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The Wrongheaded and the Transparent Eye-ball: Garrison, Emerson, and Antebellum Reform

By

Denis P. Brennan

John L. Thomas and Robert H. Abzug agree that the reform movement of the early nineteenth century was built on three factors: the expansion of democracy and egalitarianism, the millennial optimism of the early republic, and the disestablishment of the churches.¹ These factors provided the foundation on which reformers operated until the Civil War era refocused the nation toward institutional efforts at efficiency and professionalism. Building on this foundation, the approaches of these two authors then diverge and more nuanced perspectives develop.

Thomas emphasizes the influence of perfectionism. For the founding fathers, he argues, perfectionism was institutionally possible within the boundaries of a system of checks and balances, but for what Thomas calls the “romantic reformer,” perfectionism was a possibility for the educated individual as well as the means to personal self-improvement.² As the

¹ John L. Thomas, “Romantic Reform in America, 1815-1865.” *American Quarterly* (Winter, 1965): 656-681, and Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York, 1994).

² On the other hand, in Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, 1978), pp. 248-255, the author argues that Jefferson's use of the term “pursuit of happiness” bypasses the institutionalization of perfectionism and establishes it as an individual political right. Also in Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York, 1976), p. 92, perfection in the optimistic America of the National period was based on social justice

romantic reform movement spread across American society, Thomas contends, it became philosophically associated with Transcendental theory. In turn, Transcendentalism secured perfectionism within the individual and promised that from there it could move outward through family and society to regenerate the world. Since, according to Octavius Frothingham, the transcendentalist “was less a reformer of human circumstances than a regenerator of the human spirit,”³ the failure of church and state to support real reform eventually led some transcendentalists into communitarian efforts.

Abzug focuses on the religious and the “sacralization” of the profane, along with the holy, or as he defines it, “the tendency to apply religious imagination and passion to issues that most Americans considered worldly.”⁴ The religious cosmos appeared to disintegrate early in the nineteenth century as church control of social behavior was challenged by democratic changes.⁵ Initially, Abzug argues, benevolent reformers and the societies they established sought to remind people of the proper order in society. Although they never completely disappeared, benevolent reformers eventually gave way to evangelical reformers who sought individual holiness, and who in turn were succeeded by radical reformers who envisioned a complete restructuring of society. In each case, Abzug claims, the changes were precipitated by a sense of a collapsing “cosmetology” which could only be saved by commitment, in a profoundly holy and religious sense, even when the issue would most often be envisioned as one of earthly significance.

At the risk of over-simplifying both Thomas’ and Abzug’s intricate

permitting each free individual to develop his own potential fully and without restriction.

³ Frothingham, quoted in Thomas, “Romantic Reform,” p. 671.

⁴ Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, p. 3.

⁵ As Jon Butler argues in *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 270, this disintegration was not a movement away from religion but away from the establishment of church with government. Americans actively embraced religion in the nineteenth century unlike they had in the eighteenth or earlier. The actual number of formal religious congregations increased from the Revolution to the Civil War at nearly three times the rate of population growth.

examinations of one of the most active and complicated periods of American intellectual development, the crux of their analysis of nineteenth century reform appears to rest on the individual differently understood. For Thomas, perfectionist moral reform and transcendental reform preceded from the individual. It was reform within the individual that provided the structural framework for organizational or communitarian efforts to remake the rest of the world. In fact, while lack of money and management skill contributed to the final collapse of perfectionist efforts at reform, the "real cause" rested "in the person of the perfectionist self, Margaret Fuller's 'mountainous me.'"⁶ The emphasis is essentially reversed for Abzug. The individual embraces a sacralized concept which is envisioned as containing the means to reform the world. Thus, for example, acceptance of and adherence to the principles of benevolence, temperance, sabbatarianism, or even non-resistance, had the potential to restore a crumbling cosmos to the order intended by God, or whatever power that ruled the natural world. From this base grew the radical reformers (abolitionism, communitarianism, and feminism) who envisioned a complete restructuring of society. The ultimate radicalism and the one that split reformers in the 1840s was feminism. This radical call for equal rights, equal participation, and equal treatment for women was too extreme for even some radical reformers -- too much of their cosmos crumbled in its wake. "Reform had ... moved from changing habits such as drinking to rethinking the basic theological and social foundations of Western culture,"⁷ writes Abzug, and for all but the most radical reformers this was a step too far.

