

shape my thinking about the form this manuscript should ultimately take. David Donald closely scrutinized a paper, surviving fragments of which appear in the middle chapters. Professor Donald, with extraordinary kindness, also outlined for me a synthesis of his own recent researches in antebellum culture. My obligations to the earliest readers—Winthrop Jordan, Tom Leonard, and Leon Litwack—are both professional and personal; each has given much beyond his customary good counsel. The Jordan and Litwack families, Tom and Carol Leonard, and David and Joan Hollinger have been immensely helpful and supportive through the years.

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INTRODUCTION

Definitions and Implications

OPPOSITION to slavery in North America did not suddenly begin on January 1, 1831, the day William Lloyd Garrison first published his flamboyant, pioneering abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*. Yet during the 1830s the *Liberator* and similar instruments of propaganda changed abolitionism so dramatically as virtually to make it new: fervent, intransigent, and sectional where it had formerly been genteel, moderate, and strong in the upper South as well as in the North. In the hands of people like Garrison, post-1830 antislavery rejected the old colonizationist ideas that slavery could end gradually and that freed slaves—all black people—must leave North America, a position many abolitionists held before the 1830s.

After 1830 antislavery rallied around "immediate emancipation," a slogan interpreted differently by different people at different times. Ambiguous though it might be, immediate emancipation was a call to repudiate earlier, ineffective abolitionism and to unite men and women in a vigorous, uncompromising movement. Acknowledging that hardly anything remained of numerous abolition societies organized just after the American Revolution, James G. Birney argued that their decline "may be ascribed to this defect,—they did not inflexibly ask for *immediate* emancipation."¹ Any less drastic program tolerated sin, encouraged procrastination, and lulled the conscience to sleep; any more specific program set people to quarreling about details. As Birney recognized, immediatism's explicit break with previous antislavery sentiment justifies examining abolitionism after 1830 with little reference to what preceded it, even though prior antislavery activities undeniably influenced post-1830 abolitionists and abolitionism.

Here is the most vexing problem connected with abolitionism. The evil of slavery had been with Americans for generations, and the idea of immediate emancipation had been implicit for decades.² Yet immediatism did not assume prominence until after 1830. This matter of timing—why 1830?—haunts everything written on the subject. Most historians begin with the abolitionists themselves, with their religious convictions or their roles in society, moving from there to generalizations about motivation. Thus, we are told, abolitionists attacked slav-

ery while under the influence of religious doctrines arising in the 1820s; or abolitionists acted out, through their crusade against slavery, social goals and frustrations stemming from their place in the America of the 1820s and 1830s. Such interpretations have merit but often lose sight of antislavery itself, of what men and women perceived in slavery and why their opposition to it took certain forms rather than others. Such interpretations, moreover, spend too much time chasing after motivation, after what made abolitionists rather than what made abolitionism. We may never learn precisely why people became abolitionists, and the fact is we do not need to know what brings individuals to a movement in order to understand the movement itself. We can suspend the question of motivation and ask, instead, what there was in a social and cultural situation that gave a reform its style, its particular set of concerns and solutions. I have taken that approach and attempted to find the resonance between the most persistent themes in antislavery literature and conditions in antebellum America.

A new kind of abolitionism may have begun in 1831, but slavery itself did not die until 1865. To examine such a lengthy period exhaustively would require dealing with an impossible mass of material and would mean tracing several generations of abolitionists, including individuals who entered the movement quite late and with motives differing from those of the men and women of the 1830s.³ Historians customarily resolve that difficulty simply by not treating antislavery after the first decade and a half of its existence, arguing that its outlines were clear by then.⁴ The oldest abolitionists likewise often assumed not much had changed after the early 1840s. Joshua Leavitt, writing to James G. Birney in 1855, remarked that "the studies which you and others employed upon the subject of slavery and freedom [have] long since reached a point as far advanced as this generation is likely to go." William Lloyd Garrison, who changed as much as any man in the course of his long career, could still, in 1857, present antislavery just as abolitionists had for a quarter of a century—as a working out of Christianity and of the principles of the Declaration of Independence.⁵

In reality abolitionists did discover new applications for the basic beliefs that impelled them against slavery. Not only was this true of a seeker like Garrison or those who followed him into such reforms as woman's rights, anti-sabbatarianism, and ultimately to Christian anarchism; it was also true of the sober men who broke with Garrison in 1840 and went into the Liberty Party and presumably more conventional means of reform (their multiple revelations are recounted in the first chapters). The point here is that while antislavery principles may have remained fixed after a decade or so, antislavery men and women did not. As a consequence, this study could not end with

the 1840s and still deal with the relationship between antislavery and the external world.

And yet no chronology suits my purpose. I have not wanted to write an account of a crusade and how it progressed from year to year. I am, instead, interested in the constants that lie behind changes in antislavery, in the maze of assumptions abolitionists brought to their world and in the equally complicated forces society and culture brought to bear upon them. In order to get at those I have had to weave back and forth in time, even to ignore time altogether. In the account that follows, antislavery is a structure of perception. Its history ends not at a precise date but with the pattern set, tested and bent by fire, and resting on the edge of the Civil War.

There remains the matter of deciding who really was part of the movement. It was possible to be against slavery and still not to be an abolitionist, since abolitionists separated themselves from the American Colonization Society, members of which dreamed of exiling blacks from the United States. Another large body of men and women was profoundly disturbed by slavery but could not endorse immediate emancipation or abolitionist tactics. The rise of the Free Soil Party in 1848 demonstrated that much popular opposition to slavery stemmed from belief that new territory should be kept free for whites. Many abolitionists rejected such a position as a distasteful expression of prejudice and not true antislavery. The definition of an abolitionist, therefore, must include adherence to the doctrine of immediate emancipation, a willingness to devote time to expressing that doctrine publicly, and commitment to the creation of a society in which blacks would have civil equality with whites.⁶ This definition does not ignore racism in the antislavery movement—abolitionists were men and women of their time and culture. More striking was their attempt to regard blacks as "men and brothers," an essential part of antislavery although never perfectly achieved. Without it, immediate emancipation would have been far less different from colonization and Free Soil than it actually was.⁷

Black abolitionists, nonetheless, are largely omitted here because this is an essay on perception: my interests are primarily in the cultural components of antislavery—in how men and women firmly imbedded in a particular culture could turn against a well-entrenched institution.⁸ It takes little imagination to recognize that Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave, and Lewis Tappan, a white New York merchant of New England stock, might well see slavery differently and have different reasons for hating it. The issues of slavery and freedom, discrimination and equality, were brutally and directly thrust upon Douglass as they were not forced upon whites. Douglass had to be against slavery: his race, past, and human dignity allowed him no

choice. Tappan could have ignored slavery. More clearly than their black colleagues, white abolitionists serve as a way of getting at the relationship between antislavery and general American society in the three decades preceding the Civil War.

I frequently use the term "abolitionists" as if all members of the movement were interchangeable. Although my early chapters argue that real differences between abolitionists were fewer than commonly imagined, there were sharp disagreements among them on a number of matters. For many purposes abolitionists can be sorted into various camps: political abolitionists, evangelical abolitionists, radical abolitionists, and so on. It is, however, too cumbersome to note differences on each and every issue, particularly when my task is to trace the institutional, cultural, and social parameters of abolitionism, not to write a history of the antislavery movement. The core of abolitionism is fully as fascinating as its fissure-ridden exterior.

I also do not systematically examine relationships between abolitionists and other reformers, and between abolitionists and non-abolitionists. Clearly there is a problem here, since I argue that abolitionism worked within the terms of nineteenth-century American culture and reflected a desire to impose moral order upon broad economic and social change. Forces and attitudes of the sort I emphasize affected many Americans who did not become abolitionists. That, however, is no reason to dismiss such forces and attitudes as preconditions of antislavery. Diverse human beings frequently do find varied forms to satisfy similar impulses; these forms are partly provided by culture, partly limited by class, region, and even by accident. A Southerner disturbed about the direction American society was taking would be far more likely to find his scapegoat in Northern capitalism than in slavery, where abolitionists found theirs. A wealthy or middle-class person of evangelical Protestant upbringing likewise had alternatives to antislavery, most of them far less risky. Such a person might engage in genteel reforms like missionary societies or might do as human beings commonly do—submerge himself or herself in career or family, fretting occasionally about the state of things but doing little to alter it. Abolitionists were less unusual in the nature of their basic concern than in the outlet they found for it. The problem is not to isolate abolitionists from their peers but to find out what it was in antebellum America that made their crusade possible.

