Henry David Thoreau - Civil Disobedience And Nonviolent Resistance

Henry David Thoreau (July 12, 1817 – May 6, 1862; born David Henry Thoreau) was an American author, naturalist, transcendentalist, tax resister, development critic, and philosopher who is best known for Walden, a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings, and his essay, Civil Disobedience, an argument for individual resistance to civil government in moral opposition to an unjust state.

Thoreau’s books, articles, essays, journals, and poetry total over 20 volumes. Among his lasting contributions were his writings on natural history and philosophy, where he anticipated the methods and findings of ecology and environmental history, two sources of modern day environmentalism.

He was a lifelong abolitionist, delivering lectures that attacked the Fugitive Slave Law while praising the writings of Wendell Phillips and defending the abolitionist John Brown. Thoreau’s philosophy of nonviolent resistance influenced the political thoughts and actions of such later figures as Leo Tolstoy, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Some anarchists claim Thoreau as an inspiration. Though Civil Disobedience calls for improving rather than abolishing government -- “I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government” – the direction of this improvement aims at anarchism: “That government is best which governs not at all;’ and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have.”

Early Years: 1817-1837

David Henry Thoreau was born in Concord, Massachusetts to John Thoreau and Cynthia Dunbar. His paternal grandfather was of French origin and born in Jersey. His maternal grandfather, Asa Dunbar, was known for leading Harvard’s 1766 student "Bread and Butter Rebellion" the first recorded student protest in the United States. David Henry was named after a recently deceased paternal uncle, David Thoreau. He did not become “Henry David” until after college, although he never petitioned to make a legal name change. He had two older siblings, Helen and John Jr., and a younger sister, Sophia. Thoreau’s birthplace still exists on Virginia Road in Concord and is currently the focus of preservation efforts. The house is original, but it now stands about 100 yards away from its first site.

Bronson Alcott noted in his journal that Thoreau, in appearance was homely, with a nose that he called “my most prominent feature”. Of his face, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote: “[Thoreau] is as ugly as sin, long-nosed, queer-mouthed, and with uncouth and rustic, though courteous manners, corresponding very well with such an exterior. But his ugliness is of an honest and agreeable fashion, and becomes him much better than beauty.”

Thoreau studied at Harvard between 1833 and 1837. He lived in Hollis Hall and took courses in rhetoric, classics, philosophy, mathematics, and science. Legend states that Thoreau refused to pay the five-dollar fee for a Harvard diploma. In fact, the master’s degree he declined to purchase had no academic merit: Harvard College offered it to graduates “who proved their physical worth by being alive three years after graduating, and their saving, earning or inheriting quality or condition by having Five Dollars to give the college” His comment was: “Let every sheep keep its own skin.”

Returning to Concord: 1837-1841

During a leave of absence from Harvard in 1835, Thoreau taught school in Canton, Massachusetts. After graduating in 1837, he joined the faculty of Concord Academy, but he refused to administer corporal punishment and the school board soon dismissed him. He and his brother John then opened a grammar school in Concord in 1838. They introduced several progressive concepts, including nature walks and visits to local shops and businesses. The school ended when John became fatally ill from tetanus in 1841. Upon graduation Thoreau returned home to Concord, where he befriended Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson took a
paternal and at times patronizing interest in Thoreau, advising the young man and introducing him to a circle of local writers and thinkers, including Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne and his son Julian, who was a boy at the time. Of the many prominent authors who lived in Concord, Thoreau was the only town native. Emerson referred to him as the man of Concord.

Emerson constantly urged Thoreau to contribute essays and poems to a quarterly periodical, The Dial, and Emerson lobbied with editor Margaret Fuller to publish those writings. Thoreau’s first essay published there was Natural History of Massachusetts; half book review, half natural history essay, it appeared in 1842. It consisted of revised passages from his journal, which he had begun keeping at Emerson’s suggestion. The first entry on October 22, 1837 reads, “What are you doing now?’ he asked. ‘Do you keep a journal?’ So I make my first entry today.”

Thoreau was a philosopher of nature and its relation to the human condition. In his early years he followed Transcendentalism, a loose and eclectic idealist philosophy advocated by Emerson, Fuller, and Alcott. They held that an ideal spiritual state transcends, or goes beyond, the physical and empirical, and that one achieves that insight via personal intuition rather than religious doctrine. In their view, Nature is the outward sign of inward spirit, expressing the “radical correspondence of visible things and human thoughts,” as Emerson wrote in Nature (1836).

From 1841-1844, Thoreau joined the Emerson household to serve as the children’s tutor, editorial assistant, and repair man/gardener. For a few months in 1843, he moved to the home of William Emerson on Staten Island, tutoring the family sons while writing for New York periodicals, aided in part by his future literary representative Horace Greeley.

Thoreau returned to Concord and worked in his family’s pencil factory, which he would continue to do for most of his adult life. He rediscovered the process to make a good pencil out of inferior graphite by using clay as the binder; this invention improved upon graphite found in New Hampshire in 1821 by Charles Dunbar. (The process of mixing graphite and clay, known as the Conté process, was patented by Nicolas-Jacques Conté in 1795.) Later, Thoreau converted the factory to produce plumbago (graphite), used to ink typesetting machines. Frequent contact with minute particles of graphite may have weakened his lungs already damaged by TB.

Once back in Concord, Thoreau went through a restless period. In April 1844 he and his friend Edward Hoar accidentally set a fire that consumed 300 acres of Walden Woods. He spoke often of finding a farm to buy or lease, which he felt would give him a means to support himself while also providing enough solitude to write his first book.

**Civil Disobedience and the Walden Years: 1845–1849**

Thoreau embarked on a two-year experiment in simple living on July 4, 1845, when he moved to a small self-built house on land owned by Emerson in a second-growth forest around the shores of Walden Pond. The house was not in wilderness but at the edge of town, 1.5 miles (2.4 km) from his family home.

On July 24 or 25th, 1846, Thoreau ran into the local tax collector, Sam Staples, who asked him to pay six years of delinquent poll taxes. Thoreau refused because of his opposition to the Mexican-American War and slavery, and he spent a night in jail because of this refusal. (The next day Thoreau was freed, over his protests, when his aunt paid his taxes.) The experience had a strong impact on Thoreau. In January and February of 1848, he delivered lectures on "The Rights and Duties of the Individual in relation to Government" explaining his tax resistance at the Concord Lyceum. Bronson Alcott attended the lecture, and wrote in his journal on January 26th

Heard Thoreau’s lecture before the Lyceum on the relation of the individual to the State -- an admirable statement of the rights of the individual to self-government, and an attentive audience. His allusions to the
Mexican War, to Mr. Hoar’s expulsion from Carolina, his own imprisonment in Concord Jail for refusal to pay his tax, Mr. Hoar’s payment of mine when taken to prison for a similar refusal, were all pertinent, well considered, and reasoned. I took great pleasure in this deed of Thoreau’s.

Thoreau revised the lecture into an essay entitled Resistance to Civil Government (also known as Civil Disobedience). In May 1849 it was published by Elizabeth Peabody in the Aesthetic Papers.

At Walden Pond, he completed a first draft of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, an elegy to his brother, John, that described their 1839 trip to the White Mountains. Thoreau did not find a publisher for this book, and Emerson urged Thoreau to publish at his own expense. Thoreau did so with Munroe, Emerson’s own publisher, who did little to publicize the book, which failed entirely to sell. Its failure put Thoreau into debt that took years to pay off, and Emerson’s flawed advice caused a schism between the friends that never entirely healed.

In August of 1846, Thoreau briefly left Walden to make a trip to Mount Katahdin in Maine, a journey later recorded in “Ktaadn,” the first part of The Maine Woods.

Thoreau left Walden Pond on September 6, 1847. Over several years, he worked to pay off his debts and also continuously revised his manuscript. In 1854, he published Walden, or Life in the Woods, recounting the two years, two months, and two days he had spent at Walden Pond. The book compresses that time into a single calendar year, using the passage of four seasons to symbolize human development. Part memoir and part spiritual quest, Walden at first won few admirers, but today critics regard it as a classic American book that explores natural simplicity, harmony, and beauty as models for just social and cultural conditions.

**Late Years: 1851-1858**

In 1851, Thoreau became increasingly fascinated with natural history and travel/expedition narratives. He read avidly on botany and often wrote observations on this topic into his Journal. He greatly admired William Bartram, and Charles Darwin’s Voyage of the Beagle. He kept detailed observations on Concord’s nature lore, recording everything from how the fruit ripened over time to the fluctuating depths of Walden Pond and the days certain birds migrated. The point of this task was to “anticipate” the seasons of nature, in his words.

