers ran into trouble with national, state or local authorities, they were not long in asserting that their freedom to act any way they wanted was derived from a source completely outside of--and superior to--any civil power. An example will make the point clear. In 1836, shortly after Garrison had been threatened by a mob in Boston and Lovejoy had been killed in Alton, the Massachusetts state legislature appointed a committee to hear representatives of the American Anti-Slavery Society and to make recommendations regarding the advisability of imposing curbs on abolitionist activities. Garrison, Reverend Samuel May and others were appointed by the Society to appear and defend their interests before the committee. But the hearing broke off before all of the

⁴⁷Dumond, p. 71.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 70.

abolitionists could be heard. Significantly, the issue that brought about the adjournment was not agitation of the slavery question; instead, the investigative committee insisted that the abolitionists were being heard as a "favor." On the other hand, members of the Society considered it their right to be heard, and the Moral Law guaranteed that right. After the chairman of the committee suspended the hearings, Garrison petitioned the state legislature to reconvene the sessions "as a matter of right" rather than as a favor; and the legislature granted him a rehearing on his own terms.⁴⁹

To the legislative committee, no doubt, such an issue must have seemed petty. But to the radical abolitionists it was far from insignificant. They were so jealous of their personal freedom that they reaffirmed it again and again in their speeches, official documents and newspapers. The following selection from an almanac is a fair sample.

We recognize the inherent, eternal, and unalterable distinction between right and wrong; the rectitude and supreme authority of God's law; the mutual obligations and corresponding duties and rights of all moral beings.

We hold human rights to be inalienable; because their corresponding duties are unchanging; because moral qualities are indelible; because the human soul is immortal; because

⁴⁹A record of this hearing may be found in Garrison, II, pp. 95-113.

the law of God is irrepealable; because the throne of God is immovable; because the sovereign BENEFACTOR who ordained and conferred them is not man that he should lie, or the son of man that he should repent

We claim these rights for ourselves, and consequently for all men.⁵⁰

Precisely the same rights and the same source for them, as will be detailed in the next chapter, are to be found in Thoreau's writings. Having sworn allegiance to the Moral Law, he felt under no obligation to subscribe to any other. "I was not born to be forced," he wrote after his experience in jail for refusing to pay his poll taxes. "They only can force me who obey a higher law than I."⁵¹ On this basis, Thoreau could never be "forced," for he was convinced that there was no higher law than that which he obeyed.

To the radical thinkers, in the final analysis the individual reigned sovereign over a personal province on which no earthly power could trespass. Surely, if they could establish the personal divinity of every man, there would no longer be a slavery problem in the United States. "Reckon a man at the price you now hold your gods, and you can get slavery abolished--even Negro slavery,"

⁵⁰"Our Principles," The American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1837 (Boston: n. p., 1837), p. 30. There is virtually no end to such statements in abolitionist literature.

⁵¹Writings, X, p. 156.

Nathaniel P. Rogers editorialized.⁵² Thoreau added his assent.

"This obedience to conscience and trust in God . . . is only retreat to one's self," he wrote in 1841; and a few months later he remarked, "Speak to men as to Gods and you will not be insincere."⁵³

These, then, were Child's "fixed points of view," the cornerstones with which she tried to buttress the radical abolitionist movement. They are the same suppositions accepted by Thoreau, and they were used as justification by the whole group of radical, "moral" reformers for their assaults upon all of man's institutions. Since social institutions impose limitations upon individual members of society, they are incompatible with the person who believes he should enjoy absolute personal freedom. To Garrison, therefore, institutions were unjust infringements upon "natural rights" and perverters of the essential goodness of the individual, since they stood between him and his obedience to the Moral Law. Although it is easily understood why the radicals were offended by institutions, it is another matter to explain how their attacks on institutions could be viewed as consistent with their

⁵²The Herald of Freedom, September 8, 1843, p. 29. Thoreau was intimately acquainted with Roger's estimate of man's worth and praised him for it. See Wendell Glick, "Thoreau and 'The Herald of Freedom,'" New England Quarterly, XXII (June, 1949), pp. 193-204.

⁵³Writings, I, p. 180 and Ibid., p. 258.

theory that social reform should be essentially a matter of individual regeneration.

It is difficult to read extensively in the literature of radical agitation against church and state without concluding that the destruction of institutions became, after a time, the consuming passion of the movement and that revitalizing man's "inner light" became secondary. As Garrison once replied to Wendell Phillips, who charged him with being over-zealous, his life's work was to incite, to "melt the ice" around him. If man was to be made over, Garrison believed he had to be made susceptible to the new doctrines by being "agitated"; his "crust of prejudice" and "indifference" had to be "pierced" because he was governed "more by impulse than by conviction."⁵⁴ Fotheringham has accurately described the strategy of a man like Garrison:

The technique of agitation is to violate the expected, to violate the norms of the onlooker. The agitator says or does those things which are typically not expected in orderly social behavior People are disturbed enough to lift their eyes from their usual routine.⁵⁵

While Child and Rogers carried on their appeals to the "inner man," by 1842 Garrison had become almost completely absorbed in his

⁵⁴Wendell Phillips, "The Philosophy of the Abolitionist Movement," Speeches and Lectures (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1881), p. 139.

⁵⁵Fotheringham, p. 182.

attacks upon institutions and traded blow for blow with clergymen and politicians.

In launching their fiery programs, Garrison and his followers unquestionably broke with the tenets of the Moral Law. Consistency would have demanded that they devote their energies to the awakening of man to his potentials as a man. It would have dictated that all radicals follow the course which Child had recommended. But as time passed, Garrisonian abolitionists pushed Child's "ultimates" farther and farther from the center of their movement. They seemed to forget that man, by their own estimate, was to be reclaimed by increasing his inner strength rather than by "diminishing the pressure which is to be resisted." It should be emphasized, however, that most radical abolitionists had no quarrel with the principles the editors of the Standard and Herald of Freedom espoused. On the contrary, they accepted them wholeheartedly; they simply could not put them into practice. While they believed that permanent reform could come only from "within," they seemed unable to control their irresistible urge to attack those "monsters" which had grown up in opposition to the Moral Law--even though such activity, by their own standards of reform, was of secondary importance. The extent to which most radical abolitionists, especially Garrison, lost sight of Child's "principles" can best be judged by the comprehensiveness and intensity of their attacks upon political, social and religious institutions.

The most offensive institutions were those which were the largest and most firmly established in the fabric of society. Into this category fell the Christian churches, perhaps the most frequent target of abolitionist assault. It must be confessed that the churches, if they did not expressly favor slavery, at least opposed any agitation of the question. The old Puritan conscience might have been tender, but it refused to attack any question larger than Sabbath-keeping. "It was inquisitorial rather than humanitarian, and the sins which it hunted down were theological rather than social."⁵⁶ Garrison complained, probably without exaggeration, that the clergy were far more dangerous opponents to the anti-slavery crusade than all its other enemies combined:

If the church and clergy had not utterly failed to perform their peculiar and appropriate duty of relieving the oppressed and pleading for the friendless, the fatherless and the widow, anti-slavery societies would never have existed. They were literally called into existence by the delinquencies of the churches.⁵⁷

The Reverend Wilbur Fisk, for example, leader of New England Methodism, came out openly in favor of slavery. Reverend Dr. Wayland, a Baptist, and president of Brown University, published a

⁵⁶Parrington, p. 341.

⁵⁷Herald of Freedom, February 9, 1844, p. 1.

book to prove that the question should not be agitated.⁵⁸

The churches, however, should not be condemned in toto. Many clergymen, such as Reverend Samuel May, and church-going citizens formed integral links in New England's "underground railroad" system, and the iniquity of tolerating slavery was preached from many aroused pulpits.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, in the midst of general apathy or opposition, it took no tender spirits to dramatize the issues of human freedom and equality. The radical abolitionists, consequently, assaulted the churches from many sides. They examined the Bible and concluded that it was not divinely inspired. They made fun of church ceremony and ritual and refused to consider the Sabbath in any way different from other days of the week. What was most infuriating to New England clergymen was being portrayed as narrow, selfish, bigoted, heartless and hypocritical. Radicals maintained, in essence, that the church was only a human institution and that its authority, therefore, possessed none of the a priori validity of the Moral Law.

⁵⁸See Sara Kasler, "The Anti-Slavery Movement in Connecticut and Western Massachusetts" (Unpublished master's thesis, Department of History, Ohio State University, 1934), pp. 90-105; and Victor Howard, "The Anti-Slavery Movement in the Presbyterian Church, 1835-1861" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, Ohio State University, 1961).

⁵⁹Martyn, p. 174.

Garrison's anti-clerical agitation, however, did not begin with the establishment of anti-slavery societies in 1832 and 1833. While the movement was young and struggling, Garrison may have reasoned that alienation of orthodox religious people would prove fatal. But by 1845, when nearly all of the conservative abolitionists had been driven out of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Garrison did not hesitate to repudiate the Christian church and undermine its teachings. The Bible, for instance, was proclaimed to be just a book--a piece of parchment and no more--which every man had the right to examine in the light of "reason" using the infallible criterion of Moral Law. Blindly accepting the Bible, Garrison argued, was "absurd":

To say that everything in the Bible is to be believed, simply because it is found in that volume, is . . . absurd and pernicious. It is the province of reason to "search the scriptures," and determine what in them is true, and what false--what is probable, and what incredible--what is historically true, and what fabulous--what is compatible with the happiness of mankind, and what ought to be rejected as an example or rule of action

Truth is older than any parchment To discard a portion of scripture is not necessarily to reject the truth, but may be the highest evidence that one can give of his love of truth.⁶⁰

After dismissing the Bible on grounds that it conflicted with the authority of the Moral Law, it was a simple matter for the radicals, who took their cues from Garrison, to do away with church rites and

⁶⁰Garrison, III, p. 146.

dogmas. Garrison, similarly, measured them against the Moral Law and found them all completely without foundation in "fact."⁶¹

Although the amount of radical literature directed against church creeds was quite large, an even greater amount was leveled against the "Church" as an organization--as a group of believers and a body of belief. The technique was to use disparaging epithets, and those which the radicals employed were so strong that they caused no end of bitterness. Nathaniel Rogers, although committed to a policy of regenerating man from "within," could not resist villifying the church. He spoke of it as an "engine of pro-slavery tyranny," a "war-making, man-enslaving" institution. It was the "foes of freedom, humanity, and pure religion"; it was a "cage of unclean birds," an Augean stable of pollution."⁶² And the Protestant as well as Catholic clergy were described as "the bloodiest and most cowardly set of monsters on the face of the earth."⁶³ If the waking of the "faithful" from their indifference was an end the radical abolitionists had in mind, then their anti-clerical agitation was a huge success. It did not, however, attract

⁶¹In numerous issues of the Liberator, Garrison vehemently denounced the practice of Sabbath-keeping, for instance: See, Liberator, September 4, 1840, p. 3; and Liberator, March 30, 1848, p. 4.

⁶²"The Free American," Herald of Freedom, March 4, 1842, p. 2.

⁶³"The Halter-Going Clergy," Herald of Freedom, July 8, 1842, p. 20.

converts into the abolitionist fold. By 1845, hardly a minister in all of New England would permit his meeting-house to be used for abolitionist gatherings, and the vitriolic editorials of Garrison and Rogers no doubt incensed most Protestants and Catholics. But, as we have seen, Garrison and his associates pre-ferred to direct their criticisms where they would hurt the most.

The attack of the radical abolitionists against the federal government was no less heated than their assaults against the church. As the government made what appeared to the radicals as concession after concession to the slave powers--while repudiating the Moral Law--Garrison and his followers became increasingly violent and unrestrained in their condemnation. Beginning in 1843, every issue of the Liberator carried the following declaration:

Resolved, that the compact which exists between the North and the South is "a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell"--involving both parties in atrocious criminality--and should be immediately annulled.⁶⁴

After 1850, few radicals would admit that any government had a right to exist at all.

Although radical sentiment against the central government--and, for that matter, against all governments--underwent an evolution from 1840 to 1860, the arguments they raised were the same for the whole period. Essentially, they were as follows: The

⁶⁴From a masthead of the Liberator, 1843.

government was undesirable because it destroyed the individual and robbed him of his freedom; second, because it set up the Constitution, a human instrument in opposition to the Moral Law; third, because it levied taxes unjustly; and finally, because it used coercion to enforce its demands upon its own citizenry. These "reasons" provide a convenient framework for presenting their case against the government.

Every person, first of all, who allowed himself to become associated with the government in any capacity sold his manhood and surrendered all that was noble within him in order to serve a depraved institution. Members of the Abolitionist Society were discouraged from holding any political office on the grounds that government officials necessarily had to forfeit their allegiance to the Moral Law by pledging it to a spurious authority. The best that could be said of public officials was that they were "but a type of corrupt public sentiment--the product of a bad soil--tools--creatures of necessity, and not free intelligences."⁶⁵ Since every public servant, furthermore, associated with corrupt men, there was little chance for him to better himself. Chances were that dishonesty would breed dishonesty in an endless circle. Eventually, then, the "best" official would become degraded and come to act from motives

⁶⁵National Anti-Slavery Standard, November 4, 1841, p. 22.

as selfish, mercenary and immoral as his associates. "The most unprincipled, chameleon-like men in the community are the office-holders and seekers," Nathaniel Rogers asserted categorically.⁶⁶

The radical abolitionists pointed to the unwillingness of the government to free the slaves as evidence of the demoralizing circle of self-interest. Since all elected officials were necessarily malignant, the radicals insisted, it stood to reason that the Liberty Party, organized in 1840 by conservative abolitionists to elect James Birney to the Presidency, was from the outset doomed to failure. No matter how noble Birney's intentions may have been, if he were elected the spoils of office would drag him down. Politics and politicians, by definition, were immoral, and one could expect no moral reform of the country through them. "There can be no two opinions on this point," Charles Lane wrote from Concord, Massachusetts, to the Herald of Freedom:

It [the government] is destructive of manhood, of individual largeness and integrity, of love and neighborly feeling--men cannot expand to their full size of intellectual and moral being so long as it continues.⁶⁷

It seemed to the radical abolitionists that the American government nurtured those immoralities which it dedicated itself to uproot. While it had been established for the express purpose of

⁶⁶"Political Action," Herald of Freedom, November 19, 1840, p. 24.

⁶⁷Herald of Freedom, May 26, 1843, p. 14.

fostering a better life for each citizen, it had become, instead, the instrument for denying man's inalienable rights and one of his worst oppressors.

Governments . . . are ostensibly formed for the protection of human life and liberty. How absurd, how iniquitous to form an institution to protect man, and then enslave and slaughter men to protect the institutions Our affection and respect for man, as MAN, should never be supplanted by our regard for human governments.⁶⁸

The issue here was a matter of placing man first in the "natural order." The government, from the radicals' point of view, had transcended man in order of importance and sacrificed him to perpetuate itself.

Radical abolitionists objected to the government, in the second place, because it established the Constitution as an instrument having authority equal--or superior--to the Moral Law. Such a contradiction was, predictably, infuriating. The abolitionists' attitude toward the Constitution, however, underwent an interesting evolution. For a number of years after the organization of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1832, radicals were inclined to defend the document and its principles. After all, it seemed to emphasize the same inalienable rights guaranteed by the Moral Law. But when pro-slavery spokesmen began to use the Constitution as

⁶⁸Henry Wright, The Dissolution of the American Union, Demanded by Justice and Humanity, as the Incurable Enemy of Liberty (London: Routedledge and Kegan Paul, 1846), p. 3.

justification for Negro slavery, the abolitionists set out to undermine the document altogether.⁶⁹

By 1840, tolerance of the Constitution by Garrison and his associates began to wear thin. In 1842, as a result of increased activity by Southern sheriffs who pursued runaway slaves in New England, it began to break. Wendell Phillips voiced the abolitionists' attitude in a speech to the citizens of Boston:

When I look upon these crowded thousands, and see them trample on their consciences the rights of their fellow-men, at the bidding of a piece of parchment, I say, MY CURSE be on the Constitution of these United States.⁷⁰

The time had come, as Phillips announced, for the radicals to choose between allegiance to the Moral Law, on the one hand, and the claims of the Constitution on the other. He chose the former, and most of his co-workers followed. After 1845, part of the order of business at many radical conventions was to burn, as a symbolic gesture of defiance, a copy of the Constitution. (One such convention Thoreau attended in 1854 when he delivered "Slavery in Massachusetts.")

On much the same grounds, many abolitionists objected to the "right" of the government to levy taxes. Most complained that the money they paid into the Federal Treasury was used to hold slaves; many paid their taxes but filed protest against various

⁶⁹Dumond, pp. 67-71.

⁷⁰Phillips, p. 66.

government activities, such as the Mexican War. The idea of helping to pay the salaries of "deparved" public officials, especially those of United States marshals whose job it was to apprehend runaway slaves, was repulsive. Yet, of all the abolitionists who protested payment of taxes, few carried their beliefs so far that they actually withheld funds.⁷¹ Written and verbal protests seemed to the radicals to atone for their acquiescence in matters of money. If they were obliged to do something against their will, how could they be held accountable? As one radical stated:

as for taxes--it is only our voluntary acts for which we are responsible. And when did the government ever trust tax-paying to the voluntary good-will of its subjects? When it does, I, for one will refuse to pay.⁷²

Although radicals opposed the government under which they lived, they generally stayed within legal limits in expressing their opposition.

A fourth argument against the government, and one of the most persistent, was that it employed force to gain compliance from its citizens. To men who believed that the Moral Law prohibited interference of any sort with the impulses of the individual, this was criminal. The only government that had a right to exist was a

⁷¹Bronson Alcott did, but I know of no others.

⁷²The Anti-Slavery Examiner, November 13, 1846, pp. 31-32.

voluntary political body without an army, navy or local constabulary. In order to foster such a government, the radicals organized the Non-Resistance Society in 1838. No organization had ever been established whose charter members had a more certain conviction of its ultimate significance to mankind. Garrison, one of the guiding spirits in the organization, felt that the new Society represented the beginning of a great movement for the emancipation of mankind from all institutional oppression. On the day the Society was chartered, Garrison triumphantly told the readers of the Liberator:

Mankind will hail the 20th of September with more exultation and gratitude than Americans now do the 4th of July. This may now be regarded as solemn bombast.⁷³

Into the Society's "Declaration of Sentiments" Garrison poured all of his anti-institutionalism. The document, Garrison wrote enthusiastically to his wife, was the most "fanatical" and "disorganizing" statement ever penned by man--a declaration which "swept the whole surface of society, and upturned almost every existing institution on earth."⁷⁴ The proclamation was comprehensive enough, Garrison believed, to safeguard the moral integrity of the radicals no matter what circumstances should arise,

not only against all wars, whether offensive or defensive, but all preparations for war; against every naval ship, every arsenal, every fortification; against all military chieftains and soldiers; against all monuments

⁷³Liberator, September 20, 1838, p. 2.

⁷⁴Garrison, II, p. 228.

commemorative of victory over a fallen foe, all trophies won in battle, all celebrations in honor of the military or naval exploits; against all appropriations for the defense of a nation by force and arms, on the part of any legislative body; against every edict of government requiring of its subjects military service.⁷⁵

By 1845, all radical arguments against the government were summarized in the slogan, "No Union with Slaveholders." As we have seen, disunion was not their first consuming passion. Throughout the 25-year period that preceded the Civil War, radical abolitionists liked to emphasize at various times a different aspect of their reform program to the relative exclusion of all other phases. In 1838, center stage was occupied by the non-resistance program, which Garrison emphasized at the time as a matter of even greater concern than the program for the abolition of slavery. In 1845, and until the outbreak of the Civil War, disunion became the radical byword. The masthead of the Liberator echoed radical sentiment, "No Union with Slaveholders," and the paper was continuously filled with reports of "disunion" conventions. Needless to say, Garrisonian abolitionists were usually present in large numbers and dominated the proceedings. By 1854, Garrison told readers of the Liberator that the best way to destroy the institution of slavery was to separate North from South: "The one grand vital issue to be made with the Slave Power is THE DISSOLUTION OF THE EXISTING AMERICAN

⁷⁵The complete "Declaration" was printed in the Liberator, September 7, 1838, p. 4, from which the above quotation was taken.

UNION."⁷⁶

Disunion, actually, was only one step in the direction toward which Garrison attempted to move his age. He was always hopeful of someday seeing a "society" of men who paid allegiance only to the Moral Law. Garrison, fundamentally, wanted not better institutions but no institutions at all. It was one of his characteristics, and of most of his radical associates, however, that as time passed and they seemed no closer to their goals they became more and more willing to accept some of the half-way measures they had long decried in others. Garrison wrote as late as 1855: "Urge immediate abolition as earnestly as we may, it will be gradual abolition in the end."⁷⁷ And Phillips said: "If we would get half a loaf, we must demand the whole of it."⁷⁸

The most consistent of the radicals never had to undergo the trial of compromising themselves. They detected the inherent contradictions which were developing in the radical movement and retired from it in the early 1840's. We have already examined Child's position; she withdrew from active participation in 1843. Nathaniel Rogers left in 1845. Having accepted the idea of complete

⁷⁶Liberator, May 10, 1854, p. 1.

⁷⁷Garrison, III, p. 113.

⁷⁸Phillips, p. 80.

personal freedom in accordance with the Moral Law, he carried it to the logical point where he could not conscientiously remain a member of any group. It would seem that no person who devoutly believed in a moral universe and the God-like nature of man could consistently do otherwise. For the same reasons, Thoreau never joined any organization. Some question remains, then, in light of the many targets of Garrison's attacks, as to whether or not his aims and methods can be reconciled with a program that called for reform from "within." It is hard to dismiss the suspicion that he was so preoccupied with cutting down the opposition that he lost sight of the God-like man he was helping.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while New England became the home of American humanitarianism from 1830-1860, it would be misleading to declare that anti-slavery sentiment was widespread. As a whole, the northern public remained aloof or opposed agitation of the slavery question, and reaction against the abolition movement came from many quarters. Ministers denounced abolitionism from their pulpits and refused the use of their meeting-houses to anti-slavery gatherings. Northern businessmen who profited from processing cotton grown on southern acres by slave labor were often violent in their opposition. Many people in the North who had no financial stake in slavery opposed Garrison's demand for immediate emancipation on the

grounds that release of millions of slaves would flood the labor market, cause a wave of crime, or perhaps make public charity responsible for vast numbers of men and women who could not support themselves. Slavery, then, was viewed by the populace as a problem for southerners to solve. The agitation generated by anti-slavery zealots, moreover, seemed to threaten the integrity of the Union; and the latter, Schlesinger concluded, was dearer to northern hearts, even in 1860, than the destruction of "the peculiar institution."⁷⁹ It would be difficult to challenge, consequently, the statement made during the first year of the Civil War by Charles Godfrey Leland, editor of the Unionist Continental Monthly: "This is not now a question of the right to hold slaves, or the wrong of so doing So far as nine-tenths of the North ever cared, or do now care, slaves might have [interminably] hoed away down in Dixie" had the South not seceded.⁸⁰ Needless to say, there were many who probably cloaked their real motives under professed love of the Union.

That there were innumerable kindly slaveholders and contented slaves was undoubtedly correct. What Garrison and his

⁷⁹Arthur M. Schlesinger, Political and Social History of the United States: 1829-1925, II (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927), p. 94.

⁸⁰Quoted by Dillon, p. 100.

associates tried to accomplish, what few wanted to consider, was that Negroes were human, that they were men and women, not chattel. Admittedly, radical abolitionists were hardly unbiased reporters. Slavery was depicted at its worst, while the system of "wage slavery" in northern cities went unnoticed. Dumond correctly summarized the weaknesses in this aspect of radical agitation. They included "the necessity (1) for a constant increase in the enormity of the offense charged; (2) for variation, since attention was more easily arrested by the novelty of the guilt than by its degree; and (3) for unimpeachable supporting evidence to satisfy the skeptic."⁸¹ Radical abolitionists, then, acquainted Americans with details about the conditions of southern slavery. But it cannot be demonstrated that radicals influenced that cleansing of the spirit which they believed would destroy prejudice and lead to a national, moral renewal. Rather, abolitionist orators and journalists "had a cumulative effect in leading persons who heard or read them to a hatred of slavery."⁸² To be anti-slavery, however, did not imply granting Negroes equal political, social or economic rights. As Dillon observed, for many northerners anti-slavery was nothing more than a synonym for anti-southern.⁸³

⁸¹Dumond, p. 38.

⁸²Dillon, p. 98.

⁸³Ibid., p. 99.

By 1860, after several decades of agitation, radical abolitionists remained "a revolutionary minority that advocated a fundamental change in ideas, attitudes, conduct, and institutions."⁸⁴ They had disturbed the conscience of the nation but had not awakened it; they had helped make the North anti-southern but not pro-Negro. Ironically, on the eve of the Civil War, the demands of radical abolitionists--a dissenting minority--were interpreted by the South as the outward attitude of a large body politic. Indeed, from 1830-1860 people from both North and South judged the opposing section by its extremists. In the final analysis, Republicans were all William Garrisons to southerners, and slaveholders were all Simon Legrees to northerners. Abolitionists had played a catalytic role in causing the Civil War, but they hardly accomplished the ends for which Garrison and the "faithful" had worked and prayed. Slavery was legally--forcibly--abolished, but the spirit of slavery and of caste was never erased.⁸⁵

Such was the millieu of which Henry Thoreau considered himself a part. Social, economic and spiritual characteristics have been emphasized because the philosopher and speaker in Thoreau were

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 100.

⁸⁵See Merton Dillon, "The Failure of the American Abolitionists," Journal of Southern History, XXV (May, 1959), pp. 159-177, for comments on the limits of abolitionist accomplishment.

products of an intellectual and moral renaissance. Without the ferment in New England, he may not have spoken about "Civil Disobedience" or "Slavery in Massachusetts." Without the stimulus of transcendental and radical abolitionist circles, Thoreau may never have spoken in behalf of John Brown. As a young man, he rejected the conservative approach; like Child, he placed too high an estimate upon man to admit that a human being was the product of his environment. Yet, as the Civil War approached, he found himself willing to agree with Garrison that moral reform might be accelerated by attacking institutions, by "diminishing the pressure which is to be resisted." In the radical theories of Garrison and Child, then, existed many of the principles Thoreau admired and by which he lived. It should be noted, in addition, that transcendentalism and radical abolitionism were in most respects twin movements. Both were based on the same suppositions and had similar altruistic aims. In a broad interpretation of terms, a consistent radical abolitionist was a transcendentalist. Just how consistent Thoreau was will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER III

THE FORMATIVE YEARS: 1817-1848

David Henry Thoreau, a name he was to reverse when he reached maturity, was born in Concord, Massachusetts, on July 12, 1817, in what he considered "the most estimable place in all the world, and in the very nick of time, too."¹ Henry was the third of the four children of John and Cynthia Thoreau.

Helen, the oldest and tubercular from childhood, was so quiet and unimposing that few seem to have remembered her. Like all the Thoreaus, she had a strong but homely face. After attending Concord Academy, she devoted her life to teaching music and painting. Although valued by the parents of her pupils "as an example of politeness," this intelligent, humorless, homely member of the Thoreau family probably was a predestined spinster.²

John, Junior, was different. He had charm and geniality--characteristics possessed by few of the Thoreaus. Most of Concord

¹Henry David Thoreau, Journal, IX (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906), p. 160. Hereafter referred to as Journal.

²Franklin B. Sanborn, The Life of Henry David Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 197.

thought John the more promising of the two Thoreau boys, probably because he lacked the deep seriousness of his younger brother. It was from John that Henry learned much of his bird lore. Henry adored his cordial, humorous and deeply religious brother; John's early death in his brother's arms was a tragedy in Henry's life.³

Thoreau was named for his uncle David Thoreau, who died when Henry was six weeks old. He was a dreamy child, who "hated games, street parades and shows" and "company in the house"; rather, he preferred to sit on Sundays in the Gothic window of the Shattuck house in Concord watching hawks circle in the sky.⁴ The Lyceum movement reached Concord by 1829, and Thoreau was a member at about the permissible age of twelve, hearing the debates there on alternate weeks.⁵

At the age of five, Henry started school. In a Puritan academy, where Latin, Greek and French as well as music and dancing could be studied, Thoreau received his preparation for Harvard. Although Thoreau was hardly a poor student, many of his classmates considered him "stupid" and "unsympathetic" because he would not

³Edward Emerson, Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 125.

⁴Journal, III, p. 427; and Sanborn, pp. 153, 154.

⁵Henry S. Canby, Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939), p. 33; however, exactly when Thoreau joined the Lyceum is not known because its early membership lists are no longer extant.

join their games. He was so solemn that their favorite nickname for him was "Judge"; and when they wanted to tease him, he was called "the fine scholar with the big nose."⁶

The young Thoreau showed no originality or distinction. His first recorded essay, "The Seasons," written when he was ten, failed to prove anything except that he was another New England boy with an orderly mind, a vocabulary and a liking for nature. There was nothing in this youth to indicate any singularity of an eccentric genius.⁷

Indeed, it is only the direction in which young Thoreau's interests turned that is significant in his boyhood. His Journal is full of sentimental references to the hours of "splendour in the grass": "I think that no experience which I have to-day comes up to, or is comparable with, the experiences of my boyhood My life was ecstasy."⁸ When commenting about his first remembered visit to his grandmother at Walden Pond, Thoreau again fondly associated his happiest hours with the woods and fields:

one of the most ancient scenes stamped on the tablets of my memory That sweet solitude my spirit seemed so early to require at once gave the preference to this

⁶William Ellery Channing, Thoreau, the Poet-Naturalist (Boston: Charles E. Goodspeed, 1873), p. 11.

⁷Joseph Kwait, "Thoreau's Philosophical Apprenticeship," New England Quarterly, XVIII (March, 1945), p. 52.

⁸Journal, VIII, p. 306.

recess among the pines, where almost sunshine and shadow were the only inhabitants that varied the scene, over that tumultuous and varied city, as if it had found its proper nursery.⁹

Sophia, the youngest of the Thoreaus, was the family botanist. Especially fond of flowers, she sang, played the piano well and dabbled in painting. She reportedly did a portrait of Henry; but if so, it has obviously disappeared--which may be just as well.¹⁰ Sophia was probably the most genteel of the Thoreaus, a homebody and hardly an intellectual resemblance to Henry, although his lifelong and devoted admirer. It was she who fought Ellery Channing over Henry's literary remains, and it was she who loyally edited her brother's unpublished manuscripts after his death.¹¹

The Thoreau children were amateur naturalists, but not Henry--yet. Sophia, as noted, was the family botanist, and John kept an elaborate classification of birds. Before Henry became a naturalist, he had to pass through the transcendental passion--half spiritual, half romantic--which he caught from Emerson's "Nature." It was the vigorous, happy life of the hunter which was Thoreau's life as a youth. He was a hunter who later called a gun the perfect

⁹Ibid., I, pp. 380-381.

¹⁰Harding, The Days of Henry Thoreau, p. 13.

¹¹Canby, p. 29.

tool and a fisherman whose object was to catch fish, not to study them.¹² The legend of the boy naturalist must be dismissed; yet, Thoreau became a naturalist who went far beyond them all, giving up rod and gun for notebook and spy glass. The influence and memories of the green fields of youth, however, cannot be discounted.

Although Henry Thoreau lived in a predominantly woman's world when at home, it was a harmonious household. The girls were musical and the women genteel as well as intelligent. Despite the interruptions of boarders and visitors, the Thoreaus were a closely knit family. There was a warmth about it to give young Henry and his brother and sisters the feeling of security so essential to a happy childhood. Perhaps the best picture of this family circle is drawn in a letter in which Thoreau said he was not homesick. It was written from Staten Island where he was for the first and only time long absent from the neighborhood of Concord:

Dear Mother, . . . I think of you all very often, and wonder if you are still separated from me only by so many miles of earth, or so many miles of memory. This life we live is a strange dream, and I don't believe at all any account men give of it. Methinks I should be content to sit at the back door in Concord, under the poplar tree, henceforth forever

I fancy that this Sunday evening you are pouring over some select book, almost transcendental perchance, or else "Burgh's Dignity," or Massillon, or the Christian Examiner. Father has

¹²From an early manuscript draft of A Week on the Concord; quoted in The First and Last Journeys of Thoreau, F. B. Sanborn, ed., I (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1905), p. xviii.

just taken one more look at the garden, and is now absorbed in Chaptelle, or reading the newspaper quite abstractedly, only looking up occasionally over his spectacles to see how the rest are engaged, and not to miss any newer news that may not be in the paper. Helen has slipped in for the fourth time to learn the very latest item. Sophia, I suppose, is at Bangor; but Aunt Louisa, without doubt, is just flitting away to some good meeting, to save the credit of you all.¹³

This was the family which sent Henry Thoreau off to Harvard on August 9, 1833.

Thoreau at Harvard

Harvard in Thoreau's day presented a program of studies that had been hardly modified since pre-Revolutionary days.¹⁴ The emphasis was principally on classics, and the training was probably best suited for theology. Thoreau studied Greek (composition, grammar, Demosthenes, Aeschines, Sophocles, Euripides and Homer) under Cornelius Felton--later president of Harvard--and Christopher Dunkin for eight of his eleven terms in college and Latin for eight terms (composition, grammar, Livy, Horace, Cicero, Seneca and Juvenal). He also had mathematics for seven terms; history, three terms; English, eight terms (grammar, rhetoric, logic, forensics, criticism, elocution, declamations and themes) with Edward Tyrrell Channing, Professor of rhetoric and oratory and uncle of Thoreau's

¹³Henry D. Thoreau, Letters (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1885), pp. 37-39.

¹⁴See Samuel E. Morison, Three Centuries of Harvard (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press, 1936).

later friend, Ellergy Channing; and courses in mental philosophy (Paley and Stewart), natural philosophy (astronomy), intellectual philosophy (Locke, Say and Story) and theology (Paley, Butler and the New Testament) with Henry Ware for two terms.¹⁵ It would serve no useful purpose to consider in detail the many aspects of college life at Harvard; rather, emphasis will be placed on those courses and events which probably had an influence on Thoreau later in his life.

Under Henry Swasey McKean, Thoreau studied a wide range of Greek and Roman classics. Of particular interest was his exposure to Cicero's De Oratore, which supplemented the program of forensics and declamations begun in his sophomore year. Thoreau read what Cicero considered the important characteristics of effective public speech, which included exactness, precision and power to stir the emotions of those who listen. But Cicero offered Thoreau no single method by which these traits might be achieved, insisting throughout that "orators who enjoy the highest rank may be quite dissimilar."¹⁶

¹⁵Kenneth W. Cameron, "Chronology of Thoreau's Harvard Years," Emerson Society Quarterly, XV (April, 1959), pp. 1-108.

¹⁶Marcus Tullius Cicero, On Oratory and Orators, with Letters to Quintus and Brutus, J. S. Watson, trans. and ed. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1890), p. 129.

Thoreau, if Canby was correct in describing him as "the kind of lecturer who keeps his nose in his manuscript and drives the words at his audience,"¹⁷ did not practice what Cicero preached in matters of delivery. Whereas Cicero told with approval an anecdote about Demosthenes who "when asked what was the most indispensable element of oratory, . . . answered, 'Delivery'; what next, 'Delivery'; what third, 'Delivery'."¹⁸ Recalling this passage from Cicero's text, Thoreau told a young colleague that Demosthenes should have answered "1st, sincerity; 2nd, sincerity; 3rd, sincerity."¹⁹

Thoreau, however, did learn a good deal from Cicero about the general importance of expressing oneself effectively in public. Writing his speeches on John Brown or "Life Without Principle," Thoreau may well have modeled himself after Lucius Crassus, "the embodiment of consummate perfection" whose delivery Cicero described as follows:

There was very little convulsive movement of the body, no theatrical modulation of the voice, no parading back and forth, no frequent stamping of the feet. Vehemence and passion sometimes flamed in his addresses and he spoke as one consumed by righteous wrath; and yet, even in his grave

¹⁷Canby, p. 135.

¹⁸Cicero, p. 110.

¹⁹Writings, VI, p. 67.

moments he could be witty. Moreover, in spite of his love of embellishment, he managed to be brief and concise--no simple accomplishment.²⁰

Thoreau, then, may have delivered most of his orations in the manner of Crassus, for they read as though they would lend themselves to Thoreau's rigid manner of delivery. Vehemence, passion and righteous wrath, however, characterized many of his works.

Of far greater importance to Thoreau's later development was Cicero's second text studied at Harvard. Written in the form of a letter addressed to his son, Marcus, De Officiis raised profound questions about man's moral duties and resolved them in terms which were meaningful to those on the edge of maturity.²¹ In the first section, Cicero defined moral responsibility and commented on a variety of situations in order to suggest the practical implications of living by a moral code. In the second section, he turned from a discussion of absolute right and wrong in human action to questions of expediency, where behavior was determined on the basis of its ultimate contribution to comfort and happiness. The final section is devoted to questions involving the conflict between the expedient and the morally right.

²⁰Cicero, p. 115.

²¹Marcus Tullius Cicero, De Officiis, Charles Beck, ed. (Boston: Hilliard, Gray and Co., 1828).

Although Thoreau never referred directly to this essay in his writings or speeches, Cicero's "letter" left its mark. Thoreau particularly cherished Cicero's often-repeated statement that "nothing is really expedient that is not at the same time morally right."²² In order to demonstrate the inadequacy of hedonistic philosophy which measured all conduct in relation to the pleasure or pain produced, Cicero cited a variety of illustrations wherein seemingly inexpedient behavior--one causing pain--was absolutely necessary because it was the only just action. The most dramatic of these Cicero derived from a Greek moralist, Hecaton.

Suppose that a foolish man has seized hold of a plank from a sinking ship, shall a wise man wrest it from him if he can? "No," says Hecaton; "for that would be unjust."²³

This example stuck in Thoreau's mind, and he used it when events in America caused him to point out to his listeners the essential difference between expediency and justice. In Civil Disobedience, he followed Cicero's line of argument, using the example cited to refute Paley just as Cicero had used it to discredit the hedonistic philosophers of his day.

Paley, a common authority with many on moral questions, in his chapter on the "Duty of Submission to Civil Government," resolves all civil obligations into expediency: "This principle being admitted the justice

²²Ibid., III, p. 301.

²³Ibid., III, p. 365.

of every particular case of resistance is reduced to a computation of the quality of the danger and grievance on the one side, and of the possibility and expense of redressing it on the other." Of this, he says, every man shall judge for himself. But Paley appears never to have contemplated those cases to which the rule of expediency does not apply, in which a people, as well as an individual, must do justice, cost what it may. If I have wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself. This, according to Paley, would be inconvenient. But he that would save his life, in such a case, shall lose it. Thus, people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people.²⁴

This was hardly a case of chance parallelism. Elsewhere in Civil Disobedience Thoreau dealt with problems identical with those Cicero outlined for his son. Cicero, for example, distinguished between two kinds of justice, active and passive. "There are . . . two kinds of injustice . . . the one, on the part of those who inflict wrong, the other on the part of those who, when they can, do not shield from wrong those upon whom it is being inflicted."²⁵ Cicero further attributed to those who inflict injustices of the second type the same motivation and weakness with which Thoreau later charged his New England contemporaries who did nothing about the Mexican War or slavery.