We are accustomed to think of antislavery literature and similar kinds of propaganda as something a few people created in order to manipulate other people. True enough—but there is more to be said. Persuasive literature also reveals a great deal about the forces and desires propelling the men and women who make it. Propaganda, furthermore, involves an audience. Those who read, hear, or see it are

not simply passive. They interpret its symbols and determine its meaning. For propaganda to move them it must speak a language of public discourse; it must express itself in the terms of a widely shared culture. There are secret messages and hidden compulsions to propaganda, and careful analysis of them will lead one far beyond what the propaganda says overtly. It leads, in fact, to the social and cultural context that makes some long-standing issues assume special prominence at particular historical moments. For all its repetitiveness, shallowness, and occasional inconsistency, antislavery literature is a door opening on to a wide range of concerns in nineteenth-century America. The following is an attempt to pass through that door, to map the "inner history" of abolitionism—to find the source of its power.⁹

An "inner history" need not be an interior one, written solely from within the consciousness of an individual or group. My interest, instead, has been in the interplay between personality, culture, and environment. I attempt to get at that through an analysis of perception—of what it was abolitionists saw in slavery and of how what they saw reverberated with their own social situation. Perception is an important matter because people do not always see what is *there*. They see what their values, attitudes, and preconceptions prepare them to see. When a new view of an old institution arises (as happened with slavery after 1830), it marks social and cultural shifts of great significance. To take such a new perception as one's starting point is to engage in a kind of historical anthropology treating the modes of communication, the rituals, symbols, interactions, and social compulsions of past groups and subgroups.¹⁰ To do that in the following pages, I work from the forms of antislavery (its outer trappings) to the more basic level of meaning behind abolitionist rhetoric, and, finally, outward to the social conditions that gave power and validity to antislavery propaganda. My guiding impulse was not to argue with history as it has been written or with social science as it is practiced. It was to fashion a particular kind of history and, above all, to comprehend why abolitionists perceived slavery as they did after 1830.

Any analysis of abolitionism becomes tangled with moral judgments about slavery and the Civil War. There exists a feeling that virtuous behavior does not need explanation, that a stand against injustice is insulted if social, cultural, or psychological forces are found to shape it. But the majority of antebellum Americans did not take strong public moral stands and did not suffer for principles. Critics of abolitionists are correct in pointing out that it was not "normal" in the 1830s to be an abolitionist. There need be no judgment against the antislavery movement on this point—at times it is admirable to stand in opposition to society; some forms of abnormality, even "insanity," are noble.

In terms of present-day morality, the "disturbed" individuals were not abolitionists but the respectable men who reacted emotionally and violently against them. Still, commitment to immediate emancipation was the exception, not the norm, and it does not demean a moral statement to ask why people were able to make it.

This may seem a devious way to revive the tired controversy over whether or not the Civil War was brought on by irresponsible agitators and fanatics, as abolitionists were once labelled. In truth, the most irresponsible men were those who fanatically refused to take the issue of slavery seriously, the politicians who ignored it whenever possible and compromised it when it could not be ignored. Northern abolitionists and Southern fire-eaters did not make something out of thin air; slavery existed and created differences that had to be settled. Yet antislavery propaganda did help foster a general cast of mind in the North that accepted disruption of the government, even war, as a means of ending an evil institution white Americans had tolerated for generations. Abolitionism's contribution was to provide the Northern public with a way of interpreting events that became more and more credible in the 1840s and 1850s as the South increased its demands. Phrases and insights from the antislavery movement, absorbed through years of repetition, passed into the Free Soil and the Republican parties, and from there into political relevance.

The influence of antislavery, indirect though it often was, did not cease with the Civil War. I am fully convinced that the debate over slavery affected policies and intellectual developments after the war, well past the specific problems of Reconstruction where abolitionism obviously made itself felt. The admiration Garrison and others had for economic growth, for example, provided moral sanction for reformers to reach an entente with late nineteenth-century industrialism. Abolitionists like Henry C. Wright similarly embodied a transition from antebellum religious perfectionism to physical perfectionism, from health reform to post-Civil War hereditarian thought.¹¹

Here is the ultimate importance of the antislavery movement: it constructed a series of images and explanations capable of touching non-abolitionists and extending into the post-war world. In this there was to be a bitter irony. Attitudes that helped men and women respond to the evils of slavery finally blended into Darwinism and laissez-faire economics, which were to serve as props for late nineteenth-century racism. Despite such unforeseen consequences, antislavery deserves respect for the structure of thought and feeling abolitionists created out of traditional materials, general social concerns, the culture around them, and psychological necessity. That the structure was faulty and ramshackle does not lessen its significance.



I FORMS

Society and culture provide only a limited number of forms and roles through which men and women can express discontent with the way things are. These are the outer shell of reform, without which the impulses beneath reform commitments would remain amorphous, chaotic, and unarticulated.

DIVISIONS

Antislavery Unity and Disunity

THE STEAMBOAT *Rhode Island* wallowed its way from Providence to New York in the second week of May 1840. One of those aboard, a Boston editor named William Lloyd Garrison, meditated on an "American flag flying in the breeze," mournfully noting that so long as slavery existed it was not "the flag of LIBERTY." With Garrison on this journey were men and women of like sentiments, knit in anxious fellowship. They were going to a convention in New York in order to save "our heaven-approved association"—the American Anti-Slavery Society—"from dissolution, and our broad platform from being destroyed." Garrison regarded his companions as "the moral and religious elite of New England abolitionism" and he exalted in the atmosphere prevailing among them. "It was truly a great and joyful meeting," he wrote, "united together by a common bond, and partaking of the *one great spirit of humanity*." Even the weather seemed to be under divine guidance. "The northeasterly storm which had lasted for several days previous," Garrison noted, "cleared up finely just as we left Providence, and a glorious sunset and a bright moonlight evening followed. All was tranquil, all happy."¹

The voyage was more promising than the arrival. In 1840 organized abolitionism shattered, broke into pieces that themselves splintered and re-formed throughout the next two decades. Thanks to the large number of convention delegates they jammed aboard the *Rhode Island*, Garrison and his followers gained control of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Under their direction it would be the noisiest and most extreme national abolition organization, but small and ill-supported in comparison with the major benevolent enterprises of the day. Put off by Garrisonians and by years of squabbling, many faithful abolitionists simply left the American Anti-Slavery Society in May 1840. Among them were all but one member of its old executive committee. Some of those who departed went into the newly formed American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, a small, less heretical, and uninspiring alternative; some devoted themselves primarily to political activ-

ity; and others stayed clear of national organizations, preferring to work independently or through local societies.

So spectacularly bitter was the division of 1840 that it bewitched the participants and the historians who followed them. More than any single event, it dominated the way abolitionists regarded one another after 1840. For historians it has symbolized what they have seen as characteristics of abolitionists and abolitionism.² The lessons commonly drawn from the schism of 1840 deserve close attention, particularly because they are largely false. Worse than false, they are plausible enough to be misleading. To concentrate on 1840 is to be drawn away from the essential puzzle of abolitionism, the matter of discovering what forces in antebellum America had the power to bring together for any period of time men and women as contentious as the abolitionists were. But the schism did occur and it dominates the landscape of abolitionism. And so it is with 1840 and the lessons mistakenly drawn from it that I will begin.

If the schism had not taken place, Garrison asserted seventeen years afterward, abolitionism might well have changed public sentiment enough to "have settled the question before the present time, and emancipated every slave in the land." Garrison was attacking his "enemies," whom he blamed for walking out of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1840, but his point was plausible. The division did weaken the society and put to an end a period of rapid growth in its operations. Founded in 1833, it had 225 auxiliaries a scant two years later; by 1837 it embraced over 1,600 auxiliaries and had sponsored hundreds of thousands of pieces of propaganda. By 1838 the society had put numerous agents in the field and collected more than 400,000 signatures on petitions imploring Congress to take action against slavery. Never again would it be able to mount operations on that scale. Surely Garrison was correct to believe that if the American Anti-Slavery Society had not fragmented it could have done more to free the slave.

How much more is open to question. A severe financial panic in 1837 and a subsequent depression dried up funds for benevolent enterprises for several years. Dependable sources of money such as Arthur and Lewis Tappan provided the American Anti-Slavery Society with essential support in its first critical years, and the Tappans' departure in 1840 deprived it of wealth and organizational ability. That loss, however, meant a great deal less in 1840 than it would have in 1835. Some time would pass before men like the Tappans could contribute as much to reform as they had prior to 1837. The schism did cause the American Anti-Slavery Society to curtail operations more than it

would have, but even a reform entrepreneur of the calibre of Lewis Tappan could not have kept abolition activities at the high level of the mid-1830s.

More important, abolitionism did not require any strong national organization after 1840. The American Anti-Slavery Society had done its best work by then and was becoming a victim of one of its chief successes. Shortly after its formation the society had commissioned agents to travel about and speak against the sin of slavery. These earnest young men preached with evangelical fervor and left behind them a trail of hostile mobs and newly formed abolition organizations. The agency system could only have been carried out under central direction, and it was a great accomplishment of the society's first few years. Its effect, however, was to create local centers of abolitionism, most of them soon capable of sustaining themselves without the help of the parent society. These local enclaves had only the most remote of connections with the American Anti-Slavery Society and felt—probably correctly—that they knew best how to proceed against the slaveholding spirit in their own areas. "Ideas of state rights and state independence," Gamaliel Bailey wrote in 1839, "determine the character of even our benevolent operations." A year later Bailey himself encouraged the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society to sever its relationship with the American Anti-Slavery Society.³ In its six years of existence the society had performed its task well enough to make itself largely irrelevant to Bailey, his Ohio friends, and the thousands of abolitionists who had no great interest in whatever Boston or New York faction happened to control the national organization.

The division did increase the variety of abolition societies, and to Garrison and his partisans that meant antislavery energies had been hopelessly diffused. After 1840 there was no unified vanguard, marching under the banner of the American Anti-Slavery Society. There were rag-tag regiments of Garrisonians, American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society members, Liberty Party men, and a motley collection of stragglers following the flags of religious sects and local societies or simply listening to the drum-beat of their own consciences. Garrison to the contrary, this institutional disarray did no harm. Rather than discouraging abolitionists, the very diversity of antislavery after 1840 probably encouraged the maximum number of people to enlist in the cause. It insured that the focus of organizational activities would be in the villages, cities, counties, and states of the North. It made access to leadership positions relatively easy in local societies and it produced organizations to serve every shade of opinion.

