

Conscience and Violence :
Civil Disobedience and Presaging the Civil War
in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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I

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the best selling novel of the nineteenth century. Published serially in the *National Era*, an anti-slavery newspaper, from the summer of 1851 to the spring of 1852, it, attracted relatively little attention. However, when it appeared in book form it quickly became the "publishing phenomenon" of all time, selling 3,000 copies the first day and 20,000 within the first three weeks of release. No book until that time had brought the cause of American abolitionism before so large an audience. Moreover, in the years leading up to the Civil War, the novel was widely credited with galvanizing public opinion against the institution of slavery in the south. Lincoln himself, upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe, is said to have proclaimed her the "little lady who had started this great war." By the time of this meeting, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been translated into over twenty languages and more than two-million copies had been sold in the United States alone.

In this essay I would like to consider some of the ways in which *Uncle Tom Cabin* produced its remarkable effects on ante-bellum readers. In pursuing this question, I will focus somewhat narrowly on those aspects of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which pertain to Stowe's rhetori-

cal strategies. In particular, I want to address her use of what the critic Sacvan Bercovitch calls the “American jeremiad,” a type of uniquely American rhetoric that fuses Puritanism and secular politics¹. In this discussion I want to suggest that the American jeremiad enables Stowe to construct a *logic of damnation and salvation*—an either/or choice between moral extremes. Furthermore, the novel’s plot reiterates this logic through the melodramatic sequences of persecution, pursuit, flight, and in the martyrdom of the novel main protagonist, Uncle Tom. The plot enacts this logic but only partly resolves the moral questions it poses. By the novel’s end the world of slavery is purged of the wicked Simon Legree, but Stowe carefully avoids working out in the plot a solution to the larger problem of American slavery, which remains for the reader—and the nation—to solve.

As Bercovitch explains, the American jeremiad functions to bind the individual to a communal project of regeneration by calling attention to cherished national ideals—and the failure of the people to live up to them in the present time. From the opening pages of *Uncle Tom Cabin*, Stowe deals with the subject of American slavery from within this framework. Stowe evokes the Puritan vision of an exemplary moral community—“city on a hill,” as John Winthrop named it—and a “new covenant” with God in order to contrast the mythic images of the American past with the stark realities of slavery.

The tradition of civil disobedience, particularly the Christian practice of non-violent resistance, also figures largely in this novel and has an important relationship to the American jeremiad. It

should be noted that the rhetoric which Stowe employs, deriving from Puritan sermons, 'appeals' by design (in the logic of its argument) to a "higher authority" than secular institutions. There is a sense that God, rather than political bodies, holds the ultimate power over the moral problems this rhetoric addresses. As a result, her insistence on an *absolute* moral code, by which to judge the institution of slavery, negates the possibility of all *relativistic* and one might say, reformist, action in the political sphere. An appeal to higher authority, on the one hand, legitimates the highly admirable Christian passive resistance of the novel's main protagonist, Tom, but it also sanctions American militarism, a powerful centralized state², and violent means of redress.

The novel's strident tone, which strikes the reader from the Preface onward, derives its rhetorical power from points of reference *beyond* and *outside* the boundaries of the mid-century political debate over slavery. Stowe moral vision harkens back to pre-revolutionary America by invoking Christian millennialism and suggesting that the perspective of an imminent "last judgment" will illuminate the temporal dimension of the crisis over slavery. Stowe makes this connection in the text by contrasting the Puritan vision with the moral breakdown of constitutional democracy in the 1850s, epitomized in her view by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (a law requiring Northern citizens to aid in the return of escaped slaves). She considers contemporary America to have failed in fulfilling its providential "errand in the wilderness" (to make America a "beacon" of hope and moral fortitude for the world) and, as a result of its moral transgressions, the community can no longer be guided by its secular

political leaders. Instead, she says that,

“...while politicians contend, and men are swerved this way and that by conflicting tides of interest and passion, the great cause of human liberty is in the hands of the one of whom it is said... ‘He shall not fail nor be discouraged/Till He have set judgment in the earth’” (i)³.

This passage suggests that the present crisis demanded no less than the divine intervention of God into the affairs of secular government.

II

In the years leading up to the Civil War, the political spectrum in the United States had become increasingly polarized over the issue of slavery and the closely related questions of “union” and the legitimate reach of federal authority (numerous compromises had been made between North and South in an attempt to balance the “interests” of slave holding with free states). The processes of industrialization and geographical expansion in the wake of the Mexican-American War (1848) placed increased pressure on the regional balance between North and South and on the fragile boundaries of political consensus. Up to this period these geographical and political boundaries had been at least partly maintained by a series of legislative maneuvers intended to placate Southern power. Despite the abolition of the slave trade in Britain (1826) and the cessation of the importation of slaves to the United States, the slave population in the South still continued to increase, which contributed to the region’s

economic prosperity and, within the political context of the time, legitimated the South's claims to representation in the national government (based on population)⁴. The coexistence of "free" and slave states had historically hinged on a notion of shared political participation, mutual interest in a federal government, and legislative representation (excluding, of course, Many Americans, like women, slaves, the propertyless, and those from the working classes).