There are some also who, either from zeal in attending to their own business or through some sort of aversion to their fellow-men, claim that they are occupied solely with their own affairs, without seeming to themselves to be doing anyone any injury. But while they steer clear of one

²⁴Writings, IV, pp. 361-362.

²⁵De Officiis, I, p. 25.

kind of injustice, they fall into the other; they are traitors to social life, for they contribute to it none of their interest, none of their effort, none of their means.²⁶

Thoreau aptly applied this distinction in Civil Disobedience, substituting for Cicero's ambiguous "they's" the "hundred thousand merchants and farmers" of Massachusetts and New England to whom his remarks were aimed.

Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians in the South, 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. I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, cooperate with, and do the bidding of, those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless.²⁷

Whether consciously or not, Thoreau later used some of the classical heritage to which his Harvard education had introduced him. Probably of more importance, however, was that the college emphasized communication of ideas and demanded that he do so on a variety of philosophical, literary and ethical subjects. Thoreau once admitted, "What I was learning in college was chiefly, I think, to express myself."²⁸ Characteristically, he accompanied this

²⁶Ibid., pp. 29-31.

²⁷Writings, IV, p. 362.

²⁸Ibid., VI, p. 67.

admission of indebtedness with some criticism. His teachers, he continued, had not accented "sincerity" with sufficient force-- first, last and always. Nonetheless, Thoreau might have added that he thought well enough of his college training to preserve over a dozen of the essays he had written at Harvard while under the tutelage of Edward Tyrrel Channing, Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory.

Channing encouraged a liberal philosophy of writing and speaking. His personal philosophy of rhetoric and oratory was espoused in an annual series of lectures to the senior class which was published posthumously as Lectures Read to the Seniors in Harvard College²⁹ and complimented by the text from which he taught, Whately's Elements of Rhetoric.³⁰ After reading Channing's lectures, one might agree with Canby that Channing taught Thoreau and all his students how "to think out any proposition logically, and how to organize it in words," but one could hardly agree with his conclusion that the "tough-minded Professor Channing," brother of the famous New England minister, was not the least interested in having Thoreau express his own personality.³¹ At least one student,

²⁹Edward Tyrrel Channing, Lectures Read to the Seniors in Harvard College (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1856).

³⁰Richard Whately, Elements of Rhetoric (Boston: Hilliard, Gray and Co., 1835).

³¹Canby, pp. 51-52.

fortunately, recorded his impression of Channing's insistence on original and personal expression. Henry Burroughs, who graduated in 1834, saved his college lecture notes, some of which are devoted to Channing's lectures. The two following extracts from the eighth and thirteenth lectures respectively demonstrate that Channing was concerned that his students express their own ideas in a distinctive style.

A single new thought is better than volumes of criticism, too close an attention to which produces mediocrity. A writer may learn his faults from critics, but he should servilely obey no man.

We have the power and it is our duty to ascertain the original character of our minds, our peculiar tastes, temper and strength. We should inquire what study and what manner of expression suits us best. Nature would teach us but she is resisted by education, by the desire of attaining all kinds of knowledge.³²

Evidence that Thoreau, under Channing, made bold strides in formulating his personal, social philosophy as well as in achieving a distinctive writing style is to be found in his college essays, some of which have been preserved only in Sanborn's Life of Thoreau. Since they can be dated from Channing's assignment lists for 1834-1837, they provide a convenient record of three years' progress in

³²Harvard Manuscript of Henry Burroughs, Harvard University Archives.

the art of self-expression.³³ The assigned topics often tapped Thoreau's real interests and evoked a sincere, thoughtful response. Such topics as keeping a journal, assigned in the sophomore year, and being in the minority, written by Thoreau during his senior year, demonstrated Channing's attempt to assign topics within the range of his students' maturing interests. Nineteen volumes of journals, literally thousands of comments on natural phenomena and the minority report, Civil Disobedience, abundantly indicate that Channing may have appreciably influenced the direction of Thoreau's later thoughts.

Thoreau's development was encouraged by the particular nature of the assignments, forensics, made by Channing. In a forensic, the student affirmed or denied the premise contained in the assigned topic. While writing the forensic, the student was mindful that it would be delivered orally before his classmates. The assignments frequently demanded a bold, assertive tone. This aspect of Channing's course deserves special consideration, because many of Thoreau's best college essays, those in which he seemed intent on directly assaulting the beliefs of his listeners,

³³Channing's assignment list, "Subjects of Class 1834-1837," contains fifty-five topics. It is preserved in the Harvard University Archives. Quotations from Thoreau's college essays come from Sanborn, Life of Thoreau, cited earlier; his is the only text which contains the college essays written for Channing.

provided the background for lyceum lectures.

Presenting forensics nurtured the iconoclast in Thoreau's character. Forceful presentation of one's argument was expected, and, since more than half of the junior and senior assignments were forensics, Thoreau wrote and recited enough of them to make this aggressive manner of expression his own. Matured by experience and practice on the lyceum platform and energized by events that touched the core of his beliefs, Thoreau later applied this forensic technique to the assertive voice one senses in many parts of Walden, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, and throughout Life Without Principle as well as the anti-slavery speeches to be analyzed. The line of ascent from the works in college to his later speeches and essays is remarkably clear and direct. In college he achieved a forceful speaking tone; in his mature years he added to the vividness of his language and enlivened his speeches and essays with the spice of daily experience. But he was traveling the road mapped out at Harvard. Not only was this the case with regard to technique but to basic ideas as well. Compare, for instance, what he said about following the dictates of one's conscience when he was a student with what he later said on the same subject. The ideal remained constant, and one can almost sense the ghost of Cicero applauding in the background. One's duty, Thoreau told his Harvard classmates, consisted in action taken

in conformity to the dictates of an inward arbiter, in a measure independent of Matter, and its relations, Time and Space I am required, it is true, to respect the feelings of my neighbor, within the limits of his own estate; but the fear of displeasing the world ought not in the least to influence my actions.³⁴

In a similar vein, Thoreau later praised John Brown's vigorous and much condemned actions at Harper's Ferry. Ironically, he also praised Brown for avoiding the "pap" fed to students at Harvard. But he was forgetting that the Harvard "pap" had included forensics on "Advantage of being in the minority," "Absorbed in the present,"³⁵ and the assignment just quoted from, "Conformity in little and great things." Without having wrestled with such thorny topics, Thoreau might never have praised Brown with fervid eloquence nor castigated his alma mater. And if he criticized Harvard, he did so because he could admit, though grudgingly, that she was, in his own words, a "good old Alma Mater."³⁶

Most interesting of all Thoreau's remaining college forensics, for the light it sheds on his method of presenting ideas and developing details, was probably the one he wrote in May of his senior year (1837) on barbarism and civilization. The full title is "The Mark or Standard by which a Nation is judged to be Barbarous or

³⁴Sanborn, p. 151.

³⁵These forensics are no longer extant.

³⁶Writings, IV, p. 411.

Civilized. Barbarities of Civilized States." When Channing assigned this topic, he no doubt expected some students to emphasize the cruelties of so-called civilized states. Here was a topic with which Thoreau's radicalism could have full play, and his consideration of nature as a preeminent norm for human conduct received its first formal treatment. This was precisely what the forensics were designed to do: get the student to take a strong position on one side of the problem and express himself in a clear, forceful and original way.

Thoreau's approach to the topic was familiar and in accordance with the method he had been taught. In the first sentence he presented a standard of civilization: "The justice of a nation's claim to be regarded as civilized seems to depend mainly upon the degree in which Art has triumphed over Nature."³⁷ After stating this definition of civilization, Thoreau presented his own view of what constitutes the ultimate joy of life; namely, an education which serves "continuously to remind man of his mysterious relation to God and Nature,--and to exalt him [sic] above toil and drudgery of this matter-of-fact world."³⁸ Civilization, then, when accepted as the triumph of art over nature, does not serve to remind man of

³⁷Sanborn, p. 180.

³⁸Ibid., p. 181. Such a statement was no doubt welcomed by Channing, a man who, according to Burrough's notes, declared: "Nature would teach us but she is resisted by education."

his relation to nature.

The civilized man is the slave of Matter. Art paves the earth, lest he may soil the soles of his feet; it builds walls that he may not see the Heavens; year in, year out, the sun rises in vain to him; the rain falls and the wind blows, but they do not reach him. From his wigwam of brick and mortar he praises his Maker for the genial warmth of a sun he never saw, or the fruitfulness of an earth he disdains to tread upon. Who says that this is not mockery? So much for the influence of Art.³⁹

Next followed a section in which our fore-fathers were praised for their transcendental worship of nature. Without indicating who they were by name or date, but apparently referring to the "pre-civilized" inhabitants of Scotland, Wales, Switzerland and America, Thoreau blessed them all because they "surrendered themselves wholly to Nature; to contemplate her was a part of their daily food."⁴⁰ The intoxicated savage, made drunk by his worship of God and nature, was then contrasted with poor civilized man, who

can scarce sleep even in his grave. Not even there are the weary at rest, nor do the wicked cease from troubling. What with the hammering of stone, and the grating of bolts, the worms themselves are well nigh deceived.⁴¹

After a paragraph of poorly digested existential philosophy in which he concluded, "education being the bringing out . . . of that which is in man, by contact with the Not-me,"⁴² Thoreau

³⁹Ibid., pp. 180-181.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 181-182.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 182.

⁴²Ibid.

returned to a consideration of his noble savage. The American Indian, he claimed, "is more of a man than the inhabitant of a city. He lives as a man, he thinks as a man, and he dies as a man."⁴³ The so-called civilized man, Thoreau continued, the master of some specific knowledge or art--naturalist, chemist, mechanist-- "is no more of a man for all his learning. Life is still as short as ever, death as inevitable, and the heavens as far off."⁴⁴

This forensic was a lively and interesting piece of self-expression in form as well as in content. It exemplifies the expository method toward which Thoreau had been evolving during the three years with Channing. First, following Whately's advice,⁴⁵ he stated the proposition in general terms, being careful to limit himself to a manageable area of thought. Thoreau then expanded the meaning of the proposition by redefining, illuminating and employing examples. After further expansion, he sharpened the focus once more by introducing a pointed, often ironic, contrast. The movement of thought, then, was from the general to the particular and back to the general. He succeeded in making his ideas concrete by employing such devices as an analogy, anecdote, metaphor or

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 182-183.

⁴⁵James L. Golden and Edward F. J. Corbett, The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell, and Whately (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 296.

simile. This final section in the progression of his thoughts often constituted the bulk of the forensic and contained many of his most memorable phrases. When such a balanced approach was coupled with Thoreau's mature thoughts, the result was such famous barbs as these in Walden.

The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?⁴⁶

It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.⁴⁷

These repetitious, climactic triplets were built solidly on Thoreau's apprentice work under the watchful eye of Channing.

In his lecture, "Literary Tribunals," Channing imagined a writer and orator, not unlike Thoreau, who wrestled with profound thoughts "with a bold incompleteness that confounds while it animates . . ." the reader or listener. Channing then proceeded to elicit a warm understanding of this hypothetical writer and speaker in words that could later describe, though they were not meant for, Thoreau.

of one thing we may be very sure, that a writer-orator of this character little troubles himself to learn whether he shall have an audience. It is enough to him that he has thoughts which must be followed out and in some way

⁴⁶Writings, II, p. 11.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 8.

recorded, though the toil be solitary and his conceptions be doomed to long obscurity. Possibly the interpretation may come; and he can wait as patiently for it as the world.⁴⁸

Thoreau's participation in forensics was not limited to the classroom. At the end of his freshman year, he was one of five members of his class of fifty students voted into a private fraternity and debating society, the Institute of 1770. He took part in the Institute's debates on such topics as "Ought there be any restrictions on the publications of opinions?" and "Ought capital punishment to be abolished?"⁴⁹ (There is, unfortunately, no record of the Institute's proceedings.)

Thoreau's Harvard training, coming as it did at a most intellectually formative time of his life, made him aware of many currents of thought and feeling. The long, hard way, furthermore, from orthodoxy to Emerson's emancipated devotion to Kant's moral sentiment would soon be embraced by Thoreau.⁵⁰ Even as he walked out of Harvard's yard in the summer of 1837, he was beginning to express his dissatisfaction with the Scottish "common sense" philosophy that prevailed at Harvard.

⁴⁸Channing, pp. 158-159.

⁴⁹Raymond Adams, "Thoreau at Harvard," New England Quarterly, XII (March, 1940), p. 32.

⁵⁰Norman Foerster, Nature in American Literature: Studies in the Modern View of Nature (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), p. 75.

We are accustomed to say that the common sense of this age belonged to the seer of the last--as if time gave him any vantage ground. But not so: I see not but Genius must ever take an equal start, . . . common sense is not so familiar with any truth but Genius will represent it in a strange light. Let the seer bring down his broad eye to the most stale and trivial fact, and he will make you believe it a new planet in the sky.⁵¹

By breaking away from the grip of the "common sense" school, Thoreau was arriving at a more complete acceptance of the intuitive principles of transcendentalism. He postulated his design for living as follows:

Our lives will not attain to be spherical by lying on one or the other side forever; but only by resigning ourselves to the law of gravity within us, will our axis become coincident with the celestial axis and only by revolving incessantly through all circles, shall we acquire a perfect sphericity.⁵²

At the summit of the transcendental spiral will emerge the heart of Thoreau's social philosophy: insistence on individual self-sufficiency and the inherent worth of the individual.

The Winds of Abolitionism in Concord

When Thoreau returned home from Harvard in 1837, he found his father's once orthodox household simmering with radical abolitionist doctrines. To estimate just how extensively the ideas of "agitators" like Garrison or Child colored Thoreau's immediate

⁵¹Writings, I, p. 93.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 142-143.

environment during his formative years is the purpose of this section. Material will be introduced from newspapers and other primary sources to determine the extent to which some quarters in Concord were centers of radical activity and the degree to which the women in Thoreau's family circle, two sisters, two aunts, his mother and her two boarders--Mrs. Joseph Ward and her daughter, Prudence--participated in the radical movement. This section will investigate the accessibility of anti-slavery newspapers, especially the Liberator and Standard, and consider Thoreau's friendship with such militant abolitionists as Charles Lane and Bronson Alcott.

When Garrison founded the Liberator in January, 1831, Henry was a boy of fourteen. The event caused no more stir in his home or in Concord than did the establishment of the New England Anti-Slavery Society a year later. The chief outside interest of the Thoreaus at the time was the widening gulf between the Unitarian and Trinitarian faiths. In May of 1826, Thoreau's aunts withdrew from Dr. Ripley's Unitarian congregation and joined the newly established Trinitarian Church in Concord. They also persuaded Mrs. Thoreau to join them in their exodus; Ripley's church records for April 22, 1827, contain the following entry:

The church tarried by request of the pastor after divine service, and heard a written request from Cynthia Thoreau, wife of John Thoreau, to be dismissed from her particular

relation to this church and recommended to the Trinitarian Church in this place.⁵³

Consequently, Thoreau probably knew nothing of Garrison in 1831, and his family shared his ignorance. If he heard of abolitionism at all by the time he left for college in 1833, he most likely knew of it only by name.

By the time Thoreau graduated from Harvard in 1837, however, the picture had changed. To the dismay of the more conservative citizens in Concord, Garrison's followers numbered about one hundred residents, most of them women--seven of whom were from the Thoreau household. Here was an opportunity for the Thoreaus to take part in the humanitarianism of their age; here was a "cause," and they took full advantage of it. Thoreau's mother idolized Garrison, and Wendell Phillips was her favorite lecturer. For years the abolitionist societies consumed the passions of the Thoreau household, and Henry was constantly exposed to the changing emphases of radical thought.

The Middlesex County Anti-Slavery Society may well have been the first of the many avenues through which radical abolitionism came into Concord and into the Thoreau household. Organized in 1834, the Society gained converts as a result of the mobbings of

⁵³Quoted by Hubert Hoeltje, "Thoreau in Concord and Town Records," New England Quarterly, XII (December, 1939), p. 352.

Garrison in 1835 and the murder of Lovejoy in 1837. No small part of the Society's support came from Concord. John Wilder, who boarded with the Thoreaus while Henry was at Harvard, spoke frequently at meetings and was selected as a delegate to the Fourth Annual Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Convention.⁵⁴ Dr. Bartlett, one of Concord's leading citizens, was treasurer of the Society in 1840 when the annual meeting was held in the Middlesex Hotel in Concord.⁵⁵ When George Latimer was apprehended in Boston in 1843, the first of many fugitive slave cases which were to periodically excite the North, the Middlesex Society obtained the third largest number of petitioners to protest the government's action.⁵⁶ And when the Texas question plagued northern abolitionists in 1845, the Middlesex Society held a mass meeting which was attended by notable local spokesmen as well as national abolitionist leaders.⁵⁷ In short, here was anti-slavery activity about which Thoreau must have known and which brought Garrisonian radicalism into his town and home as early as 1834.

⁵⁴Liberator, January 23, 1836, p. 2.

⁵⁵Ibid., September 4, 1840, p. 2.

⁵⁶Ibid., March 17, 1843, p. 1.

⁵⁷Included among the guests were Charles Francis Adams, William Henry Channing and, of course, Phillips and Garrison. See National Anti-Slavery Standard, October 2, 1845, p. 18.

In September, 1837, the activities of the Middlesex Society were overlapped by the first of the local abolitionist societies to be organized in Concord. The Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, which monopolized for more than ten years the energy of the seven women in the Thoreau household, exposed Thoreau to Garrison's program from 1837-1850. When the Society was founded, it had 61 charter members. Mrs. John Wilder, who with her husband lived in the same house with the Thoreaus, was the Society's first president; and a close friend of the Thoreau family, Mrs. Caroline Brooks, was its secretary.⁵⁸ From the standpoint of financial contributions to the national organization, the Concord Society ranked at the top for years. In 1839, Garrison publically acknowledged the eighty dollars from their sales at the annual Boston Anti-Slavery Fair as the largest amount contributed by any society in the nation.⁵⁹ This showing was no exception. Each year thereafter, until 1850, the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society was listed as one of the ten or fifteen largest donors in the country.⁶⁰ Such a record by a society considerably smaller than the ones in Boston or

⁵⁸ Liberator, April 20, 1838, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid., April 5, 1839, p. 2.

⁶⁰ See, for instance, National Anti-Slavery Standard, July 14, 1842, p. 10; September 3, 1845, p. 23; and Liberator, March 12, 1841, p. 3; December 11, 1846, p. 4.

the other more populous towns was earned by diligent and continuous work. And with seven of its most zealous crusaders Thoreau associated almost daily for many years.

The involvement and loyalty of the Thoreau family group extended beyond financial support. They attended many abolitionist conventions,⁶¹ and Helen, Henry's sister, served for a brief period as vice-president of the Concord Society. Moreover, as Garrison's radical interests changed, so did those of the Thoreau women. In 1844, for instance, they embraced Garrisonian radicalism by voting "yes" to the following resolution at the New England Anti-Slavery Convention:

Resolved, That no equal union can exist between a slaveholding and a free community; that under any form of government, a large body of slaveholders must necessarily control the policy and character of the nation; and that it is the great fault of the United States Constitution, that it assists and facilitates this result.

Resolved, That for this reason, as well as for other reasons, no Abolitionist can consistently swear to support the Constitution; that it is, in the opinion of this Convention, a great departure from Abolition principles for Abolitionists to throw a ballot for any office under the State or United States Constitution, which requires such oath; and that we deem it a first duty for them to agitate for the dissolution of the union.⁶²

⁶¹They are mentioned, for example, in the National Anti-Slavery Standard, May 19, 1842, p. 13; and Liberator, June 14, 1844, p. 5.

⁶²Liberator, June 14, 1844, p. 1.

More than eight years were to pass before Thoreau would be willing to endorse such a resolution. But when he began to entertain and espouse such ideas, it is not difficult to determine some of their sources.

As a result of the preoccupation of the Thoreau women with abolitionism, Henry had access to nearly every major periodical of the movement. Both individually and as members of the Female Anti-Slavery Society, they subscribed to the Liberator, National Anti-Slavery Standard and Herald of Freedom.⁶³ Furthermore, the Thoreaus' prize boarder, Mrs. Joseph Ward, subscribed to the Standard from 1840 to 1844, at the very time the editorials of Lydia Child, so similar in tone and content to many of Thoreau's later ideas, were being expressed.⁶⁴ Finally, by Thoreau's own admission, he regularly read the Herald of Freedom and sympathized with the views of its editor--Nathaniel Rogers--to the extent that he wrote a favorable review of it in the transcendental publication, The Dial.⁶⁵

⁶³The editor of the Standard, for example, recognized the subscriptions of the Concord Society in the issues of August 12, 1841, p. 15, and July 17, 1845, p. 19. Nathaniel Rogers, editor of the Herald, acknowledged a subscription by the Thoreaus in his issues of September 22, 1843, p. 6, and July 26, 1844, p. 9.

⁶⁴National Anti-Slavery Standard, December 11, 1841, p. 28; March 16, 1843, p. 19; and January 18, 1844, p. 21.

⁶⁵"Herald of Freedom," Writings, X, pp. 70-72.

Circumstances were such that Thoreau was not only introduced to abolitionist periodicals but also to the editors and other abolitionist leaders. His mother's boarding-house catered to permanent residents as well as to transients. Since Mrs. Thoreau was an ardent crusader, it was only natural that many abolitionist leaders should choose her establishment when it was necessary to stay in Concord. Emerson recorded three appearances in Concord by William Garrison during which he was hosted by the Thoreaus.⁶⁶ Lovejoy, the abolitionist preacher killed in Alton, dined at least once with the Thoreaus.⁶⁷ The list of notables could be extended to include Parker Pillsbury, once editor of the Standard, Daniel Ricketson and Lydia Child.

More influential than these occasional visitors upon Thoreau, however, was his friend Bronson Alcott, who was a resident of Concord after 1840 and as radical an abolitionist as Garrison. The result of their friendship was that for at least ten years Alcott kept his friend informed about all that went on in high abolitionist councils. When he moved with his family to Concord, he brought with him a long list of abolitionist contacts. His wife, Abigail, was the sister of Reverend Samuel May, for years a member of the executive committee of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery

⁶⁶The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, V, pp. 101-102 (October 24, 1841); VI, p. 383 (April 10, 1843).

⁶⁷Emerson narrated the details of this incident in his Works, IX, pp. 305-309.

Society. When Garrison was put in the Leverett Street jail by the mayor of Boston in 1835, Alcott was the first to visit him. He helped to organize the Non-Resistance Society in 1838 and was a speaker at numerous abolitionist conventions.⁶⁸ He was, furthermore, one of the few radical abolitionists who attempted to practice the "principles" advocated by Child. It was this fundamental honesty in the man which Thoreau recognized when he wrote, "With Alcott almost alone is it possible to put all institutions behind us. Every other man owns some stock in this or that one, and will not forget it."⁶⁹

In addition to serving as a source of information for Thoreau, Alcott was responsible for introducing his younger friend to another radical in the Garrisonian tradition. In September, 1842, Thoreau met one of England's most militant reformers, Charles Lane. In America, Lane used abolitionist periodicals to spread his brand of radicalism. He published many long polemics in the Liberator and Herald of Freedom during the first six months of 1843 under the caption, "Voluntary Political Government," all of which echoed Garrison's line of attack. Lane wrote, for example, in one

⁶⁸See, for example, a brief record of Alcott's activities in Garrison, III, pp. 188, 262; IV, p. 293.

⁶⁹Writings, V, p. 141.

of them:

As fast as individuals in this district arrive at an institution of real human worth and dignity they of course cease to participate in this humble and modest mockery of humanity [representative government] .

Why is it that we prolong its crime-breeding existence? Have we no faith in man? No faith in the goodness of man? Is there no other or no better principle in the human soul than that of dark and brutal fear which alone can be tamed, not subdued, by dark and brutal force? Force! Force in all things! No freedom! No spontaneity! Always you must! Never you can, To protect humanity at the price of humanity is poor commerce When we bring into account the wear and tear of superior human feelings, civilization must be declared a bankrupt.⁷⁰

By 1843, Thoreau sympathized with Lane's sentiments and courted his friendship. An acquaintanceship with Lane, incidentally, was one of the few which Thoreau ever actively sought. Here was a man, like Alcott, who placed no trust in institutions. Here was a man who discussed with Thoreau Alcott's decision to go to jail rather than pay his poll tax (an action which Thoreau was to later duplicate), a man who suggested that they should "agitate against the State" while Alcott was imprisoned. Together they exchanged ideas, as Thoreau wrote to Emerson on January 24, 1843, "greatly to their mutual grati- and edification."⁷¹ It seems reasonable to

⁷⁰This excerpt appeared in the Herald of Freedom, May 26, 1843, p. 14, and similar sentiments were expressed in the Liberator, January 27, 1843, p. 2; March 3, 1843, p. 4; and June 16, 1843, p. 4.

⁷¹Writings, XI, pp. 60-61.

conclude that Charles Lane, in 1843, was instrumental in preparing Thoreau for the step towards Garrisonian radicalism which he was to take after his return from Walden Pond in 1847.

The conclusion that Thoreau had intimate knowledge of the radical abolitionist movement seems inescapable. The ideas of Garrison, Child and the others were so widespread and so recurrent in Concord after 1837 that it is virtually inconceivable that he could have escaped any of them. They were introduced by the Middlesex Anti-Slavery Society during and after his years at Harvard, and as a result of the fiery Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, radical thought was an influence in the community. Nearly everywhere Thoreau turned Garrisonian abolitionism confronted him. His neighbors across the hall, the Wilders, were leaders in the local and county anti-slavery societies. His mother, his two aunts, his two sisters and the Wards were all radicals. Alcott, next to William Ellery Channing (the younger) Thoreau's closest friend, was a favorite of radical councils. The Thoreau boarding-house attracted, at some time or other, almost every radical abolitionist of any stature in the country. In the final analysis, after such personal exposure for many years, Thoreau accepted the same arguments and a priori assumptions about the nature of man and the universe as his radical forerunners. In accordance with their beliefs, he later proposed his own method of reform: civil disobedience.

A Man's Belief is the Man

Few men can be explained or understood in terms of their exposure to a single body of ideas, and having lived in a period of intellectual ferment, Thoreau was no exception to the general rule. The influence of Garrison's method of reform on Thoreau's life and thoughts was unquestionably extensive. But Garrison had, by the late 1830's, resigned himself to a program of attacks against institutions, against "the evils which ensnared man from without." Young Thoreau, however, had made no such commitment. For at least eight years, from the time of his graduation from Harvard in 1837 until his departure for Walden Pond in 1845, Thoreau agreed with Lydia Child that the reform of society could be achieved by appealing to the forces of decency within man and the universe. He counseled in 1840: "There are two ways to victory--to strive bravely or to yield. How much pain the last will save we have not yet learned."⁷² Thoreau refused to be drawn into the assault upon institutions. Although the Garrisonian radicals who moved in and out of his mother's house did their best to urge him to affiliate with them, Henry would not join. "We go about mending the times," was his comment in 1841, "when we should be building the eternity."⁷³

⁷²Journal, I, p. 147.

⁷³Ibid., p. 212.

It would be erroneous to assume, however, that young Thoreau considered himself less of a reformer than his abolitionist acquaintances. The improvement of man's lot, after all, was one of his most serious concerns, and he assumed that it was of equal importance to all other intelligent, moral men as well. His obligation, as he conceived of it in his early twenties, was to do all within his power to regenerate the spirit of his fellowmen. Thoreau's idealism can hardly be disputed, nor can the genuineness of his belief that he was employing the most effective method for achieving his end. His early Journals are filled with entries which attest to a deep feeling of social obligation. "I would have men make a greater use of men,"⁷⁴ he wrote in 1841, and in 1842 he entered this explanation of his personal "errand . . . to mankind":

I would fain communicate the wealth of my life to men, who really give them what is most precious in my gift. I would secrete pearls with the shellfish and lay up honey with the bees for them. I will sift the sunbeams for the public good. I know no riches I would keep back. I have no private good, unless it be my peculiar ability to serve the public. This is the only individual property. Each one may thus be innocently rich. I inclose and foster the pearl till it is grown. I wish to communicate those parts of my life which I would gladly live again myself.⁷⁵

The idea that "sifting the sunbeams" would do more to perfect man than knocking down his "decadent" institutions was hardly

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 96.

appreciated by Garrison's followers. But Thoreau believed that in associating closely with nature, the external manifestation of the Moral Law, and thus making himself a better man, he was doing his share in improving the whole race as well. The crying need was for more noble, honest men who realized their potential as a result of their long communion with the dictates of the Moral Law. When any man bettered himself, Thoreau argued, he benefitted the condition of the human race.⁷⁶ Any man could, moreover, make his contribution wherever he chose. "We do all stand in the front ranks of the battle every moment of our lives,"⁷⁷ Thoreau believed.

"Waterloo is not the only battle-ground: as many and fatal guns are pointed at my breast now as are contained in the English arsenals."⁷⁸

Thoreau was firmly convinced until 1845 that by providing a virtuous example--one in tune with the moral universe--he was meeting his responsibilities for aiding in general reform. Such an approach, in his opinion, was far more effective than the one which Garrison pursued and capitalized more fully upon the moral forces which ultimately guided all reform. While Thoreau ruled out direct assaults upon institutions, this is not to say that his dislike for

⁷⁶Writings, IV, p. 365.

⁷⁷Journal, I, p. 350.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 96.

organizations did not develop until after 1845. One occasionally finds in his early Journal expressions of disgust, particularly for the Church--remarks which he later used as the basis for much sharper criticism.⁷⁹ Before leaving for Walden, then, Thoreau was in agreement with the theories and aims of Garrisonian abolitionists but in opposition to their methods. Reform, he insisted, was a positive, not a negative, matter. It did not consist so much of destroying the "evil" as of encouraging the "good." Like Child, he tried to point radical abolitionists toward the Moral Law. He wrote in 1838:

Just as far as men have consulted her oracle, they have obtained a clear insight, and their age has been marked for an enlightened one. But as often as they have gone gadding abroad to a strange Delphi and her mad priestess, they have been benighted, and their age Dark or Leaden.--These are garrulous and noisy eras, which no longer yield any sound.⁸⁰

It would be difficult to over-emphasize this early faith of Thoreau. From his early Journals radiates an unfaltering confidence that the Moral Law was the supreme power over the universe.

If we see the reality in things of what moment is the superficial and apparent? Take the earth and all the interests it has known,--what are they beside one deep surmise that pierces and scatters them.⁸¹

⁷⁹See, for example, Thoreau's cryptic comments in his Journal, I, p. 54, on the subject of Sabbath-keeping.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 68.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 78.

The "one deep surmise" was more real to him in his youth than "the earth and all the interests it has known," and most comforting of all, it could be counted on to destroy the false ideas of men, "the superficial and apparent" which for some reason seemed to delight them. "I see laws which never fail," Thoreau stated confidently in 1842, "of whose failure I never conceived. Indeed, I cannot detect failure anywhere but in my fears."⁸²

The evidence points to the conclusion that rarely before 1845 did Thoreau have any misgivings about the inevitability of man's moral progress. With omnipotent vitality the Moral Law permeated the universe. "As the least drop of wine tinges the whole goblet," Thoreau wrote the year of his graduation from Harvard, "so the least particle of truth colors our whole life. It is never isolated, or simply added as treasure to our stock."⁸³ Consistent with his faith, Thoreau served with those who preferred to stand and wait. Like Lydia Child, he believed that the magnetic, moral order was the only agent through which reform could be accomplished. A man could, furthermore, augment its influence by personal example, although he could not take over its function. Whoever attempted to do so, Thoreau believed, was ignorant of the shortest, surest way to victory: "yielding" rather than "striving." Not until after

⁸²Ibid., p. 339.

⁸³Ibid., p. 24.

1845 was Thoreau disturbed by the possibility that perhaps some men would never be able to comprehend the "truth" as clearly as he did. Before leaving for Walden Pond, however, he entertained no such fear. "Truth has for audience and spectator all the world," he wrote categorically in 1841.⁸⁴

Beside Thoreau's early belief in moral laissez faire, there is another--closely related--explanation for his reluctance to attack institutions. It was Thoreau's conviction that, ultimately, reforming the world had to be conducted on an individual basis and had to originate from within. Every man, in other words, had to reform himself. The reformer might inspire a man to consider personal regeneration by providing a moral model, but the real decision depended upon the individual. Even granting that Garrison's radical methods could be successful in eliminating the "evil" in institutions--and Thoreau doubted their success--the problem of changing man from within would still remain. A perfected environment, to paraphrase Thoreau, did not insure perfected man.⁸⁵ Thoreau's own words will help make the point clearer.

Alas! this is the crying sin of the age, this want of faith in the prevalence of a man. Nothing can be effected but by one man. He who wants help wants everything. True,

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 211.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 222.

this is the condition of our weakness, but it can never be the means of our recovery. We must first succeed alone, that we may enjoy our success together.⁸⁶

Although all men who led "moral" lives could aid the natural forces of reform in the universe, Thoreau insisted that he who played the most influential role was the "poet," the student and writer of literature. The man of letters possessed acute perception, could see farther into the heart of "truth" than his fellows; the poet, therefore, was uniquely endowed to be a "true reformer." "If I were to compile a volume to contain the condensed wisdom of mankind," Thoreau asserted in 1840, "I should quote no rhythmless line."⁸⁷ Since Thoreau decided to live "a truly poetic life,"⁸⁸ he consciously assumed the responsibilities for instructing society, as he believed such a resolution demanded. He rarely wrote a page with the intent to entertain; each of Thoreau's works reflected his serious purpose of advising men on how to live more satisfactorily. (Edward Channing seemed to have left his unmistakable mark.)

The poet, Thoreau further concluded, should perform the same function as nature, serving as a revealer of the Moral Law. He continually emphasized this point in his early Journals. The poet, however, was not simply a mirror of nature; both were fellow

⁸⁶Writings, X, p. 62.

⁸⁷Journal, I, p. 151.

⁸⁸Ibid.

reflectors of the same "higher law."

He [a poet] must be something more than natural,-- even supernatural. Nature will not speak through but along with him. His voice will not proceed from her midst, but, breathing on her, will make her the expression of his thought. He then poetizes when he takes a fact out of nature into spirit He is another Nature,--Nature's brother. Kindly offices do they perform for one another. Each publishes the other's truth.⁸⁹

In 1841 he wrote in a similar vein:

Though the speech of the poet goes to the heart of things, yet he is that one especially who speaks civilly to Nature as a second person and in some sense is the patron of the world.⁹⁰

As inspirational as the poet's writings may be, Thoreau felt that in the final analysis they were still less effective agents for reform than the life of the man himself. "The best you can write," he declared in his Journal, "will be the best you are."⁹¹ Behind every work of literature Thoreau wanted to sense the artist, and it was the author who interested him the most. The "true poem" was not the verse which the reader examined but the "poem not printed on paper . . . stereotyped in the poet's life."⁹² The crucial question for Thoreau, then, was not so much how an idea was "expressed in

⁸⁹Ibid., pp. 74-75.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 289.

⁹¹Ibid., pp. 225-226.

⁹²Ibid., p. 157.

stone or on canvas . . . but how far it had obtained form and expression in the life of the artist."⁹³

These, in brief, were the bases of Thoreau's early attitudes toward reform. There were two paths to victory, either to "yield" or to "strive"; Thoreau favored the former. By resigning himself to the inevitable triumph of the Moral Law and by providing a pattern for other men, the earnest reformer could insure a more perfected society than those who actively combatted the existing "evil." "What a man does, compared with what he is, is but a small part."⁹⁴ Reform, after all, had to originate from within, and only the influence of the Moral Law could penetrate the hearts of men and purge their iniquities. Until 1845, Thoreau rested securely in his faith. After his return from Walden Pond in 1847, however, he felt differently. Reluctantly, but resolutely, he moved to the attack. Although he still emphatically asserted that "being good" transcended "doing good,"⁹⁵ he was forced to admit that his program of inaction was not enough.

Before Thoreau departed for Walden, where he hoped not only to commune with nature but to more thoughtfully reflect upon the resistance of society to his brand of reform, he was the kind of

⁹³Ibid., p. 167.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 352.

⁹⁵Writings, II, pp. 116-117.

radical abolitionist Child wanted all reformers to be. His interest was in making men stronger rather than in making institutions weaker. The fate of Americans, he wrote, "does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot-box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning."⁹⁶ But while at Walden, Thoreau wondered if his method of reform was adequate. Although a man was not obliged to fashion his life in a Don Quixote manner, argued Thoreau, "it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, [evil] and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support."⁹⁷ Such support, however, was being given to the institution of slavery, Thoreau believed, by any person who pledged allegiance to the governments of Massachusetts and the United States. Was not the federal government, whose Constitution tolerated the existence of slavery, engaged in a war with Mexico for the extension of slavery? Did not the government of Massachusetts, which by its membership in the Union supported the Constitution, send troops to the war zone? Thoreau answered, "I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also."⁹⁸

⁹⁶Ibid., IV, p. 403.

⁹⁷Ibid., IV, p. 365.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 360.

It was a small step from the idea that there reigned immutable laws which guaranteed personal freedom and equality to the notion that southern slavery was the most pernicious evil on earth. And Thoreau finally took it. He had been radicalized! What made Thoreau shift from "reform" to "rebellion" can be explained, it seems to me and to the renowned abolitionist scholar, Martin Duberman, by the intransigence or indifference of society.⁹⁹ By 1845, slavery was more firmly entrenched and more widely supported in America than before the Colonization and anti-slavery movements. As slavery--together with land--became the basis of economic advance and political power across the South,

a man who worked against it was cast, in spite of his intentions, as a foe of national development, even as a revolutionary. The abolitionists' view of the mission of America as the realization of humane ideals and the majority's view of its purpose as the achievement of power and material success came into irrepressible conflict.¹⁰⁰

Racial prejudice, furthermore, in no way declined during the decades of abolitionist protest, and the slave system continued to expand and solidify. Not only did slaveholders refuse to voluntarily free their slaves, but northerners generally continued to hold anti-Negro views and supported anti-abolitionist positions. Slaveholding

⁹⁹Martin Duberman, "Black Power and the American Radical Tradition," in Dissent: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism, Alfred Young, ed. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. 310.

¹⁰⁰Dillon, p. 91.

powers dominated the national spirit, and abolitionists seemed powerless to influence events.¹⁰¹

When Thoreau left Walden Pond in the summer of 1847, he had decided on a course of action. It was not a means of bringing about reform which was completely satisfactory, but circumstances had converted him into an anarchist.¹⁰² Society, after all, scorned his more peaceful pleas for justice. The state passed its own laws in opposition to those of the moral universe and demanded compliance by means of its army, navy and police force. Its existence, however, could be justified only if it preserved and protected individual freedom. But since it had become the tool of unscrupulous politicians for holding in subjection millions of slaves--both black and white--it should be abolished, along with the Constitution, the army and navy and even state and local

¹⁰¹Ibid., pp. 91-95. Similar conclusions were reached by W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Vintage Books, 1941), pp. 91-102.