He became a land surveyor, and continued to write increasingly detailed natural history observations about the 26 mile² (67 km²) township in his Journal, a two-million word document he kept for 24 years. He also kept a series of separate notebooks, and these observations became the source for Thoreau’s late natural history writings, such as Autumnal Tints, The Succession of Trees, and Wild Apples, an essay bemoaning the destruction of indigenous and wild apple species.

Until the 1970s, Thoreau’s late pursuits were dismissed by literary critics as amateur science and declined philosophy. With the rise of environmental history and ecocriticism, several new readings of this matter began to emerge, showing Thoreau to be both a philosopher and an analyst of ecological patterns in fields and woodlots. For instance, his late essay, ”The Succession of Forest Trees,” shows that he used experimentation and analysis to explain how forests regenerate after fire or human destruction, through dispersal by seed-bearing winds or animals.

He was an early advocate of recreational hiking and canoeing, of conserving natural resources on private land, and of preserving wilderness as public land. Thoreau was also one of the first American supporters of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Although not a strict vegetarian, Thoreau ate relatively little meat and advocated vegetarianism as a means of self-improvement.

Thoreau neither rejected civilization nor fully embraced wilderness. Instead he sought a middle ground, the pastoral realm that integrates both nature and culture. The wilderness he enjoyed was the nearby swamp or forest, and he preferred “partially cultivated country.” His idea of being “far in the recesses of the wilderness”
of Maine was to “travel the logger’s path and the Indian trail,” but he also hiked on pristine untouched land. In the essay “Henry David Thoreau, Philosopher” Roderick Nash writes: “Thoreau left Concord in 1846 for the first of three trips to northern Maine. His expectations were high because he hoped to find genuine, primeval America. But contact with real wilderness in Maine affected him far differently than had the idea of wilderness in Concord. Instead of coming out of the woods with a deepened appreciation of the wilds, Thoreau felt a greater respect for civilization and realized the necessity of balance.”

He traveled to Quebec once, Cape Cod four times, and Maine three times; these landscapes inspired his “excursion” books, A Yankee in Canada, Cape Cod, and The Maine Woods, in which travel itineraries frame his thoughts about geography, history and philosophy. Other travels took him southwest to Philadelphia and New York City in 1854, and west across the Great Lakes region in 1861, visiting Niagara Falls, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Mackinac Island.

Final Years: 1859-1862

After John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, many prominent voices in the abolitionist movement distanced themselves from Brown, or damned him with faint praise. Thoreau was disgusted by this, and composed a speech -- A Plea for Captain John Brown -- which was uncompromising in its defense of Brown and his actions. Thoreau’s speech proved persuasive: first the abolitionist movement began to accept Brown as a martyr, and by the time of the American Civil War entire armies of the North would literally be singing Brown’s praises. As a contemporary biographer of John Brown put it: “If, as Alfred Kazin suggests, without John Brown there would have been no Civil War, we would add that without the Concord Transcendentalists, John Brown would have had little cultural impact.”

Thoreau first contracted tuberculosis in 1835 and suffered from it sporadically over his life. In 1859, following a late night excursion to count the rings of tree stumps during a rain storm, he became ill with bronchitis. His health declined over three years with brief periods of remission, until he eventually became bedridden. Recognizing the terminal nature of his disease, Thoreau spent his last years revising and editing his unpublished works, particularly Excursions and The Maine Woods and petitioning publishers to print revised editions of A Week and Walden. He also wrote letters and journal entries until he became too weak to continue. His friends were alarmed at his diminished appearance and fascinated by his tranquil acceptance of death. When his aunt Louisa asked him in his last weeks if he had made his peace with God, Thoreau responded quite simply: “I did not know we had ever quarreled.” He died on May 6, 1862 at the age of 44.

Originally buried in the Dunbar family plot, he and members of his immediate family were eventually moved to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, Massachusetts. Emerson wrote the eulogy spoken at his funeral. Thoreau’s best friend Ellery Channing published his first biography, Thoreau the Poet-Naturalist, in 1873, and Channing and another friend Harrison Blake edited some poems, essays, and journal entries for posthumous publication in the 1890s. Thoreau’s Journal, often mined but largely unpublished at his death, first appeared in 1906 and helped to build his modern reputation. A new and greatly expanded edition of the Journal is underway, published by Princeton University Press. Today, Thoreau is regarded as one of the foremost American writers, both for the modern clarity of his prose style and the prescience of his views on nature and politics. His memory is honored by the international Thoreau Society, the oldest and largest society devoted to an American author.

Harrison Blake

Thoreau first received a letter from Harrison Blake, an ex-minister (Unitarian) widower of Worcester, Massachusetts, in March of 1848. Thus began a correspondence which lasted at least until May 3, 1861. Only Blake’s first letter remains, but forty-nine of Thoreau’s replies have been recovered. Harrison Blake, a year older than Thoreau, heard of Thoreau’s experiment at Walden only six months after Thoreau had returned, but still six years before the book Walden was to be published. And while Thoreau was not yet widely recognized for his philosophical outlook, initiating a discourse with the author was strictly for that reason.
Blake’s first letter makes it clear that he seeks a spiritual mentor, and Thoreau’s replies reveal that he was eager to fill the role. After the death of Sophia Thoreau, Harrison Blake inherited Thoreau’s papers, and Blake was the first to publish extracts from the Journal.

Influence

Thoreau’s writings had far reaching influences on many public figures. Political leaders and reformers like Mahatma Gandhi, President John F. Kennedy, Civil rights activist Martin Luther King, Jr., Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, and Russian author Leo Tolstoy all spoke of being strongly affected by Thoreau’s work, particularly Civil Disobedience. So did many artists and authors including Edward Abbey, Willa Cather, Marcel Proust, William Butler Yeats, Sinclair Lewis, Ernest Hemingway, E. B. White and Frank Lloyd Wright and naturalists like John Burroughs, John Muir, E.O. Wilson, Edwin Way Teale, Joseph Wood Krutch and David Brower. Anarchist and feminist Emma Goldman also appreciated Thoreau, and referred to him as “the greatest American anarchist”.

Mahatma Gandhi first read Walden in 1906 while working as a Civil Rights Activist in Johannesburg, South Africa. He told American reporter Webb Miller, "[Thoreau's] ideas influenced me greatly. I adopted some of them and recommended the study of Thoreau to all of my friends who were helping me in the cause of Indian Independence. Why I actually took the name of my movement from Thoreau's essay 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience,' written about 80 years ago."

Martin Luther King, Jr noted in his Autobiography that his first encounter with the idea of non-violent resistance was reading “On Civil Disobedience” in 1944 while attending Morehouse College. He wrote in his autobiography that it was

Here, in this courageous New Englander’s refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of jail rather than support a war that would spread slavery’s territory into Mexico, I made my first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times.

I became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. No other person has been more eloquent and passionate in getting this idea across than Henry David Thoreau. As a result of his writings and personal witness, we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest. The teachings of Thoreau came alive in our civil rights movement; indeed, they are more alive than ever before. Whether expressed in a sit-in at lunch counters, a freedom ride into Mississippi, a peaceful protest in Albany, Georgia, a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, these are outgrowths of Thoreau’s insistence that evil must be resisted and that no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice. The University of Michigan’s New England Literature Program is an experiential literature and writing program run through UM’s Department of English Language and Literature which was started in the 1970’s by professors Alan Howes and Walter Clark. Howes and Clark called upon Thoreauvian ideals of nature, independence and community to create an academic program modeled after Thoreau’s experiment at Walden Pond. Today, students at NELP study Thoreau’s work--as well as that of several other New England writers from the 19th and 20th centuries--in relative isolation on Sebago Lake in Raymond, Maine.

Criticisms

Thoreau was not without his critics. Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson judged Thoreau’s endorsement of living alone in natural simplicity, apart from modern society, to be a mark of effeminacy:

Thoreau's content and ecstasy in living was, we may say, like a plant that he had watered and tended with womanish solicitude; for there is apt to be something unmanly, something almost dastardly, in a life that does not move with dash and freedom, and that fears the bracing contact of the world. In one word, Thoreau was a
The skulker did not wish virtue to go out of him among his fellow-men, but slunk into a corner to hoard it for himself. He left all for the sake of certain virtuous self-indulgences.

However, English novelist George Eliot, writing in the Westminster Review, characterized such critics as uninspired and narrow-minded:

People--very wise in their own eyes--who would have every man's life ordered according to a particular pattern, and who are intolerant of every existence the utility of which is not palpable to them, may pooh-pooh Mr. Thoreau and this episode in his history, as unpractical and dreamy.

Throughout the 19th century, Thoreau was dismissed as a cranky provincial, hostile to material progress. In a later era, Thoreau is often cited as a progenitor of modern social movements such as environmentalism and vegetarianism. However, his transcendent individualism make such associations seems academic and conjectural at best.