Two men who embodied the Reform Era in American history in the aspects emphasized by Thomas' "romantic reform" model and Abzug's "crumbling cosmos" model, respectively, were Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Lloyd Garrison. It is arguable who had the greater influence on reform, and more likely accurate to state that reform could not have succeeded without both. Emerson believed in and practiced a life structured around solitary meditation, with occasional forays into society, giving lectures at lyceums and in public halls, to explicate the search for

⁶ Thomas, "Romantic Reform," p. 679.

⁷ Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, p. 228.

individual perfection. Meanwhile Garrison insisted on confrontational action and social activity that not only demanded, as he stated in the inaugural issue of *The Liberator*, "to be heard" but also demanded change from those least willing to consider change. Although only Emerson was formally trained for the ministry, both men were preachers and knew well how to use their pulpits. Both called for each person to be perfect, but for Emerson perfection was within and for each to discover in individual ways, while for Garrison, perfection was an example for others to follow in order to reform society.

In attempting to understand the factors that influenced Emerson's and Garrison's development, even a cursory examination of their lives points to some interesting similarities. Both were born within a few years of the beginning of the nineteenth century and lived long lives. Both lost their fathers at an early age and to varying degrees learned what it meant to depend on charity. Both had strong female influences in their development, Emerson, his father's sister, Mary Moody Emerson, and Garrison, his mother, Fanny Lloyd Garrison. Religion was also important in both boys' development. Emerson's father was a minister and Garrison's grandparents disowned his mother for her religious convictions. But more interestingly, both rejected organized religion as adults. Both preferred the use of their middle names, Waldo and Lloyd. Dissimilarities also stand out. Ralph Waldo Emerson attended Boston Latin School and Harvard College on his way to a Divinity Degree, while William Lloyd Garrison's formal education was sporadic and ended at age eleven. During their long and active lives, both attracted many followers and friends, but Emerson generally maintained an ever enlarging circle of friends while Garrison's circle was ever changing and always in flux.⁸ However, the clearest difference between the two reformers was the approach each brought to efforts for reform.

⁸ In Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints* (Cambridge, 1982), Garrison is placed at the head of a Boston clique of abolitionist insurgents who, with minor exception, remained loyal and united throughout the anti-slavery struggle. Nonetheless, Garrison's broader circle was more fluid and included many who entered and left his sphere of influence, including such notables as Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Angelina and Sara Grimke, and Frederick Douglass. Whether this was the result of Garrison's passionate consistency or irrational impulse for attention is a subject beyond the scope of this paper.

Both Emerson and Garrison were solidly grounded in belief in the individual. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote perceptively about the unique character of individualism in the United States and accurately represented the role of the individual in the new nation. He believed that individualism in a democracy threatened to encourage people "to withdraw into the circle of family and friends ... and [leave] the greater society to look after itself."⁹ Americans, he observed, countered this tendency by the free institutions they created and local liberties they encouraged which brought people together and "By dint of working for the good of his fellow citizens, he in the end acquires a habit and taste for serving them."¹⁰ Emerson and Garrison personified the opposite poles of American individualism, as de Tocqueville described it.

For Emerson, the individual was an end in itself and as such he was the ultimate "romantic reformer" in the John Thomas model. Each person must find his or her own way, must troll the depths of their own soul, must harvest the reality within themselves, and must discover their own path to reward or happiness. As he attested in *Nature*, he believed that truth was found not in "the sepulchres of the fathers"¹¹ but within each person. On the highest level of intercourse with one's own self, the beauty and delight of nature can turn anyone, as it did for him, into a "transparent eyeball" and claim "I am nothing. I see all."¹² The power of man at one with nature, for Emerson, is the only power that can restore "to the world original and eternal beauty."¹³ Consequently, he counseled, "Build, therefore, your own world,"¹⁴ and, in an essay five years later, encouraged people "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is

⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by George Lawrence and edited by J. P. Mayer (New York, 1988), p. 506.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 512-3.

¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature in Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Fourth Edition, Vol. I (New York), p. 993.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 996.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1019.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1020.

true for you in your private heart, is true for all men.”¹⁵ As a result, prisons and enemies will vanish, the squalor and filth of nature disappear, and man will restore his kingdom. Emerson, in a sense, carried New England Congregationalism -- indeed the Reformation -- to its final limits.¹⁶ It was founded on the integrity of individual churches whose covenanted members of believers were independent in all matters of government from any other church. The power of grace would lead each congregation to understand and practice God’s truth. Emerson was a congregation of one and fully encouraged others to form their own similar congregations.

Garrison was on the other side. While he also believed in the individual as the source of reform, the individual was the means to reform and not the end. In the Abzug model of “crumbling cosmos” reformers, there was an intense sense of mission and urgency to restore order to the world. For instance, Lyman Beecher’s temperance campaign developed a new theme around 1827. He had for many years opposed the intemperate use of alcohol, but in a new series of sermons, he recast the problem as a threat to the moral mission of the nation. “He was preaching,” in Abzug’s words, “a jeremiad about alcohol: those whom God had chosen to bring the world to Christ were fast destroying themselves with drink.”¹⁷ Other reformers, like Sylvester Graham on diet and exercise, or Orson Fowler on phrenology, believed that their reforms were “the keys to individual health, republican virtue, and progress toward the Millennium.”¹⁸ All shared the intense commitment to the individual’s need to embrace reform for their own improvement as well as the benefit of the nation.

¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance,” in *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Fourth Edition, Vol. I (New York, 1994), p. 1046.

¹⁶ In Perry Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, 1956), Miller eloquently describes Emerson’s link to Puritanism, “the husks of Puritanism were being discarded, but the energies of many Puritans were not yet diverted ... from a passionate search of the soul and of nature, from the quest to which Calvinism had devoted them.” (see Chapter VIII, “From Edwards to Emerson”)

¹⁷ Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, p. 88.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

No one exemplified this intensity more completely than Garrison. Where Emerson sought to make men think, to ponder the meaning of life, and to commit themselves individually to an inward reform, Garrison sought to make men feel uncomfortable, to grapple with the realities around them, and to force men to make an outward visible choice for reform. He wrote in the first issue of the *Liberator* and warned all who opposed freedom for blacks in America to “tremble... [because]... I will be as harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice.”¹⁹ Seven years later, he would clarify the single-mindedness of his pursuit of this goal. In another editorial, Garrison claimed that whoever embraced the cause of abolition “loving his creed, or sect, or party, or any worldly interest, or personal reputation ... more than the cause of bleeding humanity... will prove himself to be unworthy of his abolition profession.”²⁰ It would never be enough for Garrison to be a congregation of one. Restoring oneself to right thinking was only the first step to communion with others. Four years before the Civil War began he wrote, “the very best way to obey [God]... is contained in these two -- improving ourselves, and helping our fellow men.”²¹

One example of these different approaches to reform can be seen in the reactions to William Ellery Channing’s book, *Thoughts on Slavery*, published in 1835 -- a year which also witnessed mob attacks in Boston threatening Garrison’s life, as well as the publication of Emerson’s first book, *Nature*.²² Channing’s eminence and the relative silence of the churches in Boston on the slavery issue had influenced Garrison to write to Channing in early 1834. He requested that Channing “exert [his] victorious influence for the deliverance of this country from impending

¹⁹ *Liberator*, January 1, 1831.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, December 15, 1837.

²¹ *Ibid.*, September 4, 1857.