¹⁰²The anarchist editor of a European newspaper Arbeiter Freund, Rudolph Rocker, offers the following general definition of anarchism: "Anarchism is a definite intellectual current of social thought, whose adherents advocate the abolition of . . . all political and social coercive institutions within society." From "Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism," in European Ideologies: A Survey of Twentieth Century Political Ideas, Felix Gross, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 12. A more thorough treatment of the philosophy and tactics of anarchism or revolution as they pertain to Thoreau will be considered under effects of "Civil Disobedience."

governments. All other "lesser" institutions were equally guilty and should share the same fate.

The "evil" which lurked in institutions, Thoreau concluded in 1847, was more malevolent than he had ever suspected as a youth. It was so destructive that it would have to be eradicated by every means available; that is, by decreasing the strangle-hold of institutions while at the same time appealing to the conscience of man. While the evolution in Thoreau's mode of reform during this period was critical, it actually amounted to little more than a shift in emphasis. He still believed that the most effective way to reform man was by stiffening his moral fiber, but he was willing in 1847 to facilitate individual reform by reducing the strength of his despoilers. The advance from a "humanism" which granted to man every prerogative to an "anarchism" which discounted all social authority was a short one. Following his return from Walden in 1847, Thoreau made appeal after appeal for citizens to repudiate the political and religious institutions which enchained them. He assessed the situation as follows:

The way in which men cling to old institutions after the life has departed out of them, and out of themselves, reminds me of those monkeys which cling by their tails,--aye, whose tails contract about the limbs, even the dead limbs, of the forest, and they hang suspended beyond the hunter's reach long after they are dead. It is of no use to argue with such men.¹⁰³

¹⁰³Journal, II, p. 401.

The recalcitrance of the opposition, however, did not dampen the ardor with which Thoreau pursued his campaign. The attacks which he directed against institutions during 1847-1848 bore a striking resemblance to those of earlier radical abolitionists. Hardly less vehement, for instance, was Thoreau's assault against the Christian Church. The blind faith which men put in written creeds, he believed, was totally unjustified. The sole commands by which men could live and still preserve their dignity as men were dictated by the Moral Law. "We are wont foolishly to think that the creed which a man professes is more significant than the fact he is," Thoreau complained.¹⁰⁴ Church writings and dogmas, then, were of no value at all. They were "chips and slivers which floated here and there, so light and trivial that they would never buoy up a man."¹⁰⁵

For the doctrine of Sabbath-keeping Thoreau had a personal repulsion which exceeded even that of Garrison. He was repelled by the idea of setting aside one day of the week on which the preacher taxed the ears of drowsy farmers with the same platitudes which had vexed the ears of their fathers before them. The Sabbath was a "fit conclusion of an ill-spent week," but it was certainly "not

¹⁰⁴Ibid., pp. 144-145.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., III, p. 229.

the fresh and brave beginning of a new one."¹⁰⁶ Even the sound of the church bell aroused unpleasant associations for Thoreau. When it began to ring, he once wrote, it reminded him of "the sound of many catechisms and religious books twanging a canting appeal around the world," echoing along the Nile "opposite to Pharaoh's palace and Moses in the Bulrushes, startling the multitude of storks and alligators basking in the sun."¹⁰⁷

Like Nathaniel Rogers, Thoreau carried his abhorrence of the Sabbath observance into his private life. He rarely went to church, and he acted on Sunday just as he did on every other day of the week. Edward Waldo Emerson remembered how Thoreau used to shock the community by dragging limbs of trees for firewood past the church door just as the Sunday services were being dismissed.¹⁰⁸ It was tyranny, in Thoreau's opinion, to waste one's Sunday in church. As he wrote in his Journal after refusing one morning to go:

Up and down the town, men and boys that are under subjection are polishing their shoes and brushing their go-to-meeting clothes. I, a descendant of Northmen who worshipped Thor, [ironically, the origin of Henry's surname] spend my time worshipping neither Thor nor Christ;

¹⁰⁶Writings, I, pp. 97-98.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Edward Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, as Remembered by a Young Friend (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 10.

a descendant of Northmen who sacrificed men and horses,
I sacrifice neither men nor horses.¹⁰⁹

Even the church building received its measure of Thoreau's scorn. The structure seemed to him to be the "ugliest looking building" in the whole town, a deformity on the landscape because in it "human nature stoops the lowest and is most disgraced."¹¹⁰ He thought of it as a sort of asylum for decrepit individuals who were less than men,

a sort of hospital for men's souls, and as full of quackery as the hospital for their bodies. Those who are taken into it live like pensioners in their Retreat, . . . where you may see a row of religious cripples sitting outside in sunny weather.¹¹¹

There was something quite fitting, Thoreau mused, in surrounding churches with graveyards. Like Rogers, Thoreau searched for epithets to describe his contempt. Churches were organizations composed of "infidels and skeptics who weekly gather together at the ringing of a bell"; "houses made of blocks, which topple whenever a free-spoken man, of sound lungs, blows his breath"; "prison-yards filled with slaves who have covenanted with a timid devil."¹¹² When Thoreau made up his mind to destroy institutions,

¹⁰⁹Journal, IX, p. 352.

¹¹⁰Writings, I, p. 96.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Journal, XI, pp. 324-326.

he did not attack halfheartedly. He carried his caustic remarks wherever he went and vented his wrath whenever someone was willing to listen.

Thoreau loathed the clergy even more than their followers or their buildings. To Thoreau's way of thinking, a clergyman was forced by his own chains to surrender his moral integrity and was obliged to induce other men to surrender theirs.

It is a singular infatuation that leads men to become clergymen in regular, or even irregular, standing In the clergyman of the most liberal sort I see no perfectly independent human nucleus, but I seem to see some indistinct scheme hovering about, to which he has lent himself, to which he belongs. . . . What's the use of talking to him What great interval is there between him who is caught in Africa and made a plantation slave in the South, and him who is caught in New England and made a Unitarian minister . . . ? In course of time they will abolish the one form of servitude, and, not long after, the other. I do not see the necessity for a man's . . . putting his head into a halter.¹¹³

Here was a group of men, slaves to a specious body of dogma, who were attempting to enslave more men. In the opinion of a man who dedicated his life to setting men free, this was the height of infamy.

Despite Thoreau's willingness to "reduce the power which is to be resisted," even his most abrasive polemics were sprinkled with appeals to the individual conscience. As high as his hatred of institutions rose, he never allowed his attacks upon them to become

¹¹³Ibid., IX, pp. 283-284.

the goal, as Garrison did. Thoreau's plan of reform from "without" was always secondary to his program of reform from "within." He would not, furthermore, join an abolitionist organization, being fully aware of the limitations which would be placed on his personal freedom and of the inconsistency in fighting one organization while cooperating with another. It was for these reasons that he was more consistent than most radical incendiaries.

Thoreau seemed to have recognized, as Garrison and many of his followers did--or would--not, the fundamental incongruity in making the overthrow of institutions the primary concern of "moral reform." One who did so admitted that man was the creature of his environment, and such a position Thoreau refused to take. He was willing to grant after 1847 that man's conscience would be more difficult to resurrect than he had anticipated in the early 1840's, but he still felt confident that the regeneration would eventually come. To bring about this awakening he took what he felt was an appropriate step on January 26, 1848, when he spoke in Concord on "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government," which was printed first as the essay, "Resistance to Civil Government" and later under the famous title "Civil Disobedience."

Thoreau on the Speaker's Platform,

1838-1848

January 26, 1848, was not the first time Thoreau mounted the lyceum platform. Like Emerson, he used the lecture platform as a sounding-board for his writing. Emerson read nearly every sentence to a lyceum audience before putting it into print; thus, it enabled him to determine what he had written well and what needed further polishing. What could be more natural for Henry, who considered himself primarily an author, than to adopt Emerson's approach? Also, like Emerson, Thoreau tapped his Journal for lectures, just as he tapped his lectures for his essays and books.

From all points of the compass, from the earth beneath and the heavens above, have come these inspirations and been interred duly in the order of their arrival in the journal. Thereafter, when the time arrived, they were winnowed into lectures, and again, in due time, from lectures into essays.¹¹⁴

Besides providing a valuable proving ground for his writing, the speaker's platform offered a means of supplementing Thoreau's meager income. Lecturing, moreover, was probably an ideal occupation to Thoreau's way of thinking. It gave him an enormous amount of leisure time. In a single engagement he could make more money than he could in weeks of surveying or pencil-making. Twenty-five or fifty dollars would provide many carefree hours for a man who was

¹¹⁴Ibid., VII, p. 413.

devoted to a simple life. If, however, his speaking was not monetarily rewarding--as was often the case--it provided him with an opportunity to practice speaking before a group, holding their attention and uttering the gospel of transcendentalism.

As soon as Thoreau returned to Concord from Harvard, he took an active part in the Concord Lyceum, one of the most prominent lyceums in the entire country. In March, 1838, Thoreau recorded a large number of comments on "Society" in his Journal, and these were later bonded into the first essay which he read at the Lyceum on April 11, 1838.¹¹⁵ When the Concord Lyceum began its new season in the fall, Thoreau was elected secretary and curator. Of the two offices, the latter was more important. The secretary simply recorded the minutes of the meeting, but curators were "the general agents to do any business for the society under their direction."¹¹⁶ Thoreau, then, not only took an active role in speaking before the Lyceum but in its general welfare as well.

Thoreau, moreover, was hardly a mediocre curator. For the winter of 1842-1843, for example, he provided the following speakers: Emerson (three times), George Bancroft, Theodore Parker, Horace Greeley, O. A. Brownson, Henry Giles, Wendell Phillips,

¹¹⁵Ibid., I, p. 38.

¹¹⁶_____, "The American Lyceum," Old South Leaflets, VI (Boston, 1903), p. 304.

Charles Lane, Thoreau himself and half a dozen lesser-known figures.¹¹⁷ Thoreau received \$109.20 to provide such a list of speakers. After paying \$31.25 for renting, lighting and heating the lecture hall as well as nominal fees to some of the speakers, Thoreau was able to return \$9.20 to the treasury. It was with deserved praise that he recorded in his Journal that year:

How much might be done for a town with \$100! I myself have provided a select course of twenty-five lectures for a winter, together with room, fuel, and lights, for that sum,--which was no inconsiderable benefit to every inhabitant.¹¹⁸

Thoreau continued his interest in the maintenance of the lyceum throughout his life, even though he ceased to serve as an officer of the society shortly before leaving for Walden Pond.

In the spring of 1843, Thoreau was twenty-five years old and had little, he felt, to show for it. Particularly anxious to further himself as an author, Thoreau contacted Emerson, who was in New York City, asking him to be alert for any suitable employment. Emerson's brother, William, was persuaded to employ Thoreau as a tutor for his children, and in return Thoreau was provided with board, lodging and ample time to devote to his studies. On May 1, 1843, Thoreau departed for Staten Island.

¹¹⁷Records of the Concord Lyceum, Concord Free Public Library.

¹¹⁸Journal, VIII, p. 569.

Living in the vicinity of New York City, Thoreau had ready access to new storehouses of books. The early English poets interested him at the moment, and he read all he could find of Ossian, Daniel, Donne and Lovelace. Thoreau's closeness to the city also allowed him to acquaint himself with the literary world--one of his major purposes for coming to Staten Island. He found, however, that most publishers were not interested in risking anything on new and unknown authors.¹¹⁹ In fact, Thoreau's only success in the literary world was his cultivation of a friendship with Horace Greeley, and he did not reap the benefits of that relationship until many years had passed.

Thoreau was never really happy on Staten Island or in New York City. The sea could not replace the rivers of Concord. Hardly one to be concerned with festivities, Thoreau decided he would like to go home for Thanksgiving. Emerson encouraged him by asking that he give a lecture before the Concord Lyceum. The subject for the lecture he delivered on November 29, 1843, was "The Ancient Poets"; that is, Homer, Ossian and Chaucer. Thoreau innocently accepted James Macpherson's hoax as genuine and spoke of the poems as being "of the same stamp with the Iliad itself."¹²⁰

¹¹⁹Thoreau, Correspondence, I, pp. 143-144.

¹²⁰Henry Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1849), p. 229.

Back at Concord, Thoreau was able to devote much of his free time to writing. Scattered over four years of his Journal was material about "Thomas Carlyle and His Works." By February, 1846, the embryonic notes were gathered together and moulded into a lecture. Thoreau admired Carlyle's use of humor, which was used as a vehicle to express more lofty ideals--a technique Thoreau occasionally adopted in his own speaking. Although the lecture on February 4 was apparently a success, it was not what his townsmen wanted to hear. What interested them was why he, a Harvard graduate, had given up a conventional life and had gone to live at Walden Pond the previous spring. He then began writing the series of lectures that grew into his most renowned work, Walden.

It was not until Thoreau could answer the "very particular inquiries"¹²¹ posed by the townsmen that he began to earnestly pursue the lecture platform. It was not, moreover, until the period of solitude and communion with nature at Walden ended that he knew the answers. On February 10, 1847, Thoreau delivered the first of his "Walden" lectures to his inquirers. That evening he read a paper entitled "A History of Myself," and it was received so favorably that he was asked a week later to repeat it for those who had missed it. Emerson wrote to Margaret Fuller, editor of the

¹²¹Writings, II, p. 1.

transcendental Dial, the following:

Mrs. Ripley & other members of the opposition came down the other night to hear Henry's account of his housekeeping at Walden Pond, which he read as a lecture, and were charmed by the witty wisdom which ran through it all.¹²²

A frequent member of Thoreau's audience was young E. Harlow Russell, who many years later inherited the original manuscripts of Thoreau's Journals. Russell has recalled a memorable picture of Thoreau on the lecture platform:

Thoreau seemed rather less than the medium height, well-proportioned, and noticeably straight and erect His head was not large, nor did it strike me as handsome. It was covered with a full growth of rather dark hair somewhat carelessly brushed after no particular style. His face was very striking whether seen in the front or profile view. Large perceptive eyes--blue, I think, large and prominent nose; his mouth concealed by a full dark beard, worn natural but not untrimmed; these features pervaded by a wise, serious and dignified look. The expression of his countenance was not severe or commanding, but it certainly gave no hint of shallowness or trifling. In speech he was deliberate and positive. The emphatic words seemed to "hang fire" or to be held back for an instant as if to gather force and weight Thoreau was always interesting, often entertaining, but never what you would call charming.¹²³

When Thoreau repeated the lecture, "A History of Myself," in Salem on November 25, 1848, his audience was again captivated.

¹²²Ralph Waldo Emerson, Letters, III (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), pp. 377-378.

¹²³Quoted by Walter Harding, Thoreau: Man of Concord (New York: A. Knopf, 1960), pp. 97-98.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's wife, Sophia, reported:

His lectures before us was so enchanting; such a revelation of nature in all its exquisite details of wood-thrushes, squirrels, sunshine, mists and shadows, fresh, vernal odors, pine tree ocean melodies, that my ear rang with music, and I seemed to have been wandering through copse and dingle! Mr. Thoreau has risen above all his arrogance of manner, and is as gentle, simple, ruddy, and meek as all geniuses should be; and now his great blue eyes fairly outshine and put into shade a nose which I thought must make him uncomely forever.¹²⁴

The reviewer for the Salem Observer was equally pleased and reported that while the lecture was "sufficiently Emersonian to have come from the great man himself," and that "in thought, style and delivery the similarity was equally obvious, it furnished ample proof of being a native product, by affording all the charm of an original." It was, he continued, "done in an admirable manner, in a strain of exquisite humor, with a strong undercurrent of delicate satire against the follies of our times." The performance, he agreed, had "created quite a sensation."¹²⁵

Hearing word of Thoreau's success in Salem, the Gloucester Lyceum invited him to repeat his lecture for them on December 20.

On the 23rd the Gloucester Telegraph reported:

We believe that concerning this lecture there are various opinions in the community. With all deference to the sagacity of those who can see a great deal where there is little to be

¹²⁴Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, Memories of Hawthorne (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1897), pp. 92-93.

¹²⁵Salem Observer, November 25, 1848, p. 2.

seen--hear much where there is hardly anything to be heard--perceive a wonderful depth of meaning where in fact nothing is really meant, we would take the liberty of expressing the opinion that a certain ingredient to a good lecture was, in some instances, wanting.¹²⁶

There is no record of Thoreau ever having been invited to lecture in Gloucester again. By this time he had become too transcendental--too radical. His style was often too metaphorical for a popular audience. In Worcester, moreover, when he delivered the chapter from Walden on "The Beanfield" in April, 1848, at least one auditor was totally bewildered.¹²⁷

It becomes clear, as Harding indicated,¹²⁸ that Thoreau's popularity as a lecturer was frequently in direct proportion to the amount of humor included to balance his transcendentalism. The audience laughed at his humor, but they ignored his serious thoughts. Needless to say, Thoreau was not pleased with the popular reaction to his more serious lectures. He was an apostle of reform who had a message to preach; yet, he felt he had been unsuccessful and periodically complained in his Journal:

Dear Sir,--I hear that you have a lecture of some humor. Will you do us the favor to read it before the Bugtown Institute?¹²⁹

¹²⁶Gloucester Telegraph, December 23, 1848, p. 1.

¹²⁷Annie Russell Marble, Thoreau: His Home, Friends, and Books (New York: Crowell, 1902), p. 155.

¹²⁸Harding, "The Lectures of Henry David Thoreau," p. 16.

¹²⁹Journal, XIII, p. 89.

An audience will draw out of a lecture, or enable a lecturer to read, only such parts of his lecture as they like.¹³⁰

Always you have to contend with the stupidity of men Men are more obedient at first to words than ideas. They mind names more than things. Read to them a lecture on "Education," naming that subject, and they will think that they have heard something important, but call it "Transcendentalism," and they will think it moonshine. Or halve your lecture, and put a psalm at the beginning and a prayer at the end of it and read it from a pulpit, and they will pronounce it good without thinking.¹³¹

I lose my respect for people who do not know what is good and true. I know full well that readers and hearers, with the fewest exceptions, ask me for my second best.¹³²

During Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond, he and the state of Massachusetts had a disagreement which precipitated his willingness to actively aid radical abolitionists. The story is well known. One evening in July, 1846, probably the 23rd or 24th, Thoreau walked into Concord village from Walden to pick up a shoe he had left at the cobbler's shop to be repaired. He was stopped just before departing from Concord to pick huckle-berries by Sam Staples, the local constable and tax collector, and asked to pay his poll tax for the last several years. (The Massachusetts poll tax was not a voting tax but a head tax levied on every male between the ages of

¹³⁰Ibid., XII, p. 10.

¹³¹Ibid., XIII, p. 145.

¹³²Ibid., IX, p. 250.

twenty and seventy.) As a sign that he renounced his allegiance to any government that protected slavery and declared war on Mexico, Thoreau refused to pay and went to jail. He made the most of what he thought to be a rare opportunity and questioned a cell-mate about the history of the jail, its occupants and its gossip; his informant soon tired and went to bed, leaving Thoreau to blow out the lamp. That night Thoreau's Aunt Maria paid the tax for him, and the next morning he was freed. After retrieving his mended shoe, he left for the woods to pick some berries for dinner. While Thoreau was in jail, Emerson is supposed to have come by and asked: "Henry, what are you doing in there?" to which Thoreau is supposed to have replied: "Waldo, what are you doing out there?"¹³³

On January 26, 1848, Thoreau introduced his famous doctrine of civil disobedience. He explained before a Concord audience the rationale for going to jail rather than pay the poll tax and reiterated a fundamental transcendental principle: There is a higher law than civil law--the dictates of conscience--and when these principles are in conflict, it is the citizen's duty to obey the

¹³³The story is recounted in Civil Disobedience, Walden and Stanley Hyman's, The Promised End (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1963), pp. 23-24. It is doubtful, however, that Emerson engaged in such a "pat" dialogue with Thoreau, for Staples allowed no visitors (Hyman, p. 24).

voice within rather than that of civil authority.¹³⁴ It is to an analysis of "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government" or "Civil Disobedience" that we now turn.

¹³⁴Two years later William Seward voiced his convictions in another "Higher Law" speech. For a thorough examination of his theme, see Harold L. Lawson, "The Speaking of William H. Seward, 1845-1861" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Speech, The Ohio State University, 1967), pp. 160-200.

CHAPTER IV

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

My friend will be bold to conjecture.
He will guess bravely at the significance
of my words.

Thoreau

For years Thoreau had desired only to be left alone, to be permitted to carry on his private program of social reform. But the state had jailed him for refusing to pay his taxes; it had demanded, in Thoreau's view, financial support of a war with Mexico designed to extend the hideous system of Negro slavery. Since the state had struck the first blow, Thoreau felt he had little choice but to strike back, to consider his relationship with an institution which forced compliance.

"Civil Disobedience" was transcendental individualism translated into politics. To Thoreau, the Moral Law was the fundamental law, superior to statutes and constitutions. Since political expediency and the law of morality frequently clash, Thoreau felt that it was the duty of the individual to follow the higher law. All men who intimately associated themselves with any government, Thoreau further observed, paid with their personal freedom. Whether they served in a civil or military capacity, their first loyalty

became the government, which was controlled by a corrupt, immoral body of men. No longer possessing the freedom to act as their consciences dictated, they became less and less men and more and more things. Finally, their value and dignity depreciated until they became "good citizens." Here, in his own words, was Thoreau's argument:

Civil Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made agents of injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now what are they? Men at all?

or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power?¹

Consequently,

The mass of men serve the state . . . not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, posse comitatus, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no

¹Henry David Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," in Aesthetic Papers, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1849), pp. 190-191. Professor William Howarth of the English Department at Princeton University, who is compiling a bibliography of Thoreau manuscripts which have been preserved, indicated in a letter to the author that none of the original anti-slavery speeches to be analyzed are extant. Thoreau's "Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government" exists in two slightly different versions. One was entitled "Resistance to Civil Government," which was first published in Peabody's Aesthetic Papers in the spring of 1849; and its more widely known title, "Civil Disobedience," was first published in Thoreau's A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers (Boston: Tichnor and Fields, 1866) four years after his death. Except for numerous differences in punctuation, which were probably editorial rather than authorial changes, they vary only in a few sentences. I have chosen the 1849 version as my text on the assumption that it was not based on a copy corrected by Thoreau. After delivering the lecture on January 26, 1848, Thoreau was busy correcting proofs of his first book, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, and gathering material for a series of lectures about Walden. It seems unlikely that in 1849 he had either the time or the desire to copy an old lecture, let alone make extensive revisions. Hereafter, Thoreau's text as it appeared in Peabody's edition will be referred to as "Civil Disobedience."

more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens.²

Sam Staples, the town jailer, was just such an individual, argued Thoreau. When the order came to lock up Thoreau for not paying his tax, Staples must have known that Henry was guilty of no moral wrong. Yet, because he was a "tool," reduced to a mere shadow of a man, the jailer did what he was told and dared not think for himself. For a meager living, cried Thoreau, Staples had exchanged his conscience. Like every other civil servant, he had sold himself into slavery just as abject and degrading as on the southern plantation.³ Some years later Thoreau restated the point in his Journal:

Talk about slavery! It is not the peculiar institution of the South. It exists wherever men are bought and sold, wherever a man allows himself to be made a mere thing or tool, and surrenders his inalienable rights of reason and conscience. Indeed, this slavery is more complete than that which enslaves the body alone. It exists in the Northern States, and I am reminded by what I find in the newspapers that it exists in Canada. I never yet met with, or heard of, a judge who was not a slave of this kind, and so the finest and most unfailing weapon of injustice. He fetches a slightly higher price than the black man only because he is a more valuable slave.⁴

²"Civil Disobedience," p. 191.

³Ibid., p. 203.

⁴Journal, XIV, p. 292.

The arguments which Thoreau used against the government were the same as the ones mustered by radical abolitionists for years. The federal government was destroying individual rights, thereby cheapening the worth of the individual. It resorted to the immoral use of force; it venerated the Constitution, a mere "human" instrument, and it taxed unjustly. Like the radicals, Thoreau insisted on being a man first and a subject afterwards. But when the state was coercive, he was not content with joining a resistance society, burning the Constitution or signing a petition; rather, he initiated the counter principle of passive resistance.

The Character of the Speaker

It is an established empirical generalization that sources of low credibility are not as persuasive as highly credible communicators.⁵ Consequently, it would be significant to assess Thoreau's character as viewed by his immediate audience. While Thoreau was by no means canonized in his own time, it would appear that he was more the townsman and neighbor and less the recluse and eccentric. Henry was viewed by the audience in Concord's Town Hall on January 26, 1848, not as a cold, distant, unemotional stoic but

⁵For a brief survey of much of this literature see Kenneth Andersen and Theodore Clevenger, Jr., "A Summary of Experimental Research in Ethos," Speech Monographs, XXX (June, 1963), pp. 59-78.

as a warm human being--an individual however, who was misunderstood and whose motives were often suspect.

The reciprocal suspicions which Thoreau and the villagers harbored for one another came down to two. There was, first, the business side of their lives. The villagers took a dim view of Thoreau's business--or lack of it--because it was so unremunerative; Thoreau took a dim view of their business because it was profitable and because they prized material rewards too highly. The second suspicion was that each side felt the other to be insincere. The townsmen thought Thoreau was playing a part and imitating some romantic ideal. Thoreau felt the neighbors were imitating decorum, not living their own lives but lives imposed upon them by society. The underlying strife between the villagers and Thoreau was not rooted in anger but in the skepticism of the wisdom of the way of life each side had chosen for itself. William S. Robinson, a schoolmate of John and Henry Thoreau throughout their childhoods and friend and defender of Henry, revealed the common attitude of the villagers in one of his "Warrington" letters when he wrote:

It is fortunate for literature that Thoreau lived, and built his house on the shores of Walden Pond, when he did. If his birth had been postponed twenty years, we should never have had his most delightful of all American books, "Walden" is as good of its kind as any thing in American or English literature. It is, on the whole, the best book ever written in Concord. [Thoreau] hated, or affected to hate, all crowds, and said the pleasantest place in Boston

was the Fitchburg Railway Depot, because it was the road home. What would he say if he could see Walden Pond as it is now, on whose banks he built his little house, and lived, raising beans on his farm, and charming the fishes with his flute.⁶

Particular attention should be paid to the phrase "or affected to hate." Did Robinson mean to suggest that Thoreau was merely posing? His lifelong friend probably knew that Henry Thoreau was a great talker and liked people, though hardly people in crowds. In any event, Robinson gave credence to the notion that Thoreau had an element of affection about him, and there were some who clearly understood what Thoreau's "business" was and could not accuse him of duplicity. But they were a minority in the village.

Indeed, the persistent theme of Edward Emerson's book, Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend, is that this legendary misunderstanding of Thoreau by his neighbors must be corrected and dispelled. The fact that Emerson addressed himself to this problem is one of the best proofs that it existed. The villagers did not understand the shift of emphasis in the Thoreau family business that turned it to manufacturing fine black lead instead of pencils. But they did know that Henry said he would make no more pencils, which, said Emerson,

was counted to him for righteousness by a very few, and for laziness by most. This is the principal charge made

⁶William S. Robinson, "Warrington" Pen Portraits (Boston: W. S. Robinson, 1877), p. 68.

against him in his own neighborhood. Many solid practical citizens, whose love of wild Nature was about like Dr. Johnson's, asserted that he neglected a good business, which he might have worked for a profit for his family and himself, to idle in the woods, and this cannot be forgiven.⁷

Thoreau's neighbors, moreover, could not quite forgive his going to live at Walden. These industrious traders and shopkeepers could not understand a seemingly lazy man who kept no shop and neglected his trade. Said Edward Emerson, "By village firesides on winter evenings his foolish whim was gossiped over with pity."⁸

The villagers' attitude toward Thoreau, then, had at its base the accusation of laziness that could quite naturally arise in an industrious town such as the Concord of more than a century ago. There was another group in the audience that January evening which also had an adverse opinion of Henry: the farmers. Like the villagers, they did not dislike him, but they had their doubts about him and his "foolish whim." The fact that a grown man would, for example, stay up all hours or get up at dawn for no more practical reason than to listen to a bird sing was probably enough to make the farmers think the man as well as the songbird a bit "twittery." The farmers, however, gossiped more with Henry than the townspeople, for surveying brought him into contact with farmers in a very practical

⁷Edward Emerson, Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), pp. 31-32.

⁸Ibid., p. 53.

way. They, therefore, probably had a higher opinion of him than did the villagers.

Yet, even while surveying, Thoreau was viewed as a loafer, for he was a naturalist first and then a surveyor. The farmer's role was to make nature produce crops. Wildness was a nuisance to them; beauty was probably silliness. It is forgivable, then, that they could not understand Thoreau when he went around looking at the forests or commenting on beauty. After all, a surveyor's business was to measure acres so they could be sold, not to stand and look at the landscape. There was no money in landscapes!

We have a record of one farmer's opinion that summarizes all the criticisms of Thoreau that have been described: the differences in values, the neglect of work and the impracticality of being a naturalist. It is contained in a page Mrs. Daniel Chester French included in her Memories of a Sculptor's Wife:

"Henry D. Thoreau--Henry D. Thoreau," jerking out the words with withering contempt. "His name ain't no more Henry D. Thoreau than my name is Henry D. Thoreau. And everybody knows it, and he knows it. His name's Da-a-vid Henry and it ain't never been nothing but Da-a-vid Henry. And he knows that! Why, one morning I went out in my field across there to the river, and there, beside that little old mud pond, was standing Da-a-vid Henry, and he wasn't doin' nothin' but just standin' there--lookin' at that pond, and when I came back at noon, there he was standin' with his hands behind him just lookin' down into that pond, and after dinner when I come back again if there wasn't Da-a-vid standin' there just like as if he had been there all day, gazin' down into that pond, and I stopped and looked at him and I says, "Da-a-vid Henry, what air you a-doin'?" And he didn't turn his head and he didn't

look at me. He kept on lookin' down at that pond, and he said, as if he was thinkin' about the stars in the heavens, 'Mr. Murray, I'm a-studyin'--the habits--of the bullfrog!' And there that darned fool had been standin'--the live-long day--a-studyin'--the habits--of the bull-frog!"⁹

Not all Concordians were unsympathetic towards Thoreau. Many of the ordinary citizens understood him and liked him, for he had great neighborliness. Like his father and brother, he was a delightful gossip who was regarded as a cordial talker and a dependable friend. Also, there was an entire literary club in Concord that understood Thoreau. Moreover, since he was surrounded by other transcendentalists such as Emerson, Alcott, Channing, Hawthorne, Melville and Fuller, Thoreau's ideosyncracies did not appear as marked as they might have been in another village; at least, it was easier to tolerate him.

Unlike most of the adults who came to hear Thoreau, there was one group in the audience that understood him completely: the children. Just as David Henry had listened to Lyceum speakers in his youth, the cycle repeated itself as children of a new generation were addressed by him. Like them, he was not mercenary or commercial but retained a child's innocence. As children they were hardly vocal about their fondness for Thoreau, but as adults they came to the defense of their good friend. One of them, George Hoar,

⁹Mary French, Memories of a Sculptor's Wife (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), pp. 94-95.

described his affections for his oldtime neighbor as follows:

I knew Henry Thoreau very intimately. I went to school with him when I was a little boy and he was a big one. Afterwards I was a scholar in his school.

He was very fond of small boys, and used to take them out with him in his boat, and make bows and arrows for them, and take part in their games. He liked also to get a number of the little chaps of [sic] a Saturday afternoon and take them out in his boat, or for a long walk in the woods.

He knew the best places to find huckleberries and blackberries and chestnuts and lilies and cardinal [sic] and other rare flowers. We used to call him Trainer Thoreau, because the boys called the soldiers the "trainers," and he had a long, measured stride and an erect carriage which made him seem something like a soldier.¹⁰

Another child, perhaps the one who knew Thoreau best of all, was the son of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Thoreau lived at his house for several years, and Edward Emerson had a good deal of his father's insight and sensitivity with which to measure his older friend.

In childhood I had a friend,--not a house friend, domestic, stuffy in association; not yet herdsman, or horseman, or farmer, or slave to bench, or shop, or office; nor of letters, nor art, nor society; but a free, friendly, youthful-seeming man, who wandered in from unknown woods or fields without knocking, . . . [who] passed by the elders door, but straightway sought out the children, brightened up the wood-fire forthwith; and it seemed as if it were the effect of a wholesome brave north wind, more than of the armful of "cat-sticks" which he would bring in from the yard

This youthful, cheery figure was a familiar one in our house, and when he, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, sounded his note in the hall, the children came to hug his knees, and he struggled with them, nothing loath, to the fireplace,

¹⁰George F. Hoar, Autobiography of Seventy Years, I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), p. 70.

sat down and told stories, sometimes of the strange adventure of childhood, or more often of squirrels, muskrats, hawks he had seen that day Then he would make our pencils and knives disappear, and redeem them presently from our ears and noses

This youth, who could pipe and sing himself, made for children pipes of all sorts, of grass, of leaf stalk of squash and pumpkin

The man of whom I speak was the friend of my childhood and early youth, and living and dead has helped me, and in no common way.¹¹

The following story serves as an apt conclusion to correct the prejudice generated by one farmer's observation about Thoreau.

One day we children saw Mr. Thoreau standing . . . across the road near the Assabet. He stood very still, and we knew he was watching something in the water. But we knew we must not disturb him, and so we stayed up in the dooryard. At noon-time he was still there, watching something in the water. And he stayed there all afternoon.

At last, though, along about supper time, he came up here to the house. And then we children knew that we'd learn what it was he'd been watching. He's found a duck that had just hatched out a nest of eggs. She had brought the little ducks down to the water. And Mr. Thoreau had watched all day to see her teach those little ducks about the river.

And while we ate our suppers there in the kitchen, he told us the most wonderful stories you ever heard about those ducks.¹²

To have been a naturalist in Thoreau's day was to have been generally misunderstood--except by the children.

¹¹Edward Emerson, pp. 10-11.

¹²Quoted by Raymond Adams, "Thoreau and his Neighbors," The Thoreau Society Bulletin, XLIV (Summer, 1953), p. 4, to whom the story was told.

The real target of Thoreau's speech, however, was not his Concord audience; rather, by his own admission it was the "hundred thousand merchants and farmers" of Massachusetts and New England.

Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians in the South, 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. I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, cooperate with, and do the bidding of, those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless.¹³

Considering Thoreau's lack of success on the speaker's platform as described in the previous chapter, it seems unlikely that he enjoyed any higher esteem with his intended audience--if they knew of him at all--than he did with his Concord neighbors. Essentially, Thoreau found himself cast in the unenviable light described by Greenberg and Miller:

Low source credibility may be one antecedent condition that serves to immunize an individual's beliefs and thus make him more resistant to persuasion. When, prior to its presentation, a persuasive message is attributed to a low-credible source, the audience is forewarned that the information to follow may be unreliable. This forewarning is likely to cause audience members to ignore the message's persuasive appeals and to retain original attitudes toward the issue discussed.¹⁴

¹³"Civil Disobedience," p. 193.

¹⁴Bradley S. Greenberg and Gerald R. Miller, "The Effects of Low-Credibility Sources on Message Acceptance," Speech Monographs, XXXIII (June, 1966), p. 127.

As the above quotation indicates, the question of an audience's attitude¹⁵ toward a subject and their image of the speaker are interrelated, but for purposes of analysis they will be discussed separately. Thoreau's ultimate purpose in "Civil Disobedience" was to consider the relationship of the individual to the state. In this sense, he spoke--and wrote--to future audiences. He believed in the soundness of his ideas, even if he did not keep step with his companions. His immediate goal, however, was to modify the behavior of his listeners toward the institution of chattel slavery. Thoreau confidently predicted "that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name,--if ten honest men only,--aye, if one HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor [sic], it would be the abolition of slavery in America."¹⁶

¹⁵Newcomb offers the following definition of attitudes: An attitude is the individual's organization of psychological processes, as inferred from his behavior, with respect to some aspect of the world which distinguishes from other aspects. It represents the residue of his previous experience with which he approaches any subsequent situation including that aspect and, together with the contemporary influences in such a situation, determines his behavior in it. Attitudes are enduring in the sense that such residues are carried over to new situations, but they change in so far as new residues are acquired through experience in new situations. T. M. Newcomb, "On the Definition of Attitude," in Attitudes, Marie Jahoda and Neil Warren, ed. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1966), p. 22.

¹⁶"Civil Disobedience," p. 199.

Although Concord was a cauldron of abolitionist activity, the attitudes of most citizens toward Negro slavery were hardly different than those of most northerners. Colonization societies, whose program was discussed earlier, had a considerable influence in Massachusetts and New England.¹⁷ A southern visitor reported in 1834, "Colonization is popular here [Massachusetts] --with those, I mean who know or reflect at all about it."¹⁸ The societies, it may be recalled, preached racial inferiority and maintained that any attempt to improve the Negro's lot would defy public sentiment as well as threaten or destroy the fabric of American society.

When Thoreau delivered "Civil Disobedience" in 1848, radical abolitionists--after more than a decade of agitation--were still a minority that advocated fundamental changes in attitudes, conduct and institutions. By 1860 they still had failed to convince many northerners of the wisdom of their message: freedom for the slaves, acceptance of Negroes into society and individual respect for the rights of all men. Appeals to moral principle and verbal attacks on sacred institutions by the radicals were blunt weapons against self-interest, racial bias and professed love of the

¹⁷Daniel Webster, for example, was listed annually during the ante-bellum period as an officer of the national society.

¹⁸Lucian Minor, "Letters from New England," Southern Literary Messenger, I (1934), p. 88.

Union. Indeed, as Wendell Phillips observed in his classic phrase, "The lords of the lash are wedded to the lords of the loom." And the textile workers and merchants of Massachusetts and Concord were more faithful than most.¹⁹

It should be noted, in addition, that just as the attitudes of Thoreau's audience towards the slavery question remained static over the years, so did their mutual suspicions. In 1854, the year in which he delivered "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau lamented in Walden:

I have travelled a good deal in Concord; and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and field, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stable never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture and woodlot The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost.²⁰

By 1859, when Thoreau pleaded on behalf of John Brown, he again complained of his neighbor's serfdom:

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; 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.²¹

¹⁹Boorstin, pp. 23-24.

²⁰Writings, II, p. 32.

²¹Ibid., IV, p. 457.

As Garrison commented to Wendell Phillips, there was much ice to melt.²² And if Thoreau was to be heard, he, too, would have to shout.

A Rhetorical Analysis

Transcendental speeches pose a unique problem for rhetorical critics. As Rein has accurately observed,²³ before 1855 their discourse²⁴ violated many common expectations. The transcendentalists ignored facts; they avoided statistics and considered personal testimony a sham. Their lack of organization and supporting material prompted the complaint that their speeches often seemed patternless and without purpose. Because of the unconventional characteristic of transcendental discourse, it is most profitable to let the speech itself suggest a critical methodology. A useful approach to an analysis of "Civil Disobedience" is through the identification of strategies, defined as the rules, devices or patterns that were intended to bring the speaker and listener

²²Phillips, p. 139.

²³Irving J. Rein, "The New England Transcendentalists: Philosophy and Rhetoric," Philosophy and Rhetoric, I (Spring, 1968), p. 104.

²⁴Prominent exponents of transcendentalism in New England from 1830 to about 1855 include Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, William Henry Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Hedge, Theodore Parker, Jones Very and Henry David Thoreau.

together in common accord.²⁵ From a careful consideration of transcendental discourse, four strategies emerge: revelation, transcendence, salvation and omission.²⁶ While these categories will serve as convenient focal points for an analysis of "Civil Disobedience," one can also imagine a classical or Burkian approach, for instance, contributing valuable insights. The point is to take from many theories that which is useful and relevant and not to feel bound to adopt the entire system. It is with this flexibility in mind that we examine Thoreau's speech.