Of all abolitionist commentators on the schism of 1840, William Goodell was the most sensible. "Abolitionism, before the division," he

remarked, "was a powerful elixir, in the phial of one anti-slavery organization, corked up tight, and carried about for exhibition. By the division the phial was broken and the contents spilled over the whole surface of society, where it has been working as a leaven, ever since, till the mass is beginning to upheave."⁴ Goodell was one of the few to see that in a nation as diverse and spacious as America reform movements required central direction only at some moments in time and for some limited purposes. The division did not weaken abolitionism by weakening the largest national organization. It proved a large national organization was not essential.

Besides helping to break up their own organization in 1840, many abolitionists disassociated themselves from virtually every other kind of social institution—from churches, political parties, and the government. Such behavior appalls historians who believe America's social and political structure is sound and that responsible reformers have an obligation to work within it.⁵ One of their number has tagged the abolitionists with the stubborn epithet "anti-institutionalism."

In some respects it is easy to refute the charge of anti-institutionalism. Abolitionist renunciation of religious denominations and the old political parties came after frustrating attempts to get those organizations to fight slavery; abolitionists hardly deserve blame for rejecting institutions that rejected them. Some abolitionists, moreover, felt that reformers best move society by standing apart from it and beckoning it onward to higher ethics. This is not anti-institutionalism but a faith that institutions function in a Christian fashion only if a few people have enough moral independence to denounce their failings. When churches and political parties did support antislavery, abolitionists were the first to applaud. And when the Civil War removed slavery as an issue, they had little trouble endorsing the Republican Party and the American political process.

Justifications of abolitionist conduct, however, beg the question of whether reformers can work comfortably through any institutional structure, even one they create. Here events of 1840 are of considerable significance—not as the supreme example of anti-institutionalism but as the most obvious clue to a tension inherent in antebellum reform, perhaps in American reform generally.

No doubt about it, abolitionists had a marvelous ability to fight one another and to disrupt their own organizations. They did that before 1840 and they continued to do it afterward. In the mid-1840s the American Anti-Slavery Society lost still more members over its call to dissolve the union between Northern and Southern states. Even then the society was to have acrimonious and disorderly debates for the next

quarter century. Its guiding force, Garrison, was as abrasive to colleagues as to slaveholders. One of his admirers, looking back on the movement, had no trouble compiling a long list of able co-workers he had alienated.⁶ Garrison himself left the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1865 after a dispute with his friend, Wendell Phillips.

Non-Garrisonians were only slightly less contentious. The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society was too lethargic to have any notable schisms, although in 1848 James G. Birney did angrily decline reelection to office in it. Antislavery political organizations, however, suffered feuds and defections throughout the 1840s and 1850s. The Liberty Party had schisms in 1847 and 1848. In the latter year most of its stalwarts deserted for the less principled and more popular Free Soil Party. Beginning in January 1853, William Goodell and Lysander Spooner carried on a lengthy, unseemly correspondence in which each accused the other of stealing ideas about the constitutional status of slavery.⁷ Few of these quarrels and schisms stemmed from "anti-institutionalism." Some were over serious tactical questions; some were sheer personality conflicts. Antislavery contentiousness, nonetheless, far exceeded the real issues involved and went well beyond normal irascibility. It had its own special logic.

Bickering helped abolitionists define who they were. Cut off from traditional social institutions, they had little to sustain them besides their sense of personal moral integrity. To keep that in the face of a hostile public required continual scrutiny of one's self and one's colleagues: there was no outside authority to reassure the purest that they were still pure. Through intramural conflict abolitionists were able to set their own exacting standards for belonging to the group. Take, for example, the rhetoric Garrison directed toward his opponents within the movement. It was ripe with terms like "traitor," "apostate," "false friend," and "recreancy to the cause." Such language was harsh—it hurt; and, more important, Garrison's words left no room for doubt, or self-doubt, over who was with the cause and who was against it.

Guarding the righteousness of the movement could be done in ways more subtle than Garrison's invective. One method was to make statements of principles to which morally suspect colleagues could not subscribe. James G. Birney, Henry B. Stanton, and other politically minded abolitionists did precisely that in 1838, when they insisted antislavery men had an obligation to vote and then to vote only for friends of the slave. Birney's and Stanton's proposal would have cast out two important factions: Christian anarchists like Garrison (since they refused to vote at all) and abolitionists who preferred working within the Whig or Democratic parties, even at the cost of voting for

imperfect candidates. Garrisonians denounced Birney and Stanton for this narrow definition of antislavery loyalty and prided themselves on keeping their platform open to anyone who advocated immediate emancipation, no matter what his or her other beliefs might be. In practice, though, Garrisonians found means of closing the open platform. In 1843 societies under their control began to pass resolutions asserting that "no abolitionist can consistently swear to support the Constitution [of the United States]." Garrison argued that these statements were nothing more than expressions of majority opinion and that dissenters could remain in the societies. Some did, but their consistency—their sincerity—was under a shadow.⁸

The behavior of Garrisonians and political abolitionists alike was priggish and self-righteous, but it had an intuitive rationality to it. Censoriousness and tests of loyalty made the boundaries of their groups clear and strengthened members with the thought that they were part of a moral vanguard, no matter what the rest of antislavery and the rest of America said. Having no other source of approval besides their consciences and their comrades-in-arms, they measured their own righteousness against the falseness of others, including other abolitionists.

Feuding among abolitionists also stemmed from an inevitable conflict between the character of groups and the character of reform commitments. Groups cannot exist without rules regulating interaction among members and between members and non-members. Belonging to the group inevitably prescribes what a person can and cannot do without risking excommunication. Yet listening to conscience, not obeying external authority, has been the essence of American reformers. Unsure, hesitant men and women never set themselves against society. Abolitionists in particular could not have endured the intense hostility they faced without a strong moral certainty—without a belief within each member of the movement that his or her conscience was a reliable guide to good and evil. That toughness of conscience (self-righteousness, if you prefer) made abolitionists ever alert to the ways institutions and social pressures compel people to sacrifice principles. So it is with most American radicals and reformers and so it was especially in the antebellum period, when political culture and evangelical Protestantism alike stressed individual autonomy. As much or more than American reformers generally, abolitionists were the sort of people who could not live within formal structures. They preferred being right to compromising differences for the sake of unity.

Had abolitionists truly been anti-institutional there would have been no problem. They never would have created the institutions they destroyed. They would have worked (as some did) without organizational affiliation or through ad hoc committees put together for limited

purposes. The latter device was well used in the 1840s and 1850s to protest recapture of escaped slaves and to agitate against pro-slavery legislation. But abolitionists took their long-term organizations quite seriously, and for good reason. Institutions have their practical advantages, especially in the resources and the influence they possess. More than that, it was lonely for abolitionists to be in opposition to society and natural for them to crave a community of like-minded persons. In the antebellum period a similar yearning for moral comradeship helped produce actual communities, the hundreds of utopian societies that dotted the landscape of American reform. In a less obvious manner abolitionists likewise came together in quest of brotherhood and fellowship. Their societies and conventions, when not spoiled by fights, were spiritual communions of believers who gathered out of the sinful world they were trying to change. Those moments of harmony were profoundly moving and deeply cherished, and they occurred most commonly within formal institutional structures.

The tension came here: whether abolitionists should bend their consciences to preserve the comradeship and effective action that organizations provided or should separate from organizations since these had rules and boundaries that deprived individuals of autonomy. In their relations with each other, with their own organizations, and with larger American institutions, abolitionists were condemned to suffer bursts of attraction and repulsion. Far from manifesting pure and simple anti-institutionalism, abolitionists wanted institutions for personal as well as practical reasons—but they also wanted the individual conscience to be the basic moral unit of society. Those desires were ever-present, ever-incompatible, and fatal to antislavery harmony when matters came to a head in 1840.

The usual interpretation of the division of 1840, given by abolitionists and historians alike, is that it derived from fundamental ideological differences. The schism, so the story goes, was primarily between Garrisonians and evangelical Protestants. The former were theologically unorthodox, given to radical social doctrines, and violent in their rhetoric. The latter were committed to evangelical orthodoxy, not particularly radical on issues other than slavery, and temperate in their propaganda. A third faction was closely interwoven with the evangelicals. It consisted of men who could not abide Garrison's rejection of direct political action against slavery: their vehicle between 1840 and 1848 was the Liberty Party. According to the common view of 1840, conflict was irreconcilable between Garrisonian radicalism and the cautious moderation of evangelical and political abolitionists. The division was an inevitable parting of the ways.⁹

The implications of such an interpretation are considerable. If the

schism of 1840 truly was ideological in origin then abolitionism would have to be treated as a collection of world-views, each with its own peculiar history. If, on the other hand, cleavages within the movement were neither especially ideological nor especially extreme, the important thing would be the basic pattern of abolitionism: the assumptions abolitionists shared and the relationship between those assumptions and conditions in antebellum America. The final problem of 1840 is to determine whether what antislavery men and women held in common was more significant than what they argued about.