The regional conflict centered on differing interests, ideas about autonomy, and interpretations of the federal government's power to intercede in states' internal affairs. But importantly, regional conflict occurred within the framework of secular, constitutional, politics, if also within a power structure based on money, influence, and racial domination. The often conflict-ridden process of national unity, which had produced the compromise between states' rights and federal power in the eighteenth century republic, continued into the nineteenth century with a number of subsequent "compromises" (the 1850 compromise was only one of the most notorious). But by the late 1840s political appeals to the integrity of the Union had become largely defensive tactics to preserve a balance of federal authority and states rights against numerous contradictions. Thoreau's famous essay, "Resistance to Civil Government" (popularly known as, "Civil Disobedience"), sounds out the political contradictions of the era by examining the relationship between the power of government and the dictates of individual conscience.

Uncle Tom's Cabin, of course, popularized the plight of slaves but it also stole a page from Thoreau by calling for citizens to disobey

the Fugitive Act in favor of what conscience dictated. In Stowe's view, the Slave Act converts northern citizens into accomplices of the Congressional pact between North and South, because the Act requires these citizens to turn over runaway slaves to law enforcement authorities and makes it a penalty to help them. In political terms, the law reiterated the fundamental defense of property at the heart of the Constitution, while requiring the citizens of the free states to take an active role in protecting the interests of slave holders (and thus, in effect, making the compliance of private citizens in effect a 'union-reserving act').

III

If the political freedom of the American citizen is to be understood, as Thoreau argues, by a relative freedom *from* the reach and interference of government, then the Slave Act grossly upsets a balance between the government and the individual. As a consequence, the balance between political and moral authority, which historically gave American political culture its impetus, is also disturbed. Therefore, the legitimacy of American civil authority, *as a government*, is undermined because of the constraints it imposes on individual moral freedom and the exercise of conscience. This was precisely the interpretation which Stowe urged upon her readers.

Although the Slave Act purportedly spurned Stowe to write the novel (though she always maintained that "God did the writing"), the logic of her argument against civil authority brought forth a brilliantly realized, melodramatic narrative which redrew the American debate over slavery in Puritan typological and epochal terms. These

terms constitute the either/or logic of the jeremiad as Stowe employs it in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Rendered, thus, as a crisis of moral integrity for both the individual and the nation, the Slave Act, for Stowe, meant nothing less than an ultimate test of America's Providential design and the Puritan 'new' covenant. Since Stowe is concerned with exemplary individual conduct, as *a correlative to exemplary national conduct*, the question of compliance with the Act highlights the role of consensus and individual conscience in both in initially constituting and continuing to legitimate political authority.

Evoking the Puritan errand throughout her text, Stowe confronts the reader with the absolutism implicit in the rhetoric of the American jeremiad. She employs this rhetoric in order to make the reader aware of the importance of individual dissent to the official rationale for the Slave Act (that it was necessary to preserve the union) and to link the reader with the task of national regeneration. The rhetoric of the jeremiad denies any contradiction between history and national identity. The American jeremiad renders contemporary events typologically significant by constructing all of American history as an extension of biblical prophecy. As a result, the crisis over slavery easily lent itself to arguments concerned with salvation and damnation.

According to Bercovitch, the American jeremiad "effectively weds politics to the progress of the American city of god" and entails a "fusion of secular and sacred history" in order "to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them" toward "salvation." By drawing on Puritan theology, Stowe poses a

counter-tradition to secular government and calls forth a “higher” authority and a “truer” nation than the secular-civil America of her time.

IV

The images of the nation and the rhetoric which Stowe used throughout *Uncle Tom Cabin* had a tremendous effect on the American political debate over slavery in the 1850s. Stowe succeeded in gaining a national audience for abolitionism, whereas the arguments of the Abolitionists themselves had remained at the margins of the political sphere. Stowe succeeded by appropriating elements of abolitionist argument into the novel's melodramatic episodes. By showing the victimization of African American slaves and associating their persecution with American law, Stowe creates what Peter Brooks calls a logic of the “excluded middle”⁵. The essence of this logic is to present the reader with the dilemma of having to choose between siding with the victims or the law of the land. And this narrative strategy also helped popularize in the public imagination, in a way the Abolitionists were unable to, the idea that the contemporary debate over slavery and the fate of the Union were really about an historically rooted struggle between individual conscience and the legitimacy of secular authority.