Out of the search for "lost intuitions" or "grand truths" grew a common transcendental strategy. For the transcendentalist, higher laws were not dependent for their authority upon miracles or upon any form of empirical evidence. Rather, men came to believe in "moral truths" because they were innate; the existence of God and the assurance of immortality, for example, were "given" in human nature. According to William Henry Channing, the result of such an intuitive faith "was a vague yet exalting conception of the godlike nature of the human spirit . . . as viewed by its disciples, . . . a pilgrimage from the idolatrous world of creeds and rituals to the temple of the Living God in the soul. It was putting to silence

²⁵Rein, p. 105.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 105-115.

tradition and formulas, that the Sacred Oracle might be heard through intuitions of the single-eyed and purehearted."²⁷

The "strategy of revelation" was a means of displaying supposedly impregnable arguments and presenting them in the form of epigrams or maxims. The statement needed no conventional support because it was justified by the beauty and repeatability of the phrases.²⁸ Sprinkled throughout the address were Thoreau's "grand truths." In the first sentence he declared: "I HEARTILY accept the motto,--'That government is best which governs least.'"²⁹ When encouraging members of the audience to oppose the pro-slavery forces in America, to obey the higher law from "within," Thoreau asserted, "For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever."³⁰ In turn, such a contention was "supported" as follows: "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the [civil] law, so much as for the right."³¹ And to individuals generally covetous of material riches Thoreau categorically, defiantly proclaimed: "Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue."³² In many instances, then, proverbial statements

²⁷William Henry Channing, II, p. 13.

²⁸Rein, p. 105.

²⁹"Civil Disobedience," p. 189.

³⁰Ibid., p. 199.

³¹Ibid., p. 190.

³²Ibid., p. 201.

were substituted for more complete arguments. The assertion and its support were contained in a "pregnant" phrase or catchy slogan.

Thoreau's ability to coin memorable phrases had distinct advantages. First, it was virtually impossible to frame meaningful counter-arguments. He commanded, in Rein's terms, a "thunderbolt" method of support. He could present his "grand truths," and statistics, personal testimony, quotations or any other sort of documentation would be irrelevant.³³ For his authority, Thoreau would probably refer to the Moral Law which was written in the hearts of mankind. Consider, for instance, Thoreau's famous line in Walden: "It is life near the bone where it is sweetest."³⁴ The support for such an ideal was intuitive truth--a swift, spiritual announcement. Clearly, his observation was impervious to any traditional mode of criticism. The typical methods for criticizing statements or arguments is to attack either the premise or the supporting material. Thoreau, however, gave his critics much to ponder but little to assault. His premise was so general and his evidence so scanty that it defies critical bombardment.

Thoreau's skill in the art of phraseology had a second important advantage. He may have recognized that maxims and slogans

³³Rein, p. 106.

³⁴Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Selected Essays, Walter Hendricks, ed. (Chicago: Packard and Company, 1947), p. 298.

not only lessen the likelihood of refutation but have argumentative value. In Reason and Nature, the noted philosopher Morris Cohen maintained that forms of language may produce certainty of conviction because they prevent the listener from being able to conceive of the other side of an issue:

So often does our psychologic certainty prevent us from even entertaining on the pursuit of truth, that it is well to reflect that the feeling of certainty is often nothing but our inability to conceive the opposite of what we happen to believe. In this sense there is no certainty as great as the initial one based on complete ignorance of countervailing considerations. Thus men show greater certainty about the complicated and elusive questions of politics and religion than about simpler and more verifiable issues³⁵

The tersely cogent proverb, the magical phrase, then, may be an effective means of generating belief.³⁶ Thoreau did not explicitly admit that he was combining words to attract his listeners, but

³⁵Morris Cohen, Reason and Nature (New York: Henry Holt Company, 1946), p. 83.

³⁶Copper and McGaugh state that a belief is an attitude that embodies a great deal of cognitive structuring. One has an attitude toward and a belief in or about a stimulus object. Belief connotes an attitude which involves or identifies the subject with the object. (Copper and McGaugh, "Attitude and Related Concepts," in Attitudes, p. 20.) Every speaker wants his listeners to do something about his recommendation, either in the near or distant future. (See, for instance, Fotheringham, p. 41; and Howard H. Martin and Kenneth E. Andersen, Speech Communication (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1968), pp. 136-137.) And belief in the speaker's proposal is an important prerequisite in determining an individual's future behavior. (Cooper and McGaugh, Ibid.)

there seems to be little doubt that as a "poet" he had great faith in the power of words or the dazzling phrase. Always in the minority himself, Thoreau made it a tenet of his philosophy for reform that when the world was changed for the better, a minority would be instrumental in changing it. The minority might consist of only one individual who would take his stand above the mass of men.

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves Abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts and not wait till they constitute a majority I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.³⁷

In unequivocal terms Thoreau revealed one of God's laws. Supported by innate truth, his revelation stood forth, virtually resistant to attack.

The carefully chosen word or catchy slogan was not Thoreau's only device for conveying "grand truths." Thoreau relied upon the intuitive flash for which a poem is ideally suited. To a man of letters, poetry was a means by which the secrets of the universe could be expounded. As Emerson stated:

The breadth of the problem is great, for the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man. The young man reveres men of genius, because they speak truly, they are more himself than he is. They receive of the soul as he also receives, but they more. Nature enhances her beauty, to the eye of loving men, from their belief that the poet is beholding her shows at the

³⁷"Civil Disobedience," p. 198.

same time For all men live by truth and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter in one painful secret. The man is only himself, the other half is his expression.³⁸

As a counterpart of nature, poetry was an ideal vehicle by which Thoreau could instill in his audience a sense of truth and beauty. Included in his discussion of "Civil Disobedience" were four separate stanzas of poetry. The following poem concluded the address:

O God! who in thy dear still heaven,
 Dost sit, and wait to see
 The errors, sufferings, and crimes
 Of our humanity.
 How deep must be thy Causal love!
 How whole thy final Care!
 Since Thou, who rulest over all,
 Canst see, and yet canst bear.³⁹

Given Thoreau's reliance on intuition rather than on conventional material for support, the poem was a suitable device for presenting his case. One expects supporting material in a typical argument but not in a poem.

³⁸Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in Essays and English Traits, Charles Eliot, ed., V (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1965), p. 162.

³⁹"Civil Disobedience," p. 211. These somewhat maudlin verses are not included in the 1866 version of the lecture.

In brief, Thoreau employed the "strategy of revelation" throughout "Civil Disobedience." This strategy is characterized by a display of supposedly impregnable arguments which are presented in the form of maxims, catchy phrases or poems. Thoreau, for instance, opened the lecture by quoting a popular motto and concluded his address with several lines of poetry. Arguments and supporting material were frequently expressed in a proverbial phrase or catchy slogan; the speaker commanded a "thunderbolt" method of support. Such a reliance on form rather than on content, moreover, made it difficult to frame meaningful counter-arguments. Finally, Thoreau's ability to coin a memorable phrase partially explains the reason for his enduring appeal. He had an extraordinary ability to capture flashes of experience, to provide the listener--or future reader--with "grand truths" in the language of a poet.

Strategy of Transcendence

Another strategy that characterized transcendental discourse was the "strategy of transcendence," which depended on the definition of concepts rather than on pointed, intuitive statements. In essence, the "strategy of transcendence" was a particular type of argumentative arrangement: 1) Two or more elements are defined. 2) The favored definitions are shown to be superior in various ways to the others. 3) The result is that the "inferior" definitions can be dismissed as irrelevant, or as poor concepts. 4) Having nullified

contradictory points of view, the speaker can proceed to expound the favored definition or concept.⁴⁰ This strategy, moreover, was an extension of transcendental idealism. The transcendentalist believed "in the sufficiency of intuition, the ultimate authority of the soul, and the validity of a priori truths." He had at his disposal the universal principles of the Moral Law and occasionally bolstered his concepts with examples or anecdotes.⁴¹

The "strategy of transcendence" was an identifying feature of Thoreau's speech. He argued, as Rein noted, that anarchy⁴² transcended government and that moral individualism transcended government and that moral individualism transcended society.⁴³ The entire address revolved around three arguments and Thoreau's insistence that if his listeners assent to his reasoning, they "give

⁴⁰Rein, p. 107.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 108-109.

⁴²By anarchy Thoreau meant the right of all men "to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable" ("Civil Disobedience," p. 192). In other words, anarchy meant to Thoreau direct individual action, guided by higher laws. Anarchism was virtually limited to matters of conscience and was thought of as little more than "defiant individualism." (See Wendell Glick, "Thoreau's Attack upon Relativism," Western Humanities Review, VII (Winter, 1952), pp. 35-42.) Furthermore, as the popular title of Thoreau's speech suggested, defiance was to be conducted in a civil--polite or courteous--manner. For all practical purposes, then, anarchy, revolution, civil disobedience, passive resistance, or non-violent revolution were synonymous.

⁴³Rein, p. 109.

up and disallow whatever is inconsistent."⁴⁴ In the form of rhetorical syllogisms, the arguments upon which "Civil Disobedience" rested were as follows:

- One: The best government is the government which governs least.
The government which governs not at all is the government which governs least.
Therefore, The best government is the government which governs not at all.
- Two: The best government is a government which governs not at all.
The American government is not a government which governs not at all.
Therefore, The American government is not the best government.
- Three: The first duty of every man is to do justice.
To obey the American government is not to do justice.
Therefore, The first duty of every man is not to obey the American government.

⁴⁴Writings, IV, p. 356. As Thoreau observed, the validity of his arguments depended upon his audience, not prescribed tests of formal logic. Moreover, there is generally a blending of logical, emotional and ethical "appeals" in the minds of the listeners; that is, what is "logical" for one person may be "emotional" for someone else. (See, for example, Harold P. Zelko, "Do we Persuade, Argue, or Convince," Quarterly Journal of Speech (October, 1939), pp. 385-392; Randall C. Ruechelle, "An Experimental Study of Audience Recognition of Emotional and Intellectual Appeals in Persuasion," Speech Monographs (March, 1958), pp. 49-58; and Bradley Greenberg and Gerald Miller, previously cited, p. 135.) Rosenthal has summarized the point well when he wrote that if the speech has actually been written by the man who utters it, then the precision with which he structures his arguments, and the nature and extent of supporting material, will be a reflection of the intelligence and character of the man who created it. (Paul Rosenthal, "The Concept of Ethos and the Structure of Persuasion," Speech Monographs, XXXIII (June, 1966), pp. 119-120.)

Thoreau began the lecture with the first premise of the first syllogism, after which he immediately voiced the second premise. By the end of the second sentence he had stated his conclusion, "That government is best which governs not at all."⁴⁵ He followed this argument by a series of comments on the nature of government which belittled the "American system." These remarks, bolstered by aggressive opinions and contemptuous examples, served to illuminate his first conclusion and second major premise.

The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; . . . Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed on, even impose on themselves, for their [governments] own advantage. . . . government is an expedient by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it.⁴⁶

The body of Thoreau's discourse was an elaboration of the third syllogism and demonstrated his use of the "strategy of transcendence." Defining government as an expedient, showing that justice and expediency are not to be confused, Thoreau argued that obedience to the will of the state is not to do justice. Having established to his satisfaction the validity of the third minor premise (the major premise readily granted by most of his

⁴⁵"Civil Disobedience," p. 189.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 189-190.

listeners), he acknowledged the soundness of his conclusion: It is not the duty of every man to obey the American government. The consequences of actions based on this conclusion were then examined. The jail episode and Thoreau's personal relations--or non-relations--with the state were aspects of this exploration. By way of an analogy, Thoreau granted the government as high a place on his list of obligations as he morally could; however, he believed that when the machinery of the state exacts injustice, an individual's obligation to higher laws demands civil disobedience.

If . . . injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth--certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine.⁴⁷

In the final section of the address Thoreau pictured the kind of government he could fully obey and respect. In accordance with the major premises of syllogisms one and two, this ideal state does not govern at all but respects every man's right to do justice, thus becoming truly just itself. "There will never be a really free and enlightened State, until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly."⁴⁸

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 197-198.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 211.

In the course of the speech, Thoreau's arguments were supported by means of examples, analogies, similies, anecdotes and sarcastic comments. He villified thoughtless obedience to a state and conventional means of social reform. Thoreau contended, for example, that voting was both ineffectual and immoral. It was tantamount to wishing that the "right" would prevail, and excused a citizen from taking any direct action. The man who voted in accordance with the Moral Law, Thoreau asserted, had no more influence than the man who voted against it--who was usually in the majority. Voting, then, was a wholly inadequate means for making any real advance against oppression. A minority which did no more than vote was easily silenced. But a civilly disobedient minority, guided by the Moral Law, could prevail. Thoreau expressed one of his cardinal points as follows:

All voting is a sort of gaming, like chequers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote. They will then be the only slaves. Only his vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own freedom.⁴⁹

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 194. Other radicals expressed similar views on the voting issue. See, for example, Garrison, II, p. 436; and Parker Pillsbury's argument in the National Anti-Slavery Standard, September 3, 1840, p. 13.

The sweep of Thoreau's "logic" in "Civil Disobedience" may have eluded many of his listeners, but they could hardly escape his goading devils.

As previously noted, many transcendental speeches do not lend themselves to conventional organizational patterns but, rather, reflect the speaker's stream of consciousness. Thoreau, however, was more coherent than many of his contemporaries, and his address may be outlined as follows:

Introduction

- I. "That government is best which governs least."
- II. "That government is best which governs not at all."
- III. The best government does not govern.
 - A. The American government imposes its will upon its citizens.
 - B. This government has never furthered any enterprise; rather, "the character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished."
 - C. A government which governs at all is necessarily not the best.

Body

- I. Government is an expedient.
 - A. Justice and expediency are not to be confused.
 - B. Majority rule is not the same as the rule of justice.
 - C. Obedience to the will of the state is not to do justice.

- II. It is not the duty of every man to obey the American government.
 - A. "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also in prison."
 - 1. I do not think that I ever rely on the protection of the state.
 - 2. The state is not armed with superior honesty, but with superior physical strength.
 - B. When the state exacts injustice, a man's primary obligation to obey higher laws demands disobedience to the state.

Conclusion

- I. To be just, a state must have the consent of the governed.
 - A. Such a state does not govern at all, but respects each man's right to do justice--thereby becoming just itself.
 - 1. Such a state may be imagined, "but not yet anywhere seen."

Reminiscent of the organizational pattern employed in his college forensics, Thoreau first stated the proposition in general terms. He then expanded the meaning of the proposition by redefinition, examples and illustrations. After further consideration of the role of government, he sharpened the focus by introducing pointed, often sarcastic, contrasts. For example:

Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India rubber, would never manage to bounce over the obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and, if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions, and not partly by their intentions, they would

deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.⁵⁰

Consistent with the "strategy of transcendence," the movement of thought was from the general to the particular and back to the general. He attempted to make his ideas concrete by employing such devices as analogy, anecdote or simile. The final section in the progression of his thoughts constituted the bulk of the discourse and contained many of his most memorable phrases.

Besides the stylistic qualities already mentioned, Thoreau was fond of other devices. Rhetorical questions and repetitious language patterns abound.

Why is it [government] not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and do better than it would have them?⁵¹

Also, the singular pronoun "I" was liberally sprinkled throughout the lecture. Transcendentalists were generally enchanted with a whole cluster of "selves," such as self-reliance, self-culture or self-reform. What could be more natural for Thoreau than to continually admit that he was responsible for his own statements and actions? "I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad What

⁵⁰"Civil Disobedience," p. 190.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 197.

I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn."⁵² Within the span of this brief excerpt, the pronoun was used six times. In twenty-three pages of published text, "we" appeared only once. Thoreau later explained in Walden his apparent egotism:

In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience.⁵³

A confession of dependence upon other men or institutions hardly suited Thoreau.

"Civil Disobedience," in short, represented Thoreau's use of the "strategy of transcendence," a type of argumentative arrangement. Thoreau began with a proposition, "that government is best which governs least." The requirements of the strategy included examination of alternatives, then spotlighting the implication: "that government is best which governs not at all." Thoreau then considered particular abuses of government and the consequences of blind obedience to the state. Finally, he returned to a general discussion of the role of government. Such stylistic devices as

⁵²Ibid., p. 198.

⁵³Thoreau, Walden and Selected Essays, p. 3.

examples, anecdotes, rhetorical questions, repetition of key words and personal pronouns were employed. Basically, the organizational pattern and embellishments mastered by Thoreau at Harvard marked the address.

Strategy of Salvation

Another weapon in the transcendental arsenal included the "strategy of salvation." "The strategy was essentially a problem-solution sequence. . . . the Transcendentalists attacked their opponents' hate, greed and conformity The intensity of the Transcendentalist attack created a vacuum which the Transcendentalists filled with hope for the future. All was not lost--there was a ray of hope for the sinners."⁵⁴

Henry Thoreau's refusal to pay his taxes was a calculated, conscientious evasion of civil responsibility; it was an act of individual defiance against a government that might have used his taxes to wage war against Mexico and that tolerated slavery. "Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? . . . Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then?" asked Thoreau.⁵⁵

⁵⁴Rein, pp. 110-111.

⁵⁵"Civil Disobedience," p. 190.

Consistent with the "strategy of salvation," Thoreau continued his attack:

There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; . . . They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for others to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret. At most, they give only a cheap vote, and a feeble countenance and God-speed, to the right, as it goes by them.⁵⁶

The completion of the strategy required Thoreau to provide a solution, to fill the created social "vacuum." His answer to a civil law or system of laws outrageous to his conscience was peaceful disobedience:

I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil [unjust laws], I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone It is not my business to be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me; and if they should not hear my petition, what should I do then? . . . A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 194.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 192, 198 and 200.

Thoreau's doctrine, however, was not totally unconciliatory, so long as matters of conscience were not involved:

to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject.⁵⁸

The impetus for non-violent breaking of the law stems from the transcendental belief that there was a dichotomy between civil and Moral Law and that the latter was of the utmost importance. But because men respect the former, they are sometimes misled into betraying the higher law. If they discover the discrepancy, should they trust to the gradual and conventional processes of government to resolve it? Thoreau argued that if enough men who believe in the Moral Law would break the civil law--even though they were a numerical minority--they may succeed in disrupting the state to such an extent that the government would reconsider its policies and actions. Significantly, Thoreau had discovered a key to destroying the state. The man who wished to abolish the state need only cease to cooperate with it; for instance, he might refuse military induction, jury duty or the payment of taxes. The refusal to obey, in other words, was the great weapon for completely undermining the state or hastening social reform. Furthermore, as a natural extension of transcendental dogma, the Moral Law and obedience to it were

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 190 and 206.

determined by the conscience of the individual--to be sure, an "awakened" conscience:

It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders.⁵⁹

Each man, then, was his own police force, his own lawmaker, his own self-regulator.

Centuries earlier Cicero touched upon the moral and personal dilemma that troubled Thoreau. On the one hand, Cicero recognized the essential value and personal motivation of men

who, while pursuing that calm of soul, have withdrawn from civic duty and taken refuge in retirement. Among such have been found the most famous and by far the foremost philosophers and certain other earnest, thoughtful men who could not endure the conduct of either the people or their leaders Such men have the same aims as kings--to suffer no want, to be subject to no authority, to enjoy their liberty, that is, in its essence, to live just as they please.⁶⁰

Cicero wrote this passage with some reluctance, for he was anxious that his son should be active in public affairs. Nonetheless, he granted that thoughtful solitude was a permissible mode of life.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 195.

⁶⁰De Officiis, I, p. 71. This is about as concise and accurate a portrait of Thoreau as any ever written.

"So perhaps those men of extraordinary genius who have devoted themselves to learning must be excused for not taking part in public affairs."⁶¹ Yet, if such a person discovered that withdrawal from civic affairs conflicted with his obligation to do justice, Cicero indicated that non-involvement was untenable.

And so there is reason to fear what Plato declares of the philosophers may be inadequate, when he says that they are just because they are busied with the pursuit of truth and because they despise and count as naught that which most men eagerly seek and for which they are prone to do battle against each other for death. For they secure one sort of justice, to be sure, in that they do no positive wrong to anyone, but they fall into the opposite injustice; for hampered by their pursuit of learning they leave to their fate those whom they ought to defend.⁶²

This was exactly Thoreau's plight in 1848. Like Plato's philosophers he felt that his primary duty was to pursue "truth," and that it was not "a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong." However, obedience to the Moral Law dictated that Thoreau's way of life should not become the means by which injustice could flourish; otherwise, he too would be guilty of the same hypocritical passivity as the merchants and farmers he denounced. While Cicero did not resolve this dilemma, Thoreau devised his famous doctrine of civil disobedience as the solution to this moral and personal problem. While he was free from moral culpability, he was also able to pursue

⁶¹Ibid., p. 73.

⁶²Ibid., p. 29.

"truth"--though his search might have to take place in jail. In discovering this method of reconciling the demands of ideal justice and individual preference, Thoreau made a significant contribution to moral thought. And to reveal his moral imperative he employed the "strategy of salvation."

Strategy of Omission

A fourth strategy used by the transcendentalists to present their arguments was the "strategy of omission." Since the early nineteenth century, the country had been converting from an agricultural society into an urban, industrial nation. The transcendentalists, however, encouraged a return to the simple, rural, agrarian life of early America;⁶³ the advance of science and industry, in their view, represented a general trend toward mechanism and conformity. Consequently, transcendental speakers did not discuss material that challenged their philosophy. The "strategy of omission" was designed to allow the speaker to advance his own position and to ignore conflicting doctrines or events. Such an

⁶³Much of Walden, for example, was a testimony to this transcendental point of view. Thoreau summarized his attitude as follows: "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind." (Walden and Selected Essays, p. 13.)

approach allowed the transcendentalists to consider "abstract concepts, higher law, and whirling universes."⁶⁴

Thoreau used chiefly the "strategy of omission" when he considered participation in politics as a means of social reform. What real use was the government? asked Thoreau. Name a cowardly or an unrighteous act, and the government was probably involved.

Some years ago, the State met me in behalf of the church, and commanded me to pay a certain sum toward the support of a clergyman whose preaching my father attended, but never I myself. "Pay it," it said, "or be locked up in the jail." I declined to pay. But, unfortunately, another man saw fit to pay it. . . . at the request of the selectmen, I condescended to make some such statement as this in writing: --"Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined." This I gave to the town-clerk; and he has it.⁶⁵

Thoreau also discouraged political participation because expediency and compromise, rather than strict adherence to the Moral Law, dominated the political arena. A man such as Daniel Webster personified the corrupting nature of political participation.

Webster never goes behind government, and so cannot speak with authority about it. His words are wisdom to those legislators who contemplate no essential reform in the existing government; but for thinkers, and those who legislate for all time, he never once glances at the subject. . . . thinking of the sanction which the Constitution gives to slavery, he says, "Because it was part of the original compact,--let it stand." Notwithstanding

⁶⁴Rein, pp. 113-115.

⁶⁵"Civil Disobedience," p. 202.

his special acuteness and ability, he is unable to take a fact out of its merely political relations, and behold it as it lies absolutely to be disposed of by the intellect.⁶⁶

Thoreau rarely made any reference to a source other than himself. When he did, it was always to his ultimate advantage. In the familiar transcendental fashion, employing abstract terms and appeals to the higher law, Thoreau concluded his indictment of men like Webster.

They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humility; but they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountain-head.⁶⁷

By employing the "strategy of omission," Thoreau dismissed political activity as meaningless.

I hear of a convention to be held at Baltimore, or elsewhere, for the selection of a candidate for the Presidency, made up chiefly of editors, and men who are politicians by profession; but I think, what is it to any independent, intelligent, and respectable man what decision they may come to, shall we not have the advantage of his wisdom and honesty, nevertheless? Can we not count upon some independent votes? Are there not many individuals in the country who do not attend conventions?⁶⁸

Throughout the lecture, whether reference was made to specific events, personal examples or familiar quotations, they served to

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 209.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 210.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 194-195.

reinforce Thoreau's philosophy of obedience only to just laws. "I was not born to be forced," he defiantly proclaimed. "I will breathe after my own fashion."⁶⁹ The American government, however, maintained its existence through the use of force. And compulsion, in whatever manner, was intolerable in a moral universe. Since Thoreau, furthermore, had not "delegated" any rights to the government, he felt he should be safe from coercion from that source also. Yet, the government had capitalized on its physical strength and had limited his "disobedient" protest by placing him in jail. "The State never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength."⁷⁰ No matter how Thoreau considered his relationship with government, participation in a corrupt, coercive system was untenable. And conventional procedures to initiate social reform could hardly prove fruitful with a government that forced compliance.

While the "strategy of omission" enabled Thoreau to develop his arguments on his own terms and avoid damaging material, it seems to have been designed to impress fellow transcendentalists rather than to attract a mass audience. Basically, there was hardly any

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 203.

⁷⁰Ibid.

attempt by Thoreau to share the commonly held linguistic symbols⁷¹ of his audience. The use of numerous obscure references and abstract concepts, for example, was characteristic of Thoreau's discourse. A survey of "Civil Disobedience" revealed the following citations: "Herodians," "Turkish government," "Confucius" and "Orpheus." On a typical page Thoreau might quote from a Chinese philosopher, translate from the ancient classics or quote from a metaphysical poet. He seemed to enjoy supporting his ideas by finding obscure sources or phrases and parading them before an uneducated audience.⁷² Furthermore, the concepts themselves, such as "conscience," "higher law" and "refuge of liberty," were not readily understandable; and little attempt was made to explain them. Thoreau probably assumed that his listener would himself be awakened to a transcendental point of view. Frederic Hedge dismissed critics of transcendental vagueness in the following way: "The works of the

⁷¹A symbol is defined as "a stimulus used in such a way that a conception of the thing it represents is aroused" (Fotheringham, p. 261). For a more thorough treatment of the subject, see Fotheringham's chapter, "The Dominance of Message Effect in Persuasion," pp. 43-73.

⁷²In United States 1830-1850 Frederick Jackson Turner pointed out that in 1830, there was only one college undergraduate to about 2500 people and a total of 5000 undergraduates in the entire country. Further, by the late 1840's in the United States, nearly one in twenty of the white population was recorded as "illiterate." (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935), p. 17.

transcendentalists may be interpreted word for word; but still it will be impossible to get a clear idea of their philosophy, unless we raise ourselves at once to their point of view."⁷³ One suspects that not many in Thoreau's audience rose to a receptive level. But obscure references and vague concepts may have served precisely this purpose: If the listener could crack the transcendental code, he was initiated.

Effectiveness

"Civil Disobedience" has been analyzed in terms of four transcendental strategies. As earlier defined, the strategy of revelation was characterized by a display of "grand truths" in the form of maxims, poems or catchy slogans. The strategy of transcendence was a distinguishable argumentative arrangement. The strategy of salvation consisted of attacks upon the current social order, with a transcendental vision of society offered in its place. And the strategy of omission involved a speaker's refusal to consider material which contradicted transcendental philosophy or to use conventional linguistic symbols. In all four strategies, the argument was conducted on transcendental terms; the emphasis was on intuition, definition, "abstract concepts, higher law, and whirling universes." Little effort was made to find areas of agreement between speaker and listener."⁷⁴

⁷³Frederic Hedge, "Coleridge," The Dial (July, 1840), p. 47.

⁷⁴Rein, p. 115.

"Civil Disobedience" was conceived by Thoreau as a reaction against a government that demanded allegiance and a society that had a penchant for the status quo. It seems to have been one of Thoreau's traits to alternately cajole and bewilder his listeners. He tried to make his ideas understandable and attractive with such conventional stylistic devices as proverbs, examples and analogies. On the other hand, he dulled the attractiveness of his philosophy for reform by including numerous abstract concepts, obscure references and lengthy rhetorical questions. It was as if Thoreau was enjoying the courtship rather than the conversion. As a transcendentalist and alienated member of society, he refused to use many conventional linguistic symbols. But without them Thoreau could not significantly influence his audience. Rosenthal argued that for persuasion--action consistent with the speaker's proposal--to occur, there must be a collection of linguistic symbols to which a mass audience responds in the same way.⁷⁵

Martin and Andersen have stated that "the ability to make sense out of a communication seems to rest on two things: our [*italics mine*] knowledge of the words or other symbols being used, and our ability to associate, in some useful way, unfamiliar ideas with familiar ideas."⁷⁶ Man, in other words, structures the world;

⁷⁵Rosenthal, p. 118.

⁷⁶Martin and Andersen, p. 131.

he imposes order on the environment.⁷⁷ Without structure the world would be a meaningless jumble of unrelated impressions. The transactional theory of perception⁷⁸ helps explain how each man creates his own reality.

the "reality" we have to deal with, described often in modern philosophy of science as the relationship between observer and the observed, is, in the language of transactional psychology, a "transaction," in which the knower brings to any event the entirety of his past experiences and integrations, and in which the known brings whatever it has to bring. And "reality" is neither within the knower himself nor in the known itself, but in the "transaction" between the two.⁷⁹

In effect, we create "fictions" through our perceptions: "our perceptions come from us, The perceiver decides what an object is, and where it is. He makes it what he chooses to make it, and can make it, in the light of his unique experience and purpose. He can only perceive that which he has experience and purpose to perceive."⁸⁰ Consequently, each individual "creates a world of his

⁷⁷Jerome Bruner seems to have had a similar idea in mind when he observed, "Grasping the structure of a subject is understanding it in a way that permits many other things to be related to it meaningfully. To learn structure, in short, is to learn how things are related." The Process of Education (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 7.

⁷⁸Perception is defined as "a process of interpreting stimuli which produces meaning." (Fotheringham, p. 259.)

⁷⁹S. I. Hayakawa, "Foreward," Etc., XII (Summer, 1955), p. 243.

⁸⁰Earl C. Kelly, "Education is Communication," Etc., XII (Summer, 1955), p. 250.

own, which is not held in common with anyone else. Each individual is therefore the center of his own unique universe."⁸¹ Perception, then, does not simply reveal the world, it helps to create one; objectivity recedes into more wish than fact.

there are no concrete absolutes in perception; . . . what is perceived may roughly be described as a series of functional probabilities . . . treated as absolutes in everyday behavior. We act in terms of the world as we perceive it, and we cannot "probably" act; we either act or we don't. Cantril has put it this way:

"While we may realize intellectually as scientists and psychologists that the happenings around us and our perceptions, prehensions, actions and valuings are only probabilities, still we must behave in our life as if some probably happenings are certainties. For we couldn't act, we couldn't survive if we did not make some definite and fixed assumptions. . . . we tend to make absolutes out of probabilities in order to act effectively."⁸²

Thus, each man is committed to action in a world which he at least partially made.

Although man structures his environment to suit himself, his view of the world is hardly constant. Scheidel has indicated that by means of common associations, a speaker can relate unfamiliar ideas with those familiar to the listener. He can demonstrate how things may be perceived in a new and different way, how the listener can restructure his world.⁸³ Thoreau and his fellow

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²F. P. Kilpatrick, "Perception Theory and General Semantics," Etc., XII (Summer, 1955), p. 261.

⁸³Thomas M. Scheidel, Persuasive Speaking (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1967), pp. 32-35.

transcendentalists, however, used almost solely those devices which bolstered their own philosophy. In the final analysis, "Civil Disobedience" seems to have been geared to impress other transcendentalists rather than to attract new converts. More than a declaration of independence for the mass audience, the discourse may be viewed as a sermon against oppression, materialism, mechanization and conformity. But only those few who already shared Thoreau's unspoiled vision of "higher law and whirling universes" understood his protest.

"Civil Disobedience" was as unheralded in Thoreau's lifetime as were most of his lectures. Local newspapers, such as the Concord Freeman, Concord Gazette, Middlesex Yeoman and Lowell Patriot, did not even acknowledge his appearance before the Concord Lyceum; nor did national abolitionist periodicals, like the Liberator or National Anti-Slavery Standard, mention his speech. The quixotic Bronson Alcott was indeed a notable exception to have taken great pleasure in the speech.⁸⁴ Thoreau, however, did not share Alcott's enthusiasm. In a letter to Emerson dated February 23rd, 1848, Thoreau indicated that he was not about to continue preaching on the merits of civil disobedience. "Lectures begin to multiply on my desk. I have one on Friendship which is new--and

⁸⁴ Amos Bronson Alcott, Journals (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938), p. 201.

the materials of some others. I read [italics mine] one last month to the Lyceum on The Rights & Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government."⁸⁵

More important than a favorable reaction to "Civil Disobedience" by a few transcendentalists were the long-term effects, perhaps confirming Thoreau's observation: "What is once well done is done forever." Phillip Tompkins has recently commented upon the profound historical effects of "Civil Disobedience."

Even an incomplete list of those who have testified to Thoreau's direct influence on their life is staggering; it would include Gandhi, King, Tolstoy, Buber, Proust, Frank Lloyd Wright, the founders of the British Labour Party, and the members of the Danish resistance movement of World War II. Thoreauvian principles are seen to be manifested in the Nuremburg Trials, the Eichmann Trial, the Civil Rights movement, and even the Hippie phenomenon.⁸⁶

⁸⁵Thoreau, Correspondence, p. 208. The only reference to Thoreau's manner of delivery was contained in this letter, and we can probably interpret him literally. A lecture by Thoreau meant a mechanical, unemotional reading of a manuscript. A friend of his, Joseph Hosmer, commented on Thoreau's typical method of delivery: "He was a poor lecturer--not to say speaker. He had no magnetism, but gave simple, dry details, as though he was before a jury to give in his evidence under oath." (Joseph Hosmer, "Henry D. Thoreau," Acton Patriot, no date, p. 2. Although this edition of the paper was not dated, because of its many commentaries on Thoreau's life it was probably published shortly after his death in May, 1862.)

⁸⁶Phillip Tompkins, "The Rhetorical Criticism of Non-Oratorical Works," Quarterly Journal of Speech, LV (December, 1969), p. 436.

It is not within the scope of this section to complete the above list nor to consider the numerous influences of "Civil Disobedience." (Such a focus may suggest another dissertation.) Rather, my purpose is to highlight Thoreau's contribution to other movements for social reform.

In the last half of the nineteenth century. Thoreau's doctrine of civil disobedience--non-violent, individual protest against "unjust" laws--was most evident in European anarchist⁸⁷ movements. Thoreau and European anarchists shared a vision of man's innate worth which transcended organizations and governments. The supreme example of the anarchist is that of a sadistic murderer who, with the aid of a Molotov cocktail or a razor-edged dagger, mutilates people and traditional social symbols. A general policy of violence and terrorism--such as sabotage or assassination--however, was hardly the rule.

⁸⁷As noted earlier, "Anarchism is a definite intellectual current of social thought, whose adherents advocate the abolition of . . . all political and social coercive institutions within society." From "Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism," in European Ideologies, p. 12.

Freedom of interpretation and variety in approach are elements one would expect to accompany the anarchist movement.⁸⁸

Woodcock discussed the particular problem in capturing the essence of a libertarian movement:

To describe the essential theory of anarchism is rather like trying to grapple with Proteus, for the very nature of the libertarian attitude--its rejection of dogma, its deliberate avoidance of rigidly systematic theory, and, above all, its stress on extreme freedom of choice and on the primacy of the individual judgment--creates immediately the possibility of a variety of viewpoints inconceivable in a closely dogmatic system.⁸⁹

Nonetheless, most anarchists, such as Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin of Russia, Carlo Cafiero and Enrico Malatesta of Italy, would probably endorse Tolstoy's acknowledgment:

If I had to address the American people, I should like to thank them for the great help I have received from their writers who flourished about the fifties. I would mention Garrison, Parker, Emerson, Ballou and Thoreau, not as the greatest, but as those who, I think, specially influenced me.⁹⁰

⁸⁸The European anarchist movement, launched by many transcendental articles of faith, survived for about eighty-nine years (1850-1939). George Woodcock, possibly the most knowledgeable student of anarchism who writes in the English language, placed the death of the movement at the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939. Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1962), p. 468.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 17.

⁹⁰Quoted by Walter Harding, "Thoreau's Fame Abroad," Boston Public Library Quarterly, XI (April, 1959), p. 99.

In his speech Thoreau expressed the view that the man who wished to undermine the state must cease to cooperate with it. The methods which anarchists favored to achieve social change were controversial. Most supported non-violent tactics like those outlined by Thoreau; during the last decade of the nineteenth century, however, revolutionaries, principally in Spain and Russia, resorted to assassination.⁹¹ Yet, all were united in considering themselves apolitical or anti-political. "The Anarchists," said Woodcock, "have all denied political action, and have declared that the state must not be taken over, but reformed; that the social revolution must lead, not to the dictatorship of any class, even the peasants, but to the abolition of all classes."⁹² Thoreau had insisted that political action was bloodless, devoid of meaning; voting, for example, was a disgrace, and politicians were corrupt pawns who mortgaged their consciences for--of all things--votes. At its best, government was an expedient. Compare Thoreau's wry position here with that of Alex Comfort, the English anarchist, who wrote a hundred years later: "We do not refuse to drive on the left hand side of the road or to subscribe to national health insurance. The sphere of our disobedience is limited to the sphere in which society

⁹¹Woodcock, p. 42.

⁹²Ibid., p. 31.

exceeds its powers and its usefulness."⁹³

In his opposition to the state, Thoreau may well have influenced the anarchist vision of society. He yearned for a state in which "the governed are most let alone,"⁹⁴ a state in which, by his work, man gains enough for his physical needs and thereby is most free to be master of his senses and appetites. Thoreau's view of an unhampered, innocent past represented the anarchists' ideal: a society based on fellowship, untouched by industrialism, trade and wealth.

The past the anarchist sees may not be the golden age of Hesiod and Plato, but it resembles that antique vision; it is kind of an amalgam of all those societies which have lived or are supposed to have lived--by cooperation, in tune with nature, rather than by organized government.⁹⁵

The foremost common assumption shared by Thoreau and the anarchists was a naturalistic view of society. Thoreau proclaimed, "It is truly enough said, that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward."⁹⁶ The majority of--if not all--anarchists would agree that man contains all the attributes to make him capable of

⁹³Quoted by Nicholas Walter, "Disobedience and the New Pacifism," Anarchy, XIV (April, 1962), p. 113.

⁹⁴"Civil Disobedience," p. 190.

⁹⁵Woodcock, p. 25.

⁹⁶"Civil Disobedience," p. 190.

living in freedom and social concord. In Mutual Aid (1902), Kropotkin celebrated the society of ancient Greece and medieval cities; in contrast, he outlined the consequences of centralization when the state "took possession . . . of all the judicial, economic, and administrative functions which the village community already had exercised in the interest of all."⁹⁷ Like Thoreau, Kropotkin agitated for "noble villages" in which individuality and creativity were left free to develop. To be an anarchist was not necessarily to be anti-social. "Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect," Thoreau advised, "and that will be one step toward obtaining it."⁹⁸

The goal of anarchism was always social change; its strategy was always one of social condemnation. It emerged, however, from a relatively mild, transcendental view of nature. In the early philosophic essays of Bakunin (1814-1876), for example, the emphasis was upon intuitions which were drawn from the order inherent in nature.