* The "woman question" precipitated the schism. Abby Kelley's election to the previously all-male business committee gave evangelicals and political abolitionists their excuse to abandon the American Anti-Slavery Society. Miss Kelley's triumph was both a Garrisonian victory and the climax of a long controversy over the place of females in the organization. Women had been present at the Society's creation in 1833 and some had spoken to the original meetings, a bold act for the day. No one, however, was bold enough to assert that women could sign the society's charter, its Declaration of Sentiments, and for the first four years women worked within separate female auxiliaries similar to those of other antebellum reform movements. Yet the Declaration accidentally left the door ajar for women to participate equally with male abolitionists. Membership was opened to "persons" rather than explicitly confined to men, an inadvertent wording eventually used to support the claim Miss Kelley and her backers exercised in 1840.¹⁰

In 1837 abolitionists were forced to reconsider the role of women. That year two notable converts, Sarah and Angelina Grimké, began a lecture tour of New England. The Grimké sisters came from a prominent South Carolina family, and they spoke against slavery with an authority few Northern-born abolitionists could muster. Curiosity about these eloquent ladies drove a few men to sneak into their talks, which had been intended for women only. It was a terrible affront to Victorian decorum for females to address "promiscuous assemblies"—audiences of men and women—and New England clergymen were appalled at the Grimkés' indelicacy. In June 1837 the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts produced a Pastoral Letter informing women that their "appropriate duties and influence" were to be found in subordination to men, not in public work for reform. In August a "Clerical Appeal" circulated, likewise critical of the Grimkés' course and signed by two ministers with respectable antislavery credentials. In the meantime William Lloyd Garrison poured his invective on the sisters' enemies, whether they were stiff-necked parsons or fellow abolitionists or both. Spurred on by controversy over

the Grimkés, he and many of his colleagues were beginning an examination of sexual injustices that would lead them into a movement for woman's rights. They came as close to being sexual egalitarians as was possible in antebellum America, and from 1837 onward participation of women in all kinds of general antislavery work became a fixed principle for them.

That does not mean the woman question was fought on principle. Those uneasy with Garrison's position included Theodore Dwight Weld (who married Angelina Grimké), Gerrit Smith, Alvan Stewart, and Henry B. Stanton, each of whom more or less had Garrisonian attitudes toward women but who were convinced antislavery would destroy its effectiveness by waging an unpopular battle against sexual prejudices. Garrison's abolitionist opponents hoped that the Protestant sects would become powerful weapons against slavery, and they feared alienating the clergy as Garrison had done by ill-tempered responses to the Pastoral Letter and Clerical Appeal and by his other polemics against ministers. Preserving peace with organized religion required keeping quiet about radical social doctrines, especially ones like woman's rights that challenged patterns of authority in home and church. Besides worrying about the clergy, some critics of the Garrisonians looked forward to taking political action against slavery, possibly including formation of a separate party. That would call for appealing to an all-male electorate likely to be put off by heresies such as sexual equality. As far as evangelical and political abolitionists were concerned, the tactical disadvantages of agitating woman's rights were overwhelming.

In principles, however, even the most traditionally-minded abolitionists often were closer to Garrison than to the strident antifeminism of the Pastoral Letter. Few were stodgier than Lewis Tappan, who stalked out of the American Anti-Slavery Society upon Abby Kelley's election, declaring it immoral for women to be in closed meetings with men. The constitution he wrote for the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society explicitly prohibited women from voting. Yet he did not altogether discourage feminine participation in reform work. The women of his family engaged in abolitionism and other causes, as health and domestic duties permitted. Moreover, in a remark he made defending the schism, he conceded much to Garrisonian egalitarianism: "Women have equal rights with men," he told Weld, somewhat guiltily, "and therefore they have a right to form societies of women only. Men have the same right. *Men* formed the Amer. Anti-S. Society."¹¹ By 1849 Tappan was emancipated enough to argue in favor of permitting a woman to address a missionary association.

The woman question, one anti-Garrisonian declared in 1840, was "a

false issue."¹² He was right. If irreconcilable differences of principle had been involved, Tappan and his followers would have left the American Anti-Slavery Society earlier than they did. In 1839 the organization's Annual Convention granted female delegates the same privileges as male delegates, a more drastic step than it took in 1840. Garrisonian advocacy of sexual equality did create tactical problems and it did offend the sensibilities of men like Tappan. But as much as anything the woman question affected distribution of power within the antislavery movement. A majority of female delegates to the American Anti-Slavery Society aligned themselves with Garrison and their votes shifted control from New York City abolitionists, led by Tappan, to a New England clique dominated by Garrison. The ideology of woman's rights troubled seceders less than the thought of what Garrison might do to the society when he took charge of it.

Garrison's behavior from mid-1837 onward gave his orthodox brethren good reason to worry. He flailed his critics within the movement so harshly it seemed to some as if he was more interested in assaulting fellow abolitionists than in attacking slavery. "His guns are all turned inward," Elizur Wright commented sadly in the fall of 1837.¹³ Garrison, moreover, had plunged into a great thicket of heresies that threatened to discredit antislavery in the eyes of conservative men and women. Besides endorsing woman's rights, he had become convinced that Sunday had no special claim to be the Sabbath, since all days should be holy (a position that did not endear him to clergymen). He also adopted an extreme form of perfectionism—the doctrine that man's nature is not inherently depraved and that human beings can become free from sin while on earth. Garrison consistently tried to keep these and other interests separate from antislavery; but no matter what he said the public tended to assume all abolitionists shared his peculiar beliefs, particularly since they appeared in the *Liberator*, the most notorious antislavery newspaper. To their embarrassment and irritation, political and evangelical abolitionists found themselves between two fires. Garrison castigated them for their supposed failings and public opinion held them responsible for Garrison's heresies.

That situation was awkward enough, but one of Garrison's heresies made it unbearable. In addition to everything else, the Boston editor had taken up nonresistance, a form of Christian anarchism. The "no-human-government" theory, as detractors called it, asserted that man-made political systems were innately evil and ought to be renounced. Human beings, nonresistants argued, should be ruled directly by God's law and not by earthly legislators.¹⁴ Most antislavery men and women, however, were as committed as other Americans to the idea of orderly government. They found abhorrent the nonresistant propo-

sition that it was sinful to use force to uphold human laws. Such a notion appeared to them to grant license to people to do whatever they pleased, stripping away the social restraints necessary for civilized society.

Besides raising the fearsome spectre of anarchy, nonresistance created a disagreement over tactics that had more to do with the schism than any other single factor. Shortly after Garrison made his turn to Christian anarchism, a group of men clustered around James G. Birney, Alvan Stewart, and Henry B. Stanton began to argue that abolitionists should take advantage of all promising means to fight slavery, including direct involvement in politics. They formed their own organization, the Liberty Party, in time to run Birney for the presidency in 1840. Nonresistants steadfastly believed it was wrong for abolitionists to become enmeshed in the political process (a view likewise held by many who were not Christian anarchists). Political abolitionists were equally convinced of the sinfulness of not using the political process to free the slave. From 1838 onward relations deteriorated between the factions, with each accusing the other of plunging antislavery toward ruin.

Antithetical though they were in terms of tactics, nonresistance and political abolitionism need not have broken apart the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1840. The two coexisted peacefully in Ohio for a time after the schism (when a division occurred in Ohio, it was so friendly that Garrisonians actually elected a Liberty man as president of their state organization). Even the strongholds of Christian anarchism, Garrisonian abolition societies, never had nonresistant majorities and always comprehended men and women of virtually every political and antipolitical persuasion. But more significant than cooperation between nonresistants and political abolitionists was a largely unacknowledged consensus in assumptions underpinning each position. Here, as on the woman question, antagonists were closer in principles than they allowed themselves to admit.

Nonresistants accepted the Liberty Party contention that some political action against slavery was valuable. "I have always expected, I still expect, to see abolition at the ballot box," Garrison remarked in 1839. Although critical of the Liberty Party, he and his nonresistant comrades praised Whig or Democratic politicians who stood up to the South. After 1848 they cheered on the Free Soil and Republican parties, recognizing that neither was truly antislavery but feeling both showed promise of taking more elevated stands in the future. In 1856 Garrison declared "if there were no moral barrier to our voting, and we had a million votes to bestow, we should cast them all for the Republican candidate [John C. Frémont]."¹⁵ Fremont's impressive

showing in that election seemed to Garrison a sign of the moral growth of the American people since 1830. Yet Garrisonians never relented in their assaults against fellow abolitionists who participated directly in politics. In truth, some of the ill-will was personal: Garrison could not forgive founders of the Liberty Party for what he regarded as their traitorous course toward him and the American Anti-Slavery Society between 1838 and 1840. Still, Garrisonians had a clear tactical and ethical rationale for praising politicians who moved against slavery and damning abolitionists who delved into politics.

Garrisonians frequently criticized abolitionist political action on practical grounds. They believed reformers were most effective when working through public opinion. "Let us aim to abolitionize the consciences and hearts of the people," Garrison declared, "and we may trust them at the ballot-box, or anywhere else."¹⁶ Until abolitionists weakened the movement's political impact, the major parties, the Whigs and Democrats, could ignore the paltry number of antislavery votes, secure in knowledge they would go to a futile Liberty Party candidate. Garrisonians argued that a tiny minority like the abolitionists must concentrate on building itself into a majority through propaganda; in the meantime it ought to play established political organizations off against each other and encourage them to bid for its ballots in close elections. Even nonresistants among the Garrisonians developed this strategy with sophistication and pointed proudly to cases, particularly in Ohio and Massachusetts, where blocs of antislavery voters were able to defeat pro-slavery candidates and to force concessions from Whigs and Democrats. Garrisonians felt it was more productive to stir antislavery winds and give credit to politicians who bent to them than it was to go down to noble defeats, as Liberty men did.