²² William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) was a leader of the liberal ministers in Boston. They believed that all humans had the capacity within themselves to rationally choose between good and evil, as opposed to orthodox Calvinists who believed that all humans were by nature depraved and inclined to sinfulness. See Irving H. Bartlett, ed., *William Ellery Channing: Unitarian Christianity and Other Essays* (New York, 1957) and Jack Mendelsohn, *Channing: The Reluctant Radical* (Boston, 1971).

ruin.”²³ There is no record or evidence that Channing responded to Garrison’s request, and considering the growth of anti-abolitionist activity that accompanied the anti-slavery movement during 1834 and 1835, Channing had ample other influences to encourage him to write a book on the subject of slavery. In his book, Channing condemned slavery, accepted the notion that rights grounded in nature, morality, and God, could never permit any human to be held as the property of another, and denied the validity of the use of scripture as a defense of slavery. However, he also argued that change must come from the slaveholders themselves and that non-slaveholders (such as the Boston abolitionists) ought to temper their zeal, listen to their conscience, and pray for change.²⁴

For his part, Garrison welcomed Channing’s entry into the debate and his condemnation of slavery, despite the fact that he remained uncommitted to the abolitionist agenda. In a letter to Samuel J. May, a longtime member of Garrison’s Boston clique, Garrison wrote regarding Channing’s book, “I am heartily glad that he is now committed upon the subject.” Writing from Brooklyn where he had gone to escape Boston’s anti-abolitionist mobs, he also noted, perhaps with some satisfaction, that as a result Channing will ‘soon have a southern hornet’s nest about his ears.’²⁵ Two editorial reviews of Channing’s book appeared in the *Liberator*. The first, in December 1835, praised the book for its opposition to slavery and expressed the belief that it “will do great good” for the cause, but reserved the right to raise objections at a later date.²⁶ That later review, along with a list of twenty-five errors, was published in February of the next year. Among Channing’s errors, according to Garrison, was his refusal to adopt the ideal of immediate emancipation, his expression of understanding for those “good men” among the “despots” who owned slaves, the charge of fanaticism leveled against the

²³ Francis Jackson Garrison and Wendell Phillips Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison 1805-1879: The Story of His Life Told by His Children* (Boston, 1894), I: 464-5.

²⁴ Mendelsohn, *Channing*, pp. 249-253.

²⁵ Walter M. Merrill and Louis Ruchames, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison* (Cambridge, 1971), I:572.

²⁶ *Liberator*, December 12, 1835.

abolitionist, and, especially, his call for “abolitionists to cease from their work of agitation.” This last item was likely the most damning; moderation in opposition to the sin of slavery was no virtue. Garrison concluded his review with a complete rejection of Channing’s book and declared it “utterly destitute of any redeeming, reforming power.”²⁷ The logic of Channing’s arguments exonerated non-slaveholders from complicity with slavery, but Northern silence equaled complicity for Garrison, and constituted as grievous a sin as slavery itself. Both Channing and Emerson would be content with individual, personal opposition to slavery, but that response would not restore Garrison’s crumbling cosmos. As early as 1829, he had envisioned the dire threat of slavery in an Independence Day address he gave in Boston as he prepared to move to Baltimore and co-editorship of *the Genius of Universal Emancipation* with Benjamin Lundy. Slavery was an evil, he said, and “a gangrene preying upon our vitals—an earthquake rumbling under our feet—a mine accumulating materials for a national catastrophe.”²⁸

Boston and its environs were a hotbed of agitation for both sides of the slavery debate and the publication of Channing’s *Thoughts on Slavery* did not have the salutary effect he had envisioned. Many abolitionists were less critical than Garrison but few were prepared to abandon the cause and simply pray for change now that the good doctor Channing had joined them in the condemnation of slavery. Those who opposed abolition charged him with meddling in political and economic affairs that were beyond the scope of his ministerial obligations. Channing found himself rebuked from both sides, abused by some of his own parishioners, and shunned by many of his ministerial associates.²⁹ Emerson was characteristically quiet on the matter, although he knew Channing well. As a young divinity student, Emerson had been significantly influenced by Channing as a teacher, mentor, and spiritual inspiration.³⁰ However, aside from a comment in his journals calling Channing’s book on slavery one of

²⁷ *Ibid.*, February 27, 1836.