When man begins to observe, with steady and prolonged attention, that part of Nature which surrounds him and which he discovers himself, he will finally notice that all things are governed by inherent laws which constitute their own particular nature; that each thing has its own

⁹⁷Peter Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, Barnett Newman, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, rev. 1933), p. 227.

⁹⁸"Civil Disobedience," p. 190.

peculiar form of transformation and action; that in this transformation and action there is a succession of facts and phenomena which invariably repeat themselves under the same given conditions; and which under the influence of new and determining conditions change in an equally regular and determined manner.⁹⁹

Bakunin, like Thoreau, based his arguments on higher laws. And when he was awakened to the "known and unknown laws which operate in the universe," he was in a position to fire "thunderbolts" of revelation at European society.

Thoreau and the European anarchists were a defiant breed who stood above society to criticize the historical trend toward centralization and mechanization. They were asking society to reconsider its rush toward collectivism, to remember the individual. In essence, "Civil Disobedience" and anarchism were calls for rebellion rather than total revolution; the real social revolution encouraged centralization. For Thoreau, rule by numbers was onerous. Justice was to be found in the spirit of men's souls; Thoreau was thinking of the tyranny of the majority when he asked, "Why does it always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?"¹⁰⁰ The goal of anarchy was not a state of democracy, but a kind of universal aristocracy. Each

⁹⁹Michael Bakunin, "The World Outlook," in The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, G. P. Maximoff, ed. (London: Duckworth, 1964), p. 54.

¹⁰⁰"Civil Disobedience," p. 197.

individual becomes noble, a prince, forever self-reliant, needing no government.

It seems clear that much of what European anarchists preached closely resembled Thoreau's concept of "defiant individualism." It is impossible, of course, to accurately gauge his direct influence; it may well be that just as Darwin and Wallace independently arrived at similar theories for explaining the origin of the species, European rebels, without a translation of "Civil Disobedience," formulated their own theory. Yet, in many key passages the flavor seems unmistakable; for instance, Harold Laski, the British political scientist and economist, wrote, ". . . since law is a command seeking to control my behaviour in some particular way, I must judge that conformity for myself as the test of its ethical adequacy. The roots of valid law, that is, are, and can only be, within the individual conscience. I make law legal, so to say, by giving to its operation the consent of my conscience."¹⁰¹ Whatever the extent of Thoreau's contribution, it was limited primarily to literary activities. He had defied authority when his conscience called but made no real effort to rally the masses behind his strategy. He was, after all, concerned with individual protest. Thoreau's gospel of social reform required that each

¹⁰¹ Harold Laski, The State in Theory and Practice (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1935), p. 65.

individual test for himself the advantages or disadvantages of various laws and customs in a complex society. Each man was charged to obey his conscientious preference, not those laws sustained by physical force or tradition. The anarchists, on the other hand, eventually transformed individual resistance into collective, direct political action. Rather than withdraw, they attacked. "Direct actions" included tactics that ranged from disobedience to general strikes and, occasionally, political assassination. The actions, during the climactic years of the European movement, were aimed at either destroying the existing government or preparing the people for the social revolution--the return to an unshackled, primitive unit of society.¹⁰² Thoreau's doctrine had been extended, and some forms of disobedience were no longer civil.

Perhaps the outstanding fact in considering the impact of "Civil Disobedience" is its influence during and since World War II. Interest in Thoreau in Denmark, for example, reached a high point during World War II when leaders of the Danish resistance movement considered "Civil Disobedience" as a manual of arms.¹⁰³ The most notable example of Thoreau's influence upon the modern world was

¹⁰²Woodcock, p. 14.

¹⁰³See, for instance, Harold Flender, Rescue in Denmark (New York: MacFadden-Bartell, 1963); and "Thoreau and the Danish Resistance," in Thoreau in Our Season, John Hicks, ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1966), pp. 18-36.

Mohandas K. Gandhi's use of "Civil Disobedience." "His [Thoreau's] ideas influenced me greatly," Gandhi told a journalist.

I adopted some of them and recommended the study of Thoreau to all my friends who were helping me in the cause of Indian independence. Why, I actually took the name of my movement from Thoreau's essay, "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" Until I read that essay I never found a suitable English translation for my Indian word Satyagraha There is no doubt that Thoreau's ideas greatly influenced my movement in India.¹⁰⁴

In the United States the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., was probably the leading exponent of civil disobedience. When a given law or the whole system of laws outrages his conscience, the individual has two recourses: He may abide by the law until such time as he (and others) can change it, or he may refuse to obey. Such disobedience might take either a peaceful or violent form. And violent disobedience may be either individual or collective. King was an apostle of collective, peaceful resistance; he read Thoreau and agreed that the means of attaining a moral goal cannot be divorced from the goal itself.

A few Negroes in every community, unswervingly committed to the nonviolent way, can persuade hundreds of others at least to use nonviolence as a technique and serve as the moral force to awaken the slumbering national conscience. Thoreau was thinking of such a creative minority when he said: "I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name--if ten honest men

¹⁰⁴Webb Miller, I Found No Peace (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1936), p. 238.

only--aye, if one honest man, in the state of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from the copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be--what is once well done is done forever."¹⁰⁵

Collective disobedience involving the use of force has in the past found Americans ambivalent, wavering between pride in our revolutionary past and fear of the destructive consequences of violence. In advocating nonviolence, King utilized an acceptable means of social protest to encourage behavior consistent with goals of the civil rights movement.

Despite the fact that since World War II Thoreau "has been not only widely read and praised but also understood better than his contemporaries understood him," his doctrine currently attracts relatively few adherents in America.¹⁰⁶ Henry Miller has perhaps best explained the apparent irony:

As always happens with bold, original utterances, [Thoreau's] essays have now become classic. Which means that, though they still have the power to mold character, they no longer influence the men who govern our destiny. They are prescribed reading for students and a perpetual source of inspiration to the thinker and the rebel, but as for the reading public in general they carry no weight, no

¹⁰⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here?" in Contemporary Moral Issues, Harry Girvetz, ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1963), p. 44.

¹⁰⁶ Joseph Wood Krutch, "Who Was Henry Thoreau?" Saturday Review (August 19, 1967), p. 19.

message any longer. The image of Thoreau has been fixed for the public by educators and "men of taste": it is that of a hermit, a crank, a nature faker. It is the caricature which has been preserved, as is usually the case with our eminent men.¹⁰⁷

Howard Zinn has further observed that recent protest movements have distorted Thoreau's strategy. Civil disobedience is viewed as "primarily a political tactic, rather than primarily a private assertion of personal conviction." Sit-ins, draft-card burnings and occupation of campus and municipal buildings, for example, have largely been bids for publicity--methods of dramatizing points of view as well as attempts to mobilize public support. If burning one's draft card, for instance, were truly a sign of conscientious objection to the Viet Nam war rather than a public display, one could destroy his card in the privacy of his own closet.¹⁰⁸

Individual acts of civil disobedience are, of course, occasionally reported, and countless others probably occur daily. The refusal to submit to involuntary induction into the armed forces or to pay the federal tax levied on one's telephone bill in protest of

¹⁰⁷Henry Miller, Stand Still Like the Hummingbird (Norfolk, Connecticut: James Laughlin, 1962), p. 112.

¹⁰⁸Howard Zinn, Disobedience and Democracy (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 15; see, also, Franklyn S. Haiman, "A Farewell to Rational Discourse," in The Ethics of Controversy: Politics and Protest, Donn W. Parson and Wil. A. Linkugel, eds. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1968), p. 141.

American participation in Viet Nam,¹⁰⁹ however, receive attention primarily because of their novelty, not because such forms of resistance represent a viable means of encouraging social reform.

Today, nonviolence often gives way to violence¹¹⁰ which blunts the moral imperative so essential to Thoreau. Civil disobedience must also consist of non-compliance with what is essentially an "unjust" law so that a sincere protest that has some direct relationship with injustice is clearly established. Opening water faucets to deplete a water supply as a protest against environmental pollution, for example, is simply another form of injustice or insensitivity--alienating potential friends and more firmly embittering enemies. Looting, inane destruction of property, inflicting personal injury and irresponsibility are as far from the moral foundations espoused by Thoreau--who is sometimes erroneously "credited" with having endorsed such activities--as injustice is far from justice and humanity from inhumanity. Emerson advised that each generation needs to write its own books. It should be most strenuously emphasized, however, that they need also read the minutes of the previous meetings.

¹⁰⁹Howard Zinn, "Conscientious Objection," New Republic (May 3, 1969), p. 9.

¹¹⁰See, for example, Louis Halle, "The Student Drive to Destruction," New Republic (October 19, 1969), pp. 10-13; and "Defusing the Bombs," New Republic (March 28, 1970), pp. 5-6.

CHAPTER V

SLAVERY IN MASSACHUSETTS

Know all men that I, Henry Thoreau,
do not wish to be regarded as a mem-
ber of any incorporated society which
I have not joined.

Sporadic success on the speaker's platform did not discourage Thoreau from continually sharing his transcendental view of the world with popular audiences. Moral reform was equivalent to "the effort to throw off sleep,"¹ and Thoreau dedicated many of his lectures and books to awakening his neighbors. His popularity as a speaker, however, was in proportion to the amount of humor included to balance his transcendentalism.

In October, 1849, Thoreau and Ellery Channing journeyed from Concord to Cape Cod. The excursion proved very enjoyable and educational. By mid-December he had a lecture ready on the subject, but it was not delivered before the Concord Lyceum until January 23 and 30, 1850. Emerson recorded that the speech was a huge success and that members of the audience "laughed until they cried."² Thanks

¹Writings, II, p. 142.

²Ralph Waldo Emerson, Letters, IV (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), p. 178.

to Emerson's efforts, Thoreau repeated the lecture in Danvers, Massachusetts, on February 18 and received expenses plus ten dollars.³

By the middle of the nineteenth century Thoreau was frequently asked to speak, which he was happy to do. He was invited to lecture in Newburyport on December 6, 1850; and on January 1, 1851, Thoreau delivered his Cape Cod address before the Mechanic Institute in Clinton, Massachusetts. On January 22 he read one of his "Walden" lectures in Medford. Before the presentation, he stopped in Boston to dine with the Alcotts, to whom he read the lecture. Bronson Alcott considered it "as refreshing a piece as the Lyceum will get from any lecturer going at present in New England-- a whole forest, with forester and all, imported into the citizen's and villager's brain."⁴

In the winter of 1851 the Fugitive Slave Law was passed by Congress. The Law permitted southern slaveholders to seize and return to the South any runaway slaves found in the North and assured the slaveholders of federal assistance in the process.⁵ On April 3, 1851, Thomas Sims, a Negro fugitive from Savannah, arrived just outside the sanctuary of Boston. After betraying his location by

³Thoreau, Correspondence, I, p. 255.

⁴Alcott, p. 238.

⁵Dumond, p. 66.

foolishly telegraphing home, he was arrested as a runaway. At three o'clock in the morning of April 13, United States marshals walked Sims "down State Street, past the spot where Crispus Attucks fell, and to the Long Wharf where the Acorn was moored." Sims arrived in Savannah on April 19 and was publically whipped: "the first slave Massachusetts had returned."⁶

Northern abolitionists were not only shocked and horrified at the passage of the Law but at its enforcement. Following the Sims incident, Theodore Parker cried, "I know no ruler, but God, no law but natural justice . . . I tear the hateful statute of kidnapping to slivers: I trample it underneath my feet."⁷ Thoreau reaffirmed Parker's declaration when he fumed in his Journal, "I do not believe that the North will soon come to blows with the South on this question. It would be too bright a page to be written in the history of the race at present."⁸ Thoreau intended, furthermore, to revise and expand similar Journal entries for a Concord audience, but no one asked him to speak. He stoically recorded, "It is not the invitation which I hear, but which I feel, that I

⁶Leonard W. Levy, "Sims' Case: The Fugitive Slave Law in Boston in 1851," Journal of Negro History, XXXV (January, 1950), pp. 39-74.

⁷Theodore Parker, Speeches, Addresses and Occasional Sermons, II (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855), p. 50.

⁸Journal, VIII, p. 174.

obey."⁹ Nonetheless, the invitation was probably more important to him than he admitted, and his personal reflections following the return of Sims remained a series of fragments.

On April 23, 1851, Thoreau delivered a new lecture before the Concord Lyceum entitled, "The Wild," which as a literary work is known as "Walking." It became one of his favorite speeches, and he repeated it in Worcester on May 31.¹⁰ Why Thoreau did not speak out against the Sims incident at this time is now known, especially since his Journal was filled with invectives against the South and the "peculiar institution." As events later proved, it surely was not characteristic of him.

On January 7, 1852, Thoreau lectured on his "Excursion to Canada" before the Concord Lyceum. In 1850, Thoreau and Channing had taken a trip to Canada. What is most interesting about his Journal entries is not that Thoreau detested nearly everything he saw but that the basis of his dislike rested on what seemed to him the oppressiveness of the Canadian government. He recalled standing on a hill overlooking Quebec, watching some soldiers drill. They executed all sorts of difficult maneuvers, he readily admitted, but "they made a bad impression on the whole, for it was obvious that all true manhood was in the process of being drilled out of

⁹Ibid., p. 181.

¹⁰Alcott, p. 250.

them." Their "harmony" was remarkable, Thoreau granted, but it had been purchased at an exorbitant price. They were no longer individuals but "one vast centipede of a man, good for all sorts of pulling down . . . imperfect tools of an imperfect and tyrannical government." If they should be awakened to the facts about themselves, they would realize that their "natural foe" was the government which was drilling them, and they would desert to the last man.¹¹ Thoreau later conveyed his impressions to the "good citizens" of Concord and, typically, the audience ignored his serious thoughts. On February 22, Thoreau went to Plymouth to lecture about his sojourn at Walden. His humorous lecture was particularly successful, and he was asked to return and deliver another on May 22.¹²

During the next two years Thoreau virtually ignored the speaker's platform. Although he was busy taking excursions and shaping his "Walden" lectures for print--seven revised drafts in all--he had become more and more discouraged as his more solemn messages failed to shake idols from their pedestals. In 1853 he complained in his Journal:

I have offered myself much more earnestly as a lecturer than a surveyor. Yet I do not get any employment

¹¹Journal, IX, pp. 20-22.

¹²Marble, p. 149.

as a lecturer; was not invited to lecture once last winter, and only once (without pay) this winter. But I can get surveying enough, which a hundred others in this country can do as well as I, though it is not boasting much to say that a hundred others in New England cannot lecture as well as I on my themes.¹³

In May, 1854, however, his wrath against the slaveholders exploded; and he once again attempted to preach his transcendental message from the speaker's pulpit.

On May 24, 1854, Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave employed in Boston, was found by his former master, arrested and ordered back to Virginia. The warrant for his arrest had been issued by Edward G. Loring, probate judge for Suffolk County and a dedicated servant of the Fugitive Slave Law. An audience at Faneuil Hall that day heard Wendell Phillips and Theodore Parker all but urge violence to prevent the return of Burns to the South. Almost simultaneously, Thomas Higginson led an attack on the courthouse to free Burns, but was repulsed for lack of numbers; in the course of the action, a deputy was shot and killed. By three o'clock in the afternoon all the armed forces of Boston lined the streets from the courthouse to the wharf, and canons were leveled at the 20,000 spectators.¹⁴

The following Sunday Parker condemned non-resistance to the Fugitive

¹³Journal, XII, p. 21.

¹⁴Filler, pp. 213-215.

Slave Law and passionately indicted Loring and his "henchmen" for conspiracy:

EDWARD GREELEY LORING, Judge of Probate for the County of Suffolk, in the State of Massachusetts, Fugitive Slave Bill Commissioner of the United States, before these citizens of Boston, on Ascension Sunday, assembled to worship God, I charge you with the death of that man who was killed on last Friday. He was your fellow-servant in kidnapping. He dies at your hand. You fired the shot which makes his wife a widow, his child an orphan. I charge you with the peril of twelve men arrested for murder, and on trial for their lives. I charge you with filling the Court House with one hundred and eighty-four hired ruffians of the United States, and alarming not only this city for her liberties that are in peril, but stirring up the whole Commonwealth of Massachusetts with indignation, which no man knows how to stop--which no man can stop. You have done it all!¹⁵

On the Fourth of July, 1854, a radical group of abolitionists led by William Lloyd Garrison held a mass meeting in neighboring Framingham. Before a sympathetic audience Garrison demonstrated his extraordinary boldness and craft as an agitator. After contrasting the principles of the Declaration of Independence with the present state of the Republic, he continued:

"I should now proceed to perform an action which would be the testimony of my own soul, to all present, of the estimation in which I hold the pro-slavery laws and deeds of the nation." Producing a copy of the Fugitive Slave Law, he set fire to it, and burnt it to ashes. Using an old and well known phrase, he said, "And let all the people say, Amen"; and a unanimous cheer and shout of "Amen" burst from the vast audience. In like manner Mr. Garrison burned the decision of Edward G. Loring in the case of Anthony Burns . . . the multitude ratifying the fiery immolation with shouts of

¹⁵Parker, pp. 71-72.

applause. Then, holding up the U. S. Constitution, he branded it as the source and parent of all the other atrocities,--"a covenant with death and an agreement with hell"--and consumed it to ashes on the spot, exclaiming, "So perish all compromises with tyranny! and let all the people say, Amen!" A tremendous shout of "Amen" went up to heaven in ratification of the deed.¹⁶

Garrison was followed on the platform by Reverend M. B. Bird, Wendell Phillips, Edmund Quincy, Charles Remond and Henry Thoreau.¹⁷ Mingled in the audience were some who obviously disapproved of radical ideas and Garrison's fiery exhibitions. The Boston Daily Journal reported the following day, "One of the features of the occasion was the burning by Mr. Garrison of copies of the fugitive slave law, the decision of Judge Loring, Judge Curtis's to the U. S. Grand Jury and of the Constitution, the latter amid some expressions of dissent."¹⁸ The majority of the audience, however, was in accord with Garrisonian principles, and one observer noted that Thoreau was "clamoured for."¹⁹

¹⁶Garrison, III, p. 412. Garrison's speech and actions were also reported in an editorial, "The Fourth at Framingham," Liberator, August 5, 1854, pp. 2-3.

¹⁷Their speeches were reprinted in issues of the Liberator from July 8-August 5, 1854. Thoreau's address was published on July 21, p. 2; and in the New York Daily Tribune, August 2, 1854, p. 3. "Slavery in Massachusetts" also appeared in Thoreau's Writings, IV, pp. 388-408. Except for minor changes in punctuation, all three copies of the lecture were identical.

¹⁸Boston Daily Journal, July 5, 1854, p. 2.

¹⁹Moncure D. Conway, Autobiography, Memories and Experiences, I (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1904), p. 184.

When Thoreau learned of Burns' arrest in May, his indignation poured forth in his Journal. This time Thoreau received an invitation to speak.²⁰ Going back through his Journal, Thoreau molded his comments on the Burns case and the earlier Sims episode into one of the most caustic attacks on a government that would condone slavery. "Slavery in Massachusetts" was designed to sting his native state into secession.

Let the State dissolve her union with the slaveholder. She may wriggle and hesitate, and ask to read the Constitution once more; but she can find no respectable law or precedent which sanctions the continuance of such a union for an instant.²¹

What was worse than "evil" was the toleration of it. As Thoreau moved closer to Garrison, "No Union with Slaveholders" meant that Massachusetts should initiate a grand exodus from southern slavery and the oppression which emanated from Washington. Implicit in Thoreau's argument were the principles of interposition and nullification.²² Thoreau granted to Massachusetts many of the prerogatives he attributed to individuals under the Moral Law. She had

²⁰Leo Stoller, After Walden (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957), p. 139.

²¹Writings, IV, p. 403.

²²Dumond, pp. 79-80. Thoreau would no doubt be horrified to learn how closely his position here resembled that of John C. Calhoun or the earlier Virginia and Kentucky resolutions.

fundamental rights which the Federal government could not infringe upon, regardless of circumstances. She had the right, for example, to veto any Federal enactment. The power of the Federal government over Massachusetts, in other words, was delegated and could be withdrawn at the State's discretion.

Heretofore, Thoreau had sided with the nonresistants, for they reflected his transcendental philosophy. In his anger, however, he united with the activists and publicly denounced the press, the Church and the State of Massachusetts for tacitly promoting slavery. While other radicals talked about injustices in Kansas or Virginia, Thoreau spoke of his State's servility and of the twelve men who were on trial for having tried to rescue Burns. This is what he meant by slavery in Massachusetts! Thoreau did not generalize about the evils of government, as he did when he refused to pay his taxes; rather, he denounced the application of a particular statute to a specific individual. In righteous indignation Thoreau proclaimed, "The [civil] law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free."²³ To Higginson and his associates, Thoreau gave his full support: "My sympathies in this case are wholly with the accused, and wholly against their accusers and judges."²⁴ Higginson and the others had been in accord with the

²³Writings, IV, p. 396.

²⁴Ibid., p. 404.

higher law, and thus their attack was justified. Their immediate failure--or success--did not seem to concern Thoreau, for he asserted that fame "considers not the simple heroism of an action, but only as it is connected with its apparent consequences."²⁵ Since it was the act itself which counted, Thoreau expected Higginson to plead guilty and take his punishment, as Thoreau had done when Sheriff Staples demanded the poll tax.²⁶

A Rhetorical Analysis

In "Civil Disobedience" Thoreau stated, "I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor;"²⁷ By 1854, the kind of government which Thoreau could embrace seemed more and more unattainable. Yet, he was still chiefly concerned with cleansing the individual from "within" and held that reform was first of the spirit and only secondarily of the world. If Massachusetts "wriggled and hesitated" over secession, Thoreau suggested, "Let every inhabitant of the State dissolve his union with her, as long as she delays to do her duty."²⁸ He once again recommended the tactics of "Civil Disobedience": that every upright man withhold his support of unjust institutions. "Let the

²⁵Ibid., p. 403.

²⁶Ibid., p. 404.

²⁷"Civil Disobedience," p. 211.

²⁸Writings, IV, p. 403.

judge and the jury, and the sheriff and the jailer, cease to act under a corrupt government,--cease to be tools and become men," Thoreau recorded in his Journal at this time.²⁹ In the lecture itself he suggested that the governor "could at least have resigned himself into fame."³⁰ Just as the means for encouraging reform were unmistakable, so were the strategies used to describe slavery in Massachusetts: revelation, transcendence, salvation and omission.

The "strategy of revelation" was a means of displaying supposedly impregnable arguments or transcendental truths in the form of maxims or catchy slogans.³¹ Statistics, personal testimony, quotations and other sorts of documentation were irrelevant.³² Thoreau once again fired "thunderbolts"; this time, however, probably few in the audience objected to the assault. "There is not one slave in Nebraska; there are perhaps a million slaves in Massachusetts."³³ With all his uncompromising idealism he attacked every possible expediency connected with politics: "They who have been bred in the school of politics fail now and always to face

²⁹Journal, XII, p. 365.

³⁰Writings, IV, p. 390.

³¹Rein, p. 105.

³²Ibid., p. 106.

³³Writings, IV, p. 388.

facts They put off the day of settlement indefinitely, and meanwhile, the debt accumulates."³⁴ The "idea of turning a man into a sausage" was no worse than obedience to the Fugitive Slave Law.³⁵ Rhythmically, Thoreau assailed the State, the Press and the Church, all institutions which conspired to send runaway slaves back to their masters. "I believe that in this country," Thoreau asserted, "the press exerts a greater and more pernicious influence than the church did in its worst period." Excluding such people as Garrison, Child and Rogers, "I say, that probably no country was ever ruled by so mean a class of tyrant as, with a few notable exceptions, are the editors of the periodical press in this country."³⁶

The editors and preachers as well as the politicians were described as unprincipled men because they reduced others to "wood and iron and stone."³⁷ "And as they live and rule only by their servility, and appealing to the worse, and not the better, nature of man," those who heed their advice "are in the condition of the dog that returns to his vomit."³⁸ Thoreau mimicked the attitude of the timorous law-obeying citizen:

Do what you will, O Government! with my wife and children,
I will obey your commands to the letter It will
indeed grieve me if . . . you deliver them to overseers . . .

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., p. 394.

³⁶Ibid., p. 398.

³⁷Ibid., p. 397.

³⁸Ibid., p. 398.

or to be whipped to death I will peaceably pursue my chosen calling on this fair earth, until perchance, one day, when I have put on mourning for them dead, I shall have persuaded you to relent.³⁹

Almost every sentence was an absolute in itself; each was an expression of Thoreau's deepest feelings. His attacks were unrelenting and boundless; supported by the Law written in the hearts of mankind, Thoreau's "grand truths" stood forth, virtually resistant to criticism.

The "strategy of revelation" was also used to again expose the irrelevance of political participation; this time, however, Thoreau did not rely on lyrical, soothing poems but on sharply honed cleavers. By his own admission, his remarks were surely "murder to the State."⁴⁰ He reminded his neighbor of the edict issued in "Civil Disobedience": "they are to be men first, and Americans only at a late and convenient hour."⁴¹ Voting, as a means of fostering social reform, again fell prey to the transcendental onslaught.

if the majority vote the devil to be God, the minority will live and behave accordingly, and obey the successful candidate, trusting that, some time or other, by some speaker's [castigation] perhaps, they may reinstate God.⁴²

³⁹Ibid., p. 400.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 401.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 407.

⁴²Ibid., p. 402.

The fate of the individual and of the country "does not depend on what kind of paper you drop into the ballot-box once a year, but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning."⁴³

Even as he addressed a Garrisonian audience, Thoreau estimated the power of individual example beyond any other device for promoting reform. Personal defection, he argued, would weaken institutions because it provided a pattern for others to follow.

Among measures to be adopted, I would suggest to make as earnest and vigorous an assault on the press as had already been made, and with effect, on the Church The freemen of New England have only to refrain from purchasing and reading these sheets, have only to withhold their cents, to kill a score of them at once.⁴⁴

If Massachusetts was to avoid corruption, she, too, must withdraw her allegiance; otherwise, how could she escape responsibility for participating in the immoral deeds of the country? But even if the State avoids her moral obligation, "let each inhabitant of the State dissolve his union with her."

Strategy of Transcendence

The "strategy of transcendence," it may be recalled, depended on definition of concepts rather than on succinct, intuitive statements, as in the previous strategy. Essentially, the

⁴³Ibid., p. 403.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 399.

"strategy of transcendence" was a particular type of argumentative arrangement: 1) Two or more elements are defined. 2) The favored definitions are shown to be superior in various ways to the others. 3) The result is that the "inferior" definitions can be dismissed as irrelevant or as poor concepts. 4) Having nullified opposing points of view, the speaker can proceed to expound the favored definitions or concepts.⁴⁵ Furthermore, as in the "strategy of revelation," the speaker cited the universal principles of the Moral Law but bolstered his concepts with such stylistic devices as examples or anecdotes.⁴⁶

The "strategy of transcendence" was an identifying mark of Thoreau's address. "Slavery in Massachusetts" revolved around two transcendental arguments. In the form of rhetorical syllogisms, they were as follows:

- | | |
|------------|--|
| One: | Civil laws that are in opposition to higher laws are immoral. |
| | The Fugitive Slave Law is in opposition to higher laws. |
| Therefore, | The Fugitive Slave Law is immoral. |
| | |
| Two: | Men who live in harmony with the Moral Law lead the richest lives. |
| | Servants of government do not live in harmony with the Moral Law. |
| Therefore, | Servants of governments do not lead the richest lives. |

⁴⁵Rein, p. 107.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 108-109.

Thoreau began by attacking the citizens of his own state for cowardice, for supporting southern slavery by obeying unjust laws and thus becoming obedient slaves themselves. To make his point concrete, Thoreau compared the situations in Nebraska and Massachusetts to illustrate how the citizens of his own state had deluded themselves in their concern about matters "a thousand miles off," whereas the real trouble was at home. "The house was on fire, and not the prairie."⁴⁷ Then he stated his shocking truth: "There is not one slave in Nebraska; there are perhaps a million slaves in Massachusetts."⁴⁸ The accusation was both an attack on the tyranny of politics and on the voluntary submission, in Thoreau's view, of those who accept political expediency as a substitute for moral absolutes. Politics, in other words, promoted slavery in both the South and the North. Thoreau urged his listeners to see themselves as victims of slavery, not as crusaders against it. Throughout the discourse, Thoreau tried to orient the audience to his view of the situation; namely, chattel slavery was a pervasive evil force, not a distant, innocuous social institution.

Why had no one revealed the real situation? Thoreau answered, "They who have been bred in the school of politics fail now and always to face facts."⁴⁹ Politicians were characterized as

⁴⁷Writings, IV, p. 388.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

charletons, glib opponents of Thoreau's truth, and their followers had similarly overlooked a most fundamental "fact" of man's existence. The question of whether a man may be considered a slave did not depend on the interpretation of some civil law, for it had already been decided "from eternity to eternity."⁵⁰ A higher law decreed that man was inherently free and, as Thoreau insisted, all the advances of civilization testified to this fact. Thus, Thoreau established absolute polarity between freedom and slavery. Government, furthermore, retarded individual freedom, which was irritating enough. But the assumption of authority by government to return fugitive slaves was an abomination:

We may be tempted to ask from whom he [Edward Loring] received his commission, and who he is that received it; what novel statutes he obeys, and what precedents are to him of authority. Such an arbiter's very existence is an impertinence. We do not ask him to make up his mind, but to make up his pack.⁵¹

To further illustrate the government's retreat from the problem of slavery, Thoreau focused his attack on a convenient symbolic figure, Governor Clifford of Massachusetts. He related a comic scene in which the Governor, acting as Commander-in-chief of the militia, performed certain military and religious rituals like a wooden puppet. Governmental power, Thoreau indicated, was only a show for the public, a distraction. In more vital matters, the

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 389.

⁵¹Ibid.

Governor--and the central government--was useless. "When freedom is most endangered, he dwells in the deepest obscurity. A distinguished clergyman told me that he chose the profession of a clergyman because it afforded the most leisure . . . I would recommend to him the profession of a Governor."⁵² The Governor was a figurehead, a shadow of a man who failed to associate himself with higher laws. "He was no Governor of mine. He did not govern me."⁵³ Thoreau's outrage finally surfaced when he concluded his parody on Governor Clifford.

After he and the United States government had perfectly succeeded in robbing a poor innocent black man of his liberty for life, and as far as they could, of his Creator's likeness in his breast, he made a speech to his accomplices, at a congratulatory supper!⁵⁴

The mention of the "Creator's likeness" and the "laws of humanity" suggested the transcendental basis of Thoreau's criticism. In his view, government not only failed to act positively, but it sided with "the guilty, and not the innocent,-- with injustice, and not justice."⁵⁵

Thoreau crystallized the deplorable conditions to which his countrymen were subjected by his use of imagery. By placing itself at the disposal of the slaveholder, the army became an object of ridicule and the soldier "a fool made conspicuous by a painted coat."

⁵²Ibid., p. 390.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 390-391.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 391-392.

The whole military force of the State is at the service of a Mr. Suttle, a slaveholder from Virginia, to enable him to catch a man [Anthony Burns] whom he calls his property; but not a soldier is offered to save a citizen of Massachusetts from being kidnapped! . . . The slave was carried back by exactly such as these; i.e., by the soldier, of whom the best you can say in this connection is that he is a fool made conspicuous by a painted coat.⁵⁶

The citizens of Massachusetts were described as victims of their own indifference and hypocrisy; their liberty cap was really a fool's-cap.⁵⁷ The Independence Day celebration was an example of their servility. Thoreau again reversed the typical view of events.

I do not know but there are some who, if they were tied to a whipping post, and could but get one hand free, would use it to ring the bells and fire the cannons to celebrate their liberty That was the extent of their freedom; and when the sound of the bells died away, when the powder was all expended, their liberty went off with the smoke.⁵⁸

The meaning of the celebration was completely distorted as it was transformed into Thoreau's truth.

Thoreau then stated the means by which "victims" of slavery could once again assert their independence. "Whoever can discern truth has received his commission from a higher source than the chiefest [sic] justice in the world who can discern only law."⁵⁹ According to Thoreau, it was in his section of the country, rural New England, where freedom of thought existed and men would

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 392.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 393.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 396.

eventually "discern truth." "The city does not think much"; consequently, its inhabitants are more likely to be blinded by politics and overlook the moral significance of the slavery issue.⁶⁰ Preferring the most direct participation which existed in New England's local governments, Thoreau claimed that the town meeting was "the true Congress, and the most respectable one that is ever assembled in the United States."⁶¹ Faced with the imposition of a national law clearly favoring the South, all his provincialism emerged as Thoreau described his region as the home of humanitarian ideals.

On any moral question, I would rather have the opinion of Boxboro than of Boston and New York put together. When the former speaks, I feel as if somebody had spoken, as if humanity was yet, and a reasonable being had asserted its rights,--as if some unprejudiced men among the country's hills had at length turned their attention to the subject, and by a few sensible words redeemed the reputation of the race.⁶²

Surely, Thoreau ignored many of the defects in local government, but the rural areas were less corrupt than the city. Moreover, the opinions expressed in the metropolitan newspapers concerning the Fugitive Slave Law and the duty of citizens to respect it confirmed Thoreau's worst impressions. The Boston publications symbolized the perversion of public opinion and the distortion of transcendental truth; one could do no less than to refuse to

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 397.

⁶²Ibid., pp. 396-397.

purchase the corrupt city newspapers.⁶³

In his assault on the press, Thoreau linked the pro-slavery journals with political expediency and then contrasted their points of view with the spiritual values in the scriptures. "We are not a religious people, but we are a nation of politicians At any meeting of politicians . . . how impertinent it would be to quote from the Bible! how pertinent to quote from a newspaper or from the Constitution!"⁶⁴ As the black counterpart of the Bible, the newspaper was "a leaf from the gospel of the gambling-house, the grocery, and the brothel, harmonizing with the gospel of the Merchant's Exchange."⁶⁵ To further dramatize his position, Thoreau pictured his personal reaction, "When I have taken up this paper [either the Boston Post, Mail, Journal, Advertiser Courier or Times] with my cuffs turned up, I have heard the gurgling of the sewer through every column."⁶⁶

Using two polar symbols for good and evil, God and the devil, Thoreau next illustrated how the political system, which catered to expediency, clouded basic ethical distinctions. "If the majority vote the devil to be God, the minority will live and behave accordingly,--and obey the successful candidate, trusting that, some time or other, by some speaker's [castigation],

⁶³Ibid., pp. 397-398.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 398.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

perhaps, they may reinstate God."⁶⁷ The vote, bulwark of the democratic process, thus became the symbol of compromise. Having little respect for virtue, the political system existed as a possibility for the worship of devils. Thoreau's moral judgment was based on the supremacy of the individual and his disdain for constraints imposed by the state. He prophesied to his listeners that "The fate of the country does not depend on how you vote at the polls, . . . but on what kind of man you drop from your chamber into the street every morning."⁶⁸ What was sound for the individual was applicable to the State of Massachusetts. Either the state should withdraw from the Union or the individual should "dissolve his union with her."⁶⁹ "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong," Thoreau charged in "Civil Disobedience," "but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support."⁷⁰ The only union Thoreau would sanction consisted of individuals bound together by a respect for higher laws.

These thoughts about a state which hesitated in its duty led Thoreau to consider the persecution of those individuals who fulfilled their moral obligations. Once again he attempted to

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 402.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 403.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰"Civil Disobedience," p. 195.

demonstrate how conventional views had distorted the true picture. Those who attempted to rescue Burns were actually heroes, but they were not applauded because they had failed. Although these men were "preeminently innocent," they were obliged to plead guilty. "Covered with disgrace, the State has sat down coolly to try for their lives and liberties the men who attempted to do its duty for it. And this is called justice!"⁷¹ Judges, furthermore, were regarded by Thoreau as men without principle who substituted the process of government for its benign end.

Justice is sweet and musical; but injustice is harsh and discordant. The judge still sits grinding at his organ, but it yields no music, and we hear only the sound of the handle. He believes all music resides in the handle, and the crowd toss him their coppers the same as before.⁷²

Although Thoreau took no part in the attack on the courthouse, "it behooves every man to see that his influence is on the side of justice."⁷³ By means of exalted imagery, Thoreau aligned himself with higher truths than expediency: justice, heroism and innocence.

A government which restricted men of principle, which made citizens "live more economically in respect to virtue and all noble qualities,"⁷⁴ served only to diminish the value of life. Basing his argument on the proposition that man's life was richest when it followed the higher laws--the ultimate source of value--Thoreau

⁷¹Writings, IV, p. 404.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 405.

described in economic terms the effect of unjust governmental actions on himself and on those citizens not directly involved in the Burns case. As in "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau used personal pronouns to underscore his remarks.

I had never respected the government near to which I lived, but I had foolishly thought that I might manage to live here, minding my private affairs, and forget it. For my part, 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. [sic] 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 within hell.⁷⁵

Thoreau proceeded to highlight the discrepancy between the laws of expediency and the higher laws.

Suppose you have a small library, with pictures to adorn the walls,--a garden laid out around,--and contemplate scientific and literary pursuits, and discover all at once that your villa, with all its contents, is located in hell, and that the justice of the peace has a cloven foot and a forked tail,--do not these things suddenly lose their value in your eyes?⁷⁶

Political compromise may permit the devil to assume power. Since all property, furthermore, is insecure under a policy of expediency, the tradesman, the farmer, the merchant were all adversely affected.⁷⁷ In an attempt to have his listeners avoid "the empire of hell," Thoreau called for more assertive individual action: "We have used up all our inherited freedom. If we would save our

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 406.

⁷⁷Ibid.

lives, we must fight for them."⁷⁸

The violent disobedience implied in the last sentence became in the end simply a gesture. Instead of developing arguments for social revolution, rather than offering programs for organized resistance, Thoreau abruptly shifted his attention to nature. The Garrisonian policy of "No Union with Slaveholders" meant individual dissolution of the Union; social revolution was the result of an individual's obedience to the higher laws. Thoreau made little attempt to gain support among the abolitionists of Framingham; rather, the truth was to speak for itself. "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 the rulers and the ruled are without principle."⁷⁹ Nature constantly reminded man that absolute values, such as justice, beauty and purity, existed. "I shall not soon despair of the world for . . . the cowardice and want of principle of Northern men." The white water-lily "suggests what kind of laws have prevailed longest and widest, and still prevail, and that the time may come when men's deeds will smell as sweet."⁸⁰ For Thoreau, this was one of the most potent justifications for his absolutist position: "I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the water-lily Nature has been partner to no

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 407.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

Missouri Compromise."⁸¹ Slavery and servility, because they existed outside the laws of nature, were doomed by their own sterility. The water-lily represented Thoreau's hope for humanity. "The foul slime [in which it grows] stands for the sloth and vice of man, the decay of humanity; the fragrant flower that springs from it, for the purity and courage which are immortal."⁸²

Thoreau's conclusion seemed more of a testament to his own helplessness than any real assurance of future justice.