Garrisonians also saw moral dangers in the Liberty Party and other forms of direct political involvement. They thought the essence of American politicking was lust for office—principles, conscience, everything of spiritual value gave way to the basest sort of demagoguery. (Garrison once compared campaign tactics in presidential elections to "the Asiatic Cholera," with cholera having the advantage since it "spreads no moral contaminations.") For Garrison, Christian anarchism was a protest against the corruptions of Jacksonian politics. By remaining aloof from electioneering and by talking of a time when morality would not depend on laws, nonresistants proclaimed nobler standards than were to be found in the antebellum political system: nonresistance was a way of saying that things did not have to be as they were. Nonresistants accepted the fact that their ideal lay a long

time in the future and that for the present men would continue to vote, no matter how vile the candidates and platforms. But Garrisonians could never believe men might engage in partisan warfare and still remain morally pure. Abolitionists, they felt, should encourage voters and politicians to rise to their level instead of sinking to the level of politics.

Liberty men approached electioneering with many of the same apprehensions expressed by Garrisonians. Though favorable to independent nominations, the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society's executive committee warned that "Political parties, in the nature of things, are under strong temptation to compromise principle for the sake of success." The Liberty Party, it added, "must not expect to be free from this tendency." The party's two-time presidential nominee, James G. Birney, did his best to still those fears. Far from becoming an office-crazed politico, as Garrisonian rhetoric predicted, he spent a large part of his first run for the presidency in England attending an anti-slavery meeting. He issued defiantly uninspiring campaign statements and informed the electorate he doubted its ability to govern itself intelligently. Rather than abandoning Birney for his tactlessness, supporters took it as evidence of his fine character. One of his political managers congratulated him for saving "our struggle from degenerating into a mere scramble for office, or from sacrificing our ultimate object to present expediency."¹⁷ When expediency beckoned in 1848, a portion of the Liberty men did depart into the Free Soil coalition, even at the cost of endorsing an old enemy, Martin Van Buren, and abandoning the purely antislavery stand they had taken up to then. But the most adamant Liberty men declined to be tempted by success and continued to lose elections as Radical Political Abolitionists. The only one of their number to win office, Gerrit Smith, was so appalled by what he found in Washington that he resigned before his term was up—he valued his integrity more than his seat in Congress. In common with Garrisonians, abolitionists like Smith were acutely sensitive to conflict between their moral principles and the antebellum political system. What Garrisonians failed to acknowledge was that political abolitionists, no less than themselves, usually came down on the side of principle.

Political abolitionists also shared the Garrisonian belief that a reformer's basic task was to influence public sentiment. An important figure in Ohio Liberty Party affairs, Gamaliel Bailey, declared, "we have no faith in any political action against unconstitutional slavery which is not grounded on a deeply-rooted hostility to all slavery, constitutional or unconstitutional." The "moral aspects" of antislavery, he wrote, "are of paramount importance." For Garrisonians that reason-

ing implied staying out of politics and concentrating on written or spoken propaganda; for Bailey and fellow Liberty men political agitation was itself a significant form of propaganda. "It is as an educational party, mainly, that we stand before the country," declared one of Gerrit Smith's colleagues while nominating him for governor of New York. Smith used his acceptance speech to predict defeat and to state succinctly what made him run. "Our nomination," he said, "is to serve the purpose of honoring our principles and giving wider publicity to them."¹⁸ Smith was less interested in becoming governor than in taking the abolitionist case to the public. Electioneering—the great American sport of the day—was a means to do so. It was another weapon in the antislavery arsenal and not, as Garrisonians claimed, a renunciation of moral suasion.

In addition to being a tactic, political antislavery was an ethical statement. It permitted abolitionists to withdraw from the corruptions of the major parties and, simultaneously, to show the public a superior alternative, a party based on principle rather than expediency. In that respect, the Liberty Party served much the same function for political abolitionists as nonresistance did for Garrisonians: each reversed the image of the system as it operated; each presented a program rooted in morality rather than in the greed, corruption, and compromise that defined antebellum politics. Differences between political abolitionism and nonresistance dwindled into ideological insignificance when Liberty man Beriah Green announced his concept of electoral politics. "To offer (vote) office or accept of office on any other ground and for any other purpose, than to furnish a true *medium*, thro' which the throne of the Messiah may be reflected," Green wrote, "is exceedingly absurd and immeasurably wicked." He, no less than the Garrisonians, disdained any party "which refused to act upon the principles of Divine Government."¹⁹ Voting for an abolitionist candidate, like becoming a nonresistant, was a gesture of protest against imperfections in American political life.

Like the Garrisonians, Liberty men came to see abolitionism as part of a broad crusade to create a just world. In 1844 the party's platform resolved that slaveholding was merely "the grossest form and most revolting manifestation of Despotism" and that Liberty men must "carry out the principles of Equal Rights, into all their practical consequences and applications, and support every just measure conducive to individual and social freedom." The party came to oppose the tariff, favor hard money, and advocate the right of human beings to possess property earned by their labor. Such a stance was a partial repudiation of the principles of the Whig Party, from which most abolitionists had originally come, and an acceptance of a *laissez-faire*, individual-

istic, and localistic definition of freedom that aligned Liberty men with radical Jacksonian Democrats.²⁰ This emphasis also brought the party nearer to the nonresistants, who, in exaggerated fashion, were likewise fearful of governmental power and who agreed that liberty consisted of the right of men and women to act as independent moral and economic agents, unhindered by society.

Similarities between Garrisonians and political abolitionists became more obvious as years passed. By the mid-1840s Garrisonians had become more politically conscious than they were in 1840. Four years after the schism they renounced the federal union because it involved Northerners in complicity with Southern slavery, an extreme act that, as we shall see, had political calculations behind it. They also established cordial relationships with friendly office-holders and, of course, followed happily the rise of Free Soil sentiment after 1848. A number of their stalwarts went so far as to criticize Garrison for his intransigence toward the Liberty Party, and a few of them flirted with ideas of independent political action.²¹ For their part, Liberty men by 1848 either drifted toward the Free Soil movement and on into the mainstream of political life—the course of Gamaliel Bailey and Salmon P. Chase—or else clung to the stern antislavery faith of the mid-1840s, as did James G. Birney, Gerrit Smith, and William Goodell. In the decades following the division Liberty men and Garrisonians alike revealed by their behavior that they were of a divided mind about the political process. Each faction was alternately drawn to it and repulsed from it by the moral compromises it demanded of



successful candidates. Each faction was entranced by a vision of a more perfect society and neither one was quite certain whether the American-political system was capable of bringing it about.

"There never was any but an imaginary chasm between us," an old Liberty man told William Lloyd Garrison in 1862.²² He exaggerated a bit. It was a serious matter for abolitionists to disagree over whether women should participate equally with men in antislavery work and over whether to engage in direct political action. Yet Garrison's correspondent was more right than wrong. Abolitionist quarrels were not between competing ideologies: they took place within a parameter of assumptions. In terms of antebellum political culture, abolitionists possessed a Whig sense of responsibility for national affairs; but they grafted it onto the Democratic ideal of a state free from coercion. In religion, abolitionists drew from Protestant traditions, with their stress on individual conscience, and fused those with 1820s revivalism and its millennialistic faith that mankind could become perfect, or nearly so, while on earth. There was more within the parameter—and we shall deal with that in time—but when conflict arose it generally was because some abolitionist (Garrison most notably) went to the outer reaches of the parameter's egalitarian, anarchistic, and perfectionistic logic, farther than others cared to go. Even at those moments abolitionists were bound together by beliefs and perceptions that went deeper than the issues they argued about.

The division occurred for a simple reason: there was nothing to prevent it. Localism, personality conflicts, hard times, tension between group needs and individual conscience, and differences over tactics limited the American Anti-Slavery Society's effectiveness. By 1840 abolitionists could accomplish more without a single national organization and were better off going their separate ways.

The sad thing is that antislavery men and women, and historians following their lead, made the parting seem more serious than it was. It did not hurt antislavery; it did not demonstrate "anti-institutionalism"; and it did not derive from strong ideological differences. Negative though they are, those points have to be made. If they were not, the division would continue to bewitch and mislead, as it has since 1840. The real problem is to learn what abolitionists shared—otherwise we cannot understand what produced a particular style of antislavery in the 1830s and sustained its emotional power for three decades.

MEANS

Abolitionism as Career and Community

DIVISIONS among abolitionists were so frequent and so noisy that they obscured patterns of expression and social interaction that took place outside institutions and in everyday situations.¹ Such patterns are an important kind of human behavior: they have deep meanings not apparent to a casual observer. We grasp their significance best when we are outsiders, looking at an alien culture rather than at our ancestors or our contemporaries. Through intellect and imagination, for instance, we can tell that power, domination, family, obligation, tradition, and affection have unspoken parts when non-western peoples pay deference to one another. All humans—corporation executives as well as tribesmen—similarly express themselves and interact with one another on several levels simultaneously, governed by rules imbedded in culture.

It is time to turn to such a network of assumptions and coded meanings hidden beneath the surface of words, gestures, and deeds in antislavery. The place to begin is with three matters that were interconnected, although not obviously so: the social role of the reformer in antebellum America; the rituals and artifacts of antislavery; and abolitionist advocacy of violence. These fall into a pattern of their own and it is one that tells much about what antislavery meant to abolitionists.