Readings of Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government"

Wynn Yarborough, Virginia Commonwealth University (1995)

Criticism of Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" changed dramatically from the 1920s to the 1970s. Michael Meyer's *Several More Lives to Live: Thoreau's Political Reputation in America* shows the progression of opinion surrounding Thoreau and his politics.

In the 1920s, an age of relative affluence, Thoreau was popularly seen as an anarchist, a rebel. In the critics' minds, but there were mixed opinions. Most of these reflect a reaction to the materialism of the time. Eliseo Vivas noted that Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government," in *The New Student* was "...one of the first native attacks upon American Imperialism..." (34) Vivas was writing when the US was involved in many countries in South America and Central America. Vivas saw Thoreau's politics, especially his stance on resistance to government, as troubling, "Thoreau's ideals are inoperative in the real, everyday world, and because he will not compromise his ideals, at all, they have no effect upon the world: they are politically useless." (35) In the 1960s, we will see how useful Thoreau becomes.

Another critic, Vernon Parrington, would praise Thoreau as truly original and independent. "Parrington transforms what several of his contemporaries [such as Atkinson] considered to be Thoreau's selfish tenacity into a virtue. Thoreau's unwillingness to compromise was not a sign of perversity but of principle." (40) The political anarchist image of Thoreau does not disturb Parrington, who considered him American in political thought: "Parrington places Thoreau in the liberal tradition by tracing the political ideas in "Civil Disobedience" back to William Godwin's *Political Justice* (p. 409, Parrington), which helped inform Jefferson..." (42)

The 1920s criticism also shows the one direction criticism of Thoreau would maintain, in some slight degree, throughout the century. Brooks Atkinson, a conservative critic, bashed Thoreau for his politics, calling him "a self-contained, unsocial being, a troglodyte of sorts" (36). But it is not his personal attacks on Thoreau that emerge as important; in fact we could disregard his opinion except for the fact that underlying his charges against Thoreau's "feline" politics is his great respect for Thoreau, the naturalist. This will reappear throughout the century, the focus away from the political towards the naturalist. Here would be a good place to note why.

Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government" clashes with his defense of John Brown. In one he advocates non-violent resistance; in the other he defends the actions of violence. This is where critics find the clash of logic, and many simply ignore his politics, because they are considered inconsistent. I would argue that Thoreau is
human, subject to emotion and became quite involved in the slavery question. Brown was an individual doing what he thought necessary; Thoreau opts for another course, one of nonviolence, although the implication in "Resistance to Civil Government," is that violence is prevalent throughout history. Here is where the student of Thoreau must make a decision, Should Thoreau be held to a philosohical tract he wrote in 1848 as compared to "A Plea for Captain John Brown," written in 1860 at a time of great tension about slavery? It must be remembered that Thoreau did not join a society for abolition, but rather vocalized his thoughts on injustice. He is political in thought, and as proven from his own action, a practitioner of non-violent resistance.

In the 1930s, James MacKaye would turn to the politics and denounce them. MacKaye saw Thoreau's politics showing no cooperation and devoid of reason. Meyer sees him as an extension of the twenties critics, "In this, MacKaye followed commentators of the twenties. It is one thing for a person to regulate his own economy and thereby free himself from want, but it is quite another to repudiate government." MacKaye continues in the tradition of Atkinson, whereas Blankenship, continues in the tradition of Parrington. The thirties marked a different era for America, the flirtation with communism, trying to find a solution for the Great Depression. "[H]is radicalism was no longer considered to be so shocking by most commentators of the thirties. His radicalism was studied even within the academy." (58) It should be remembered that it was not academics who were doing the writing on "Resistance to Civil Government" but journalists and social critics. "Until the forties, the best criticism on Thoreau (using any critical standard for excellence) is to be found in journalistic pieces, or occasional chapters on Thoreau in books-most of them written by critics outside the academy," (59). Meyer goes further to state that "There was not one American analysis of even article length on "Civil Disobedience" … prior to the 1940's. In the thirties there was a strong tendency to use Thoreau first and ask questions later." (74) There was an avoidance of the politics in this essay, although people used him and his simple economy to protest the effects of industry, especially in an age of the collapse of the American economy.

The 1940s show some of the universal appeal of Thoreau, in terms of his usefulness. Thoreau was used as guidance for those who opposed the war as "conscientious objectors." A society gearing up for war might have trouble appreciating Thoreau. Thomas Lyle Collins, one critic who was opposed to the war, "uses Thoreau as a rationale for American isolationism and noninterventionism." (85) Max Cosman used Thoreau to justify WWII based on the differences between the Mexican War and WWII. Here we see a reconciling of "Resistance to Civil Government" and "A Plea for Captain John Brown." In "A Plea," Thoreau foresees circumstances where he might have to "kill or be killed"; this applies to his attitude against slavery. Cosman sees the same attitude towards the Nazis. Cosman "calls attention to this passage in order to conclude with the major point of his article, which is that Thoreau speaks to Americans in 1944." (86) Here we see the usefulness of Thoreau by dissenters and by consenters.

The Thoreau Society was founded in 1941 by Walter Harding who saw Thoreau as being in both camps in the debate over the war. He saw Thoreau "[as] not a dangerous isolationist but an individual." (94) Harding does go further to see Thoreau as primarily a non-violent pacifist, ignoring his support of John Brown. Meyer seems to see Harding as doing what Thoreau himself would have loathed, "deification."

F. O. Matthiessen connects Thoreau with socialism in *American Renaissance*. Matthiessen was concerned with the text, the art itself, not the artist so much. Matthiessen said that Thoreau's individualism was inflated, that Thoreau believed in collective action. Meyer, while lauding the contribution of Matthiessen to study of *Walden*, saw Matthiessen as too political in his assessment of Thoreau, "Matthiessen allows his enthusiasm and appreciation for Thoreau's art to interfere with a view of politics that would be more in keeping with his own values, values which were highly suspicious of Transcendental individualism." (101) Please remember that Matthiessen is noted as changing the face of American criticism from the artist to the art.

The 1950s, the age of McCarthyism, reflected the ignorance of his politics again. The influence of Matthiessen is evident in how Thoreau's political thought diminished and literary art form increased, "Commentaries on Thoreau tended to be about how he expressed his ideas rather than about what his ideas were." (110) Stanley Hyman, chief critic during the fifties and one of the most respected scholars on Thoreau, cites style as more
important that politics in Thoreau. He follows, of course, Matthiessen. Meyer traces this view of elevated artist as tied to Hymen's personal view, which once again shows us the "usefulness" of Thoreau. Hyman places Thoreau in the "compartmentalized functionaries" of Emerson; one is an artist and that is it.

Henry Eulaus, a political scientist, saw Thoreau as promoting his own version of the nation-state. Eulaus "reasons that because liberals have convinced themselves that Thoreau was a liberal collectivist, they overlook his self-righteousness and fall into the same trap of "ethical absolution" that he did" (124). Eulaus sees Thoreau as close-minded and concerned with "the individual conscience as the bedrock of all action" (124). Eulaus saw the dangers of both "enlightened liberalism" and McCarthyism and, more importantly, the need for compromise, so it is easy to see why he would have problems with someone like Thoreau. This is the first critical essay on the politics of Thoreau, according to Meyer.

In the 1960s, Thoreau became not only relevant but almost a popular icon. "He became important to the reform impulse of the 1960s, and as that impulse spread so too did Thoreau's political reputation" (152). Carried over from the fifties was the beginning of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King would use Thoreau to show the path of nonviolent resistance, but once again he was using Thoreau, not studying him. "Resistance to Civil Government" was used by everyone from the Beats to the Pacifists. Staughton Lynd, a New Left historian, claimed that Thoreau was both violent and nonviolent, which would seem to follow from the dichotomy of messages in "Resistance to Civil Government" and "A Plea for John Brown." Meyers claims that "Lynd does not make an issue of the means of reform, because he is interested in gathering "non-aligned individuals" of the new radicalism under one umbrella in order that they might discover what unites them-their insistence on direct action as a response to injustice" (165) Some attacks on Thoreau came out of this period that still focused on his isolationism and his "estrangement from collective action and the specific needs of the people" (170)

But one of the most original perspectives to come out in the sixties was a psychological interpretation of Thoreau. This came out of Carl Bode's introduction to The Portable Thoreau which he edited. Bode re-edited this edition in 1964 and drew on a Freudian approach to Thoreau, based on Raymond Gozzi's work. Bode claims that Thoreau was "plagued by an 'incipient homosexuality'" (p. 111, Bode as quoted by Meyer, 173) Bode saw John Brown as a mythological father-figure for Thoreau. The hatred of father is translated into a hatred of state, of the paternalistic powerful government, according to Bode. In the same psychoanalytical mode, C. Roland Wagner, writes "that much of Thoreau's writing represents his unconscious struggle for a sexual identity" (Meyer 175).