The "strategy of transcendence" was skillfully employed in Thoreau's address: indeed, "Slavery in Massachusetts" was a classic example of how the strategy operated. Thoreau aligned his key concepts in a fairly rigid dichotomy. On the positive side were the elements of freedom, morality, the people from rural areas, the anti-slavery forces, the blossoming flower and even the Bible. On the negative side were slavery, the newspaper, the government, the vote and the democratic process, the inhabitants of the city and the devil. Frequently, the key concepts or values were compared and contrasted to the dictates of higher laws. They were then placed in their "proper" perspective; Independence Day, for example, was transformed into a day of bondage; the Bible was replaced by newspapers, and editors were converted into clergymen. Imagery, examples, hypothetical illustrations, rhetorical questions, satire

⁸¹Ibid., pp. 407-408.

⁸²Ibid., p. 408.

and personal pronouns were some of the stylistic devices used to highlight Thoreau's transcendental version of reality.

As Thoreau shifted and redefined many conventional symbols, he employed the same organizational pattern mastered at Harvard.

"Slavery in Massachusetts" may be outlined as follows:

Introduction

- I. The iniquitous Fugitive Slave Law should be repealed.

Body

- I. The laws of humanity take precedent over civil laws.
 - A. The statutes of this Commonwealth have "succeeded in robbing a poor innocent black man of his liberty for life."
 1. When freedom is most endangered, the Governor dwells in the deepest obscurity.
 2. "What I am concerned to know is, that that man's influence and authority were on the side of the slaveholder, and not of the slave."
 3. He proved no better than the majority of his constituents would be likely to prove.
 4. The whole military force of the State is at the service of the slaveholders.
 - B. "I wish my countrymen to consider that whatever the human law may be, neither individual nor a nation can ever commit the least act of injustice against the obscure individual without having to pay the penalty for it."
 1. Civil law will never make man free.
 2. Judges recognize no authority but the Constitution.
 3. Whoever can discern truth has received his commission from a higher authority than the judiciary.

- II. Men who live in harmony with the Moral Law lead the richest lives.
 - A. The majority of men in this country are not men of principle.
 - 1. Their actions are influenced by corrupt newspapers.
 - 2. "If they vote, they do not send men to Congress on errands of humanity."
 - B. "I would remind my countrymen that they are to be men first, and Americans only at a late and convenient hour."
 - 1. Laws that do not aid humanity are worthless.
 - 2. Judges and lawyers are men of expediency; they persist in being the servants of the worst men and not the servants of humanity.
 - 3. "In morals the only sliders are backsliders."
 - C. What is needed are men, not of policy but of probity.
 - 1. Policy and expediency are not to be confused with morality.
 - 2. If the state does not dissolve her union with the slaveholders, let each man dissolve his union with the state.
 - D. It is the obligation of every man to make certain that his influence is on the side of justice.
 - 1. "If there is any hell more unprincipled than our rulers, and we, the ruled, I feel curious to see it."
 - E. Under a policy of expediency, life itself decreases in value, and "all things which minister to it are worth less."

Conclusion

- I. The flower's sweet fragrance attests to the virtue in every man.
 - A. Any man who is willing to perceive and love Nature can be spared from moral decay.
 - 1. "Slavery and servility have produced no sweet-scented flower . . . they are merely a decaying and a death, offensive to all healthy nostrils."

In a now familiar pattern, Thoreau initially considered the propositions in general terms. He proceeded to expand the meaning of his first argument by redefinition, examples and illustrations. He then sharpened the focus by introducing pointed, sarcastic comments about the Governor and the legal system. Consistent with the "strategy of transcendence," the movement of thought was from the general to the particular and back to the general. Thoreau's second argument was contained in the final progression of his thoughts and constituted the bulk of the discourse. In addition to examples and illustrations, Thoreau employed such stylistic devices as imagery, rhetorical questions, satire, personal pronouns, comparison and contrast.

Strategy of Salvation

The "strategy of salvation" was essentially "a problem-solution sequence. . . . the Transcendentalists attacked their opponents' hate, greed and conformity. . . . The intensity of the Transcendentalists' attack created a vacuum which [they] filled

with hope for the future."⁸³ In burning words, Thoreau unleashed a torrent of abuse on his countrymen, the Governor, the Commonwealth, federal government, the judiciary and the press.

Thoreau opened his address with an attack upon his neighbors' lethargy and cowardice.

The inhabitants of Concord are not prepared to stand by one of their own bridges, but talk only of taking up a position on the highlands beyond the Yellowstone River. Our Butricks and Davises and Hosmers are retreating thither, and I fear that they will leave no Lexington Common between them and the enemy.⁸⁴

He later denounced the selfishness and folly of those citizens who celebrated Independence Day after the return of an innocent man to slavery. "Nowadays," he said, "men wear a fool's cap, and call it a liberty-cap. I do not know but there are some who, if they were tied to a whipping-post, and could but get one hand free, would use it to ring the bells and fire the cannons to celebrate their liberty."⁸⁵

Politicians, mundane creatures of opportunism and compromise, rarely escaped Thoreau's barbs. "The fact which the politician faces is merely that there is less honor among thieves than was supposed, and not the fact that they are thieves."⁸⁶

⁸³Rein, pp. 110-111.

⁸⁴Writings, IV, p. 388.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 393.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 389.

In particular, "when freedom is most endangered," the Governor of Massachusetts "dwells in the deepest obscurity." "The Governor's exploit is to review the troops on muster day. I have seen him on horseback, with his hat off, listening to a chaplain's prayer I think that I could manage to get along without one."⁸⁷

Thoreau had come to recognize, as he had not in 1848, that the judiciary and the press acted as repressive forces in much the same way as did the state. Judges and lawyers were all men of expediency. "They persist in being the servants of the worst men, and not the servants of humanity."⁸⁸ Similarly, newspapers, in the conflict between freedom and slavery, subordinated the demands of justice to the claims of expediency. "The press is, almost without exception, corrupt."⁸⁹ "When I have taken up this paper," declared Thoreau with reference to influential Boston publications, "I have heard the gurgling of the sewer through every column. Could slavery suggest a more complete servility than some of these journals exhibit?"⁹⁰ Political and social institutions, in short, were denounced as mockeries of principle; the whole environment appeared tainted. Significantly, by 1854, Thoreau began to consider that passive resistance might not be the only acceptable method for

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 389-390.

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 401-402.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 397.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 399-400.

encouraging social reform. In light of the moral paralysis surrounding the slavery question, Thoreau defiantly proclaimed:

I need not say what match I would touch, what system endeavor to blow up; but as I love my life, I would side with the light, and let the dark earth roll from under me, calling my mother and brother to follow.⁹¹

He further declared, "Show me a free state, and a court truly of justice, and I will fight for them, if need be."⁹² "Slavery in Massachusetts" was patently a call for individuals to be more assertive, and Thoreau's isolated expressions should not be extended to include him in any anarchist fold. It was, however, highly unusual for him to even suggest active support of or direct assault upon an institution. For a man who could not persuade himself that he did not dwell "wholly within hell," perhaps the day was not too distant when he would champion reform by means other than non-violent resistance.

Following his attack upon men and institutions, consistent with the "strategy of salvation," Thoreau attempted to fill the created social "vacuum." His answer to a law or policy outrageous to his conscience was still individual, peaceful disobedience. What the country needed in the crisis of the 1850's, Thoreau asserted, was men of "probity," not of "policy." To those who recognized laws from a higher source than civil authority, to those who desired to

⁹¹Ibid., p. 401.

⁹²Ibid., pp. 404-405.

preserve their own moral integrity, Thoreau advised: Dissolve every association with the State and Federal governments.⁹³

Thoreau made it clear throughout his life that he did not consider himself a subject of any government and, as a citizen of no country, did not feel bound by American laws. To make certain no one would erroneously assume that his residence in the United States meant he was a citizen, he filed his famous declaration with the Concord town clerk: "Know all men . . . that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined."⁹⁴ That step assured Thoreau that he would not be held personally responsible for the immoral deeds of the country. It may never have occurred to him that having never "joined" the Union he could hardly secede from it. Resigning, however, was such an effective gesture, such a potent form of protest, that Thoreau used it again and again to express his dissatisfaction. Although he claimed not to be a citizen of Massachusetts or the United States, Thoreau seceded at least a dozen times after 1848.

⁹³Ibid., p. 403.

⁹⁴"Civil Disobedience," p. 202.

Strategy of Omission

The "strategy of omission" was designed to allow the speaker to advance his own position and to ignore conflicting doctrines or events. Such an approach allowed the transcendentalists to consider "abstract concepts, higher law, and whirling universes."⁹⁵ Thoreau's use of the strategy was most evident in his indictment of those who venerated Constitutional authority above that of the Moral Law. In addition to the state's complicity with slaveholders by enforcing the Fugitive Slave Law, Thoreau offered another reason why citizens of Massachusetts should secede: Morality was being replaced by constitutionality.

A group of men in a constitutional convention had authored an imperfect document, Thoreau argued. They submitted it to state legislatures and to the judgment of the people as a reasonable foundation for the national government. Parts of it were reasonable enough, Thoreau admitted. It was not, however, infallible and had no jurisdiction when morality was involved. It was preposterous to ask: Is Negro slavery constitutional? Such a question was highly irrelevant. Negro slavery was immoral, and that was enough to condemn it for all time and for all people.

The judge may decide this way or that; it is a kind of accident, at best. . . . recognizing no authority but the Constitution, it [the Supreme Court] has decided

⁹⁵Rein, pp. 113-115.

that the three million are and shall continue to be slaves. Such judges as these are merely the inspectors of a pick-lock and murderer's tools, to tell him whether they are in working order or not, and there they think that their responsibility ends. There was a prior case on the docket, which they, as judges appointed by God, had no right to skip.⁹⁶

It was just as ridiculous to ask, moreover, whether specific governmental enactments concerning slavery were constitutional. Congress had no more right to pass laws which conflicted with absolute morality than the Supreme Court had the authority to weigh such laws against the Constitution. The Fugitive Slave Law, for example, "rises not to the level of the head or the reason; its natural habitat is in the dirt. It was born and bred, and has its life, only in the dust and mire, on a level with the feet."⁹⁷ Clearly, such a law violated the Moral Law, and that was more than enough to make it invalid.

To Thoreau's chagrin and indignation, however, the State of Massachusetts avoided the moral issue altogether and wrangled over the constitutionality of the act.⁹⁸ Thoreau tried to reinforce what the radicals assembled at Framingham had already agreed upon years before: The Constitution was no standard for moral judgments. Servants of government, such as obedient citizens,

⁹⁶Writings, IV, pp. 395-396.

⁹⁷Ibid., pp. 394-395.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 403.

judges and lawyers:

consider, not whether the Fugitive Slave Law is right, but whether it is what they call constitutional. Is virtue constitutional or vice? Is equity constitutional, or iniquity? In important moral and vital questions, like this, it is just as impertinent to ask whether it is profitable or not. They persist in being the servants of the worst of men, and not the servants of humanity. The question is, not whether you or your grandfather, seventy years ago, did not enter into an agreement to serve the devil, and that service is not accordingly now due; but whether you will not now, for once and last, serve God,--in spite of your own recreancy, or that of your ancestor,--by obeying that eternal and only just CONSTITUTION, which He, and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in your being.⁹⁹

Thoreau further insisted that slavery was not only morally wrong but that it was contrary to the principles on which the nation was founded. There were universal laws, inherent rights of man, which existed in the public mind prior to the establishment of the Constitution, to which the framers of the Constitution and all subsequent legislative and judicial bodies were bound. And civil laws or Constitutional interpretations which supported slavery were contrary to these principles. Here was an implied aspect of the higher law doctrine which radical abolitionists affirmed for more than two decades.¹⁰⁰

I am compelled to see that they [legislators and judges] put themselves, or rather are by character, exactly on a level with the marine who discharges his musket in any

⁹⁹Ibid., pp. 401-402.

¹⁰⁰Dumond, p. 71.

direction he is ordered to. They are just as much tools, and as little men. Certainly, they are not the more to be respected, because their master [the Constitution] enslaves their understandings and consciences, instead of their bodies.¹⁰¹

What was needed, in Thoreau's view, were men who recognized laws higher than the Constitution and who were guided not by the decisions of the morally corrupt majority.

Summary

"Slavery in Massachusetts" has been analyzed in terms of four transcendental strategies. As explained earlier, the strategy of revelation was characterized by a display of "grand truths" in the form of maxims or proverbial statements. The strategy of transcendence was a distinguishable argumentative arrangement. The strategy of salvation consisted of attacks upon the current social order, with a transcendental vision of society offered in its place. And the strategy of omission involved a speaker's refusal to consider material which contradicted transcendental philosophy. In all four strategies, the argument was conducted on transcendental terms; the emphasis was on intuition, definition, "abstract concepts, higher law, and whirling universes."¹⁰²

During the 1850's, the North--largely against "slavery in the abstract"--went down to defeat again and again when pitted

¹⁰¹Writings, IV, p. 401.

¹⁰²Rein, p. 115.

against the determination of the South to preserve the "peculiar institution." The Supreme Court, for instance, had confined itself to an interpretation of the Constitution; it had upheld the Fugitive Slave Law. In 1851, Thomas Sims was returned from Boston to slavery in Georgia; in May, 1854, Anthony Burns was ordered back to Virginia. The opponents of reform, as Thoreau prophetically observed in "Civil Disobedience," were "not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here [in New England], who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity."¹⁰³ The Burns episode infuriated Thoreau and triggered a caustic attack on a government that would condone slavery. What was worse than "evil" was the toleration of it. "Slavery in Massachusetts" was designed to stir his native state into secession. And so long as the state delayed in its moral duty, "let each inhabitant of the State dissolve his union with her." While other radicals at the anti-slavery rally in Framingham on July 4, 1854, talked about injustices "a thousand miles off," Thoreau spoke of his state's servility and of the twelve men who were on trial for having tried to rescue Burns. This is what he meant by slavery in Massachusetts. "The house was on fire, and not the prairie." This time, however, there were no obscure references, no gaps between transcendental principles and concrete

¹⁰³"Civil Disobedience," p. 193.

issues. In a whirlwind of passion, in fiery language, Thoreau attacked his obedient and cowardly neighbors, the Governor of Massachusetts, the expedient and immoral legislator, politician, judge, minister and Supreme Court, the corrupt press, the servile military and the unjust Fugitive Slave Law. Few men or institutions were spared from the transcendental onslaught.

Even after condoning the organized Garrisonian approach for attacking evil, Thoreau continued to place himself outside of organized movements. "No Union with Slaveholders" still meant individual dissolution of the Union. No matter how vehemently he was moved, no matter how much he was willing to echo radical principles, Thoreau was naturally suspicious of any group to which more than two people belonged. "Show me a free state, and a court truly of justice," Thoreau declared, "and I will fight for them, if need be." He never indicated, however, how he would go about creating a free state and courts of justice. One element of Thoreau's personality never proposed "courageously to assault evil, but patiently to starve it out,"¹⁰⁴ while another looked for individual actions that would precipitate a direct assault on the institution of chattel slavery. The conflict between the passive and militant aspects within Thoreau's personality was resolved finally in his defense of John Brown.

¹⁰⁴Writings, I, p. 146.

Effectiveness

Thoreau's speech attracted considerable attention, and with printings in both the Liberator and Tribune--as noted earlier--his address probably reached more people than any other work before that day. Horace Greeley's New York Daily Tribune published the text in full on August 2 and accompanied it with an editorial entitled "A Higher-Law Speech":

The lower-law journals so often make ado about the speeches in Congress of those whom they designate champions of the Higher Law, that we shall enlighten and edify them, undoubtedly, by the report we publish this morning of a genuine Higher Law Speech--that of Henry D. Thoreau at the late celebration of our National Anniversary in Framingham, Mass., when Wm. Lloyd Garrison burned a copy of the Federal Constitution. No one can read this speech without realizing that the claims of Messrs. Sumner, Seward and Chase to be recognized as Higher-Law champions are of a very questionable validity. Mr. Thoreau is the Simon-Pure article, and his remarks have a racy piquancy and telling point which none but a man thoroughly in earnest and regardless of self in his fidelity to a deep conviction ever fully attains. The humor here so signally evinced is born of pathos--it is the lightning which reveals to hearers and readers the speaker's profound abhorrence of the sacrifice of subordination of one human being to the pleasure or convenience of another. A great many will read this speech with unction who will pretend to blame us for printing it; but our back is broad and can bear censure. Let each and all be fairly heard.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵New York Daily Tribune, August 2, 1854, p. 3. Seward's "Higher Law" speech was delivered on March 11, 1850 and may be found in The Works of William H. Seward, George Baker (ed.), IV (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1887), pp. 52-92. For a thorough analysis of Seward's address, see Harold L. Lawson, "The Speaking of William H. Seward, 1845-1861" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Speech, The Ohio State University, 1967), pp. 160-229.

Thomas Higginson, who led the debacled attempt to rescue Burns from his Boston prison cell, hailed the speech as surpassing any statement of truth generated by the Burns arrest.¹⁰⁶ Moncure Conway, who observed that Thoreau was "clamoured for" at the meeting, wrote that "he read his paper with great effectiveness."¹⁰⁷ Of all the Boston newspapers maligned in the address, only one, hardly sympathetic, even acknowledged the rally: "At Framingham there was an Anti-Slavery pic-nic [sic] at which there was speaking from Messrs. Garrison, Phillips and others of that class."¹⁰⁸

Thoreau's suggested boycott of pro-slavery newspapers and call for individual secession, however, received no recorded support; it was his evolution toward violent resistance that was bringing him into harmony with the times. In a letter published in the Liberator on July 7, 1854, Angelina Grimke, wife of Theodore Weld and a significant anti-slavery agitator herself, announced her abandonment of passive resistance and the conviction that nothing short of violence would bring an end to slavery. "It is time," she wrote, "that the alarm-bell was rung through the Northern States, and that the holy resolution was solemnly, universally adopted,

¹⁰⁶Thoreau, Correspondence, I, p. 336.

¹⁰⁷Conway, p. 184.

¹⁰⁸Boston Daily Journal, July 5, 1854, p. 2.

that, cost what it may, no fugitive from slavery should ever go back from Northern soil." One may argue that "a civil war must be the result of such a course," and so it would, but "if we cannot do our duty to the oppressed millions of our country and the world without war, let it come, both servile and civil; for I now entirely despair of the triumph of Justice and Humanity without shedding of blood. A temporary war," she concluded, "is an incomparably less evil than permanent slavery."¹⁰⁹ The decisive question Thoreau would resolve before John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry in 1859 was not "about the weapon, but the spirit in which you use it."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹Liberator, July 7, 1854, p. 6.

¹¹⁰Journal, XII, p. 437.

CHAPTER VI

A PLEA FOR CAPTAIN JOHN BROWN

"Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them."

Shakespeare

After Walden was published in August of 1854, Thoreau decided to offer himself as a lecturer on a nationwide scale, particularly throughout the Midwest where Emerson was so successful. He embarked on the project, however, with serious reservations:

Thinking this afternoon of the prospect of my writing lectures and going abroad to read them next winter, I realized how incomparably great are the advantages of obscurity and poverty which I have enjoyed so long I have given myself up to nature; I have lived so many springs and summers and autumns and winters as if I had nothing else to do but live them, and imbibe whatever nutriment they had for me If I go abroad lecturing, how shall I ever recover the lost winter?¹

Nature's journeyman need not have worried, for the project was abandoned when Thoreau failed to receive any offers.²

¹Journal, VII, p. 46.

²Canby stated (p. 362) that no invitations were extended; however, the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library contains a letter from C. B. Bernard, corresponding secretary of the Akron, Ohio, Library Association, offering Thoreau fifty dollars if he would speak before the group. There is, however, no evidence of his acceptance.

Around home, however, speaking engagements were more plentiful. On November 20 he delivered a lecture in Philadelphia entitled "Moose-hunting." Judging from W. H. Furness' letter to Emerson, the speech was unsuccessful, for "the audience was stupid and did not appreciate Thoreau."³

On December 6, 1854, Thoreau read a paper at the Independent Lectures at Railroad Hall in Providence, Rhode Island. It was entitled "Getting a Living" or "What Shall It Profit Man if He Gains the Whole World But Lose His Own Soul?" The lecture, entitled posthumously, "Life Without Principle," was a summary of Thoreau's personal philosophy. He asked the audience to be self-reliant, to be concerned with fundamental (transcendental) principles, not to be led astray by public opinion, the desire for material riches or any other diverting influence. Although his purely transcendental proclamation was later considered one of his more successful lectures, it was a failure in Providence, and Thoreau complained in his Journal:

I feel that I am in danger of cheapening myself by trying to become a successful lecturer, i.e., to interest my audiences. I am disappointed to find that most that I am and value myself for is lost, or worse than lost, on my audience. I fail to get even the attention of the mass. I should suit them better if I suited myself less.⁴

³H. H. Furness, Records of a Lifelong Friendship (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), p. 103.

⁴Journal, VII, pp. 78-79.

By 1855 interest in Thoreau as a lecturer was almost non-existent. He delivered only two lectures that year--in Worcester on January 4 and at Concord on February 14. On both occasions he read "What Shall It Profit?" Thoreau knew full well what was wrong, although he was not about to soothe his audience; his message was either delivered like an iconoclastic bombshell, or not at all!

Many will complain of my lectures that they are too transcendental. "Can't understand them." "Would you have us return to the savage state?" Etc., etc. A criticism true enough, it may be, from their point of view. But the fact is, the earnest lecturer can speak only to his like, and adapting himself to his audience is a mere compliment which he pays them. If you wish to know how I think, you must endeavor to put yourself in my place. If you wish me to speak as if I were you, that is another affair.⁵

Interest in Thoreau also declined because he was probably not a very effective speaker. Ellery Channing related that Thoreau had a minor speech defect, a sort of burr in his speech "owing to his peculiar pronunciation of the letter r."⁶ His presence on the speaker's platform, moreover, has been described as "not inspiring" and his voice as "not specially musical."⁷ He tended to bury his nose in the manuscript rather than keep his eyes on the audience. Only when he was excited in a fight for justice, such as in his

⁵Ibid., p. 197.

⁶Channing, p. 4.

⁷Sanborn, p. 37.

"Slavery in Massachusetts" address at Framingham, was he sufficiently dynamic to arouse his audience. When he talked about his various excursions, it was the humor that carried him along. But the audiences often missed the more subtle humor of the transcendental remarks, so the lectures were frequently unsuccessful.

On December 18, 1856, in Amherst, New Hampshire, Thoreau read his paper on "Walking"; it was his only lecture of the year. Although the audience gave him their close attention, no one spoke to him afterwards; he concluded that even though they liked it, they hesitated to admit it.⁸

On February 3, 1857, Thoreau delivered a lecture in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. He informed Blake that he had read the same paper there six years before but had expanded it so much that he had enough for a full evening even after omitting what had been read previously.⁹

Thoreau did not lecture again for almost a year. By the fall of 1858, his bitterness was completely aroused, and he poured forth into his Journal his most devastating denunciation of the

⁸Thoreau, in a letter to Harrison Blake, December 31, 1856, Writings, VI, p. 302.

⁹Thoreau, in a letter to Blake, February 6, 1857, Ibid., p. 304.

lecture system and the popular lecturer:

Preaching? Lecturing? Who are ye that ask for these things? What do ye want to hear, ye pulling infants. A trumpet-sound that would train you up to mankind, or a nurse's lullaby? The preachers and lecturers deal with men of straw, as they are men of straw themselves.

.

It is no compliment to be invited before the rich Institutes and Lyceums. The settled lecturers are as tame as settled ministers. The audiences do not want to hear any prophet; they do not wish to be stimulated and instructed, but entertained. They, their wives and daughters, go to the Lyceum to such a sugarplum. The little of medicine they get is disguised with sugar. It is never the reformer they hear then, but a faint and timid echo of him only.¹⁰

Despite the fact that Thoreau was obviously disenchanted with the lecture system, most of the complaints centered around his not being asked to speak more frequently; rare was the occasion when he turned down an opportunity to speak. Why then did he pursue the speaker's platform after numerous failures? Perhaps the public platform appealed to him, as it did to Emerson, because the lecture was a direct confrontation between the intuitive personality and his audience. Did it not provide, when successful, the ideal means for transmitting the intuitions of transcendentalism? Thoreau sought to transmit, face to face, the results of his inquiries into spiritual reality to men and women who might never read what he had to say, especially since publication was difficult or impossible

¹⁰Journal, XII, pp. 324-325.

during his lifetime.¹¹

After a long dearth, there was a sudden surge of interest in Thoreau as a lecturer.¹² He delivered about as many lectures in 1859 as any other year during his life. On February 22 he arrived in Worcester and gave lectures both that evening and the next entitled "Autumnal Tints." In it he described all the bright tints of foliage in the order in which they present themselves. Thoreau complained to his Journal that all the criticism he ever got on the lecture was that he had assumed his audience had not seen so much of the autumnal tints as they really had.¹³ Sallie Holley, the famous abolitionist, heard both lectures and reported that they were "beautiful and, I doubt not, a faithful report of the colours of leaves."¹⁴

Thoreau's success continued in the spring and summer as he repeated his new nature lecture in the neighborhood of Concord. But it was Thoreau's "Plea for John Brown" on October 30, 1859, that created a real impact. News of Brown's raid on the Federal armory

¹¹Canby, p. 136.

¹²Renewed interest in Thoreau as a speaker centered around his completion of a lecture about nature that he had been preparing for several years.

¹³Journal, XII, p. 357.

¹⁴Sallie Holley, A Life for Liberty (New York: Putnam, 1899), p. 85.

at Harper's Ferry reached Concord by October 19, 1859, and Thoreau's reaction was immediate. For days Thoreau could think of nothing else but of Brown's willingness to sacrifice everything, even his life, for his principles. On the nineteenth he wrote some two thousand words in his Journal;¹⁵ on the twenty-first, some two thousand more;¹⁶ and on the twenty-second, impassioned paragraphs stretching for another six thousand.¹⁷ Nature temporarily lost its appeal as Thoreau breathed a fire into his Journal even greater than the one at the time of the Burns incident. Sanborn recalled that Thoreau said he went to bed with a pencil and notebook under his pillow so that he might write down his thoughts of the moment.¹⁸

Thoreau was hardly surprised to find that many of his townsmen dismissed Brown as a fool and that most of the newspapers denounced him. The typically outspoken Liberator, for example, labeled the attack a "misguided, wild, and apparently insane . . . effort."¹⁹ He was, however, shocked to discover that none of the abolitionists seemed willing to defend Brown; rather, their only reaction was that Brown had been impractical and inexpedient.

¹⁵Journal, XII, pp. 400-410.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 411-418.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 418-439.

¹⁸Sanborn, p. 303.

¹⁹Journal, XII, p. 407; and Liberator, October 19, 1859, p. 1.

Certainly someone should speak out in Brown's behalf, Thoreau decided. Having organized his Journal comments into a lecture, Thoreau announced he would deliver a defense of "The Character of Captain Brown, now in the Clutches of the Salveholder" in Concord Town Hall on October 30.²⁰ Members of the Republican Town Committee as well as the local abolitionists sent word that they thought his proposal inadvisable; a defense of Brown at this time would raise further opposition to all anti-slavery activities.²¹ Even Sanborn, one of Brown's collaborators, felt that public statements in defense of Brown would be imprudent. To the many critics Thoreau zealously replied, "I do not send to you for advice, but to announce that I am to speak."²² Since Thoreau was a resident of Concord, he could not be denied the use of the Town Hall. The selectman, however, refused to ring the town bell to announce the meeting, which--according to tradition--Thoreau rang himself.²³

²⁰Writings, XVIII, p. 374.

²¹Journal, XII, p. 439.

²²Quoted by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Complete Works, X (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), p. 460.

²³Canby, p. 391.

An Eccentric Kinship: Henry Thoreau
and John Brown²⁴

In order to understand why Thoreau, a sensitive exponent of non-violence, spoke in favor of the militant John Brown, it would seem prudent to analyze the moral relationship between the two men. Thoreau first met John Brown in the late winter of 1857 when Brown visited Sanborn in Concord. Brown was one of the leaders of the anti-slavery forces in the Kansas territory and had battled with the Border Ruffians who swarmed over from Missouri in an attempt to make Kansas another slave state. His activities had brought him national attention, and he came east to raise money for his troops. Since Sanborn was at the time having his noon meals at the Thoreau boarding-house, he brought Brown with him for lunch and left him there for the afternoon talking with Thoreau. These two unique men faced one another that long winter afternoon. In his metallic voice, ringing with the demonic clang of a prophet, Brown told Thoreau the details of the battle of Black Jack in Kansas, where he with only nine men had captured more than twenty Ruffians under the command of Henry Clay Pate.²⁵

²⁴So dubbed by Herbert L. Carson, "An Eccentric Kinship: Henry David Thoreau's 'A Plea for Captain John Brown,'" Southern Speech Journal, XXVII (Winter, 1961), pp. 151-155.

²⁵Allan Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln, II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), p. 12.

On February 18, 1857, Brown spoke in the Concord Town Hall, dramatically displaying, for example, a bowie knife he had taken from Pate and a chain with which his oldest son John--his blood still rusting on it--had been dragged for miles on bleeding feet by a United States dragoon.²⁶ When Brown pleaded for funds, Sanborn pledged one hundred dollars, Emerson fifty, and Thoreau's father ten. Thoreau himself contributed only "a trifle" because he was irritated that Brown was not willing to take his supporters more into his confidence and explain what he wished to do with the funds.²⁷

Brown returned to Concord on May 7, 1859, to visit with Sanborn. Meanwhile, in January, 1859, George Sterns, a wealthy abolitionist from Medford, Massachusetts, and supporter of Brown, spent an afternoon skating with Emerson and Thoreau at Walden Pond. Sterns devoted a large part of the time praising Brown's heroism to Thoreau, apparently convincing Thoreau of Brown's virtues.²⁸ On May 8 Brown spoke again in Concord Town Hall, giving further details of his Kansas activities and pleading for more funds.

²⁶Ruth Wheeler, "John Brown in Concord," Concord Journal, October 15, 1959, pp. 1, 4.

²⁷Journal, XII, p. 437.

²⁸Frank Stearns, The Life and Public Service of George Luther Stearns (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1907), p. 181.

Thoreau was in the audience again and was probably more impressed than he had been at the time of Brown's first visit.

Thoreau knew nothing in advance of Brown's plans for raiding Harper's Ferry on October 16, 1859; ironically, the first man publicly to condone Brown's activities had little to say specifically about the attack on the Federal armory. There was, curiously, no real interchange between these two men, for Brown was capable of great duplicity. He had come to Boston ostensibly to get supplies for the Free State cause in Kansas; his real purpose, however, was to gain control of two hundred Sharps' rifles, owned by the Massachusetts Kansas Committee and stored in Tabor, Iowa. Thoreau himself felt this lack of communication. He recorded in his Journal for October, 1859: "I subscribed a trifle when he was here three years ago; I had such confidence in the man--that he would do right--but it would seem that he had not confidence in me, nor in anybody else I know, to communicate his plans to us."²⁹

Thoreau, however, was wrong in one significant respect: Brown had confided his ultimate plan to four men whom Thoreau knew intimately--Frank Sanborn, Edwin Morton, Thomas Higginson and Theodore Parker.³⁰ Why was it they, and not Thoreau, whom the terrible "Saint" included in his little army? Whereas Thoreau was

²⁹Journal, XII, p. 437.

³⁰Nevins, pp. 21-24, 73-74.

locked in the coils of individualism, they had divested themselves of it. They were willing to join what Thoreau's inner self rejected: a revolutionary society. He was not willing to accept fusion into a common cause; he sought only individual friends.

Why, then, was Thoreau the "outcast," passive observer of mankind, the first to applaud the militant Brown? What compelled Thoreau to praise a man whom Allan Nevins pointed out as having been an ignorant, narrow-minded, insane, fanatically prejudiced and thoroughly selfish egotist, with a vein of hard cruelty?³¹ Most of the virtues Thoreau had been so desperately seeking in a friend rested in John Brown. The challenging question in Thoreau's time, that issue which every man had to make a choice of either confronting or going around, was the institution of chattel slavery. Both men sought an end to the institution. Thoreau, however, not only sought desirable goals but justifiable means as well. Brown, on the other hand, used any method to achieve his desired end, no matter how violent.³² Nonetheless, Thoreau's affinity for Brown was not inconsistent with Thoreau's stated beliefs. In Walden, for example, Thoreau pleaded for each man to "step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."³³ Brown did exactly that;

³¹Ibid., pp. 9-32.

³²Carson, p. 151.

³³Thoreau, Walden and Selected Essays, p. 295.

he saw evil and rose against it.

In "Civil Disobedience" Thoreau expressed a philosophy congruent with Brown's activities. At best, Thoreau maintained, "government is . . . but an expedient."³⁴ One takes action against government "from principle, the perception and performance of right." Such action based on principle "changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything that was."³⁵ Lastly, if civil law is "of such a nature that it requires you to be an agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law."³⁶ In John Brown of Pottawatomie Thoreau found his man of principle--a just minority which Thoreau contended in "Life Without Principle" might overturn a tyrannical government.³⁷

Finally, Thoreau insisted in Walden: "I would not have any one adopt my mode of any account . . . but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way."³⁸ Both men expressed an independence of character, each in his unique way. Thoreau passively resisted a government that allowed slavery to

³⁴"Civil Disobedience," p. 189.

³⁵Ibid., p. 198.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Thoreau, Walden and Selected Essays, p. 427.

³⁸Ibid., p. 90.

exist, while Brown actively attacked the institution of slavery.

Brown believed himself to be morally justified in his raid on Harper's Ferry. He broke laws to do "right." Thoreau agreed. The summary of policy from "Civil Disobedience" indicates that Thoreau was not only consistent in speaking out in Brown's behalf but actually encouraged a righteous defiance of civil law. Justification for the use of violence, on the basis of moral necessity, is obviously a dangerous thesis; it may be used to condone the wildest fanaticism.³⁹ Each man, then, must be "very careful to find out and pursue his own way." To Thoreau this meant praise of a man not afraid to die for his beliefs. It meant desperate hours of confusion in which everything he had thought and known about his friend was being distorted in public and private, and it meant a plea to celebrate the character of a man who was being hammered into oblivion.

A Rhetorical Analysis

As noted earlier, it is most profitable to let the speech itself suggest a critical methodology. Consequently, Thoreau's "Plea" may be understood and examined in terms of a classical analysis. By 1859, the transcendental movement was moribund; its leaders had defected, and the familiar strategies had been

³⁹Carson, p. 155.

abandoned. Jones Very, for instance, had gone into seclusion, Orestes Brownson had converted to Catholicism, Christopher Cranch was living in Rome and was joined there by Theodore Parker following Brown's raid. As early as 1850, Emerson revealed in his journal the transcendentalists' sense of rejection and defeat: "I hurry now to my work admonished that I have few days left."⁴⁰

It would be a mistake to identify transcendental strategies of such figures as Parker, Emerson or Thoreau unless the reference is to the period from about 1840-1855. In Parker's famous sermon of 1840, "A Discourse of the Transient and Permanent in Christianity," for example, he spoke in the familiar pattern of the transcendentalists. In the following passage Parker sounded like Emerson when he said,

These words [Christ's] have become the breadth of the good, the hope of the good, the hope of the wise, the joy of the pious, and that for many, many millions of hearts, they are the prayers of our churches; our better devotion by fireside and fieldside; the enchantment of our hearts. It is these words that still work wonders, to which the first recorded miracles were nothing in grandeur and utility. It is these which build our temples and beautify our homes. They raise our thoughts of sublimity; they purify our ideal of purity; they hallow our prayer for truth and love. They make beautiful and divine, the life which plain men lead. They give wings to our aspirations. What charmers they are!⁴¹

⁴⁰Emerson, Works, V, p. 246.

⁴¹Parker, Speeches, Addresses and Occasional Sermons, I, pp. 2-3.

After 1848, Parker abandoned the strategy and language of the movement. Compare his early speeches at West Roxbury with his later efforts at Faneuil Hall. The addresses at West Roxbury were laced with references to Pindar and Phidias. The later speeches, such as the "Boston Kidnapping" and "The Nebraska Question," emphasized American history and the Minutemen. Furthermore, the lecture at the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in Boston, delivered in 1852, demonstrated how Parker sacrificed the spontaneity and the imagination of his earlier efforts for a more orderly presentation. The organizational pattern was painstakingly clear: "First, I will speak of the present crisis in our affairs; then of the political parties amongst us; then of the manner in which this crisis is met; next of the forces of freedom; and last, of its friends."⁴² Such an approach was hardly consistent with the "strategy of transcendence." Parker had not abandoned transcendental doctrine, but merely the modes of expression.

Thoreau's "Plea" exemplified similar changes in method. Thoreau was decidedly transcendental in his 1843 essay, "A Winter Walk":

The sun rises as proudly over such a glen as over the valley of the Seine or the Tiber, and it seems the residence of a pure and self-subsistent valor, . . . Here reign the simplicity and purity of a primitive age, and a health and hope far remote from towns and cities. Standing

⁴²Ibid., II, p. 104.

quite alone, far in the forest, while the wind is shaking down snow from the trees, and leaving the only human tracks behind us, we find our reflections of a richer variety than the life of cities.⁴³

"Civil Disobedience" was a compendium of transcendental principles, and the flavor of "Slavery in Massachusetts" was appropriately captured in the title of Greeley's editorial, "A Higher-Law Speech." By 1859, however, Thoreau no longer resorted to the strategies which had characterized the movement's discourse. "A Plea for Captain John Brown" contained, for example, few epigrams or quotable sentences; no "thunderbolts" of revelations were fired at the audience; no vague or mystical references were included in the address.

In the past, Thoreau had refused to "cheapen" himself by considering his audience. This time, however, he deliberately sought converts and refrained from delivering iconoclastic bombshells. Although most of the material in the "Plea" can be found in his Journal, Thoreau did not include all of his notes in the final draft. One of the omissions Thoreau made when transforming his comments into the final address was the following paragraph, written on the first day he learned of Brown's attack.

The brutish, thick-skinned herd, who do not know a man by sympathy, make haste home from their ballot-boxes and churches to their Castles of Indolence, perchance to cherish their valor there with some nursery talk of knights

⁴³Thoreau, Walden and Selected Essays, pp. 311-312.

and dragons. A whole nation will for ages cling to the memory of its Arthur, or other imaginary hero, who perhaps never assailed its peculiar institutions or sin, and, being imaginary, never failed, when they are themselves the very freebooters and craven knights whom he routed, while they forget their real heroes.⁴⁴

In one swipe, Thoreau struck at the cherished beliefs of his townsmen. While one of Thoreau's aims was to stir his neighbors, another was to defend a man's character and actions. Neither purpose would have advanced if the audience were antagonized.

Thoreau must have also felt that verbal attacks on Christ and the churches would be too offensive to the audience. Though not all statements concerning religion and religious groups were omitted, the following two passages were deleted:

If Christ should appear on earth he would on all hands be denounced as a mistaken, misguided man, insane and crazed.⁴⁵

Thus the insane man preaches, while the representatives of so-called Christians (I refer to the Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions), who pretend to be interested in the heathen, dare not so much protest against the foreign slave-trade.⁴⁶

The material Thoreau did not transfer from his Journal to the "Plea" consisted primarily of those remarks which could incense his listeners to the point where any favorable reaction to his defense of Brown would be thwarted. Examples of additional critical

⁴⁴Journal, XII, p. 405.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 407.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 415-416.

passages which were deleted include the following:

It galls me to listen to the remarks of craven-hearted neighbors who speak disparagingly of Brown.⁴⁷

I speak to the stupid and timid chattels of the north, pretending to read history and their Bibles, desecrating every house and every day they breathe in!⁴⁸

Who is here so base, that would be a bondman? Who is here so vile, that will not love his country? If any, speak; for him have I offended. I pause for a reply.⁴⁹

The omissions help demonstrate Thoreau's attempt to refrain from alienating his audience, but--by design--he did not entirely succeed.