Wendell Phillips came as close as any abolitionist to being a theoretician of propaganda and of the reformer's place in American society. According to Phillips, a democracy functions morally only if it has agitators who devote themselves to stirring public opinion. Once the public moves, politicians follow eagerly. Phillips argued that effectiveness and fidelity to principles required reformers to take extreme positions, ones unlikely to be accepted by the mass of mankind. Only by being shocking, insistent, and intransigent can an agitator overcome public apathy and inertia, which always favor the status quo. For Phillips this was both an article of faith and something proven by

experience. "Our reckless course, our empty rant, our fanaticism," he boasted, "has made Abolitionists of some of the best and ablest men in the land."² Such triumphs were temporary. Phillips maintained that it was the reformer's fate never to be found among the majority but eternally to be ahead of the rest of humanity, beckoning it to a higher moral ground.

Phillips' interpretation is attractive in its simplicity. It especially appeals to a cautious or disillusioned liberal sensibility because it assumes reformers have a permanent place in society but that extreme rhetoric results in nothing more than moderate change.³ Phillips, nonetheless, scarcely described, let alone analyzed, all that abolitionists did.

He was misleading when he claimed reformers worked primarily through public attitudes. That glossed over numerous ways in which abolitionists tried to coerce slaveholders. Some abolitionists hoped to put economic pressure on the South by operating stores selling nothing made by slave labor. David Child even planted sugar beets in Massachusetts in order to show Northerners they could sweeten their diet with "free" sugar. Phillips himself was interested in a project to grow cheap cotton in India to bring down Southern slavery by making it unprofitable. In the 1850s he urged slaves to run away or to rebel.⁴ These tactics were very different from the "moral suasion" Phillips glorified in his theoretical statements.

There were more subtle omissions and ambiguities in Phillips' pronouncements on agitation. He and fellow abolitionists argued that moral suasion was a matter of appealing to men and women as responsible beings and convincing them of the justice of immediate emancipation. Yet reformers suspected that most humans were not moral, and they believed that the godly individual's conscience was a surer guide to virtue than was the voice of society. Beriah Green captured the tension perfectly. Although he was a Liberty man and presumably interested in attracting voters to the cause, he felt "a greater delusion was never hatched from a cocatrice's egg, than what is commonly boasted of as the *Democratic principle*." He wanted "the control of Wisdom" rather than the control of universal suffrage. Phillips similarly refused to indulge in admiration for "the people." "The masses are governed more by impulse than conviction," he said in 1853, in tones appropriate for a Calvinistic Boston Brahmin. The problem was that abolitionists had to appeal to those masses or cease to be agitators in a democratic society. Phillips' response was an uneasy balance of moral elitism and democratic clichés. He argued that the agitator's function was to educate the populace and to lead public opinion to redemption. "The people always mean right, and in the end

they will have the right," he insisted, conceding it required a monumental amount of work to bring them to that point.⁵

Phillips' remarks reveal most by their incompleteness. They reflect a general abolitionist disinterest in pursuing abstract questions of tactics. With the great exception of their debate over the Liberty Party and political action, abolitionists did not even make much effort to weigh the relative effectiveness of various propaganda devices—surprising in a movement having to make the most of limited resources. When abolitionists did bring themselves to assess the means they used, they did so with casualness and diversity of opinion. "The press," R. G. Williams thought, "has probably made seven-eighths of all the abolitionists in the country." Thomas Wentworth Higginson dated his conversion from reading an antislavery book, but he added that "the eloquence of public meetings was a more exciting stimulus."⁶

It was just as well that abolitionists settled for random statements like those of Williams and Higginson and the engaging generalities of Wendell Phillips. Lack of theorizing about tactics freed abolitionists to pursue various alternatives without the agonizing introspection that that occasionally paralyzes the American left.⁷ No one in the movement had to feel guilt over working in the manner he or she found most comfortable, whether through prose, lecturing, or as an organizer of meetings and events. Even within propaganda forms there was a broad spectrum of tolerable styles—as there might not have



been had abolitionists attempted to develop coherent theories of moral suasion. At one extreme were closely reasoned political analyses of slavery; at the other were bitter and emotional polemics; somewhere in between were more or less factual treatises giving examples from the laws and unguarded writings of slaveholders themselves. That diversity of forms and styles let abolitionists have the best of all worlds. They could play to a rational and legalistic audience; they could pummel opponents and waverers with harsh language; they could manipulate sentimental conventions with tearful accounts of black families separated by cruel masters; and they could attack sentimental conventions when the "fastidious decorum of the age" stood in their way.

Whatever its effects, the failure of abolitionists to create a well-defined conception of agitation was indication that the crusade fit comfortably into a pre-existing set of roles, expectations, and techniques. William Goodell saw things accurately in retrospect. He recalled how a "new spirit of moral enterprise and inquiry" had been loose in the land in the 1820s and 1830s and how many future abolitionists had imbibed that spirit long before turning to antislavery. Phillips and his colleagues could avoid systematic self-scrutiny because nearly every kind of activity they engaged in (independent political action again being the exception) was familiar to them and had already proven its worth in earlier benevolent enterprises.

In reality Phillips' agitator was a new kind of profession that derived from several antebellum refinements in techniques of agitation. Some of these were secular adaptations of older Protestant forms. Goodell, the most astute student of the process, remarked upon a proliferation of "voluntary lecturers and agents of societies" and of "promiscuous conventions" attacking diverse evils. The former were the reform equivalent of itinerant clergymen, long a fixture of American religion; the latter were analogous to revivals and camp meetings. Other improvements in propaganda techniques came from innovations in transportation and printing. These reduced the cost of distributing information to a level where individuals and tiny groups could afford to put unconventional ideas before a mass audience.⁸

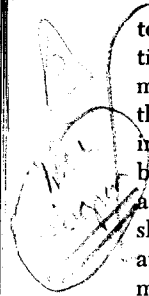
What neither Phillips nor Goodell quite grasped was that a combination of these factors—some religious, some scientific, and some social—conspired to make reform a viable occupation in antebellum America. To be sure, a few men and women in previous decades had devoted much of their lives to social improvement, but these were figures like John Woolman, a gentle eighteenth-century Quaker, who worked primarily within religious frameworks. The more common type of eighteenth-century reformer had been a man or woman of

civic virtue, a Benjamin Franklin engaged in many worthy activities but not defining his or her life in terms of one or two reform commitments. Even in the antebellum period such gentleman-reformers persisted. The distinguished sponsors of the American Colonization Society fit that description well: they were statesmen, lawyers, or planters for whom colonization was a peripheral matter. Phillips' agitator was different. His existence depended on engagement in reform. His income might derive from reform work or he might use income from other sources to support reform activities, but in either instance he was first and foremost a reformer. The significance of Phillips' musings on agitators was not in his sense of how they functioned but rather in the fact he could assume that in antebellum America men and women could make secular reform a career.

Once reform became a profession, professional considerations began to influence what reformers did—reinforcing a social role was as fully a part of some abolitionist enterprises as increasing support for the cause. Abolitionists themselves implied as much when they rejected "expediency." Immediate effectiveness mattered less, most of them insisted, than whether tactics represented adherence to the highest moral standard. Without that uncompromising commitment, abolitionists were in danger of losing the integrity and firmness of conviction that set reformers off from the unregenerate masses. Naturally enough abolitionists did at times choose expediency and they did occasionally fall into manipulating their audiences for effect (a bit cynically once in a while). Those lapses aside, antislavery most frequently entwined a desire to persuade others with a drive to preserve the distinctiveness of the group.

Even many ostensibly public events served to identify and strengthen true-hearted reformers rather than to reach unbelievers. A large number of antislavery meetings, for instance, were essentially private rituals to celebrate dates of significance only to abolitionists. Twenty years after, Boston antislavery men and women marked the anniversary of a violent mobbing they had suffered. New York abolitionists annually commemorated the successful rescue of a fugitive slave named Jerry. In New England, at Oberlin, and probably elsewhere, abolitionists held mournful picnics on the Fourth of July (reminders that democratic America did not give freedom to all) and joyous picnics on the first of August, the date of emancipation in the British West Indies.⁹ These were seasons of brotherhood, affirmations of a beleaguered conviction amidst a sinful society, celebrations of a victory yet to come.

In the same category were antislavery fairs or bazaars, held most successfully in Boston and Philadelphia, but also appearing in small



towns throughout the free states. Unlike picnics and ritual celebrations, fairs did have their practical side. They were wonderfully profit-making ventures, the Philadelphia one netting around \$28,000 through the years while the Boston fair put several thousand dollars annually into antislavery coffers. There was even some thought that bazaars brought new friends to the cause. "Those who shun the lecture room," a correspondent told the *Liberator*, "cannot help receiving the antislavery impress from the Fair." She may have been correct but money and converts were not what fairs were all about. Maria Weston Chapman said of the women who helped her organize the Boston bazaar: "It is the moral power, springing from the exertion to raise it [the money]; this increase of light, and energy, and skill, and perseverance, and christian fellowship, and devotedness to our holy enterprise,—and spiritual strength and comfort,—that we value far more than the largest sum." Mary Grew recalled fairs as "Passover Festivals, whither 'our tribes went up' with gladness, and found refreshment and strength."¹⁰ Like so many antislavery gatherings, fairs were the rites of a community.