The 1970s saw Thoreau as the forefather of protest to the Vietnam War. The Night Thoreau Spent In Jail by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee was a one-act play which centered on his protest of the Mexican War. It was quite successful and kept Thoreau alive in terms of the seventies, ushering in the Vietnam era. Meyer has the great last word by recalling Thoreau's sense of humor and disgust, "washing of hands", in political matters: it "is important and chastening to be learned from Thoreau's apolitical temperament, a temperament which resulted in his unwillingness to take politics seriously and his subsequent impulse to champion violence as a means of surgically removing evil from the world." (192)
On the Duty of Civil Disobedience
by Henry David Thoreau
[1849, original title: Resistance to Civil Government]

I heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least"; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe—"That government is best which governs not at all"; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

This American government—what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed upon, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow. Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient, by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of India-rubber, would never manage to bounce over obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads. But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.

After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases can not be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents on injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for the law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Men at all? or small movable forts and magazines, at the
service of some unscrupulous man in power? Visit the Navy Yard, and behold a marine, such a man as an
American government can make, or such as it can make a man with its black arts—a mere shadow and
reminiscence of humanity, a man laid out alive and standing, and already, as one may say, buried under arms
with funeral accompaniment, though it may be,

"Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corse to the rampart we hurried;
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
O'er the grave where our hero was buried."

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the
standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, posse comitatus, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise
whatever of the judgement or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and
stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no
more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs.
Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others—as most legislators, politicians,
lawyers, ministers, and office-holders—serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any
moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God. A very few—as heroes,
patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men—serve the state with their consciences also, and so
necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it. A wise man will only
be useful as a man, and will not submit to be "clay," and "stop a hole to keep the wind away," but leave that
office to his dust at least:

"I am too high born to be propertied,
To be a second at control,
Or useful serving-man and instrument
To any sovereign state throughout the world."

He who gives himself entirely to his fellow men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself
partially to them is pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist.

How does it become a man to behave toward the American government today? I answer, that he cannot
without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my
government which is the slave's government also.

All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the
government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is not
the case now. But such was the case, they think, in the Revolution of '75. If one were to tell me that this was a
bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probable that I
should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them. All machines have their friction; and possibly this
does enough good to counter-balance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about it. But when
the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a
machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be
the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and
subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes
this duty the more urgent is that fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading
army.

Paley, a common authority with many on moral questions, in his chapter on the "Duty of Submission to Civil
Government," resolves all civil obligation into expediency; and he proceeds to say that "so long as the interest
of the whole society requires it, that is, so long as the established government cannot be resisted or changed
without public inconvenience, it is the will of God... that the established government be obeyed—and no
longer. This principle being admitted, the justice of every particular case of resistance is reduced to a
computation of the quantity of the danger and grievance on the one side, and of the probability and expense
of redressing it on the other." Of this, he says, every man shall judge for himself. But Paley appears never to
have contemplated those cases to which the rule of expediency does not apply, in which a people, as well as an individual, must do justice, cost what it may. If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself. This, according to Paley, would be inconvenient. But he that would save his life, in such a case, shall lose it. This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people.

In their practice, nations agree with Paley; but does anyone think that Massachusetts does exactly what is right at the present crisis?

"A drab of stat,
a cloth-o'-silver slut,
To have her train borne up,
and her soul trail in the dirt."

Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, cost what it may. I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, co-operate with, and do the bidding of, those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless. We are accustomed to say, that the mass of men are unprepared; but improvement is slow, because the few are not as materially wiser or better than the many. It is not so important that many should be good as you, as that there be some absolute goodness somewhere; for that will leaven the whole lump. There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free trade, and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both. What is the price-current of an honest man and patriot today? They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for other to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret. At most, they give up only a cheap vote, and a feeble countenance and Godspeed, to the right, as it goes by them. There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man. But it is easier to deal with the real possessor of a thing than with the temporary guardian of it.

All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it. The character of the voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail. I am willing to leave it to the majority. Its obligation, therefore, never exceeds that of expediency. Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men. When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote. They will then be the only slaves. Only his vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own freedom by his vote.

I hear of a convention to be held at Baltimore, or elsewhere, for the selection of a candidate for the Presidency, made up chiefly of editors, and men who are politicians by profession; but I think, what is it to any independent, intelligent, and respectable man what decision they may come to? Shall we not have the advantage of this wisdom and honesty, nevertheless? Can we not count upon some independent votes? Are there not many individuals in the country who do not attend conventions? But no: I find that the respectable man, so called, has immediately drifted from his position, and despairs of his country, when his country has more reasons to despair of him. He forthwith adopts one of the candidates thus selected as the only available one, thus proving that he is himself available for any purposes of the demagogue. His vote is of no more worth than that of any unprincipled foreigner or hireling native, who may have been bought. O for a man who is a man, and, as my neighbor says, has a bone in his back which you cannot pass your hand through! Our statistics are at fault: the population has been returned too large. How many men are there to a square thousand miles in the country? Hardly one. Does not America offer any inducement for men to settle here?
The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow—one who may be known by the development of his organ of gregariousness, and a manifest lack of intellect and cheerful self-reliance; whose first and chief concern, on coming into the world, is to see that the almshouses are in good repair; and, before yet he has lawfully donned the virile garb, to collect a fund to the support of the widows and orphans that may be; who, in short, ventures to live only by the aid of the Mutual Insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently.

It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even to most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man’s shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too. See what gross inconsistency is tolerated. I have heard some of my townsmen say, "I should like to have them order me out to help put down an insurrection of the slaves, or to march to Mexico—see if I would go"; and yet these very men have each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by their money, furnished a substitute. The soldier is applauded who refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain the unjust government which makes the war; is applauded by those whose own act and authority he disregards and sets at naught; as if the state were penitent to that degree that it hired one to scourge it while it sinned, but not to that degree that it left off sinning for a moment. Thus, under the name of Order and Civil Government, we are all made at last to pay homage to and support our own meanness. After the first blush of sin comes its indifference; and from immoral it becomes, as it were, unmoral, and not quite unnecessary to that life which we have made.

The broadest and most prevalent error requires the most disinterested virtue to sustain it. The slight reproach to which the virtue of patriotism is commonly liable, the noble are most likely to incur. Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious obstacles to reform. Some are petitioning the State to dissolve the Union, to disregard the requisitions of the President. Why do they not dissolve it themselves—the union between themselves and the State—and refuse to pay their quota into its treasury? Do not they stand in same relation to the State that the State does to the Union? And have not the same reasons prevented the State from resisting the Union which have prevented them from resisting the State?

How can a man be satisfied to entertain an opinion merely, and enjoy it? Is there any enjoyment in it, if his opinion is that he is aggrieved? If you are cheated out of a single dollar by your neighbor, you do not rest satisfied with knowing you are cheated, or with saying that you are cheated, or even with petitioning him to pay you your due; but you take effectual steps at once to obtain the full amount, and see to it that you are never cheated again. Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divided States and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men, generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to put out its faults, and do better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

One would think, that a deliberate and practical denial of its authority was the only offense never contemplated by its government; else, why has it not assigned its definite, its suitable and proportionate, penalty? If a man who has no property refuses but once to earn nine shillings for the State, he is put in prison for a period unlimited by any law that I know, and determined only by the discretion of those who put him
If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth—certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.

As for adopting the ways of the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man's life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad. A man has not everything to do, but something; and because he cannot do everything, it is not necessary that he should be doing something wrong. It is not my business to be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me; and if they should not hear my petition, what should I do then? But in this case the State has provided no way: its very Constitution is the evil. This may seem to be harsh and stubborn and unconciliatory; but it is to treat with the utmost kindness and consideration the only spirit that can appreciate or deserves it. So is all change for the better, like birth and death, which convulse the body.

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves Abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right to prevail through them. I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.

I meet this American government, or its representative, the State government, directly, and face to face, once a year—no more—in the person of its tax-gatherer; this is the only mode in which a man situated as I am necessarily meets it; and it then says distinctly, Recognize me; and the simplest, the most effectual, and, in the present posture of affairs, the indispensablist mode of treating with it on this head, of expressing your little satisfaction with and love for it, is to deny it then. My civil neighbor, the tax-gatherer, is the very man I have to deal with—for it is, after all, with men and not with parchment that I quarrel—and he has voluntarily chosen to be an agent of the government. How shall he ever know well that he is and does as an officer of the government, or as a man, until he is obliged to consider whether he will treat me, his neighbor, for whom he has respect, as a neighbor and well-disposed man, or as a maniac and disturber of the peace, and see if he can get over this obstruction to his neighbors without a ruder and more impetuous thought or speech corresponding with his action. I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name—if ten honest men only—ay, if one HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever. But we love better to talk about it: that we say is our mission. Reform keeps many scores of newspapers in its service, but not one man. If my esteemed neighbor, the State's ambassador, who will devote his days to the settlement of the question of human rights in the Council Chamber, instead of being threatened with the prisons of Carolina, were to sit down the prisoner of Massachusetts, that State which is so anxious to foist the sin of slavery upon her sister—though at present she can discover only an act of inhospitality to be the ground of a quarrel with her—the Legislature would not wholly waive the subject of the following winter.