Essentially, the occasion for this address demanded that Thoreau be heard. He tried to omit passages from the Journal that might offend his audience and abandoned the strategies which had proven ineffective. As we will investigate in the next section, transcendentalism remained a guiding influence in Thoreau's life, but on that Sunday evening in Concord's Town Hall, he no longer sounded like a transcendentalist. As a speaker modifies his discourse, so should the critic adapt his approach.

Invention: Extrinsic Factors

Invention, which deals with the speaker's source of ideas, is probably the most important part of rhetoric. Thonssen and

⁴⁷ibid., p. 401.

⁴⁸ibid., p. 412.

⁴⁹ibid., p. 417.

Baird speak of invention and its crucial importance in the following manner:

Invention involves the attempt on the part of the orator, as Cicero says, "to find out what he should say" It is an investigative undertaking, embracing a survey and forecast of the subject and a search for the arguments suitable to the given rhetorical effort Thus certain writers--Aristotle among them--give more attention to invention than to the other parts of rhetoric. This is done on the ground, and perhaps properly, that the content is the most important part of a speech.⁵⁰

Having considered Thoreau's experiences on the speaker's platform and the relationships between him and Brown, we are now ready to discover some of the external sources for his "Plea." The most obvious of such sources are newspaper accounts of Brown's raid, anti-slavery influences in New England and in the Thoreau household, and Henry's conversations with Brown. The most important sources, however, were Thoreau's own proclamations on the anti-slavery issue, progressing from "Civil Disobedience" through "Slavery in Massachusetts" to "A Plea for Captain John Brown." It is a progression of increased resistance to the state as an institution. In "Civil Disobedience" his resistance was "peaceable" and consisted primarily of his refusal to pay taxes. In the second he advocated violation of the Fugitive Slave Law. In his third statement he endorsed a man who openly rebelled against the whole state, not just one law.

⁵⁰Thonssen and Baird, p. 79.

Subtly, slowly, surely, the belief in justified violence had been capturing Thoreau's mind. Passive resistance was not enough in a state that had stopped recognizing human rights. By October, 1859, Thoreau's creed reflected the increasing violence of the conflict; that is, in the eyes of God the shot of a rifle and the impact of anti-slavery ideas might bring the same end and, with a man of principle such as Brown, have the same justification. Shall John Brown be disparaged for resorting to violence, Thoreau must have argued to himself, when Massachusetts, which would defend the hen-roosts of Concord by violence if necessary, tolerated slavery?

Thoreau's inner argument may not have been really philosophic, but it was human enough. Almost single handedly, a man had attacked an institution which governments were afraid to touch. Let the man be highly principled, Thoreau concluded, and we shall approve of his deeds, praise them and, if necessary, share them. "I do not wish to kill or be killed," Thoreau wrote in his Journal while Brown was on trial, "but I can foresee circumstances in which both of these things would be by me unavoidable. In extremities I could even be killed."⁵¹ To understand Thoreau's inventive process in defending John Brown, there is no mistaking the break with a previously inflexible conviction. In none of his previous

⁵¹ Journal, XII, p. 437.

statements had Thoreau gone beyond advocating passive resistance, and whatever Brown was, he was certainly not passive. The remark, "even be killed," moreover, was not comic for Thoreau. As an ardent individualist, Thoreau must have found it in theory almost as difficult to imagine himself dying for others as Thoreau, the detester of violence, found it difficult to imagine himself killing another individual.⁵²

Cautious though this last Journal statement may seem, like Thoreau's championship of John Brown, it involved acceptance of some "social responsibility." And from the speech itself one can judge that Thoreau had changed; he was counting numbers, empathizing with a group: "[Brown] and his six sons, and his son-in-law, not to enumerate the other, . . . in teaching us [*italics mine*] how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live."⁵³ Perhaps the most significant testimony of Thoreau's recognition of "social responsibility" and identification with the "other" was his transference of his words from private to public utterances; he altered the impersonal character of the Journal entries. Whereas he had written "I understand that" or "I have been told he made such a

⁵²Joseph Wood Krutch, Henry David Thoreau (Toronto: William Sloane, Inc., 1948), p. 236.

⁵³Writings, IV, pp. 432, 435.

remark as this,"⁵⁴ from the platform he bluntly stated, "I heard him say that" or "He said!"⁵⁵ Thoreau was proudly declaring that John Brown was his friend; he was at last recognizing a moral relationship of I-Thou.

As indicated earlier, Thoreau had little to say specifically about Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry. He pleaded not for Brown's life but for his character and denounced those who spoke timidly against slavery yet who were afraid to say a word in defense of Brown. Thoreau, however, did not lose sight of his transcendental principles. In one vein he wanted to arouse, to lead, to help settle the great struggle of his time, by force if necessary; in the other he proclaimed himself an avowed recluse, unable to share a common opinion with anyone. This was Thoreau's fatal contradiction full blown. Since the rhetorical critic "tries to appraise and tries to get at the root of the man's thinking,"⁵⁶ no examination of Thoreau's stock of ideas would be complete without analyzing his transcendentalism as it related to John Brown, for the highest praise he gave to Brown was that he thought of him as a transcendentalist.⁵⁷

⁵⁴Journal, XII, pp. 426, 435.

⁵⁵Writings, IV, p. 409.

⁵⁶Thonssen and Baird, p. 340.

⁵⁷Writings, IV, p. 437.

In many ways, the best description of Thoreau was in Emerson's perceptive statement on transcendentalism in 1842. Emerson described the transcendentalist as believing, first, that "You may think me a child of circumstances: I make my own circumstance."⁵⁸ The perfectibility of man became the perfectibility of the individual. The transcendentalist, Emerson declared, was lonely and shunned society as imperfect, as evil. "He who so goes to walk alone, accuses the world."⁵⁹ Although in later years Thoreau rarely read Emerson's works, "The Transcendentalist" appeared at a critical moment in Thoreau's life. There is no question that he read it avidly,⁶⁰ for it was one of the seminal works in his life. Consider, for example, the following Journal entry as Thoreau incorporated the gospel of transcendentalism into his thinking:

I cannot see the bottom of the sky, because I cannot see the bottom of myself. It is the symbol of my own infinity. My eye penetrates as far into the ether as that depth is inward from which my contemporary thought springs.⁶¹

Unlike John Brown, the faithful transcendentalist never planned. Everything had to be instinctive and new. "I do not wish

⁵⁸ Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Stephen Whicher, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 195.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 200.

⁶⁰ Walter Harding, Thoreau's Library (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1957), p. 48.

⁶¹ Journal, 1, p. 150.

to do one thing but once. I do not love routine," Emerson proclaimed.⁶² But when a transcendentalist did act, the action could be revolutionary. To illustrate this, Emerson quoted Jacobi, the transcendental moralist who said:

[I] would assassinate like Timoleon; would perjure myself like Epaminodas and John de Witt. I would resolve on suicide like Cato; I would commit sacrilege with David; yea, and pluck corn of the Sabbath, for no other reason than that I was suffering from lack of food. For I have assurance in myself, that, in pardoning those faults according to the letter, man exerts the sovereign rights which the majesty of his being confers on him.⁶³

With this sort of eloquence, transcendentalism conferred on individualism a standard of morality. Yet, every action based on one man's "sovereign rights" is bound to debase the sovereign rights of another man; consequently, few transcendentalists ever acted at all, for they knew that all acts were in some way invasive of others.

It was the reaction to the invasion of another's inalienable rights that the transcendentalists had to face in their assessment of John Brown. Brown tried to get people to do what they did not want to do; and when they fought back, he killed them. In theory, however, transcendentalism had such respect for the private character of man that it would hardly judge Brown at all, let alone

⁶²Whicher, p. 202.

⁶³Ibid.

condemn him to death. To Thoreau, in the final analysis, Brown appeared as one who followed the voice within himself, even though it led him into opposition with the state; hence, to a man who believed in the supreme dignity of the individual man, Brown was a transcendentalist.

If the source from which Thoreau's ideas in defense of John Brown appear to be inconsistent, it is because they were inconsistent. On one hand, we can ascribe this inconsistency to a natural growth and development of his thoughts over a period of years; on the other hand, we can attribute it to the fact that he was a very temperamental human being. Like most of us, he could be considerate, gentle and agreeable one moment and irascible the next. In his Journal for March 25, 1842, Thoreau said: "Great persons are not soon learned, not even their outlines, but they change like the mountains in the horizon as we ride along."⁶⁴ In analyzing the evolution of Thoreau's transcendentalism as well as his own proclamations on the anti-slavery issue, the principal fountainheads for his "Plea for Captain John Brown" emerge. He wanted to help settle the challenging question of his time by defending what he had come to believe were the righteous activities of his friend against an unjust state; on the other hand, he proclaimed himself to be detached from society, unable to share a common opinion with anyone. Indeed, Thoreau aptly personified his observation.

⁶⁴Journal, I, p. 347.

Invention: Intrinsic Factors

By 1859, as noted in Chapter IV, Thoreau and his Concord neighbors were still suspicious of one another; Henry was considered "unproductive" and insincere, while Thoreau regarded his townsmen as "mercenary."⁶⁵ These antecedent impressions concerning the character of the speaker⁶⁶ may be altered during the address by the speaker's demonstration of sagacity, integrity and good will.⁶⁷

⁶⁵A speaker's prior reputation is important in gauging his influence on the audience. For a further treatment of this subject, see A. Craig Baird, Rhetoric: A Philosophical Inquiry (New York: The Ronald Press, 1965), p. 113; and Bradley S. Greenberg and Gerald R. Miller, "The Effects of Low-Credible Sources on Message Acceptance," Speech Monographs, XXXIII (June, 1966), pp. 127-136.

⁶⁶The term "character of the speaker," credibility, reputation, image or ethos is used to encompass any and all aspects of the speaker's personality, intellect, temperament or other personal traits that may function during his interaction with the audience (Rosenthal, p. 114). It should be reemphasized, moreover, that analysis of a speech in terms of the traditional modes of "proof"--ethos, logos and pathos--is made in order to examine some of the parts that comprise the whole. The classical "means of persuasion," as indicated by the empirical studies cited in earlier chapters, are not genuinely discreet and distinguishable categories.

⁶⁷The Rhetoric of Aristotle, Lane Cooper, trans. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1932), p. 91; Aristotle's observation has been confirmed by Carl Hovland and Walter Weiss, "The Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness," Public Opinion Quarterly, XVI (December, 1961), pp. 635-650.

Typically, a speaker establishes rapport with his audience in order to make his ideas "palatable" and generate good will. However, to "a large audience, composed of men of all parties, assembled to hear Thoreau's address,"⁶⁸ Thoreau remarked at the outset:

Little as I know of Captain Brown, I would fain do my part to correct the tone and statements of the newspapers, and of my country-men generally, respecting his character and actions We can at least express our sympathy with, and admiration of, him and his companions, and that is what I now propose to do.⁶⁹

Characteristically, Thoreau was willing to sacrifice the good-will of his audience to a certain extent; his integrity, however, was above reproach. In his work, Life Without Principle, Thoreau related that he took for granted whenever he lectured that the audience desired to hear what he thought about some subject, though he may be the greatest fool in the country; "and I resolve, accordingly, that I will give them a strong dose of myself."⁷⁰

Despite Thoreau's professed lack of knowledge about Captain Brown, he presented to the audience intimate details about the life of his righteous friend. Also, identification of Brown with the

⁶⁸Henry S. Salt, Life of Henry David Thoreau (London: Walter Scott, Ltd., 1896), pp. 139-140.

⁶⁹Writings, IV, p. 409.

⁷⁰Thoreau, Walden and Selected Essays, p. 421.

audience was evident in Thoreau's address; for example, Brown was by descent and birth a New England farmer, a man of great common sense, deliberate and practical as that class was. "He was like the best of those who stood at Concord Bridge once, on Lexington Common, and on Bunker Hill, only he was firmer and higher principled than any that I have chanced to hear of as there."⁷¹

The sincerity of Thoreau's words, which may be equated with his sense of mission--an attempt to celebrate the beauty of Brown's character and actions--is illustrated when he uttered:

I read all the newspapers I could get within a week after this event, and I do not remember in them a single expression of sympathy for these men The same journal which contained this pregnant news was chiefly filled, in parallel columns, with the reports of the political conventions that were to be held They [the readers] should have been spared this contrast,--been printed in an extra, at least. To turn from the voices and deeds of earnest men to the cackling of political conventions.⁷²

Although Brown's severe punishment at the hands of his captors appeared imminent, Thoreau was confident that "One higher than the high watcheth, and there are higher than they." His earnest and solemn overtures may be summarized as follows:

I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character,--his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and not his in the

⁷¹Writings, IV, p. 411.

⁷²Ibid., p. 421.

least. Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an Angel of light.⁷³

Thoreau developed his ethical "proof" as he created the Brown images: a highly principled man, of New England ancestry, reaching out against injustice; the saviour who put all of his life's energies into attacking evil; a man whose noble deeds were twisted and marred by shallow journalists. Essentially, then, Thoreau built his ethos by associating with the laudatory character and actions of Brown.

The effectiveness which Thoreau displayed in his use of ethical "proof" was also evident in his use of logical "proof." Let us consider, then, how he supported some of the logical "appeals" that were used in defending John Brown.

One of the main charges against Brown was that his actions were foolhardy--the work of a madman. Thoreau used strong language in rejecting this argument.

⁷³Ibid., p. 438.

On the whole, my respect for my fellowmen, except as one may outweigh a million, is not being increased these days. I have noticed the cold-blooded way in which newspaper writers and men generally speak of this event, . . . "Misguided! Garrulous! Insane! Vindictive!"⁷⁴

The following rhetorical syllogism illustrates the basis of Thoreau's attack against these charges:

All those who persistently and effectively stood up for the dignity of human nature were true patriots.

Brown persistently and effectively stood up for the dignity of human nature.

Brown, therefore, was a true patriot.

The above syllogism was also used in the body of Thoreau's "Plea." Thoreau, moreover, frequently reinforced his arguments by following analogy with analogy, piling image upon image or paradox on top of paradox.

⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 417, 439. "Cognition," "reason," "logic" and "thought" are terms often used interchangeably. "In the persuasive communication such activity is stimulated by certain combinations of visual and aural symbols issued by the speaker, and the totality of these stimuli and the cortically centered response is conventionally designated as the logical element of the communication." Egon Brunswick, Leon Festinger and Charles Osgood, Contemporary Approaches to Cognition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 43. The importance of logic or reason in discourse is discussed by Baird, pp. 51-76, and Gerald R. Miller and Thomas Nilsen, Perspectives on Argumentation (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1966), pp. 24-37.

He [Brown] could not have been tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist.⁷⁵

It seems as if no man had ever died in America before; for in order to die you must first have lived Franklin,--Washington,--they were let off without dying; they were merely missing one day.⁷⁶

Thoreau continued to build his case on behalf of Brown by employing negative evidence and constructing inductive arguments.

It is a relief to turn from these slanders to the testimony of his more truthful, but frightened jailers and hangmen. Governor Wise [of Virginia] speaks far more justly and appreciatingly of him than any Northern editor, or politician, or public personage, that I chance to have heard from. I know that you can afford to hear him [Wise] again on this subject. He says: "They are themselves mistaken who take him to be a madman He is cool, collected, and indomitable, and it is but just to him to say that he was humane to his prisoners And he inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth."⁷⁷

Thoreau further proclaimed:

The murderer always knows that he is justly punished; but when a government takes the life of a man without the consent of his conscience, it is an audacious government, and is taking a step towards its own dissolution. Is it not possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong? Are laws to be enforced simply because they were

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 425.

⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 434-435.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 428. Inductive and deductive reasoning are not separate, antagonistic processes. ". . . thought process . . . can be exhibited as either a deduction or an induction according to the point of view used in interpreting it." D. S. Robinson, The Principles of Reasoning (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947), p. 206. Induction, for example, can begin with concrete facts from which a general proposition may be framed.

made? or declared by any number of men to be good, if they are not good? Are judges to interpret the law according to the letter, and not the spirit?⁷⁸

Further examples of Thoreau's use of deductive reasoning come in his refutation of a government that maintained slavery and killed the liberators of the slave:

The only government that I recognize--and it matters not how few are at the head of it, or how small its army--is that power that establishes justice in the land, never that which establishes injustice.⁷⁹

The syllogism derived from this statement may be demonstrated as follows:

Only those governments which establish justice in the land are legitimate.

This government does not establish justice in the land.

This government, therefore, is not legitimate.

Thoreau next asserted that when a government takes the life of a man without the consent of his conscience, "it is an audacious government."⁸⁰ The premises inherent in this argument constituted an important part of Thoreau's basic plea.

All governments taking the life of a man without the consent of his conscience are audacious.

This government is taking the life of John Brown without the consent of his conscience.

This government, therefore, is audacious.

⁷⁸Ibid., pp. 437-438.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 430.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 437.

In final support of John Brown, Thoreau offered the following causal relationship: When the present form of slavery is abolished, "we shall be at liberty to weep for Captain Brown. Then, and not till then, will we take our revenge."⁸¹ When the hour-long speech was over, "the few rabid people were no longer talking of the gallows for John Brown;"⁸² and many of those who came to scoff, Edward Emerson observed, remained to pray.⁸³

The expressed purpose of Thoreau's speech has already been discussed; namely, to celebrate the character and actions of John Brown. However, what means were used to stir the imagination of his audience in order that they might sympathize with and admire John Brown? Aristotle, writing on persuasion, indicated the importance of emotion⁸⁴ in speaking. He spoke of the importance of

⁸¹Ibid., p. 440.

⁸²Leon Bazalgette, Henry Thoreau (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1924), p. 321.

⁸³Edward Emerson, p. 120.

⁸⁴Kretch and Crutchfield view emotion as a multi-dimensional term. "In its broadest psychological meaning the term emotion refers to a stirred-up state of the organism, reflected in three quite different ways: (1) emotional experience, e.g., the person feels angry; (2) emotional behavior, e.g., he curses and attacks his tormentor; (3) physiological changes in the body, e.g., the blood rushes to his face, the heart beats faster, etc. These three aspects are intimately related" D. Kretch and R. Crutchfield, Elements of Psychology (New York: Knopf, 1958), p. 230. Jon Eisen-son, J. Jeffrey Auer and John Irwin view emotion in similar terms. See The Psychology of Communication (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 69.

knowing that emotion to which the audience is most susceptible-- prejudice, pity, anger, hate and love--and adapting the message in such a way as to take advantage of that emotion to strengthen the persuasiveness of the presented message.⁸⁵ Baird,⁸⁶ Rosenthal⁸⁷ and Steele and Redding,⁸⁸ for example, have similarly acknowledged the importance of emotion in speaking.

The motives of courage and valor were prominent in Thoreau's "Plea." By his use of imagery the speaker helped clarify his message: The courageous and valiant efforts of Brown and his men would not go unnoticed. "I hear many condemn these men because they were so few," Thoreau proclaimed. But when were the good and the brave ever in the majority, he continued. The very fact that Brown had no troop of hirelings around him distinguished him from ordinary heroes. Although his company was small, every man who was at Harper's Ferry was a picked man, culled out of many thousands, perhaps millions; each man was of rare courage, devoted to humanity, and ready to sacrifice his life at any moment for the benefit of his

⁸⁵The Rhetoric of Aristotle, pp. 91-136.

⁸⁶Baird, pp. 116-140.

⁸⁷Rosenthal, p. 118.

⁸⁸Edward Steele and W. Charles Redding, "The American Value System: Premises for Persuasion," Western Speech, XXVI (Spring, 1962), pp. 83-91.

fellow man.⁸⁹ In at least one point in his speech, Thoreau's use of the metaphor was prophetic: "the steady, and for the most part successful, charge of this man for some years against the legions of slavery . . . do you think that will go unsung."⁹⁰ Two years later, all the troops of the North, preparing for war against the same South which John Brown had invaded before them, were singing: "John Brown's body lies a-mould'ring in the grave, but his soul goes marching on."

Stirred by friendship and emotion, an embattled soul himself, the speaker attempted to generate empathy for his "brother" by relating Brown's benign remarks to his captors:

"I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them; that is why I am here; not to gratify any personal animosity, revenge, or vindictive spirit. It is my sympathy with the oppressed and the wronged, that are as good as you, and as precious in the sight of God."⁹¹

Because of the sombre nature of this talk, Thoreau acquainted his audience with the virtuous character and probable fate of Old Brown by employing allusions, appropriately enough, from the ecclesiastical realm; hence, he attempted to evoke the spiritual passions of his audience. "There may have been a few stifled growls in certain corners of the hall," but no one protested. It was as if

⁸⁹Writings, IV, p. 432.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 418.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 439.

Thoreau's convictions "had stirred that soft dough."⁹²

What shall we think of a government to which all the truly brave and just men in the land are enemies, standing between it and those whom it oppresses? A government that pretends to be Christian and crucifies a million Christs every day!⁹³

.

You who pretend to care for Christ crucified, consider what you are about to do to him who offered himself to be the saviour of four millions of men.⁹⁴

Thoreau, in short, attempted to stir the imagination and galvanize the will of Concord's citizens by revealing the courage, valor and urgency of Brown's actions. Moreover, using imagery and emotionally stirring passages, Thoreau spoke of Brown as a martyred champion of individual freedom, victimized by an unjust State. Thoreau's speaking on behalf of Brown with conviction and eloquence caused Emerson, who was there to hear his friend, to record in his journal: "He was listened to by all respectfully, by many with a sympathy that surprised themselves."⁹⁵

Organization

Arrangement of the parts of Thoreau's "Plea" seems to fit closely that outlining pattern referred to by A. Craig Baird and

⁹²Bazalgette, p. 321.

⁹³Writings, IV, p. 430.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 437.

⁹⁵Whicher, p. 383.

Franklin H. Knowler in their text, General Speech. This pattern consists of three parts: (1) the introduction, which gives a background to the subject and makes the theme and purpose clear; (2) the body of the speech, which can be developed in chronological, topographical, definitional, classificational or problem-solution order; and (3) the conclusion, which includes such devices as summaries, questions, prophesies, quotations, anecdotes and striking statements.⁹⁶

In the introduction, Thoreau sympathetically portrayed Brown as a man fighting for a cause: "I would fain do my part to correct the tone and the statements of the newspapers, and of my countrymen generally, respecting his character and actions."⁹⁷ Thoreau then presented a biographical sketch of Brown, emphasizing Brown's resolve to "never have anything to do with any war, unless it were a war for liberty."⁹⁸ Coming early in the speech, this statement attempted to create an image of Brown as a crusader, not as a warrior.

In the body of the address, a man with a cause continued to be Thoreau's theme: "He had the courage to face his country

⁹⁶A. Craig Baird and Franklin H. Knowler, General Speech (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1957), pp. 61-88.

⁹⁷Writings, IV, p. 409.

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 410.

herself, when she was in the wrong."⁹⁹ Citing one of Brown's followers as his source, Thoreau discussed the Captain's moral and religious fiber, his "Spartan habits," his "common sense and directness of speech" coupled with "tact and prudence" and his almost herculean courage and faith.¹⁰⁰ "Superior numbers quailed before him," Thoreau told his Concord audience, "because they lacked a cause."¹⁰¹ With scorn for man and for human institutions, Thoreau hurled bitter protests at Brown's detractors and enemies.

Continuing, Thoreau came to one of his favorite topics:

When a government puts forth its strength on the side of injustice, as ours to maintain slavery and kill the liberators of the slave, it reveals itself merely a brute force The only government that I recognize--and it matters not how few are at the head of it, or how small its army--is that power that establishes justice in the land, never that which establishes injustice.¹⁰²

Thoreau then stated Brown's credo" "A man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave."¹⁰³

Before concluding, Thoreau repeated the theme of righteous defiance of an unjust government:

Is it not possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong? Are laws to be enforced simply because

⁹⁹Ibid., p. 411.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., pp. 412-413.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 416.

¹⁰²Ibid., pp. 429-430.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 433.

they were made? Or declared by any number of men to be good, if they are not good? Is there any necessity for a man's being a tool to perform a deed of which his better nature disapproves?¹⁰⁴

Finally, Thoreau began the conclusion by paraphrasing his opening remarks: "I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character" ¹⁰⁵ Thoreau prophesied that Brown's words would prove historically valid: "This question is still to be settled,--this negro question."¹⁰⁶ "Then," Thoreau predicted, " . . . we will take our revenge."¹⁰⁷

Thoreau's "Plea for Captain John Brown" may be outlined as follows:

Introduction

- I. "I do not wish to force my thoughts upon you, but I feel forced myself."
- II. I will do my part to correct the tone and the statements of the newspapers, and of my countrymen generally, respecting John Brown's character and actions.

Body

- I. Brown would "never have anything to do with any war, unless it were a war for liberty."

¹⁰⁴Ibid., IV, pp. 437-438. Similar questions were posed by Kant when he considered his categorical imperative. For an analysis of Kant's ethical theory, see Oliver A. Johnson (ed.), Ethics (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 179-201.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 438.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 440.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

- A. It was largely through his efforts that Kansas was a free state.
 - B. His courage extended to an attack on his own country, "when she was in the wrong."
- II. Brown's attack on the Federal arsenal was not a wild and desperate act.
- A. In the past, "superior numbers quailed before him . . . because they lacked a cause."
 - B. There are presently several individuals in every Northern town that applaud Brown's activities, and the number is growing.
- III. "Our foes are in our midst and all about us."
- A. Our enemy "is the all but universal woodenness of both head and heart"
 - 1. We are afraid to denounce injustices of all kinds.
 - 2. The modern Christian "shows the whites of his eyes on the Sabbath, and the blacks all the rest of the week."
 - B. Not one newspaper, within a week after the attack, has expressed any sympathy or admiration for Brown and his Crusaders.
 - 1. Newspaper and magazine editors print what is expedient, not what is true.
 - 2. Condemnation of Brown and his men "suggests what a sane set of editors we are blessed with, not "mistaken men"; who know very well on which side their bread is buttered, at least."
 - 3. Influential editors cannot conceive of Brown's magnanimity, for they are "accustomed to deal with politicians, men of an infinitely lower grade."
- IV. The assault on Harper's Ferry brings out the character of the United States government.

- A. Any government which supports injustice, as ours does in maintaining slavery and killing the liberators of the oppressed, reveals itself "a demoniacal force."
 - B. "The only government that I recognize . . . is that which establishes justice in the land"
- V. Every man has a perfect right to forcefully interfere with the slaveholder in order to free the slaves.
- A. Many condemn Brown and his men because they were so few in number, but "when were the good and brave ever in a majority?"
 - B. In teaching us how to die, these men have taught us how to live.
 - 1. In order to die, you must first have lived.
 - 2. "If you know how to begin, you will know when to end."
- VI. "Who is it whose safety requires that Captain Brown be hung?
- A. The criminal always knows when he is justly punished.
 - B. Any government which takes the life of a man without the consent of his conscience "is an audacious government."
 - 1. Laws should be interpreted by judges not according to the letter but according to the spirit.
 - 2. "Is it the intention of law-makers that good men shall be hung ever?"

Conclusion

- I. "I am here to plead his cause with you."
 - A. The crucifixion of Christ and Brown's hanging are like "the two ends of a chain which is not without its links."
 - B. Only when the present form of slavery is abolished will we "be at liberty to weep for Captain Brown."

Thoreau, it would appear, structured his arguments around a special topical sequence based upon a series of related ideas. As a result, the organizational pattern demonstrated strong unity and coherence.

Style

"The third part of rhetoric," said Thonssen and Baird, "was originally called elocutio, and it referred specifically to style."¹⁰⁸ It embraces the concept of expression in language,¹⁰⁹ resulting from the choice of words and their arrangement or composition.

Thoreau's "Plea" was no lecture on Walden Pond, which took eight years to have the jeweler's touch applied; he had little time in which to string together a glittering continuity of remarks. Yet, there was a simplicity and forthrightness in Thoreau's speech. The passion of the unpolished sentences was different from the sputter of fireworks with which Thoreau usually proceeded; and although the speech contained few "thunderbolts," few epigrams or

¹⁰⁸Thonssen and Baird, p. 79.

¹⁰⁹"Language," stated Baird, is "the broad term to encompass all communication through words and their combinations that produce artistic and literary effect" (p. 141). He further observed, "Language is the instrumentality by which speakers and writers embody their ideas, their logical and emotional supports, and their thematic development. The aim is to produce comprehension and favorable response" (p. 153). Language and style, moreover, are often used interchangeably (pp. 141-169).

quotable sentences, his use of several stylistic devices should be noted here. These devices included use of the metaphor, simile, rhetorical questions and emotionally loaded words.

Thoreau's "Plea" sparkled with metaphors. He employed strong, direct, austere images which made his homeliest statements among his very best. In order to achieve distinction in style, Thoreau returned to one of his favorite stylistic techniques-- piling image upon image.

The thoughtful man becomes a hermit in the thoroughfares of the market-place. Impassable seas suddenly find their level between us, or dumb steppes stretch themselves out there. It is the difference of constitutions, of intelligence, and faith, and not streams and mountains, that make the true and impassable boundaries between individuals and between states.¹¹⁰

The following metaphors further heightened the vividness of Thoreau's "Plea":

No doubt you can get more in your market for a quart of milk than for a quart of blood, but that is not the market that heroes carry their blood to.¹¹¹

[Brown] went to the great university of the West, where he sedulously pursued the study of Liberty . . . and having taken many degrees, he finally commenced the public practice of Humanity in Kansas.¹¹²

We can well believe Emerson's statement that the speech "was listened to by all respectfully, by many with a sympathy that

¹¹⁰Writings, IV, p. 421.

¹¹¹Ibid., p. 418.

¹¹²Ibid., p. 411.

surprised themselves." The following simile may very well explain why, towards the end of the address, "there was electricity in the air and in the applause."¹¹³

Such do not know [critics of Brown] that like the seed is the fruit, and that, in the moral world, when good seed is planted, good fruit is inevitable, and does not depend on our watering and cultivating; that when you plant, or bury, a hero in the field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up. This is a seed of such force and vitality, that it does not ask our leave to germinate.¹¹⁴

Comparison and contrast were employed by Thoreau in order to highlight the righteous character of Brown. Brown's enemies were dwarfed and defeated in his presence: "on the one side, half-brutish, half-timid questioning; on the other, truth, clear as lightning, crashing into their obscene temples." Brown's captors were made to stand with Pilate and the Inquisition, while his remarks at the time of his capture were "like the speeches of Cromwell."¹¹⁵

Rhetorical questions also abounded in Thoreau's "Plea." As we have seen, he wanted to relate not merely the event but the empathy which had been established in his own consciousness between himself and Brown. When he attacked Brown's critics, Thoreau spoke

¹¹³Bazalgette, p. 321.

¹¹⁴Writings, IV, p. 418.

¹¹⁵Ibid., pp. 414, 426.

with the terse vehemence of a man whose rage was increased by the fact that he had to waste precious time in the irritating business of scolding them. Note, for example, the following statement:

As for the herd of newspapers and magazines, I do not chance to know an editor in the country who will deliberately print anything which he knows will ultimately and permanently reduce the number of his subscribers. They do not believe that it would be expedient. How then can they print truth?¹¹⁶

When Thoreau was not trying to convey the tang of a particular sensation, he was apt to take an argumentative tone. His style was concrete and solid, adapted for a striking impact. Although Thoreau was not descended from preachers--nor did he have any sympathy for organized religion--he used homiletic phrases to strengthen his case. The following analogy, for instance, illustrated Thoreau's keen awareness of including emotion in speaking:

You who pretend to care for Christ crucified, consider what you are about to do to him who offered himself to be the saviour of four millions of men.¹¹⁷

.

Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 422.

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 437.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 438.

Thoreau concluded his speech by employing verbal images and historical allusions:

I foresee the time when the painter will paint that scene at Harper's Ferry, no longer going to Rome for a subject; the poet will sing it; the historian record it; and, with the Landing of the Pilgrims and the Declaration of Independence, it will be the ornament of some future national gallery, when at least the present form of slavery shall be no more.¹¹⁹

From these examples it can be seen that Thoreau mastered and favored some definite stylistic devices. He used such embellishments as the metaphor, simile, rhetorical question and comparison and contrast to advantage. Essentially, Thoreau spoke on behalf of John Brown as though nothing were necessary except passionate sincerity and as though an effective style were nothing more than simple, direct statements with conviction behind them.¹²⁰

To observe the richness, the variety and the originality of Thoreau's imagination is both instructive and captivating. His words were jagged, sharp and immovable; he enticed the unwilling to see his point.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 440.

¹²⁰Krutch, p. 267.

Delivery

Delivery includes voice control, physical appearance and movement. Of this element Cicero declared:

Many have said that the faculty of greatest use to the speaker and the most valuable for persuasion is Delivery. For my part, I should not readily say that any one of the five faculties is the most important; that an exceptionally great usefulness resides in the delivery I should boldly affirm.¹²¹

Cicero's assertion is hardly extreme, and the importance of delivery in public address is not without support.¹²²

Thoreau's delivery can only be analyzed on the basis of what was recorded during his lifetime. We have seen that Thoreau was both a success and a failure as a public speaker. He could delight his audiences, and they enjoyed him immensely. He did not, however, have the necessary platform "appeal" to convey his more lofty messages unless he was aroused enough to forget his self-consciousness and deliver a burning address. In his "Plea," as in his attack on "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau's delivery was dynamic and forceful.

¹²¹Cicero's Rhetorica: Ad Herennium, Harry Caplan, trans. (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1954), pp. 189-191.

¹²²See, for example, Harold P. Zelko, "Is Oratory a Lost Art?" Quarterly Journal of Speech, XXXI (February, 1955), pp. 40-48; and Paul Heinberg, "Relationships of Content and Delivery to General Effectiveness," Speech Monographs, XXX (June, 1963), pp. 105-112.

In height, he was about average, but his limbs were rather longer than usual. His face, once seen, could not easily be forgotten. The features were quite marked; the nose very Roman, described as more like a beak; the brows large and overhanging, deepset blue eyes--eyes which expressed all shades of feeling but which were never weak. His hair was a dark brown, exceedingly abundant, fine and soft. The mouth, with prominent lips, pursed up with meaning and thought when silent but channeled the most varied and instructive sayings when open. His whole body had an active earnestness, as if he had not a moment to waste; the clenched hand implied purpose.¹²³

Thoreau had more expression and enthusiasm in his voice than usual. No longer was he a man bored with the necessity of uttering fine-spun sarcasms before rows and rows of eyes that could not understand him; he fervently attempted to celebrate Brown's actions instead of excusing the crime. Even in his impromptu remarks before and after the speech, it was as if he had lost all his old shyness and discovered how to communicate with men. Thoreau spoke fluently and in a tone of exaltation thundered against the Union, the President and the State of Massachusetts.¹²⁴

¹²³Channing, p. 25.

¹²⁴Bazalgette, p. 321.

As in "Civil Disobedience" and the "Slavery" speech following the Burns incident, Thoreau read his address. His forceful and passionate delivery, however, outweighed some of the disadvantages common to a manuscript presentation; namely, the difficulty of presenting the manuscript effectively and reading at the audience instead of talking with them. The Liberator, which had been singled out for particular chastisement, bitingly acknowledged Thoreau's ringing delivery:

This exciting theme seemed to have awakened "the hermit of Concord" from his usual state of philosophic indifference, and he spoke with real enthusiasm A very large audience listened . . . giving hearty applause to some of the most energetic expressions of the speaker.¹²⁵

Delivery, like the other traditional canons, is to be identified with the total communication process.¹²⁶ In desiring his audience to receive the full impact of his message and experience emotional kinship with John Brown, we may conclude that Thoreau's delivery was highly effective. Minot Pratt, upon returning home from Concord's Town Hall, described "the whole man speaking" when he wrote to his wife:

¹²⁵Liberator, November 4, 1859, p. 2.

¹²⁶The concept of process in communication indicates "we view events and relationships as dynamic, on-going, ever-changing, continuous. When we label something as process, we also mean that it does not have a beginning, an end, a fixed sequence of events. It is not static, at rest. It is moving. The ingredients within a process interact; each affects all the others." David Berlo, The Process of Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960), p. 24.

Henry spoke of [Brown] in terms of the most unqualified eulogy. I never heard him before speak so much in praise of any man The lecture was full of Henry's quaint and strong expressions: hitting the politicians in the hardest manner, and showing but little of that veneration which is due to our beloved President and all the government officials, who are laboring so hard and so disinterestedly for the welfare of our dear people. The church also, as a body, came in for a share of whipping, and it was laid on right earnestly.¹²⁷

Effectiveness

"It is not a simple task," stated Thonssen and Baird, "to trace the influence of a speaker's words upon the public mind. Influences operating upon people at a given time may be manifold and completely related." They went on to say, however,

By its nature, speaking is a response-getting activity. Conceived as an act of communication, it seeks to realize an end or objective agreeable to the purpose of the orator.¹²⁸

Concluding that ". . . response is the key determinant of effectiveness," Thonssen and Baird indicated that it can be measured

¹²⁷ Quoted in Concord Journal, December 8, 1932, p. 1.

¹²⁸ Thonssen and Baird, p. 448.

either immediately or ultimately.¹²⁹

Having stirred the people of Concord, Thoreau did not let the message lose its initial force. On October 31 he wrote to his friend Harrison Blake and offered to repeat the lecture in Worcester if only his expenses would be paid.¹³⁰ On the same day a telegram arrived from Charles W. Slack, director of the Fraternity Lectures in Boston, asking Thoreau to repeat the lecture in Boston on November 1.¹³¹

Thoreau immediately accepted the invitation and spoke at Tremont Temple. The auditorium, one of Boston's largest, was filled, and Thoreau again spoke with great success. Many of the major Boston newspapers reported and discussed the lecture at length. The Boston Journal, for example, noted that many of his statements had

¹²⁹Ibid. In a similar vein, Fotheringham distinguishes between consummatory and instrumental effect. A consummatory effect is "a receiver response to a message which is valued by the persuader as an end in itself and not for its capacity to generate further behavior" (p. 225). An instrumental effect, on the other hand, is viewed as "an effect in a receiver generative of that further behavior sought by a persuader" (p. 257). Fotheringham, however, is less ambiguous about the goal of all persuasive efforts; it includes action in the form of either adoption, continuance, deterrence or discontinuance by members of an audience (pp. 32-33).

¹³⁰Thoreau, Correspondence, II, p. 413.