The community itself might be small and faction-ridden, but social criteria for membership in it were unusually generous. Unlike most careers in antebellum America, reform was not the monopoly of adult, white males—the politically important segment of the population. Abolitionists also drew in black people, women, and children, a strikingly unpolitical approach to social change, one directed as much at the disfranchised as at the men who presumably made decisions with their ballots. The drive of the reformer was to bring into fellowship the moral part of the nation, which was not at all the same as the political part.

A way to accomplish that end was to hold meetings—fairs, picnics, and conventions—in which all ages, sexes, and races could join. Another way was to mingle abolitionist commitment with day-to-day spontaneous interaction among family and friends. Fairs did so by turning purchase of Christmas presents and mundane household items into a moral act (simple iron holders at one fair were promoted as "anti-slave holders"). Other endeavors likewise brought abolitionism into private situations. There were Ladies' Anti-Slavery Sewing Societies, the one in New York bragging that "with their needles and pencils they can reach the heart through the eye." These ladies produced such items as antislavery handkerchiefs for children ("operating upon many a little heart") and samplers for the walls of reform parlors, bearing mottoes like "May the points of our needles prick the slaveholders' consciences." Truly committed men and women could purchase antislavery earthenware so that they might "silently preach abo-

litionism to their guests, and train up their children in sound principles, by the simple process of furnishing their tables." If that were not enough, abolitionists could write on specially printed antislavery stationery and seal these letters with "wafers" telling of slavery's manifold evils.¹¹

Trivial as wafers, stationery, earthenware, samplers, and handkerchiefs seem, they were social signs of great importance. Like fairs, picnics, and ritual celebrations, they were evidence that when commitment came it was total. Antislavery was not something to be casually added to a person's previous beliefs and activities. It was acceptance of an image of one's self, admission to a community, and adoption of a way of life having its own peculiar badges of loyalty.

The abolitionists' conception of their role hinged on moral suasion. They saw themselves as teachers, preachers, and prophets of a better society. Yet crucial as moral suasion was, it was compromised by an undercurrent of violence in antislavery rhetoric. At first this appeared as nothing more than an ambivalence toward insurrections, but by the 1850s it became, for some, virtually a loss of faith in moral suasion as a tactic. Like the mundane emblems of antislavery sentiment, this growing fascination with violence was a function of the life-changing hold antislavery took on its converts.

From the beginning there was a strong sense among abolitionists that slavery might end in bloodshed, probably in a slave revolt. Nat Turner's Rebellion, most terrifying of all North American uprisings, occurred in 1831, less than a year after Garrison began publication of the *Liberator*, and it seemed an omen of worse things to come. "There is now about as much certainty that God will destroy the slave states by a series of calamities as that the sun will rise tomorrow," Garrison warned in Turner's aftermath. William Jay, writing about the same time, concluded that "the slaves will either receive their freedom as a boon, or they will wrest it by force from their masters."¹² Abolitionists like Garrison and Jay took care to point out that they did not endorse insurrection but they also did not equivocate: if the white South failed to emancipate its slaves it was doomed.

Clearly abolitionists had practical reasons for talking about slave revolts. Critics frequently charged them with stirring insurrection or else claimed that emancipation led inevitably to race war. As a consequence abolitionists had to spend inordinate amounts of time at such tasks as explaining that the famous uprising on St. Domingo had not come from granting freedom but from French attempts to reimpose slavery.¹³ The unfortunate conjunction of Nat Turner's Revolt with the early months of the *Liberator* made it even more imperative

for abolitionists to disassociate themselves from black rebellion. By presenting their work as the only alternative to insurrection they denied complicity in slave violence and turned fear of it into a reason for supporting their cause.

In yet another way abolitionists consciously took advantage of white uneasiness about slave revolts. Garrisonians played upon such apprehensions in the 1840s and 1850s when they advocated breaking the federal union between free and slave states. Often mistakenly seen as merely an attempt to preserve personal moral purity, this "disunion" strategy impressed Garrisonians as an effective tactic to scare the South into ending slavery. The terror for Southerners came because the thrust of disunionism, Garrison once explained, "is to withdraw from the masters all those resources and instrumentalities now furnished to them by the North, without which they are powerless." Chief among those instrumentalities was a promise of armed force to put down slave revolts. Disunionism offered the white South a Devil's choice: either emancipation and preservation of the Union or dissolution of the Union and more Nat Turners.¹⁴

Opponents as well as proponents recognized that disunionism rested upon a logic of violence. Long before the strategy took shape William Jay (hardly a Garrisonian) argued that if the Union collapsed, "a civil war ensues—the moral means heretofore used by abolitionists give place to the confused noise of the warrior, and to garments rolled in blood; servile insurrection necessarily follows in the train of civil war, and if slavery perish it will perish only in a deluge of BLOOD." The *Radical Abolitionist*, reviewing Wendell Phillips' arguments in 1857, gave its mock summation: "And so the 'dissolution of the Union' doctrine has dwindled down, at last, to this—an expedient for settling the slavery question by a masterly inactivity at the North—*Hands Off! Let the two races fight it out!*" Yet political abolitionists were as willing as Garrisonians to use hints of disunionism to play upon fears of insurrection. The Liberty Party's 1844 platform resolved that it was not the duty of the government "to maintain slavery by military force." This put the party on record in favor of withdrawal of Northern aid in case of a slave revolt. In a passage ominous to white Southerners the platform asserted "when freemen unsheath the sword it should be to strike for *Liberty*, not for despotism."¹⁵

Such predictions of violence aside, pacifism was deeply ingrained in early antislavery thought, and genuine concern over the possibility of insurrection may have helped push some of the pioneer abolitionists to advocate immediate emancipation. When first declaring her antislavery commitment, Angelina Grimké portrayed abolitionism as the only way to prevent a catastrophe far worse than Nat Turner's Rebellion. "At one time," she wrote,

I thought this system would be overthrown in blood, with the confused noise of the warrior; but a hope gleams across my mind, that *our* blood will be spilt, instead of the slaveholders, our *lives* will be taken and theirs spared. . . . I say a *hope*, for of all things I desire to be spared the anguish of seeing our beloved country desolated with the horrors of a servile war.¹⁶

That was the heart-felt language of a Southern-born woman who foresaw bloody atonement unless national repentance came rapidly.

Abolitionists spoke of slave revolts in situations that likewise indicate real apprehensions were at work, not just calculations of propaganda advantage. In a private letter to a fellow Northerner, Maria Weston Chapman in December 1850 predicted "an insurrection within a month." Alvan Stewart's speeches contained references to the horror of Turner's Revolt well after the event, and he justified the Liberty Party by asking if "the avenging sword, the midnight flame, the forlorn shriek of despair" were to be the only remedy for slavery. "God forbid," he exclaimed, "that the fair plains of the South should be delivered over to the vandalism of such a terrible necessity."¹⁷ Stewart knew that his party had no audience in the South and that his words had power only because they expressed the anxieties of himself and his fellow Liberty men.

There is further evidence that abolitionist distaste for violence was genuine. In 1837 an Illinois antislavery editor, Elijah Lovejoy, died at the hands of an angry mob. Abolitionists exploited his martyrdom to generate revulsion against enemies of the cause; but Lovejoy had taken up firearms to defend his press and that fact dampened enthusiasm for him among abolitionists and made their propaganda about his death less effective than it might have been. There were other instances when abolitionists created difficulties for themselves by reproving comrades for endorsing violent means. In 1843 Maria Weston Chapman took Henry Highland Garnet, a black abolitionist, to task for preaching revolt. Garnet felt the rebuke was presumptuous from a white and the dispute between the two assumed ugly racial overtones. These obscured the fact that black Garrisonians likewise disavowed Garnet and that Mrs. Chapman, a month earlier, had criticized her fellow white Garrisonian, Stephen Foster, for not clearly condemning slave uprisings.¹⁸ That kind of bickering would not have occurred if abolitionists had not taken their nonviolence very seriously.

Even after attitudes had begun to change in the 1850s, abolitionists who felt they had little else in common nonetheless paid tribute to each other's lingering pacifism. The *National Era* gave rare praise to Garrison in 1857, calling him "a man who . . . has constantly written and acted against the policy of force, against all physical violence, against the shedding of blood." Two and a half years later the paper

was similarly satisfied with his first remarks on John Brown's raid, being "pleased to observe that even Mr. Garrison has been true to his peace principles on this occasion."¹⁹

It is possible that abolitionist pacifism was a mechanism for denying, on the conscious level, subconscious fantasies of violence. Certainly it took lurid imaginations to create the more gruesome anti-slavery descriptions of insurrections and of Southern brutality. Whatever its psychological components, nonviolence did have an ambivalence that was easily brought to the surface by events, by frustration, and by taunts of anti-abolitionists.