Under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less despondent spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find them; on that separate but more free and honorable ground, where the State places those who are not with her, but against her—the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer
afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within its walls, they do not know by how much
truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has
experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole
influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is
irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war
and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this
year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to
commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peacable revolution, if any such
is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, "But what shall I do?" my
answer is, "If you really wish to do anything, resign your office." When the subject has refused allegiance, and
the officer has resigned from office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow.
Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man's real manhood
and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now.

I have contemplated the imprisonment of the offender, rather than the seizure of his goods—though both will
serve the same purpose—because they who assert the purest right, and consequently are most dangerous to
a corrupt State, commonly have not spent much time in accumulating property. To such the State renders
comparatively small service, and a slight tax is wont to appear exorbitant, particularly if they are obliged to
earn it by special labor with their hands. If there were one who lived wholly without the use of money, the
State itself would hesitate to demand it of him. But the rich man—not to make any invidious comparison—is
always sold to the institution which makes him rich. Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for
money comes between a man and his objects, and obtains them for him; it was certainly no great virtue to
obtain it. It puts to rest many questions which he would otherwise be taxed to answer; while the only new
question which it puts is the hard but superfluous one, how to spend it. Thus his moral ground is taken from
under his feet. The opportunities of living are diminished in proportion as that are called the "means" are
increased. The best thing a man can do for his culture when he is rich is to endeavor to carry out those
schemes which he entertained when he was poor. Christ answered the Herodians according to their
condition. "Show me the tribute-money," said he—and one took a penny out of his pocket—if you use money
which has the image of Caesar on it, and which he has made current and valuable, that is, if you are men of the
State, and gladly enjoy the advantages of Caesar's government, then pay him back some of his own when he
demands it. "Render therefore to Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God those things which are God's"—
leaving them no wiser than before as to which was which; for they did not wish to know.

When I converse with the freest of my neighbors, I perceive that, whatever they may say about the magnitude
and seriousness of the question, and their regard for the public tranquility, the long and the short of the
matter is, that they cannot spare the protection of the existing government, and they dread the consequences
to their property and families of disobedience to it. For my own part, I should not like to think that I ever rely
on the protection of the State. But, if I deny the authority of the State when it presents its tax bill, it will soon
take and waste all my property, and so harass me and my children without end. This is hard. This makes it
impossible for a man to live honestly, and at the same time comfortably, in outward respects. It will not be
worth the while to accumulate property; that would be sure to go again. You must hire or squat somewhere,
and raise but a small crop, and eat that soon. You must live within yourself, and depend upon yourself always
tucked up and ready for a start, and not have many affairs. A man may grow rich in Turkey even, if he will be
in all respects a good subject of the Turkish government. Confucius said: "If a state is governed by the
principles of reason, poverty and misery are subjects of shame; if a state is not governed by the principles of
reason, riches and honors are subjects of shame." No: until I want the protection of Massachusetts to be
extended to me in some distant Southern port, where my liberty is endangered, or until I am bent solely on
building up an estate at home by peaceful enterprise, I can afford to refuse allegiance to Massachusetts, and
her right to my property and life. It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the
State than it would to obey. I should feel as if I were worth less in that case.

Some years ago, the State met me in behalf of the Church, and commanded me to pay a certain sum toward
the support of a clergyman whose preaching my father attended, but never I myself. "Pay," it said, "or be
locked up in the jail." I declined to pay. But, unfortunately, another man saw fit to pay it. I did not see why the
schoolmaster should be taxed to support the priest, and not the priest the schoolmaster; for I was not the
State's schoolmaster, but I supported myself by voluntary subscription. I did not see why the lyceum should not present its tax bill, and have the State to back its demand, as well as the Church. However, at the request of the selectmen, I condescended to make some such statement as this in writing: "Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined." This I gave to the town clerk; and he has it. The State, having thus learned that I did not wish to be regarded as a member of that church, has never made a like demand on me since; though it said that it must adhere to its original presumption that time. If I had known how to name them, I should then have signed off in detail from all the societies which I never signed on to; but I did not know where to find such a complete list.

I have paid no poll tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account, for one night; and, as I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was. I did nor for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax. They plainly did not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who are underbred. In every threat and in every compliment there was a blunder; for they thought that my chief desire was to stand the other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and they were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it.

Thus the state never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. What force has a multitude? They only can force me who obey a higher law than I. They force me to become like themselves. I do not hear of men being forced to live this way or that by masses of men. What sort of life were that to live? When I meet a government which says to me, "Your money or your life," why should I be in haste to give it my money? It may be in a great strait, and not know what to do: I cannot help that. It must help itself; do as I do. It is not worth the while to snivel about it. I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society. I am not the son of the engineer. I perceive that, when an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a plant cannot live according to nature, it dies; and so a man.

The night in prison was novel and interesting enough. The prisoners in their shirtsleeves were enjoying a chat and the evening air in the doorway, when I entered. But the jailer said, "Come, boys, it is time to lock up"; and so they dispersed, and I heard the sound of their steps returning into the hollow apartments. My room-mate was introduced to me by the jailer as "a first-rate fellow and clever man." When the door was locked, he showed me where to hang my hat, and how he managed matters there. The rooms were whitewashed once a month; and this one, at least, was the whitest, most simply furnished, and probably neatest apartment in town. He naturally wanted to know where I came from, and what brought me there; and, when I had told him, I asked him in my turn how he came there, presuming him to be an honest man, of course; and as the world goes, I believe he was. "Why," said he, "they accuse me of burning a barn; but I never did it." As near as I could discover, he had probably gone to bed in a barn when drunk, and smoked his pipe there; and so a barn was burnt. He had the reputation of being a clever man, had been there some three months waiting for his trial to come on, and would have to wait as much longer; but he was quite domesticated and contented, since he got his board for nothing, and thought that he was well treated.
He occupied one window, and I the other; and I saw that if one stayed there long, his principal business would be to look out the window. I had soon read all the tracts that were left there, and examined where former prisoners had broken out, and where a grate had been sawed off, and heard the history of the various occupants of that room; for I found that even there there was a history and a gossip which never circulated beyond the walls of the jail. Probably this is the only house in the town where verses are composed, which are afterward printed in a circular form, but not published. I was shown quite a long list of young men who had been detected in an attempt to escape, who avenged themselves by singing them.

I pumped my fellow-prisoner as dry as I could, for fear I should never see him again; but at length he showed me which was my bed, and left me to blow out the lamp.

It was like travelling into a far country, such as I had never expected to behold, to lie there for one night. It seemed to me that I never had heard the town clock strike before, not the evening sounds of the village; for we slept with the windows open, which were inside the grating. It was to see my native village in the light of the Middle Ages, and our Concord was turned into a Rhine stream, and visions of knights and castles passed before me. They were the voices of old burghers that I heard in the streets. I was an involuntary spectator and auditor of whatever was done and said in the kitchen of the adjacent village inn—a wholly new and rare experience to me. It was a closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside of it. I never had seen its institutions before. This is one of its peculiar institutions; for it is a shire town. I began to comprehend what its inhabitants were about.

In the morning, our breakfasts were put through the hole in the door, in small oblong-square tin pans, made to fit, and holding a pint of chocolate, with brown bread, and an iron spoon. When they called for the vessels again, I was green enough to return what bread I had left, but my comrade seized it, and said that I should lay that up for lunch or dinner. Soon after he was let out to work at haying in a neighboring field, whither he went every day, and would not be back till noon; so he bade me good day, saying that he doubted if he should see me again.

When I came out of prison—for some one interfered, and paid that tax—I did not perceive that great changes had taken place on the common, such as he observed who went in a youth and emerged a gray-headed man; and yet a change had come to my eyes come over the scene—the town, and State, and country, greater than any that mere time could effect. I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent the people among whom I lived could be trusted as good neighbors and friends; that their friendship was for summer weather only; that they did not greatly propose to do right; that they were a distinct race from me by their prejudices and superstitions, as the Chinamen and Malays are; that in their sacrifices to humanity they ran no risks, not even to their property; that after all they were not so noble but they treated the thief as he had treated them, and hoped, by a certain outward observance and a few prayers, and by walking in a particular straight though useless path from time to time, to save their souls. This may be to judge my neighbors harshly; for I believe that many of them are not aware that they have such an institution as the jail in their village.