²⁸ Garrison and Garrison, *The Story of His Life*, I: 128.

²⁹ Mendelsohn, *Channing*, pp. 253-6.

³⁰ Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson* (New York, 1982), pp. 64-80.

the “perfectly genuine works of the times.”³¹ Emerson was silent at this time on the issue of abolition.

In keeping with Thomas’ definition of the romantic reformer, Emerson, in January of 1841, addressed the issue of reform but not slavery, in particular, in a lecture titled “Man the Reformer”, read before the Mechanics Apprentices’ Library Association of Boston.³² Each person, he argued, strives “to be in his place a free and helpful man, a reformer, a benefactor”³³ and any digression from this impulse cannot be charged only to the abuses of commerce, trade, property, or class. Every person must recognize their shared culpability for all the wrongs of the world that require reform, but rather than “extravagant” demands for absolute and immediate change, “we must not cease to *tend* to correction of flagrant wrongs, by laying one stone aright every day.”³⁴ The scope of current reform sentiment calls us, Emerson claimed, “to revise the whole of our social structure, the State, the school, religion, marriage, trade, science, and explore the foundations of our own nature.”³⁵ Without such exploration, revision would be futile. Science, politics and statesmanship cannot create a reformed society without first reforming man. Likening current reformers to a wind that attempts to blow in a climate of change, Emerson preferred to be like the sun that warms each individual and encouraged each to “let our affection flow out to our fellows.”³⁶ In closing, he urged his listeners who would be reformers to practice prudence, a trait which required that a person, “should not be a subject of irregular and interrupted impulses of virtue, but a continent, persisting,

³¹ Merton M. Sealts, Jr. ed., *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, 1965), V, p. 150.

³² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature Addresses and Lectures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1903; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1968), pp. 225-256.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 247 (Emerson’s italics).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

immovable person."³⁷ True reform depended on a patient and consistent application of virtue and not on passionate and inconsistent outbursts of emotion.

This lecture came two months after Emerson and Garrison attended the Chardon Street Convention in Boston. When, in his lecture, he charged "neither can we ever construct that heavenly society you prate of out of foolish, sick, selfish men and women,"³⁸ one could surmise that he was recalling that convention. Bronson Alcott, Emerson's Concord neighbor and friend, was a member of the committee that drafted the call for the convention which was published in the *Liberator*. The convention hoped to determine the truth of claims to the Divine ordination of "Institutions called the Sabbath, the Ministry and the Church."³⁹ No record of the proceedings were ever published, perhaps because the vast collection of reformers of all persuasions agreed on little structure and no order, but could only agree to free discussion and completely open inquiry. Garrison supported the convention and believed strongly that truth would emerge in an atmosphere of unrestricted discussion and inquiry. In a letter to his brother-in-law, George Benson, Garrison urged him to come to the convention and explained how it was stirring dismay among people Garrison called "Cowards" because they refused to recognize that "truth is mightier than error, and that it is darkness, and not light, that is afraid of investigation."⁴⁰

His faith was not shaken by this meeting, but neither did truth (nor little else) emerge. Emerson wrote a brief summary of the convention which included the following:

If the assembly was disorderly, it was picturesque. Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians and

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

³⁹ *Liberator*, October 16, 1840.

⁴⁰ Garrison and Garrison, *The Story of His Life*, II: 424.

Philosophers, -- all came successively to the top, and seized their moment, if not their hour, wherein to chide, or pray, or preach, or protest.⁴¹

Whether this gathering formed the basis for Emerson's comment in his subsequent lecture to the apprentices or not, his response to the Chardon Street Convention clearly exemplifies Emerson's disdain for organized reform beyond the individual level. Organized institutional efforts might be "picturesque", but it would certainly never bring true reform.