In the narrative pattern of persecuted, pursued, and victimized slaves, and in the heroic intervention of exemplary Christian figures, the novel powerfully links in the reader's mind the incursion of political and economic forces into the near sacred, protected bounds of the American home. As Jane Tompkins and Philip Fisher have

both noted, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a radical novel for including the African-American slave within what mid-century culture recognized as the humane sphere of the domestic household. The inclusion of African-Americans in this white, middle class social "space," established the slave within a network of affective rather than property relations. And the novel offers a procession of exemplary familial figures who disobey secular authority under the rubric of conscience and "higher" [or, as Stowe would insist, divine] law. The novel put into effect, through the logic of melodramatic narrative, Stowe's rallying cry for a new consensus which would combine civil disobedience with an affirmation of the either/or terms of the American jeremiad. The call to civil disobedience, in familial terms, placed individual commitment to the rhetoric of the jeremiad, and a correlative turn away from secular politics and political authority, within a framework of moral absolutes guided by belief in transcendent agency and higher law.

V

Stowe's appropriation of the jeremiad is pivotal for the binary, either/or, logic which compels a typological reading of the American crisis over slavery. Ultimately, however, such an interpretation justifies a recourse to violence, despite the fact that the novels' main protagonist displays exemplary non-violent resistance to the cruel and depraved Simon Legree.

James M. Cox also suggests that Stowe employed the strategies of melodrama for some of these reasons and, moreover, she set the novel's final scene in the deep South in order to provide images of

concrete evil which would then remain for the national community to purge. He suggests that the “South is the field” to set Stowe’s “fusion of Calvinist sermon, social critique, and secular melodrama” because it allowed her to place theological evil in a concrete setting where “it could be abolished by political and military power⁶.” By the end of the novel both Tom and Legree are dead—in effect a ‘drow’ between good and evil—but the larger “sin” of slavery remains unaddressed.

In the culminating chapters, The novel’s protagonist, Tom, steadfastly resists Legree’s verbal and physical onslaughts, and the order to inflict violence, in the form of a whipping, on another slave. While Legree humiliates and, in the end, brutally murders Tom, the narrator reminds the reader that such abuses occur routinely under the “shadow of American Law.” The reader is given to understand that while Tom’s resistance is exemplary, his suffering at the hands of Legree is merely typical of the cruelty sanctioned by the slave system. Moreover, the narrator emphasizes the impossibility of judicial redress in the South in order to affirm the reader’s experience that Tom’s death is both socially sanctioned and irremediable by means of conventional justice.

Stowe employs the jeremiad to invoke a spirit of holy war, aimed not against the south *per se*, though this would be the eventual outcome, but rather against what the novel presents as the relativistic and morally unacceptable standards of the secular-political sphere. By this logic, compromise, which it is an essential part of the political process, is indicted for sanctioning the worst abuses that occur under slavery.

That Stowe wanted readers to come away from the story with a

sense of renewed moral fervor, if not militancy, is evident in the novel's conclusion. Here, Stowe takes leave of them with the hope that, having borne witness to Tom's death, the politics of the slave debate will now acquire epochal and absolute moral significance. Moreover, the evil which the novel stages could not yet be purged from the public world because the crisis was yet to be understood in what the novel argues were its essentially oppositional terms. To underscore this interpretation of slave crisis, Stowe says in her "Conclusion,"

"Christians! every time that you pray that the kingdom of Christ may come, can you forget that prophecy associates in dread fellowship, the *day of vengeance* with the year of his redeemed?

A Day of grace is yet held out to us. Both North and South have been guilty before God; and the *Christian Church* has a heavy account to answer. *Not by combining together*, to protect injustice and cruelty, and making a common capital of sin, is this Union to be saved,—but by repentance, justice and mercy; not surer is *the eternal law* by which the millstone sinks in the ocean, than *that stronger law* by which injustice and U p cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God!" (emphases, mine).

The passage is remarkable not just for its rhetorical power but also for shaping nineteenth century America's bitterest political crisis into a religious typological framework that emphatically rejected consti-

tutional politics. The passage does far more than boldly reiterate America's providential role in human history or warn of its failures to live up to the Puritan covenant. It reconstructs a genealogy between the Puritan mission and the crisis of 1850, entirely skipping over secular political history and side-stepping the universalist claims of the Revolutionary tradition, to which, ironically, figures like Frederick Douglass and Lincoln both appealed.