It was formerly the custom in our village, when a poor debtor came out of jail, for his acquaintances to salute him, looking through their fingers, which were crossed to represent the jail window, "How do ye do?" My neighbors did not thus salute me, but first looked at me, and then at one another, as if I had returned from a long journey. I was put into jail as I was going to the shoemaker's to get a shoe which was mended. When I was let out the next morning, I proceeded to finish my errand, and, having put on my mended shoe, joined a huckleberry party, who were impatient to put themselves under my conduct; and in half an hour—for the horse was soon tackled—was in the midst of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off, and then the State was nowhere to be seen.

This is the whole history of "My Prisons."

I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject; and as for supporting schools, I am doing my part to educate my fellow countrymen now. It is for no particular item in the tax bill that I refuse to pay it. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State, to
withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man or a musket to shoot one with—the dollar is innocent—but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance. In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make use and get what advantages of her I can, as is usual in such cases.

If others pay the tax which is demanded of me, from a sympathy with the State, they do but what they have already done in their own case, or rather they abet injustice to a greater extent than the State requires. If they pay the tax from a mistaken interest in the individual taxed, to save his property, or prevent his going to jail, it is because they have not considered wisely how far they let their private feelings interfere with the public good.

This, then, is my position at present. But one cannot be too much on his guard in such a case, lest his actions be biased by obstinacy or an undue regard for the opinions of men. Let him see that he does only what belongs to himself and to the hour.

I think sometimes, Why, this people mean well, they are only ignorant; they would do better if they knew how: why give your neighbors this pain to treat you as they are not inclined to? But I think again, This is no reason why I should do as they do, or permit others to suffer much greater pain of a different kind. Again, I sometimes say to myself, When many millions of men, without heat, without ill will, without personal feelings of any kind, demand of you a few shillings only, without the possibility, such is their constitution, of retracting or altering their present demand, and without the possibility, on your side, of appeal to any other millions, why expose yourself to this overwhelming brute force? You do not resist cold and hunger, the winds and the waves, thus obstinately; you quietly submit to a thousand similar necessities. You do not put your head into the fire. But just in proportion as I regard this as not wholly a brute force, but partly a human force, and consider that I have relations to those millions as to so many millions of men, and not of mere brute or inanimate things, I see that appeal is possible, first and instantaneously, from them to the Maker of them, and, secondly, from them to themselves. But if I put my head deliberately into the fire, there is no appeal to fire or to the Maker of fire, and I have only myself to blame. If I could convince myself that I have any right to be satisfied with men as they are, and to treat them accordingly, and not according, in some respects, to my requisitions and expectations of what they and I ought to be, then, like a good Mussulman and fatalist, I should endeavor to be satisfied with things as they are, and say it is the will of God. And, above all, there is this difference between resisting this and a purely brute or natural force, that I can resist this with some effect; but I cannot expect, like Orpheus, to change the nature of the rocks and trees and beasts.

I do not wish to quarrel with any man or nation. I do not wish to split hairs, to make fine distinctions, or set myself up as better than my neighbors. I seek rather, I may say, even an excuse for conforming to the laws of the land. I am but too ready to conform to them. Indeed, I have reason to suspect myself on this head; and each year, as the tax-gatherer comes round, I find myself disposed to review the acts and position of the general and State governments, and the spirit of the people to discover a pretext for conformity.

"We must affect our country as our parents,
And if at any time we alienate
Out love or industry from doing it honor,
We must respect effects and teach the soul
Matter of conscience and religion,
And not desire of rule or benefit."

I believe that the State will soon be able to take all my work of this sort out of my hands, and then I shall be no better patriot than my fellow-countrymen. Seen from a lower point of view, the Constitution, with all its faults, is very good; the law and the courts are very respectable; even this State and this American government are, in many respects, very admirable, and rare things, to be thankful for, such as a great many have described them; seen from a higher still, and the highest, who shall say what they are, or that they are worth looking at or thinking of at all?

However, the government does not concern me much, and I shall bestow the fewest possible thoughts on it. It is not many moments that I live under a government, even in this world. If a man is thought-free, fancy-free,
imagination-free, that which is not never for a long time appearing to be to him, unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him.

I know that most men think differently from myself; but those whose lives are by profession devoted to the study of these or kindred subjects content me as little as any. Statesmen and legislators, standing so completely within the institution, never distinctly and nakedly behold it. They speak of moving society, but have no resting-place without it. They may be men of a certain experience and discrimination, and have no doubt invented ingenious and even useful systems, for which we sincerely thank them; but all their wit and usefulness lie within certain not very wide limits. They are wont to forget that the world is not governed by policy and expediency. Webster never goes behind government, and so cannot speak with authority about it. His words are wisdom to those legislators who contemplate no essential reform in the existing government; but for thinkers, and those who legislate for all time, he never once glances at the subject. I know of those whose serene and wise speculations on this theme would soon reveal the limits of his mind's range and hospitality. Yet, compared with the cheap professions of most reformers, and the still cheaper wisdom an eloquence of politicians in general, his are almost the only sensible and valuable words, and we thank Heaven for him. Comparatively, he is always strong, original, and, above all, practical. Still, his quality is not wisdom, but prudence. The lawyer's truth is not Truth, but consistency or a consistent expediency. Truth is always in harmony with herself, and is not concerned chiefly to reveal the justice that may consist with wrong-doing. He well deserves to be called, as he has been called, the Defender of the Constitution. There are really no blows to be given him but defensive ones. He is not a leader, but a follower. His leaders are the men of '87. "I have never made an effort," he says, "and never propose to make an effort; I have never countenanced an effort, and never mean to countenance an effort, to disturb the arrangement as originally made, by which various States came into the Union." Still thinking of the sanction which the Constitution gives to slavery, he says, "Because it was part of the original compact—let it stand." Notwithstanding his special acuteness and ability, he is unable to take a fact out of its merely political relations, and behold it as it lies absolutely to be disposed of by the intellect—what, for instance, it behooves a man to do here in American today with regard to slavery—but ventures, or is driven, to make some such desperate answer to the following, while professing to speak absolutely, and as a private man—from which what new and singular of social duties might be inferred? "The manner," says he, "in which the governments of the States where slavery exists are to regulate it is for their own consideration, under the responsibility to their constituents, to the general laws of propriety, humanity, and justice, and to God. Associations formed elsewhere, springing from a feeling of humanity, or any other cause, have nothing whatever to do with it. They have never received any encouragement from me and they never will."

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

No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America. They are rare in the history of the world. There are orators, politicians, and eloquent men, by the thousand; but the speaker has not yet opened his mouth to speak who is capable of settling the much-vexed questions of the day. We love eloquence for its own sake, and not for any truth which it may utter, or any heroism it may inspire. Our legislators have not yet learned the comparative value of free trade and of freedom, of union, and of rectitude, to a nation. They have no genius or talent for comparatively humble questions of taxation and finance, commerce and manufactures and agriculture. If we were left solely to the wordy wit of legislators in Congress for our guidance, uncorrected by the seasonable experience and the effectual complaints of the people, America would not long retain her rank among the nations. For eighteen hundred years, though perchance I have no right to say it, the New Testament has been written; yet where is the legislator who has wisdom and practical talent enough to avail himself of the light which it sheds on the science of legislation.

The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit to—for I will cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I, and in many things even those who neither know nor can do so well—is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. The progress from an absolute to a limited
monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress toward a true respect for the individual. Even the Chinese philosopher was wise enough to regard the individual as the basis of the empire. Is a democracy, such as we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own repose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow men. A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which I have also imagined, but not yet anywhere seen.
SUMMARY:

Thoreau's essay espoused John Brown and his fight for abolition. In opposition with popular opinion of the time--Thoreau vehemently refuted the claims of newspapers and his fellow countrymen who characterized Brown as foolish and insane--he painted a portrait of a peerless man whose embrace of a cause was unparalleled. Brown's commitment to justice and adherence to the United States Constitution forced him to fight state-sponsored injustice, one he was only affected by in spirit.

A unique man, Thoreau proclaimed in admiration, Brown was highly moral and humane. Independent, "under the auspices of John Brown and nobody else," and direct of speech, Brown instilled fear, which he attributed to a lack of cause, into large groups of men who supported slavery. Incomparable to man, Thoreau likens Brown's execution--he states that he regards Brown as dead before his actual death--to Christ's crucifixion at the hands of Pontius Pilate with whom he compares the American government.