Antislavery men and women found themselves occasionally having to extol acts of violence in order to refute racist charges that blacks were innately docile and fit only to be bondsmen. The Worcester County North Division Anti-Slavery Society neatly captured the problem in a resolution passed in 1842. The society decided "that while we would deprecate a resort to arms for the emancipation of the enslaved population of the south, yet we rejoice in the fact proved, by the recent strike for freedom of the slaves of the Creole, that slaves are not indifferent, as our opponents have often declared, to the inestimable blessings of civil liberty." Wendell Phillips announced in 1858 that "the Slave who does not write his own merit in the catalogue of insurrections hardly deserves freedom." Driving the matter home, he asserted "no slave proves his manhood, except those who rise and at least try to cut their masters' throat."²⁰

Vindications of slave violence also gave abolitionists a chance to reproach Americans for moral inconsistency. Every Fourth of July Americans celebrated resistance to oppression, a principle whites refused to grant to blacks. Mocking patriotic defenders of slavery, James G. Birney claimed, "those who approve of the conduct of our fathers in the American Revolution, must agree that the slaves have at least as good a natural right to vindicate their rights by physical force." Henry C. Wright made the same point. "Is there an 'apology' for any one who 'brandishes deadly weapons' in self-defence?" he asked. "For Warren? For Washington? For Nat Turner? There is as much apology for the one as the other."²¹ If anything, nonresistants like Wright were under more compulsion than Birney to make that kind of argument. They could twist it to discredit both defenders of slavery and the use of force itself. Such reasoning, however, put nonresistants in the treacherous position of maintaining that rebellions were justified by the principles of the American Revolution (as well as by natural right) and yet of insisting that they personally could not endorse rebellions.

Although abolitionist nonviolence rested upon a firmly Christian

base, Protestantism contained countercurrents that helped reformers, as they lost faith in pacifism, to explain and even anticipate violence. Pessimism over the progress of antislavery became a brooding sense that God would chastize His wayward people, as He had done in biblical times. Protestant imagery of a blood sacrifice in expiation of sin and of a final battle between good and evil was, for abolitionists, a guarantee of imminent destruction.

Despair and predictions of godly retribution gathered strength from political developments after 1845. Annexation of Texas that year and a subsequent war with Mexico raised again the spectre of further expansion of slavery. The most provoking of all political events, however, was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which gave Northerners responsibility to help slaveholders capture runaways. Black abolitionists were particularly willing to use force to block masters from retaking their former chattel. Frederick Douglass, who in 1843 blasted Henry Highland Garnet's call for insurrection, now urged blacks to resist enforcement of the act by all possible means. Some whites were no less warlike and over the next several years there was a series of bloody episodes in which ex-slaves and their Northern allies battled would-be slave catchers, sometimes with fatal results.

In the mid-1850s violence on a still larger scale broke out in Kansas—open and savage warfare over whether that territory would be slave or free. A number of abolitionists actively supported the free state forces, and all antislavery factions followed events in Kansas with intense interest. Ironically, some abolitionists in the 1850s were beginning to believe that the political system was responding to their propaganda; but the response seemed too slow, slaveholders too strong, and the times too violent. By 1856 James G. Birney, once chief of the political abolitionists, told Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "I regret that a civil war should rage [in Kansas] but if slavery cannot be exterminated without one—and I don't see how it can be—I say let it come." Lysander Spooner, who had tried to convince Americans that slavery was unconstitutional, lost his faith in the power of law and logic and became entranced with the idea of insurrection.²²

Among political abolitionists the most interesting pilgrim on the journey away from pacifism was Gerrit Smith, a wealthy New York state landlord who at the time of the division in 1840 declared himself leaning toward nonresistance. He nevertheless broke with the Garrisonians and worked for the Liberty Party. A frequent candidate under the antislavery banner, Smith won a term in the House of Representatives during the Kansas-Nebraska debates. By that time he questioned both non-resistance and the democratic process in America. ". . . I went to Congress with very little hope of the peaceful termina-

tion of American slavery," he told Frederick Douglass. "I have returned with less." Four years later, in August 1859, Smith claimed that the failure of all parties, from the Liberty through to the Republican, to do anything for slaves had led "intelligent black men . . . [to] see no hope for their race in the practice and policy of white men. No wonder they are brought to the conclusion that no resource is left to them but God and insurrections." "For insurrection then," he predicted, "we may look any year, any month, any day." Within months his involvement with John Brown became public knowledge.²³

The Garrisonians, with their strong nonresistant minority, had been the faction most committed to pacifism, but even their faith wavered in the 1850s. It was increasingly difficult for them to condemn all violence when some of it, such as that of the free state forces in Kansas, seemed nobly directed against slavery. The Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, where nonresistants were strongest, heeded the prodding of Henry C. Wright in 1857 and adopted resolutions pledging support in "every effort of the slave to obtain his freedom, whether by flight or insurrection," and asserting "those who hold to the right of armed resistance to oppression ought to recognize this right on the part of the slaves against their tyrant masters, and assist them to achieve their complete enfranchisement." Wright looked forward to the day "when an insurrection of slaves against the tyrants that crush them will be most welcome news" to the North. To a critic who felt Wright and Garrison had abandoned nonresistance, Garrison replied, "we are taking the American people on their own ground, and judging of them by their own standard." Wright agreed. "My object," he said, "is to test this nation by its own acknowledged rule of action."²⁴ That rule was violence. By the mid-1850s nonresistants could no longer ask slaves to live by the principles of peace in a world that was not peaceful.

More than any other episode in a bloody decade, John Brown's raid brought abolitionists to open admiration of violent means. Brown was a stubborn and magnetic man, a religious zealot allied with no anti-slavery organization but loosely acquainted with some eastern abolitionists. The path of Brown's twisted life took him through failed business ventures, a career of guerilla warfare in Kansas, and, on October 16, 1859, into a poorly planned assault on the Federal Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. The raid was doomed, and Brown was never entirely clear or candid about what he had wished to accomplish. It was apparent, however, that he and his men, who included blacks as well as whites, saw their act as a first blow against slavery, most probably as the inspiration for a slave uprising they hoped would spread throughout the South.

Garrisonians could not endorse Brown's Raid when measuring it by their principles. But falling back on the formula pronounced by Garrison and Wright, they found Brown's actions magnificent when judged by the morality of a society based on force—far more magnificent than they had found Lovejoy's death fighting in self-defense twenty years earlier. The American Anti-Slavery Society devoted its *Annual Report* for 1859 to "the memory of the noble hero-martyr" John Brown, concluding unconvincingly that the raid's failure "confirmed us in the choice we made, at the beginning, of spiritual instead of carnal weapons." Wendell Phillips did not bother to make even that perfunctory bow toward pacifism. "The lesson of the hour is insurrection," he gloated, going on to hint that the antislavery crusade bore responsibility for Brown. "Insurrection of thought," he declared, "always precedes the insurrection of action."²⁵

Not all abolitionists were as quick as Phillips to take credit for Brown. The raid was so shocking and so morally ambiguous that at first it stunned and confused abolitionists (indeed, the whole nation). But the moral ambiguities for abolitionists largely disappeared with Brown's trial and his execution by the state of Virginia on December 2, 1859. Brown, who had done few things well in his life, behaved with dignity and spoke with biblical cadences when faced with death. He was hatred of slavery incarnate, a magnificent and ferocious avenging angel brought to earth. Virginia obligingly gave Brown the chance to be a martyr, and he played the part superbly.

But there was more to Brown's appeal to abolitionists than his gallows eloquence. Though Brown's actions were contrary to antislavery pacifism, they resonated with something inherent to the reformer's



role. If reform was to be a career, if there was no ground for compromise, if one's life took meaning from hatred of slavery, then John Brown was a kinsman, less an aberration than a culmination. Brown himself recognized the kinship, as well as the unwillingness of other abolitionists to take their principles as far, when he dismissed Wendell Phillips for only *talking* about fighting.²⁶ Brown grasped a flaw in Phillips' conception of the agitator that Phillips barely sensed. What if society refused to listen to moral suasion? Give up? Settle for half a loaf? How long could the agitator beckon onward a nation that ignored virtue? Was there not a time when evil became so overwhelming that the only recourse was to strike at it, the Devil's weapons in hand?

War did not follow hard upon Brown's raid, as the old man had wished. It came a year and a half later, in the spring of 1861. It was civil, not servile, and abolitionist peace principles, already thoroughly weakened, nearly vanished with the firing upon Fort Sumter. A small number of abolitionists stuck stubbornly to nonviolence, a handful of men and women from all factions, including anti-Garrisonians like Beriah Green. Garrison and the nonresistants were of divided mind, appalled at the carnage but increasingly drawn to the Union cause, especially after the Emancipation Proclamation turned the war (however begrudgingly) into a struggle against slavery. Many of the nonresistants were genuinely sorry that slavery would not die peacefully, and a few had the courage to ask whether the clash of arms might not bring worse sins in its trail. More common was the response of other abolitionists, less extreme peace men, who found evasions to allow them to support the war. Finally there were abolitionists, many of them never peace men at heart, who marched off to battle with little hesitation. One of Garrison's sons became an officer commanding black troops.²⁷

It neither glorifies Brown nor justifies his violence to say that he was the most consistent of abolitionists; sometimes inconsistency is more humane and effective than consistency, and a greater person than Brown might have weighed the value of life differently than he did. There were, nonetheless, few places for abolitionist zeal to go once it became central to a person's sense of self. Institutions could not contain it, compromise could not satisfy it, and the American political system could not comprehend it.

When Wendell Phillips pronounced the platitudes about agitation that endeared him to historians he did not foresee the progression that brought him on a dreary December day to a rough farmhouse near North Elba, New York, where he delivered a eulogy over the

body of John Brown. Yet there was a thread of consistency running from Phillips' ideas about agitation through the common rituals and artifacts of antislavery and ending at Harper's Ferry. The thread was identification of self with the cause. For its staunchest disciples, post-1830 abolitionism was a style of life. It defined their role in society, whom they associated with, what they surrounded themselves with, and—for a few—how they died.