¹³¹Charles W. Slack, in a telegram to Thoreau, October 31, 1859. The original document is located in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

been greeted with applause.¹³² The Boston Atlas & Daily Bee, a pro-slavery newspaper, after devoting several columns to reporting the speech, condemned it as the views of a fanatic.¹³³ Another newspaper, complaining that Thoreau extolled Brown's virtues above every other man that ever lived, thought his views "high-wrought."¹³⁴ Garrison's Liberator, irritated that Thoreau had singled it out for not defending Brown, acknowledged that "this exciting theme seemed to have awakened 'the hermit of Concord' from his usual state of philosophic indifference" but dismissed the lecture in three brief paragraphs.¹³⁵ The New York Daily Tribune, equally annoyed at Thoreau's denunciations, dismissed his ideas as "foolish and ill natured" and complained,

Editors like those of The Tribune and The Liberator, . . . while the lecturer was cultivating beans and killing woodchucks on the margin of Walden Pond, made a public opinion strong enough on Anti-Slavery grounds to tolerate a speech from him in defense of insurrection.¹³⁶

¹³²Boston Journal, November 2, 1859, p. 3.

¹³³Boston Atlas & Daily Bee, November 3, 1859, pp. 2-3.

¹³⁴Unidentified clipping in Bronson Alcott's Journal.

¹³⁵Liberator, November 4, 1859, p. 2.

¹³⁶New York Daily Tribune, November 5, 1859, p. 2.

On November 3 Thoreau repeated his "Plea" in Worcester. Blake had rented Washburn Hall and announced that a ten-cent admission would be charged. The Worcester Spy encouraged its readers to attend because Thoreau never dealt in commonplaces, and "what he has to say is likely to be worth hearing."¹³⁷ Three Worcester weekly newspapers, Spy, Palladium and Aegis and Transcript, however, made no further reference to Thoreau's speech following the November 3 endorsement.

Public response soon after Thoreau's speech is important because it played a significant role in the strength of later effects. "A Plea for Captain John Brown" is perhaps the most impelling of all of Thoreau's anti-slavery addresses. Although Brown and his raiders have been buried for more than a century, Thoreau's "Plea" remains vibrant and alive.¹³⁸

Summary

In the raid on Harper's Ferry on October 16, 1859, Thoreau finally found his man of principle. John Brown had asserted the right of the individual to resist the authority of an unjust government. Angered by highly emotional and somewhat distorted reports which poured from all quarters about John Brown, Thoreau felt the need for a defense of Brown.

¹³⁷ Worcester Spy, November 3, 1859, p. 2.

¹³⁸ Harding, pp. 417-418.

In the midst of the shock waves from Harper's Ferry, Thoreau distinguished himself from all other reformers by being the first to publically speak out in Brown's defense. Thoreau's "Plea for Captain John Brown," as we have seen, was first read at a meeting of citizens of Concord on October 30, 1859. It was moulded almost entirely from notes in his Journal, which had been written during the days immediately following Brown's raid on October 16 of that year.

The occasion for this speech demanded that Thoreau be heard, and he abandoned the transcendental strategies which had proven ineffective with popular audiences. Since it is most profitable to let the discourse itself suggest a critical methodology, Thoreau's "Plea" has been examined in terms of a classical analysis. The traditional parts--invention, organization, style and delivery--should be identified with the total process. All of these elements "act together spontaneously at the moment of expression. The binding factor is the purpose in each case to affect an audience response . . . in a purposeful direction."¹³⁹

In this stirring address Thoreau proclaimed that Brown's raid was the best news that America ever had. To Thoreau, Brown was braver than the patriots who met the enemy at Lexington and Bunker

¹³⁹Baird, p. 212.

Hill. Those men had the courage to face their country's enemy, but Brown had the courage to face his own country when it was wrong. Thoreau thought of Brown as a man of rare common sense, transcendentalist above all, and as a man of ideas and principles. No man in America, he continued, had ever stood up so inflexibly for the dignity of human nature. Brown, moreover, could not be tried by a jury of his peers, for his peers did not exist. Whereas the Liberator, for example, called Brown's efforts "misguided, wild and insane," Thoreau concluded that the beauty of Brown's character, the resolve that made up the totality of his life, quickened the feeble pulse of the irresolute North.

Thoreau's "Plea" was divided into three main sections: introduction, body and conclusion. To an audience that had scarcely heard a word in Brown's favor and that often misunderstood Thoreau's motives, Thoreau attempted to identify himself with a man he had come to believe was a Crusader and an embattled soul. Thus he endeavoured to stir the imagination of his audience by creating the image of Brown as a man with a just cause. He concluded by sanctioning righteous defiance of an unjust government and prophesied that Brown's words to his captors would prove historically valid: "this question is still to be settled,--this negro question, . . . the end of that is not yet." Thoreau effectively used such stylistic devices as the metaphor, simile, rhetorical question and

comparison and contrast. The content and style were reinforced by a voice which was used to advantage. He read his speech as if it burned him, convinced that effective style and delivery consisted of simple, direct statements uttered with conviction and passionate sincerity. His "Plea" was not only "heard by all respectfully," but "many of those who came to scoff remained to pray."

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

"It is not the critic who counts . . . the credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly . . . who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat."

Theodore Roosevelt

Richard Weaver has perceptively stated that "nowhere does a man's rhetoric catch up with him more completely than in the topics he chooses to win other men's assent."¹ For all intents and purposes, Thoreau's defense of John Brown in 1859 was almost his final act before he became a dying man; it marked the end of more than twenty years as a speaker on the Lyceum platform and the culmination of increased resistance to the state as an institution. In "Civil Disobedience" his resistance was "peaceable" and consisted mainly of his refusal to pay taxes. In "Slavery in Massachusetts," his second major proclamation on the anti-slavery issue, Thoreau

¹Richard M. Weaver, The Ethics of Rhetoric (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), p. 114.

advocated violation of the Fugitive Slave Law. In his third statement, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau endorsed a man who openly had rebelled against the whole state, not just one law. Thoreau's anti-slavery remarks, then, have been considered more as a campaign than as isolated persuasive efforts. As Fotheringham indicated:

persuasion is more typically a campaign through time rather than a one-shot effort. Exceptions can be found, as in mail-order or door-to-door persuasion, but generally an effort is seldom limited to a single measure. A structured series of messages is more often developed, using varied media, message forms, and codes.²

The purpose of this study has been to determine in what manner Thoreau's unique qualities as a speaker were reflected in "Civil Disobedience," "Slavery in Massachusetts" and in defense of John Brown. "If we are to fully understand the achievement of the 'Sage of Walden,' we cannot afford to neglect his work as a lecturer,"³ for in his own day Thoreau was probably as widely known as a speaker as he was a writer. Tompkins has recently observed that Thoreau is a "natural" candidate for rhetorical explication if for no other reason than because he was a "careful student of rhetoric."⁴ The aim of this work, furthermore, has been to

²Fotheringham, pp. xvi-xvii.

³Harding, "The Lectures of Henry David Thoreau," p. 38.

⁴Tompkins, p. 436.

demonstrate how Thoreau's general philosophy of social reform was mirrored by speaking out on the issue that every man had to either confront or avoid: the peculiar institution of chattel slavery.

Any discussion of a speaker's development would have been incomplete without consideration of the impressions he received from his social, political, economic and religious environments. Some of the most interesting years of the American experiment occurred from the 1830's until the outbreak of the Civil War. That era witnessed the beginning of an incredible expansion toward material prosperity, paralleled by an outburst of spiritual and intellectual fervor. The crust of Puritanism shattered, and new ideologies emerged. A part of the nation became humanitarian, turning the moral force of Puritan or Quaker heritage toward the perfectibility of man; another part divorced itself from all the old disciplines in a race for the dollars that began to roll; a third part, aware that the country had become a continent, began to amass economic power. Outwardly stable in the settled East and South, inwardly it was bubbling with conflicts between idealism and materialism, abolitionism and slavery, zeal and common sense, religion and the gospel of success.⁵ The thirties, forties and fifties were the years of maturity for Henry Thoreau, with the economic, intellectual

⁵Morison and Commager, I, pp. 541-562.

and spiritual climate of New England as varied, distinctive and in some ways more distinguished than that of America generally.

The generation of New England Americans before the Civil War participated in reform movements which ranged over the whole spectrum of social change. They turned from bankruptcy reform to public education, from women's rights to temperance and vegetarianism, from spiritualism to the abolition of capital punishment. Above all, in that ferment of reform the more courageous came to grips with the slavery question.

Radical abolitionism--a movement which sought freedom for the slave and recognition of his rights as a human being--was a compelling force in a world awakening to new concepts of humanity. Indeed, the chief characteristic of the period was the insistence upon the inherent rights of all men. The right to the pursuit of "life, liberty and happiness" was no longer viewed as the privilege of those who had estates of a certain value or those who were strong enough mentally and physically to win their own way. "Democracy was coming into its own, and expressing itself rather in terms of the brotherhood of human beings than in those of abstract equality in political rights and obligations."⁶ In the whole humanitarian movement of the times, abolition of slavery was the central target.

⁶Adams, p. 367.

The country was obliged to listen to crusaders such as William Lloyd Garrison and the Grimkes, Frederick Douglass and Wendell Phillips.

The radical abolitionist movement, at the time of its inception in 1832, was benign and sanguine. It placed emphasis on "moral suasion," believing that its primary task was to bring the inequity of slavery to the country's attention, to arouse the American conscience. Essentially, such radical social action was an expression of transcendental faith, which glorified consciousness and free will. Couched in the language of philosophy and literature, transcendentalism attempted to clarify the relationships of man to nature and man to God. It stipulated that there were great a priori moral truths that go beyond sensory proof. There was, furthermore, a hierarchy of truths of which the most important were that nature is beneficent, God is charitable and man divine. It followed that if these transcendental tenets were true, then any secular transgression of them was in disobedience to God's wishes. If man were truly perfectible, and at least potentially divine, then it was a crime against God that man should be subjected to the ravages of moral corruption. In other words, if the law of conscience comes into conflict with the law of the land, one is obligated to follow one's conscience. In most respects, then, transcendentalism and radical abolitionism were twin movements. Both were based on the same supposition and had similar altruistic aims.

Some of those radicals--particularly Garrison--who later became staunch advocates of immediate emancipation were willing early in the crusade to settle for gradual emancipation immediately initiated. This early flexibility, however, received little encouragement. The appeals to conscience brought meager results. In the North the radicals encountered hostility or massive apathy; in the South, unanimous resistance. Thus thwarted, in the early 1840's this dissenting minority began to attack verbally the institutions which ensnared men, to advocate such doctrines as "disunion" and "no government."

Born into a family and community of Garrisonian abolitionists, Thoreau underwent a similar passage from "moderation" to "extremism." From the time of his graduation from Harvard in 1837 until his departure for Walden Pond in 1845, young Thoreau agreed with Lydia Child--editor of the National Anti-Slavery Standard--that the reform of society could be achieved by appealing to the forces of decency within man and the universe. Such an approach, in his opinion, was far more effective than the one which Garrison pursued and galvanized the moral forces which ultimately guided all reform. Until 1845, Thoreau rested securely in his faith. After his return from Walden Pond in 1847, however, Thoreau moved to the attack. Although he still emphatically asserted that "being good"

transcended "doing good,"⁷ he was forced to admit that his program of moral awakening was not enough in a state that had stopped recognizing human rights. Consequently, he appealed to citizens to denounce the political and social institutions which corrupted them. By 1847, in other words, Thoreau was willing to facilitate individual reform by verbally assaulting the "kingdom of darkness."

It is essential that the modification in attitude and program by radical abolitionists be recognized, for it illustrates the developmental nature of movements for social change. To reduce the point to individuals, Garrison did not start his career with the doctrine of "immediatism." What made him shift from "reform" to "rebellion" can primarily be explained by "the intransigence or indifference of society: either society refuses reforms or gives them in the form of tokens."⁸ Similarly, society scorned Thoreau's more peaceful pleas for justice. The existence of the state could be justified, in his view, only if it preserved and protected individual freedom. Since it had become the tool of unscrupulous politicians for holding in subjection millions of slaves, it should be abolished. All other "lesser" institutions, by tolerating slavery, were equally guilty and should share the same fate.

It would be illuminating to examine some of the key factors which prevented radical abolitionists from attracting a large

⁷Writings, II, pp. 116-117.

⁸Duberman, p. 310.

following. Of prime importance, their philosophy was directly contrary to the national hierarchy of values, a system of beliefs--conscious or not--which tends to impede the drive for rapid change in America. This value structure stresses, first of all, the virtue of "accumulation," chiefly of material goods. As slavery, together with land, became the basis of economic advance and political power across the South,

a man who worked against it was cast, in spite of his intentions, as a foe of national development, even as a revolutionary. The abolitionists' view of the mission of America as the realization of humane ideals and the majority's view of its purpose as the achievement of power and material success came into irrepressible conflict.⁹

The pragmatic quality of Americans has been described too often to bear repetition.¹⁰ Almost any group, however, that challenges the desirability of this goal, which suggests that individual rights are sacrificed for economic stability or for a continually growing Gross National Product, invites almost automatic rejection.

A second obstacle that our value structure places in the path of rapid change is its insistence on the benevolence of

⁹Dillon, p. 91.

¹⁰See, for example, John Kenneth Galbraith, The Affluent Society (New York: New American Library, 1958), pp. 69-83; Alvin H. Hansen, The Postwar American Economy (New York: Norton and Company, 1964), pp. 56-69; and George E. Mowry, The Urban Nation: 1920-1960 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), pp. 111-133.

history. Duberman has summarized the point well when he stated:

To the average American, human history is the story of automatic progress. Every day in every way we have got [sic] better and better. Ergo, there is no need for a frontal assault on our ills; time alone will be sufficient to cure them. Thus it is that many whites considered the "Negro Problem" solved by the passage of civil rights legislation. They choose to ignore the fact that the daily lives of most Negroes have changed but slightly, or, as in the case of unemployment, for the worse.¹¹

In this same context, Americans tend to ignore pressing problems which have only recently emerged; for instance, urban slums, the breakdown of family structure in the ghetto and technological unemployment. To the current list may be added one of the problems which hampered the radical movement and which shows little sign of simply yielding to time: racial prejudice.

A further obstacle to reform movements is that often their style and mood run counter to the prevailing tendency in our national character toward conformity. Foreign travelers to America, such as Martineau, Trollope and Mackay, recognized that "the business of America was business" and that society resembled the continually changing river alluded to by Heraclitus. But in recognizing the collective business of American society lies the real contribution of Tocqueville's work, Democracy in America. Tocqueville prophesied that the egalitarian spirit of America would

¹¹Duberman, p. 313.

make dissension suspect and that the man who acted out of principle would be looked upon by jaundiced eyes.¹² Were one to recount the details of every mobbing of anti-slavery workers, it would require volumes. In our own time, the creation of "Black Lists," name-calling and social ostracism, for example, has demonstrated that Tocqueville's fear was not without foundation. Recently, Vice-President Agnew has identified some of America's worst enemies. They include: opponents of the war in Viet Nam, "intellectuals, Eastern Establishment, NYTimes, authors of 'dirty movies,' permissive parents, 'supercilious sophisticates,'"¹³ In insisting on the right of the individual to rely on his own judgment--whether in dress, speech, music or sex, for instance--reform movements may be wholly within the American tradition of personal freedom, but this heritage seems to be more evident in Fourth of July speeches than in attitudes toward behavior. Some of our national values, in short, provide stability to our institutions and identity but pain to our reformers.

¹²Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, I (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), pp. 162-183.

¹³Quoted by T. R. B., "The Trick of It," New Republic (February 28, 1970), p. 4.

As a Man Speaks, So is He

An examination of Thoreau's position on anti-slavery in the forties and fifties, as noted earlier, reveals two distinct forces, one leading him away from the movement toward perfection of the individual, the other toward the direct assault on slavery which he later approved of in his defense of John Brown. Thoreau had not come into the world to make it "a good place to live in, but to live in it."¹⁴ His goal was to perfect his own soul, not "devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong."¹⁵ Yet, only by demonstrating that he did not sanction evil outside of himself could Thoreau feel that he was free of evil from within.

Although a man was not obliged to fashion his life in a Don Quixote manner, argued Thoreau, "it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, [evil] and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support."¹⁶ Such support, however, was being given to the institution of slavery, Thoreau believed, by any person who in any supported the governments of Massachusetts and the United States. Was not the government of the United States, whose Constitution tolerated the existence of slavery, engaged in an unjust war against Mexico for the extension

¹⁴Writings, IV, p. 368.

¹⁵"Civil Disobedience," p. 195.

¹⁶Ibid.

of slavery? Was not the government of Massachusetts, which by its membership in the Union supported the Constitution, about to send troops to support this war for the extension of slavery? Thoreau answered, "I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave's government also."¹⁷ Cleansing one's hand of evil meant dissolving the relationship with government and refusing to obey any legislative acts which were in conflict with the "higher law." The soldier, then, must refuse to serve in an unjust war, and Henry Thoreau must refuse to pay taxes-- and to submit to whatever punishment the state decides.

Thoreau believed that in advocating and practicing this sort of action he was bringing his wrath to bear on the slave power and freeing himself from waiting for the majority to act. When the Concord sheriff, Sam Staples, met him and demanded the poll tax, Thoreau was on his way to the shoemaker. After he was released from jail the next morning, he put on his mended shoe and was off to lead a huckleberry party; he had fulfilled his duty and could attend to private matters. But Thoreau realized that as far as the abolition of slavery was concerned, the success of his tactic depended upon numbers. One man might be jailed without any serious consequences to the state, but what if his defiance were imitated by a thousand? Even if men of principle were numerically a minority, they would

¹⁷Ibid., p. 192.

severely disrupt the operation of the state. "If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State," he argued, "will not hesitate which to choose." What Thoreau proposed was "the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible."¹⁸ His answer, then, to a civil law or system of laws outrageous to his conscience was civil disobedience.¹⁹ Significantly, Thoreau had discovered a key to destroying the state. The man who wished to abolish the state need only cease to cooperate with it; for instance, he might refuse military induction, jury duty or the payment of taxes. The refusal to obey, in other words, was the great weapon for completely undermining the state or hastening social reform. Each man, in the final analysis, was his own police force, his own lawmaker, his own self-regulator.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 200.

¹⁹By civil disobedience Thoreau meant the right of all men "to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable" ("Civil Disobedience," p. 192). In other words, to Thoreau civil disobedience meant direct individual action, guided by higher laws. Disobedience was limited to matters of conscience and was thought of as little more than "defiant individualism." (See Wendell Glick, "Thoreau's Attack upon Relativism," Western Humanities Review, VII (Winter, 1952), pp. 35-42.) Furthermore, as the popular title of Thoreau's speech suggests, defiance was to be conducted in a civil--polite or courteous--manner. For all practical purposes, then, civil disobedience, passive resistance, or non-violent revolution were synonymous.

Although Thoreau recognized that success depended on numbers, there seems to be little evidence of his diligent attempt to gain support among the abolitionists of Concord and Boston; rather, the truth was to speak for itself. Peaceful revolution was the result of an individual's obedience to the "higher law." Thoreau had gone to jail alone, and after his lecture on "Civil Disobedience" to the residents of Concord on January 26, 1848, in which he made public the rationale for his refusal to pay the poll tax, he remained alone.

"Civil Disobedience" was analyzed in terms of rhetorical strategies, defined as the rules, devices or patterns that were intended to bring the speaker and listener together in common accord.²⁰ From a careful consideration of Thoreau's discourse, four main strategies emerged: revelation, transcendence, salvation and omission. The "strategy of revelation" was a means of displaying supposedly impregnable arguments and presenting them in the form of epigrams or maxims. The statement needed no conventional support because it was justified by the beauty and repeatability of the phrases.²¹ Sprinkled throughout the address were Thoreau's "grand truths"; for example, "it matters not how small the beginning may

²⁰Rein, p. 105.

²¹Ibid.

seem to be: what is once well done is done forever."²² In turn, such a contention was "supported" as follows: "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the [civil] law, so much as for the right."²³ Proverbial statements, then, were substituted for more complete arguments. The assertion and its support were contained in a "pregnant" phrase or catchy slogan.

Thoreau's ability to coin memorable phrases had distinct advantages. First, it was virtually impossible to frame meaningful counter-arguments. He presented his transcendental truths, and statistics, personal testimony, quotations and any other sort of documentation was irrelevant. For his authority, Thoreau would probably refer to the Moral Law which was written in the hearts of mankind. Thoreau's skill in the art of phraseology had a second important advantage. He may have recognized that maxims and slogans not only lessen the likelihood of refutation but have argumentative value. In Reason and Nature Cohen maintained that forms of language may produce certainty of conviction because they prevent the listener from being able to conceive of the other side of an issue.²⁴ Hence, the tersely cogent proverb, the magical phrase may be an effective means of generating belief. Finally, Thoreau's

²²"Civil Disobedience," p. 199.

²³Ibid., p. 190.

²⁴Cohen, p. 83.

ability to coin a memorable phrase partially explains the reason for his enduring appeal. He had an extraordinary ability to capture flashes of experience, to provide the listener--or future reader--with "grand truths" in the language of a poet.

Another strategy that characterized Thoreau's address was the "strategy of transcendence," which depended on the definition of concepts rather than on pointed, intuitive statements. In essence, this strategy was a particular type of argumentative arrangement:

- 1) Two or more elements are defined.
- 2) The favored definitions are shown to be superior in various ways to others.
- 3) The result is that the "inferior" definitions can be dismissed as irrelevant or as poor concepts.
- 4) Having nullified contradictory points of view, the speaker can proceed to expound the favored definition or concept.²⁵

The "strategy of transcendence," moreover, was an extension of transcendental idealism. The transcendentalist believed in "the sufficiency of intuition, the ultimate authority, and the validity of a priori truths." He had at his disposal, the universal principles of the Moral Law and occasionally bolstered his concepts with examples or anecdotes.²⁶

To Thoreau, the Moral Law was the fundamental law, superior to statutes and constitutions. Since political expediency and the

²⁵Rein, p. 107.

²⁶Ibid., pp. 108-109.

law of morality frequently clash, Thoreau felt that it was the duty of the individual to follow higher laws. All men who intimately associated themselves with any government, he further observed, paid with their personal freedom. Whether they served in a civil or military capacity, their first loyalty became the government, which was controlled by a corrupt, immoral body of men. No longer possessing the freedom to act as their consciences dictated, they became less and less men and more and more things. Finally, their value and dignity depreciated until they became "good citizens."

The arguments which Thoreau used against the government were the same as the ones mustered by radical abolitionists for years. The federal government was destroying individual rights, thereby cheapening the worth of the individual. It resorted to the immoral use of force; it venerated the Constitution--a mere "human" instrument--and it taxed unjustly. Like the radicals, Thoreau insisted on being a man first and a subject afterwards. He vilified thoughtless obedience to the state, political participation and conventional means of social reform, such as voting or signing a petition. Such stylistic devices as examples, anecdotes, rhetorical questions, repetition of key words and personal pronouns marked the lecture.

Another weapon in Thoreau's arsenal was the "strategy of salvation." "The strategy was essentially a problem-solution

sequence. The speaker denounced his listener's hate, greed and conformity The intensity of the . . . attack created a vacuum which [he] filled with hope for the future."²⁷ Thoreau's refusal to pay his taxes was a calculated, conscientious evasion of civil responsibility; it was an act of individual defiance against a government that might have used his taxes to wage war against Mexico and that tolerated slavery. "Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then?" asked Thoreau.²⁸

The completion of the strategy required Thoreau to provide a solution, to fill the created social "vacuum." When the state was coercive or unjust, Thoreau did not advise joining an anti-slavery society, burning the Constitution or signing a petition; rather, he initiated the counter principle of peaceful disobedience:

A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood When the subject has refused allegiance,

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 110-111.

²⁸ "Civil Disobedience," p. 190.

and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished.²⁹

Thoreau's doctrine, however, was not totally unconciliatory, so long as men were not led into betraying the higher law. "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; . . . but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, . . . not to give it practically his support."³⁰ Obedience to the Moral Law, in other words, dictated that an individual's way of life should not become the means by which injustice could flourish. In discovering civil disobedience as a method for generating social reform, Thoreau reconciled the demands of ideal justice with individual preference, thereby making a significant contribution to moral thought.

A fourth strategy employed by Thoreau to present his arguments was the "strategy of omission." Since the early nineteenth century, the country had been converting from an agricultural society into an urban, industrial nation. The advance of science and industry, in Thoreau's view, represented an odious trend toward mechanization and conformity. Consequently, he did not discuss material that challenged his transcendental philosophy. The "strategy of omission" was designed to allow the speaker to advance his own position and to ignore conflicting doctrines or events.

²⁹Ibid., p. 200.

³⁰Ibid., p. 195.

Such an approach allowed Thoreau to consider "abstract concepts, higher law, and whirling universes."³¹

While this strategy enabled Thoreau to develop his arguments on his own terms and avoid damaging material, it seems to have been designed to impress fellow transcendentalists rather than to attract a mass audience. Basically, there was hardly any attempt by Thoreau to share the commonly held linguistic symbols of his audience. On a typical page Thoreau might quote from a Chinese philosopher, translate from the ancient classics or quote from a meta-physical poet. He seemed to enjoy supporting his ideas by finding obscure sources or phrases and parading them before an uneducated audience.

"Civil Disobedience," in sum, was conceived by Thoreau as a reaction against a government that demanded allegiance and a society that had a penchant for the status quo. In all four strategies--revelation, transcendence, salvation and omission--the argument was conducted on Thoreau's terms; the emphasis was on intuition, definition, "abstract concepts, higher law, and whirling universes." Little effort was made to find areas of agreement between speaker and listener. Thoreau used almost solely those devices which bolstered his own philosophy. In the final analysis, "Civil Disobedience" seems to have been geared to impress other transcendentalists, such as Emerson, Alcott and Parker, rather than to attract

³¹Rein, pp. 113-115.

new converts. More than a blueprint of independence for the mass audience, the discourse may be viewed as a sermon against oppression, materialism, mechanization and conformity. But only those few who already shared Thoreau's unspoiled vision of "higher law and whirling universes" understood his protest.

Had the abolition of slavery waited for a sufficient increase in the number of men and women willing to undertake it solely from principle, it might very well not have come about. Thoreau served as a beacon, pointing out the road that must be traveled by men awakening to the higher law. Beyond this, however, lies organized political action, a threshold Thoreau never crossed. Unlike Garrison, whose life's work was to organize, to agitate, to "melt the ice" around him,³² Thoreau made no attempt to rally the masses behind his tactic of civil disobedience. He formed no organization to combat military induction or the payment of taxes; he formed no Internationals like the European anarchists he influenced. For Thoreau, the Garrisonian policy of "No Union with Slaveholders" meant individual dissolution of the Union. On at least two occasions in the 1850's, however, Thoreau was so moved by events involving the slavery question as to again seek an audience for his thoughts.

In the winter of 1851 the Fugitive Slave Law was passed by Congress. The Law permitted southern slaveholders to seize and

³²Phillips, p. 139.

return to the South any runaway slaves found in the North and assured the slaveholders of federal assistance in the process. On April 13, 1851, Thomas Sims was returned from Boston to Savannah, Georgia.³³ Northern abolitionists were not only shocked and horrified at the passage of the Law but at its enforcement. Why Thoreau did not speak out against the Sims incident at this time is not known, especially since his Journal was filled with invectives against the South and the "peculiar institution." In May, 1854, however, his wrath against the slaveholders exploded; and he once again attempted to preach his transcendental message from the speaker's pulpit.

On May 24, 1854, Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave employed in Boston, was found by his former master, arrested and ordered back to Virginia. That same day, Thomas Higginson led an attack on the courthouse to free Burns but was repulsed. When Thoreau learned of Burns' arrest, his indignation poured forth in his Journal. After receiving an invitation to speak at a Garrisonian rally in Framingham on July 4, 1854, Thoreau molded his Journal notes on the Burns case and the earlier Sims episode into one of the most caustic attacks on a government that would condone slavery.

What was worse than "evil" was the toleration of it. "Slavery in Massachusetts" was designed to stir his native state

³³Levy, pp. 39-74.

into secession. Thoreau granted to Massachusetts many of the prerogatives he attributed to individuals under the Moral Law; consequently, the state should initiate a grand exodus from southern slavery and the oppression which emanated from Washington. And so long as the state delayed in its moral duty, "let each inhabitant of the State dissolve his union with her."³⁴ While other radicals at the anti-slavery rally talked about injustices "a thousand miles off,"³⁵ Thoreau spoke of his state's servility and of the twelve men who were on trial for having tried to rescue Burns. This is what he meant by slavery in Massachusetts. "There is not one slave in Nebraska; there are perhaps a million slaves in Massachusetts. . . . the house was on fire, and not the prairie."³⁶

"Slavery in Massachusetts" was analyzed in terms of four main strategies. As explained earlier, the strategy of revelation was characterized by a display of "grand truths" in the form of maxims or proverbial statements. The strategy of transcendence was a distinguishable argumentative arrangement. The strategy of salvation consisted of attacks upon the current social order, with Thoreau's vision of society offered in its place. And the strategy of omission involved Thoreau's refusal to consider material which contradicted his transcendental philosophy. Again, the argument

³⁴Writings, IV, p. 403.

³⁵Ibid., p. 388.

³⁶Ibid.

was conducted on Thoreau's terms. The emphasis was on intuition, definition, "abstract concepts, higher law, and whirling universes." This time, however, there were no obscure references, no gaps between transcendental principles and concrete issues. Thoreau did not generalize about the evils of government, as he did when he refused to pay his taxes. Rather, he denounced the application of a particular statute to a specific individual. In a whirlwind of passion, in fiery language, Thoreau attacked his obedient and cowardly neighbors, the Governor of Massachusetts, the expedient and immoral legislator, politician, judge, minister and Supreme Court, the corrupt press, the servile military and the unjust Fugitive Slave Law. Few men or institutions were spared from the transcendental onslaught.

It should be clear that certain strategies were identifiable features of "Civil Disobedience" and "Slavery in Massachusetts." When a speaker expounds his personal philosophy or adopts the position of a movement, such as transcendentalism or radical abolitionism, two principles emerge: There are certain strategies by which the speaker can advance his position, and there are others that he cannot use. The speaker, in other words, is committed to a specific pattern of strategies. Because of his opposition to the mid-nineteenth century trends toward conformity and mechanization, for instance, Thoreau was bound to employ the strategy of salvation. This strategy enabled him to create a social vacuum which he then

filled with his plan for moral regeneration.

It would appear that there are certain strategies which accompany the role, or position or occupation of a speaker. One suspects a common core of strategies marked the campaign speeches of James Cox and Hubert Humphrey, for example. Both men emerged as the presidential nominees of a sorely divided, virtually insolvent Democratic Party--Cox in 1920³⁷ and Humphrey in 1968. Each candidate, furthermore, was linked with the previous administration and held accountable for its policies. If similar strategies were used and can be identified, a number of rhetorical and historical comparisons can be drawn. Similarly, what strategies characterize the rhetoric of such "extremist" organizations as the John Birch Society or Weathermen? What strategies are employed to counter these groups?

Even after Thoreau in his "Slavery" speech condoned the organized Garrisonian approach for attacking evil, he continued to place himself outside of organized movements. "No Union with Slaveholders" still meant individual dissolution of the Union. No matter how vehemently he was moved, no matter how much he was willing to echo radical principles, Thoreau remained suspicious of any group to which more than two people belonged. "Show me a free state, and a

³⁷Robert Brake, "The Porch and the Stump: Campaign Strategies in the 1920 Presidential Election," Quarterly Journal of Speech, LV (October, 1969), pp. 256-267.

court truly of justice," Thoreau declared, "and I will fight for them, if need be."³⁸ He never indicated, however, how he would go about creating a free state and courts of justice. One element of Thoreau's personality never proposed "courageously to assault evil, but patiently to starve it out,"³⁹ while another looked for individual actions that would precipitate a direct assault on the institution of chattel slavery. The conflict between the passive and militant aspects within Thoreau's personality was resolved finally in his defense of John Brown.

What the country desperately needed, Thoreau had asserted in his previous anti-slavery speeches, was men of principle. Indeed, if one honest man would act solely from principle and be willing to accept the consequences, he concluded, the "peculiar institution" would crumble. In the raid on Harper's Ferry on October 16, 1859, Thoreau found his man of principle. Brown satisfied Thoreau's demand for a man with a higher aim in life than simple longevity. Brown's attempt to launch a slave insurrection, furthermore, was an infinitely more direct and violent action than any contemplated by Thoreau; however, each man shared, in Thoreau's view, direct perception of the higher law.⁴⁰ It was the image of a man of principle in direct struggle with evil that prompted Thoreau's "Plea for Captain John Brown" on October 30, 1859.

³⁸Writings, IV, pp. 404-405.

³⁹Ibid., I, p. 146.

⁴⁰Ibid., IV, p. 403.

Unlike those concerned with what was politically expedient, Thoreau did not have to reflect upon and evaluate the effects of Brown's raid. His only task was to awaken his neighbors to the nobility of the act performed.

The decisive question Thoreau resolved in 1859 was not "about the weapon, but the spirit in which you use it."⁴¹ Passive resistance was no longer the only acceptable means of reform in a state that had stopped recognizing human rights. By October, Thoreau's creed reflected the increasing violence of the conflict. That is, in the eyes of God the shot of a rifle and Thoreau's anti-slavery crusade might bring about the same end and, with a man of principle such as Brown, have the same justification. Should John Brown be vilified for resorting to violence, Thoreau must have argued to himself, when Massachusetts, which would defend the hen-roosts of Concord by violence if necessary, tolerated slavery?

By 1859, the transcendental movement was moribund. Its leaders had defected, and the familiar strategies had been abandoned. The occasion for this address demanded that Thoreau be heard, and he omitted key passages from the speech which might offend his listeners as well as departed from the transcendental modes of expression that had proven ineffective with popular audiences. Since it was most profitable to let the discourse itself

⁴¹Journal, XII, p. 437.

suggest a critical methodology, Thoreau's "Plea" was examined in terms of a classical analysis--invention, organization, style and delivery.

In this stirring address Thoreau proclaimed that Brown's raid was the best news that America ever had. To Thoreau, Brown was braver than the patriots who met the enemy at Lexington and Bunker Hill. Those men had the courage to face their country's enemy, but Brown had the courage to face his own country when it was wrong. Thoreau thought of Brown as a man of rare common sense, transcendentalist above all, and as a man of ideas and principles. No man in America, he continued, had ever stood up so inflexibly for the dignity of human nature. Brown, moreover, could not be tried by a jury of his peers, for his peers did not exist. Whereas the Liberator, for example, called Brown's efforts "misguided, wild and insane,"⁴² Thoreau concluded that the beauty of Brown's character, the resolve that made up the totality of his life, quickened the feeble pulse of the irresolute North.

Thoreau's "Plea" was divided into three main sections: introduction, body and conclusion. To an audience that had scarcely heard a word in Brown's favor and that often misunderstood Thoreau's motives, Thoreau attempted to identify himself with a man he had come to believe was a Crusader and an embattled soul. Thus he

⁴²Writings, IV, p. 421.

endeavored to stir the imagination of his audience by creating the image of Brown as a man with a just cause. He concluded by sanctioning righteous defiance of an unjust government and prophesied that Brown's words to his captors would prove historically valid: "this question is still to be settled,--this negro question, . . . the end of that is not yet."⁴³ Thoreau effectively used such stylistic devices as the metaphor, simile, rhetorical question and comparison and contrast. The content and style were reinforced by a voice which was used to advantage. He read his speech as if it burned him, convinced that effective style and delivery consisted of simple, direct statements uttered with conviction and passionate sincerity. His "Plea" was not only "heard by all respectfully," but "many of those who came to scoff remained to pray."⁴⁴

In July, 1860, when one of Thoreau's tributes to Brown was read to abolitionists gathered at the martyr's grave in North Elba, New York, the chairman introduced his declaration by praising the author as a man "whom all must honor who know him: Of a fearless, truthful soul, living near to Nature, with ear attuned to catch her simplest and most subtle thought, and heart willing to interpret

⁴³Writings, IV, p. 440.

⁴⁴Edward Emerson, p. 120.

them to his willing brain, he often speaks undisguised, . . . the judgment upon great events which others, either timid or powerless of speech, so long to hear expressed."⁴⁵ The assessment of Henry Thoreau was accurate. All three major anti-slavery proclamations were a cauldron of bold, original utterances. Thoreau's inflexible belief in obedience to the Moral Law, moreover, demanded that he call attention to that issue about which no compromise was possible. Basing his arguments dealing with the slavery question on "the nature of the thing"--what Weaver terms arguments from definition⁴⁶--Thoreau repeatedly affirmed that slavery was not a domestic concern of the South but a moral evil which menaced the rights of freemen, was contrary to the principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence and was a violation of higher laws. His personal struggle, furthermore, which prevented him from acting out the militancy he clearly admired gave his anti-slavery speeches a forcefulness aroused by no other subject. "Their intensity came from the pent conflict within."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ _____, Liberator, July 27, 1860, p. 3.

⁴⁶Weaver, p. 86.

⁴⁷Stoller, p. 153.

The Legacy

The analyses of Thoreau's major anti-slavery speeches do more than provide an insight into the rhetorical practices of a man who spent a season observing the life cycle of a leaf or who squatted for hours in order to shake hands with a bull-frog: It increases our understanding of Thoreau's philosophy of social reform. In his "Plea for Captain John Brown," for example, Thoreau shouldered the full burden and affinity for Brown's revolutionary morality. He did not safely espouse the overthrow of tyrannies distant in time and place but--like Locke--insisted that government be limited to the common good and that it is, consequently, morally revocable. Each of Thoreau's anti-slavery addresses, moreover, was a call for individuals to be more assertive. They were not designed to unite individuals against a common enemy--which is a dangerous and anarchistic thought--but to urge them to have the state recognize "the individual as a higher and independent power."⁴⁸ Essentially, men like Higginson and Brown performed moral acts of defiance as individuals and accepted the consequences. Thoreau applauded their actions, leaving others to join him or not, depending on whether they were "good men" or merely "good citizens."

⁴⁸"Civil Disobedience," p. 211.

Thoreau's animosity toward all forms of authority was closely tied to his transcendental concepts involving the perfectibility of man. As a disciple of Emerson who in turn was a devout student of Kant, Thoreau viewed man as a creative agent who could shape his own circumstances. When man realized his capacities, he would no longer need government. Guided by the Moral Law, conscience coupled with reason would guide human conduct.

But what would happen to our society, until a brotherhood of individuals would be established, if everyone acted as Thoreau did, refusing to pay his taxes or speaking passionately in behalf of men like John Brown? If the individual, in other words, were left to determine his own rights, what authority would be left to distinguish between enlightened resistance to the state and anarchy which would eventually dissolve the state itself? It is in the framework of Thoreau's transcendental ethic, with its insistence on the dignity of the individual, that he would probably answer, "I care not for states compared with individuals; I have my own business of living to attend to; if other men were doing the same thing, we would hardly need so much government, for the real power and authority of the state is derived from a healthy regard for the individual."

Nowhere was respect for the individual more pronounced than in Thoreau's major anti-slavery speeches. In each one he protested

not only against slavery and a government that countenanced the "peculiar institution" but, in the name of human dignity and individuality, criticized the trends toward conformity, restrictiveness and mechanization. This criticism was perhaps Thoreau's greatest achievement and our legacy. Isolated statements can be selected from the addresses to bolster any position ranging from violent nihilism to passive resistance. He was, however, one of the clearest, most consistent voices for individual freedom and responsibility that ever spoke in America.

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