Thoreau vents at the scores of Americans who have voiced their displeasure and scorn for John Brown. The same people, Thoreau says, can't relate to Brown because of their concrete stances and "dead" existences; they are truly not living, only a handful of men have lived. Thoreau also criticizes contemporary Christians, who say their prayers and then go to sleep aware of injustice but doing nothing to change it. Similarly, Thoreau states those who believe Brown threw his life away and died as a fool, are fools. Brown gave his life for justice, not for material gains, and was completely sane, perhaps more so than any other human being. Rebutting the arguments based on the small number of rebels, Thoreau responds "when were the good and the brave ever in a majority?" Thoreau also points out the irony of The Liberator, an abolitionist newspaper, labeling Brown's actions as misguided.

FULL TEXT

A PLEA FOR CAPTAIN JOHN BROWN

By Henry David Thoreau [Read to the citizens of Concord, Mass., Sunday Evening, October 30, 1859.]

I trust that you will pardon me for being here. I do not wish to force my thoughts upon you, but I feel forced myself. Little as I know of Captain Brown, I would fain do my part to correct the tone and the statements of the newspapers, and of my countrymen generally, respecting his character and actions. It costs us nothing to be just. We can at least express our sympathy with, and admiration of, him and his companions, and that is what I now propose to do.

First, as to his history. I will endeavor to omit, as much as possible, what you have already read. I need not describe his person to you, for probably most of you have seen and will not soon forget him. I am told that his grandfather, John Brown, was an officer in the Revolution; that he himself was born in Connecticut about the beginning of this century, but early went with his father to Ohio. I heard him say that his father was a contractor who furnished beef to the army there, in the war of 1812; that he accompanied him to the camp, and assisted him in that employment, seeing a good deal of military life,—more, perhaps, than if he had been a soldier; for he was often present at the councils of the officers. Especially, he learned by experience how armies are supplied and maintained in the field,—a work which, he observed, requires at least as much experience and skill as to lead them in battle. He said that few persons had any conception of the cost, even the pecuniary cost, of firing a single bullet in war. He saw enough, at any rate, to disgust him with a military life; indeed, to excite in his a great abhorrence of it; so much so, that though he was tempted by the offer of some petty office in the army, when he was about eighteen, he not only declined that, but he also refused to train when warned, and was fined for it. He then resolved that he would never have anything to do with any war, unless it were a war for liberty.
When the troubles in Kansas began, he sent several of his sons thither to strengthen the party of the Free State men, fitting them out with such weapons as he had; telling them that if the troubles should increase, and there should be need of his, he would follow, to assist them with his hand and counsel. This, as you all know, he soon after did; and it was through his agency, far more than any other's, that Kansas was made free. For a part of his life he was a surveyor, and at one time he was engaged in wool-growing, and he went to Europe as an agent about that business. There, as everywhere, he had his eyes about him, and made many original observations. He said, for instance, that he saw why the soil of England was so rich, and that of Germany (I think it was) so poor, and he thought of writing to some of the crowned heads about it. It was because in England the peasantry live on the soil which they cultivate, but in Germany they are gathered into villages, at night. It is a pity that he did not make a book of his observations.

I should say that he was an old-fashioned man in respect for the Constitution, and his faith in the permanence of this Union. Slavery he deemed to be wholly opposed to these, and he was its determined foe. He was by descent and birth a New England farmer, a man of great common-sense, deliberate and practical as that class is, and tenfold more so. He was like the best of those who stood at Concord Bridge once, on Lexington Common, and on Bunker Hill, only he was firmer and higher principled than any that I have chanced to hear of as there. It was no abolition lecturer that converted him. Ethan Allen and Stark, with whom he may in some respects be compared, were rangers in a lower and less important field. They could bravely face their country's foes, but he had the courage to face his country herself, when she was in the wrong. A Western writer says, to account for his escape from so many perils, that he was concealed under a "rural exterior"; as if, in that prairie land, a hero should, by good rights, wear a citizen's dress only.

He did not go to the college called Harvard, good old Alma Mater as she is. He was not fed on the pap that is there furnished. As he phrased it, "I know no more of grammar than one of your calves." But he went to the great university of the West, where he sedulously pursued the study of Liberty, for which he had early betrayed a fondness, and having taken many degrees, he finally commenced the public practice of Humanity in Kansas, as you all know. Such were his humanities and not any study of grammar. He would have left a Greek accent slanting the wrong way, and righted up a falling man.

He was one of that class of whom we hear a great deal, but, for the most part, see nothing at all,—the Puritans. It would be in vain to kill him. He died lately in the time of Cromwell, but he reappeared here. Why should he not? Some of the Puritan stock are said to have come over and settled in New England. They were a class that did something else than celebrate their forefathers' day, and eat parched corn in remembrance of that time. They were neither Democrats nor Republicans, but men of simple habits, straightforward, prayerful; not thinking much of rulers who did not fear God, not making many compromises, nor seeking after available candidates.

"In his camp," as one has recently written, and as I have myself heard him state, "he permitted no profanity; no man of loose morals was suffered to remain there, unless, indeed, as a prisoner of war. 'I would rather,' said he, 'have the small-pox, yellow-fever, and cholera, all together in my camp, than a man without principle... It is a mistake, sir, that our people make, when they think that bullies are the best fighters, or that they are the fit men to oppose these Southerners. Give me men of good principles,—God-fearing men,—men who respect themselves, and with a dozen of them I will oppose any hundred such men as these Buford ruffians.'" He said that if one offered himself to be a soldier under him, who was forward to tell what he could or would do, if he could only get sight of the enemy, he had but little confidence in him.

He was never able to find more than a score or so of recruits whom he would accept, and only about a dozen, among them his sons, in whom he had perfect faith. When he was here, some years ago, he showed to a few a little manuscript book,—his "orderly book" I think he called it,—containing the names of his company in Kansas, and the rules by which they bound themselves; and he stated that several of them had already sealed the contract with their blood. When some one remarked that, with the addition of a chaplain, it would have been a perfect Cromwellian troop, he observed that he would have been glad to add a chaplain to the list, if he could have found one who could fill that office worthily. It is easy enough to find one for the United States army. I believe that he had prayers in his camp morning and evening, nevertheless.
He was a man of Spartan habits, and at sixty was scrupulous about his diet at your table, excusing himself by saying that he must eat sparingly and fare hard, as became a soldier, or one who was fitting himself for difficult enterprises, a life of exposure.

A man of rare common-sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles,—that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but carrying out the purpose of a life. I noticed that he did not overstate anything, but spoke within bounds. I remember, particularly, how, in his speech here, he referred to what his family had suffered in Kansas, without ever giving the least vent to his pent-up fire. It was a volcano with an ordinary chimney-flue. Also referring to the deeds of certain Border Ruffians, he said, rapidly paring away his speech, like an experienced soldier, keeping a reserve of force and meaning, "They had a perfect right to be hung." He was not in the least a rhetorician, was not talking to Buncombe or his constituents anywhere, had no need to invent anything but to tell the simple truth, and communicate his own resolution; therefore he appeared incomparably strong, and eloquence in Congress and elsewhere seemed to me at a discount. It was like the speeches of Cromwell compared with those of an ordinary king.

As for his tact and prudence, I will merely say, that at a time when scarcely a man from the Free States was able to reach Kansas by any direct route, at least without having his arms taken from him, he, carrying what imperfect guns and other weapons he could collect, openly and slowly drove an ox-cart through Missouri, apparently in the capacity of a surveyor, with his surveying compass exposed in it, and so passed unsuspected, and had ample opportunity to learn the designs of the enemy. For some time after his arrival he still followed the same profession. When, for instance, he saw a knot of the ruffians on the prairie, discussing, of course, the single topic which then occupied their minds, he would, perhaps, take his compass and one of his sons, and proceed to run an imaginary line right through the very spot on which that conclave had assembled, and when he came up to them, he would naturally pause and have some talk with them, learning their news, and, at last, all their plans perfectly; and having thus completed his real survey he would resume his imaginary one, and run on his line till he was out of sight.

When I expressed surprise that he could live in Kansas at all, with a price set upon his head, and so large a number, including the authorities, exasperated against him, he accounted for it by saying, "It is perfectly well understood that I will not be taken." Much of the time for some years he has had to skulk in swamps, suffering from poverty and from sickness, which was the consequence of exposure, befriended only by Indians and a few whites. But though it might be known that he was lurking in a particular swamp, his foes commonly did not care to go in after him. He could even come out into a town where there were more Border Ruffians than Free State men, and transact some business, without delaying long, and yet not be molested; for, said he, "No little handful of men were willing to undertake it, and a large body could not be got together in season."

As for his recent failure, we do not know the facts about it. It was evidently far from being a wild and desperate attempt. His enemy, Mr. Vallandigham, is compelled to say, that "it was among the best planned executed conspiracies that ever failed."