Emerson would make this point more explicitly three years later in a lecture titled "New England Reformer" before a group at Amory Hall in Boston.⁴² Garrison also spoke at Amory Hall on a variety of reform topics, including abolition, the church, peace, and the rights of women.⁴³ In his lecture, Emerson praised the reformer who found strength in his own powers, but expressed concern that "society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things around him."⁴⁴ Generally he found two faults with the state of reform movements. The first was a narrowness of perspective that found fault in only one part of society. Evil touched all institutions, and efforts to change only trade, or only diet, or only education were partial, piecemeal, and incomplete solutions. The other fault lay in "their reliance on association"⁴⁵ which restricted individuals to serve the purpose of the group rather than to fulfill their own nature. Essentially, as in his earlier lecture, the path to true reform lay with the individual recognizing and fulfilling their own nature and their own potential. New England reformers (like Garrison, it might be noted) will not find serenity until they discover along with Emerson "that our own orbit is all our task, and we need not assist the

⁴¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Lectures and Biographical Sketches* (Boston, 1904; reprint, New York, 1968), X, pp. 373-7.

⁴² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays* (Boston, 1903; reprint, New York, pp. 249-285.

⁴³ Garrison and Garrison, *The Story of His Life*, III: 133.

⁴⁴ Emerson, *Essays*, p. 261.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

administration of the universe."⁴⁶ All men seek the truth and only by obedience to their own wisdom "does an angel seem to arise before a man and lead him by the hand out of all the wards of the prison."⁴⁷

Despite their different approaches, Emerson generally had a positive opinion of Garrison, even if most references include a tinge of discontent. In his journal of October 27, 1839, Emerson described him as "a man of great ability in conversation, of a certain long-sightedness in debate ... a tenacity of his proposition ... and an eloquence of illustration, which contents the ear and the mind."⁴⁸ Another time he chided, "Garrison is venerable in his place, like a tart Luther..."⁴⁹ Yet Emerson's comments never stray far from an understanding of their fundamental differences in approach to reform. In one entry, he refers to a conversation he had with Garrison in which Emerson questioned how Garrison "can afford to think much and talk much about the foibles of his neighbors, or 'denounce' and play 'the son of thunder' as he called it." Garrison took too much from people and gave little in return, Emerson continued. Much as he described in his lecture at Amory Hall, Emerson would prefer to transform a man "and imparadise him in ideas, or [in] the pursuit of human beauty." Thus transformed, man would, without compulsion, leave his foibles behind and enter "in his right mind into the assembly and conversation of men."⁵⁰ For Emerson, Garrison's vision was distorted. He did not see, as the exhilarated Emerson of *Nature* could, with a "transparent eye-ball" but rather, as Emerson described abolitionists in general, he was "wrongheaded, but ... wrongheaded in the right direction."⁵¹

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 284.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁴⁸ Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, eds., *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, V: 303.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII: 110.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, VI: 101-2.

⁵¹ James Elliot Cabot, *A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1887; reprint, New York, 1965), II, 430.

What was the “right direction” for Emerson can clearly be seen in a comparison of his and Garrison’s reaction to the killing of Elijah Lovejoy. A relatively recent adherent of abolitionism, Lovejoy published an anti-slavery newspaper and had three of his presses destroyed by mobs. While attempting to protect a fourth, Lovejoy was shot dead on November 7, 1837, in Alton, Illinois. Abolition had its first “martyr” and the incident provoked significant reaction and numerous public meetings throughout the country. When the news reached Boston, the *Liberator* of November 24th appeared with heavy black borders to indicate mourning. By this time, Garrison was committed to non-resistance⁵² and, in his editorial, expressed regret that Lovejoy had allowed “any provocation ... to drive [him] to take up arms in self defense.”⁵³ Later in the year, in a letter to Samuel J. May, Garrison would go farther and declare that Lovejoy had not died as “an abolitionist, but as one of the police of Alton, regularly enrolled by the Mayor ... to sustain the supremacy of law against anarchists and ruffians.”⁵⁴ The Mayor of Alton had indeed authorized Lovejoy and others to arm themselves against the mobs that had already destroyed three presses. Nevertheless, Garrison fully embraced the resolutions of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society which called upon its members and all citizens to not be “dismayed or disheartened by the loss” of Lovejoy, but rather to be “filled with more animation, and ... more firmly bent upon prosecuting our holy enterprise until the last fetter is broken and the last captive set free.”⁵⁵ At a December 1837 meeting of the Massachusetts Society, Garrison reminded the members that Lovejoy was “only one of more than two millions of martyrs to the foul spirit of

⁵² Garrison understood non-resistance to mean a rejection of the use of force or coercion by anyone, including governments. Any use of human defense against evil reflected a failure to rely on divine protection and gospel principles. A more detailed discussion of Garrison’s non-resistance can be found in Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism*, (New York, 1967), pp. 78-83, and Thomas, *The Liberator* (Boston, 1963), pp. 256-80.