VI

I would like now to consider more closely some of the the political ramifications of Stowe's moral stance. Political theorists remind us that acting in accordance with the dictates of conscience or the heart does necessarily ensure either a moral or political stance because political acts always require the presence, interaction, and, finally, the judgment of others. As Herman Melville so poignantly dramatizes in "Billy Budd," goodness which acts only in accordance with an individual's moral intention and self-perception may produce surprisingly disastrous results, such as when Billy inadvertently kills the depraved Claggart with a disproportionately violent response to Claggart's provocations (and later in that story Melville's narrator ironically informs us that 'good' and 'evil' had switched places).

So when the rhetoric of the jeremiad directs individual conscience toward a millennialist view of the slave crisis, the appeal to higher law which this view contains risks directing action in the public sphere without reference to others. This position, like that of Melville's tragic protagonist, also assumes that the goodness of its

moral precepts is self-evident and will be universally recognized as such by others, even though their perspectives may vary radically (in this regard, today's militant pro-life activists also come to mind).

Following inner dictums may be political in nature (as proved to be true in the movements that arose around Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr.), but perhaps only when an impersonal form of authority can be constituted out of a collective call to principle (that is, during the American Civil Rights Movement, for example, activists argued for making the laws of the South consistent with the American Constitution, no more and no less). In the *Psychology of Non-violence* Leroy Pelton points out that Gandhi claimed only those who have willingly and scrupulously obeyed the laws of a society (perhaps out of intelligent appreciation for their necessity in promoting the *common good*) have the right to engage in civil disobedience of certain laws in well-defined circumstances.

Where does this leave us, especially since Tom's behavior is law-abiding to a flaw? In her discussion of the 1960s and the possibility of political action under modern political conditions, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt made the crucial distinction between civil disobedience and acts of conscience⁷. She—rather provocatively—suggests that Thoreau, and his model, Socrates, were not, strictly speaking, civil disobedients because each in effect based his non-compliance with legal authority on personal or transcendental truth. Such a stance, according to Arendt, lies outside of the political sphere, which is constituted by the presence and 'inter-subjectivity' of others and constrained by reasoned debate and a recognizable common good. Despite the legacy of both Socrates and Thoreau, it was

their commitment to personal action, not the claims of conscience, which Arendt believes argues most strongly—in a political sense—for the disobedience they effected.

Particularly in democracies, objective values that arise out of the inter-subjective processes of argument and debate provide public authority its legitimacy. Whereas, recourse to the authority of 'higher law,' which in the novel legitimizes civil disobedience, effectively ends debate and, like Tom, may carry the individual into the lonely realm of martyrdom, or, like Billy Budd, to reflexive, self-assured violence.

VII

In summary, I would like to suggest that the either/or logic Stowe set up through her appropriation of the jeremiad contributed to the logic of a holy crusade that galvanized American culture and helped ready it for war. The need to purge the "evil" South in order to affirm the solidarity of the nation, would construct the Northern states and the Federal government, in 1860, as righteous vanquishers. But it would not be until abolition had been combined with the more politically viable appeal to free land and labor that Lincoln was able to direct public outrage toward southern secession and fears of disunion toward the moral ends of African American freedom.

I would like to conclude this admittedly critical view of the politics of this remarkable and complex novel by citing John William Ward, who observes that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "gave Americans a chance to experience some of the difficulty American society faced in deciding what to do about slavery, a decision that was never made and was

left to the brute irrationality of war to determine⁸.” I would add that the alternatives to war may have been somewhere in that vast ‘excluded middle,’ between transcendent good and complete depravity, along a continuum, perhaps, of political interestedness and the dictates of conscience.

Notes

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1. In the *American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) Bercovitch defines the jeremiad as a form of rhetorical argument that carries Puritan ideas about America's moral exceptionalism into the political sphere. The posing of a choice between salvation and damnation is an inherent part of this rhetoric's structure.
2. Wilson, Edmund. *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the Civil War*, 1962. On this topic, Wilson's seminal study is unique in questioning the aggrandizement of federal power, a consequence of the Union victory over the South.
3. For examples of Puritan religious discourse on which Stowe based this excerpt from the text, see John Winthrop's "City on Hill" speech aboard the *Arabella*, 1630, and John Danforth's "Election Day Sermon," 1672.
4. Davis, David Brion. *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1975. Davis's account of slavery and the causes which led to its

- dissolution in the nineteenth century is generally considered to be one of the most comprehensive and authoritative on the subject.
5. Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1967.
 6. Cox, James. M. "Harriet Beecher Stowe: From Sectionalism to Regionalism." *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 38.4 (March 1984): 444-66.
 7. Arendt, Hannah. *Crises of the Public*. [no longer in print], 1969.
 8. Ward's essay appear in the "afterword" of the Signet edition of the novel, [no longer in print], 1958.