⁵³ *Liberator*, November 24, 1837.

⁵⁴ Merrill and Ruchames, *Letter of William Lloyd Garrison*, Vol. II: p. 332.

⁵⁵ *Liberator*, November 24, 1837.

American slavery.”⁵⁶ The Lovejoy incident posed a conflict for Garrison the non-resister and the abolitionist, but did represent a call for continued organization and confrontation.

Emerson’s response to the incident led in a somewhat different direction. Certainly he was against slavery, although at the time his opinion of Africans was rather low. The manuscript for an address he gave on slavery in November of 1837 has been lost, but the outline of the speech in his journal notes states, “I think it cannot be maintained by any candid person that the African race have ever occupied or do promise ever to occupy any very high place in the human family.”⁵⁷ For his part, Garrison had long embraced African-Americans as “my fellow-beings”⁵⁸ and called for “the complete enfranchisement of our colored countrymen.”⁵⁹ Emerson’s opinion, however, did not detract from his belief that slavery was wrong and that the path to its demise required open and free discussion. Many of the meetings called to voice concern about Lovejoy’s death had difficulty finding a place to gather. In Boston, the use of Faneuil Hall was initially denied to William Ellery Channing and other prominent citizens. In Concord, Emerson addressed a gathering about Lovejoy and this denial of the right to assemble and speak freely about any subject were the focus of his remarks, not the issue of slavery or the fight for its abolition. “I account this a matter of grave importance,” Emerson stated, and “I regret to hear that all the churches but one, and almost all the public halls in Boston, are closed against the discussion of this question.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, Emerson warned the abolitionist that he should “not exaggerate” the sins of the southern plantation owner and become “forgetful of the vices of his own town and neighborhood, of himself.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, January 5, 1838.

⁵⁷ Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notes*, XII: 152.

⁵⁸ *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, March 5, 1830, in Garrison and Garrison, *The Story of His Life*, I: 173.

⁵⁹ *Liberator*, December 15, 1837.

⁶⁰ Cabot, *A Memoir*, p. 425.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

Resolution of the slavery issue would not come from organization and agitation. At the Masonic Temple in Boston in January of 1838, Emerson delivered a lecture titled "Heroism" and Lovejoy's death and the path to change were parts of the lecture's message. The situation of man and the quality of freedom in the current day is greater, Emerson argued, than ever before, yet heroes and martyrs will still suffer persecution. Such a hero was the "brave Lovejoy [who] gave his breast to the bullets of a mob, for the rights of free speech and opinion."⁶² Notably there was no mention of Lovejoy's defense of the rights of the enslaved, but Emerson did suggest a direction for men to follow in pursuit of "any road of perfect peace." There was no other road, for Emerson, "a man can walk but to take counsel of his own bosom. Let him quit too much association, let him go home much and establish himself in those courses he approves."⁶³ Emerson refused to embrace social reform movements and continued to believe that society could not be saved unless reformation became established within the individual.

That the transcendentalist and the abolitionist approached political and social reform differently is hardly a new idea, although it has not yet been developed in the individual careers of Emerson and Garrison. Aileen Kraditor contended that the two groups were separated by a "religious-philosophical chasm as wide as that between the immanent God whose 'Revelation is the disclosure of the soul' and the transcendent God whose will is revealed in the Bible."⁶⁴ As a result of this separation, she continued, the "spirit of transcendentalism was hostile to a *movement* for change."⁶⁵ For both Emerson and the romantic reformer of the John Thomas model, change preceded from the individual and consequently organized reform obstructed the opportunity for meaningful change. In light of this difference, when Emerson bemoaned in an 1852 journal entry his failure to become more involved in the anti-slavery movement, we

⁶² Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams, eds. *The Early Lecture of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Cambridge, 1964), II: p. 337.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

⁶⁴ Kraditor, *Means*, p. 23. The author is quoting Emerson, "The Over-Soul."

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

should not be surprised by his response to his own concern. He wrote, "But then, in hours of sanity, I recover myself & say, God must govern his own world.... I have quite other slaves to free than those Negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts...."⁶⁶ For Garrison, God needed the assistance he and other reformers provided in order to govern the world, and while "those Negroes" remained deprived of their freedom, there would be no spirits that were not in some manner imprisoned. "My pen cannot remain idle," he wrote shortly before entering a Baltimore jail in 1830 for libeling a New England shipowner who transported slaves, "nor my voice be suppressed, nor my heart cease to bleed, while two millions of my fellow-beings wear the shackles of slavery in my own guilty country."⁶⁷

Neither the "romantic reformer" like Emerson, nor the "cosmos crumbling" reformer like Garrison can claim direct credit for the abolition of slavery. As Stanley Elkins observed, the circle of transcendentalists that centered on Emerson in Concord provided a singular intellectual effort in antebellum America. However, they were incapable of translating that effort into collective action. "Not only did these men," he argued, "fail to analyze slavery itself as an institution, but they failed to consider and exploit institutional means for subverting it.... Their relationship with abolition societies was never anything but equivocal."⁶⁸ For the abolitionists' part, Garrison and other immediatists fit the model described in the words of Lawrence Friedman as the "abolitionist push-Southern shove interpretation"⁶⁹ of sectionalism and secession. According to this explanation, the small group of abolitionists could not convert Northerners to embrace immediate emancipation, but did erroneously convince paranoid Southerners that a well-organized conspiracy threatened the existence of the institution of slavery. So convinced, they demanded special protection for slavery, which in turn provoked Northern

⁶⁶ Emerson and Forbes, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, VIII: p. 316.

⁶⁷ Garrison and Garrison, *The Story of His Life*, I: p. 173.

⁶⁸ Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, Second Edition (Chicago, 1968), p. 168.

⁶⁹ Friedman, *Gregarious Saints*, p. 4.

paranoia about the inordinate influence and challenge to individual rights by the Southern "slave power."

Whatever success resulted from reform in the antebellum United States, it can hardly be credited wholly to either the Thomas "romantic reform" model represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson or the Abzug "crumbling cosmos" model represented by William Lloyd Garrison. Shortly before his death in 1860, Theodore Parker⁷⁰ responded to a letter from Garrison with praise for his work and offered the following opinion:

Three men now living have done New England and the North great service. They are quite unlike, but all are soldiers in the same great cause – Wm. L. Garrison, Horace Mann, and R. W. Emerson. You took the most dangerous and difficult part....⁷¹

Garrison and Emerson were two men who lived in close proximity, traveled many of the same roads nationally as well as internationally, spoke to and influenced thousands with their rhetoric, and sought in the end the same goal, freedom for each individual, body and soul. It matters little now if we measure one part "more dangerous and difficult" than another. Drawing from different perspectives Emerson and Garrison played significant roles at a critical stage in the development of our young nation's identity. Together they epitomized the sections of a divided empire that unite to make the individual character within each of us whole.

⁷⁰ Theodore Parker (1810-1860) was a Unitarian minister who became known as the "preacher" of the Transcendentalist movement and an ardent supporter of abolition. Other transcendentalists had left church ministry but Parker steadfastly refused to resign. He sought to lead Unitarians away from a narrowing doctrinal drift and the Transcendentalists from an insular individuality. In the process he combined the roles of preacher, scholar and activist, and became uniquely qualified to comment on and assess Garrison and Emerson. See Henry Steele Commager, *Theodore Parker: Yankee Crusader* (Boston, 1960).

⁷¹ Merrill and Ruchames, *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, IV: p. 607.