Not to mention his other successes, was it a failure, or did it show a want of good management, to deliver from bondage a dozen human beings, and walk off with them by broad daylight, for weeks if not months, at a leisurely pace, through one State after another, for half the length of the North, conspicuous to all parties, with a price set upon his head, going into a court-room on his way and telling what he had done, thus convincing Missouri that it was not profitable to try to hold slaves in his neighborhood?—and this, not because the government menials were lenient, but because they were afraid of him. Yet he did not attribute his success, foolishly, to "his star," or to any magic. He said, truly, that the reason why such greatly superior numbers quailed before him was, as one of his prisoners confessed, because they lacked a cause,—a kind of armor which he and his party never lacked. When the time came, few men were found willing to lay down their lives in defence of what they knew to be wrong; they did not like that this should be their last act in this world.

But to make haste to his last act, and its effects.
The newspapers seem to ignore, or perhaps are really ignorant of the fact, that there are at least as many as two or three individuals to a town throughout the North who think much as the present speaker does about him and his enterprise. I do not hesitate to say that they are an important and growing party. We aspire to be something more than stupid and timid chattels, pretending to read history and our Bibles, but desecrating every house and every day we breathe in. Perhaps anxious politicians may prove that only seventeen white men and five negroes were concerned in the late enterprise; but their very anxiety to prove this might suggest to themselves that all is not told. Why do they still dodge the truth? They are so anxious because of a dim consciousness of the fact, which they do not distinctly face, that at least a million of the free inhabitants of the United States would have rejoiced if it had succeeded. They at most only criticise the tactics. Though we wear no crape, the thought of that man's position and probable fate is spoiling many a man's day here at the North for other thinking. If any one who has seen him here can pursue successfully any other train of thought, I do not know what he is made of. If there is any such who gets his usual allowance of sleep, I will warrant him to fatten easily under any circumstances which do not touch his body or purse. I put a piece of paper and a pencil under my pillow, and when I could not sleep, I wrote in the dark.

On the whole, my respect for my fellow-men, except as one may outweigh a million, is not being increased these days. I have noticed the cold-blooded way in which newspaper writers and men generally speak of this event, as if an ordinary malefactor, though one of unusual "pluck," —as the Governor of Virginia is reported to have said, using the language of the cock-pit, "the gamest man he ever saw," —had been caught, and were about to be hung. He was not dreaming of his foes when the governor thought he looked so brave. It turns what sweetness I have to gall, to hear, or hear of, the remarks of some of my neighbors. When we heard at first that he was dead, one of my townsmen observed that "he died as the fool dieth"; which, pardon me, for an instant suggested a likeness in him dying to my neighbor living. Others, craven-hearted, said disparagingly, that "he threw his life away," because he resisted the government. Which way have they thrown their lives, pray?—such as would praise a man for attacking singly an ordinary band of thieves or murderers. I hear another ask, Yankee-like, "What will he gain by it?" as if he expected to fill his pockets by this enterprise. Such a one has no idea of gain but in this worldly sense. If it does not lead to a "surprise" party, if he does not get a new pair of boots, or a vote of thanks, it must be a failure. "But he won't gain anything by it." Well, no, I don't suppose he could get four-and-sixpence a day for being hung, take the year round; but then he stands a chance to save a considerable part of his soul,—and such a soul!—when you do not. No doubt you can get more in your market for a quart of milk than for a quart of blood, but that is not the market that heroes carry their blood to.

Such do not know that like the seed is the fruit, and that, in the moral world, when good seed is planted, good fruit is inevitable, and does not depend on our watering and cultivating; that when you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up. This is a seed of such force and vitality, that it does not ask our leave to germinate.

The momentary charge at Balaclava, in obedience to a blundering command, proving what a perfect machine the soldier is, has, properly enough, been celebrated by a poet laureate; but the steady, and for the most part successful, charge of this man, for some years, against the legions of Slavery, in obedience to an infinitely higher command, is as much more memorable than that, as an intelligent and conscientious man is superior to a machine. Do you think that that will go unsung?

"Served him right,"—"A dangerous man,"—"He is undoubtedly insane." So they proceed to live their sane, and wise, and altogether admirable lives, reading their Plutarch a little, but chiefly pausing at that feat of Putnam, who was let down into a wolf's den; and in this wise they nourish themselves for brave and patriotic deeds some time or other. The Tract Society could afford to print that story of Putnam. You might open the district schools with the reading of it, for there is nothing about Slavery or the Church in it; unless it occurs to the reader that some pastors are wolves in sheep's clothing, "The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions" even, might dare to protest against that wolf. I have heard of boards, and of American boards, but it chances that I never heard of this particular lumber till lately. And yet I hear of Northern men, and women, and children, by families, buying a "life membership" in such societies as these. A life-membership in the grave! You can get buried cheaper than that.
Our foes are in our midst and all about us. There is hardly a house but is divided against itself, for our foe is the all but universal woodenness of both head and heart, the want of vitality in man, which is the effect of our vice; and hence are begotten fear, superstition, bigotry, persecution, and slavery of all kinds. We are mere figureheads upon a hulk, with livers in the place of hearts. The curse is the worship of idols, which at length changes the worshipper into a stone image himself; and the New-England is just as much an idolater as the Hindoo. This man was an exception, for he did not set up even a political graven image between him and his God.

A church that can never have done with excommunicating Christ while it exists! Away with your broad and flat churches, and your narrow and tall churches! Take a step forward, and invent a new style of out-houses. Invent a salt that will save you, and defend our nostrils.

The modern Christian is a man who has consented to say all the prayers in the liturgy, provided you will let him go straight to bed and sleep quietly afterward. All his prayers begin with "Now I lay me down to sleep," and he is forever looking forward to the time when he shall go to his "long rest." He has consented to perform certain old-established charities, too, after a fashion, but he does not wish to hear of any new-fangled ones; he doesn't wish to have any supplementary articles added to the contract, to fit it to the present time. He shows the whites of his eyes on the Sabbath, and the blacks all the rest of the week. The evil is not merely a stagnation of blood, but a stagnation of spirit. Many, no doubt, are well disposed, but sluggish by constitution and by habit, and they cannot conceive of a man who is actuated by higher motives than they are. Accordingly they pronounce this man insane, for they know that they could never act as he does, as long as they are themselves.

We dream of foreign countries, of other times and races of men, placing them at a distance in history or space; but let some significant event like the present occur in our midst, and we discover, often, this distance and this strangeness between us and our nearest neighbors. They are our Austria, and Chinas, and South Sea Islands. Our crowded society becomes well spaced all at once, clean and handsome to the eye,—a city of magnificent distances. We discover why it was that we never got beyond compliments and surfaces with them before; we become aware of as many versts between us and them as there are between a wandering Tartar and a Chinese town. The thoughtful man becomes a hermit in the thoroughfares of the market-place. Impassable seas suddenly find their level between us, or dumb steppes stretch themselves out there. It is the difference of constitution, of intelligence, and faith, and not streams and mountains, that make the true and impassable boundaries between individuals and between states. None but the like-minded can come plenipotentiary to our court.

I read all the newspapers I could get within a weeek after this event, and I do not remember in them a single expression of sympathy for these men. I have since seen one noble statement, in a Boston paper, not editorial. Some voluminous sheets decided not to print the full report of Brown's words to the exclusion of other matter. It was as if a publisher should reject the manuscript of the New Testament, and print Wilson's last speech. The same journal which contained this pregnant news, was chiefly filled, in parallel columns, with the reports of the political conventions that were being held. But the descent to them was too steep. They should have been spared this contrast,—been printed in an extra, at least. To turn from the voices and deeds of earnest men to the cackling of political conventions! Office-seekers and speech-makers, who do not so much as lay an honest egg, but wear their breasts bare upon an egg of chalk! Their great game is the game of straws, or rather that universal aboriginal game of the platter, at which the Indians cried hub, bub! Exclude the reports of religious and political conventions, and publish the words of a living man.

But I object not so much to what they have omitted, as to what they have inserted. Even the Liberator called it "a misguided, wild, and apparently insane—effort." As for the herd of newspapers and magazines, I do not chance to know an editor in the country who will deliberately print anything which he knows will ultimately and permanently reduce the number of his subscribers. They do not believe that it would be expedient. How then can they print truth? If we do not say pleasant things, they argue, nobody will attend to us. And so they do like some travelling auctioneers, who sing an obscene song, in order to draw a crowd around them. Republican editors, obliged to get their sentences ready for the morning edition, and accustomed to look at everything by the twilight of politics, express no admiration, nor true sorrow even, but call these men
"deluded fanatics,"—"mistaken men,"—"insane," or "crazed." It suggests what a sane set of editors we are blessed with, not "mistaken men"; who know very well on which side their bread is buttered, at least. A man does a brave and humane deed, and at once, on all sides, we hear people and parties declaring, "I didn't do it, nor countenance him to do it, in any conceivable way. It can't be fairly inferred from my past career." I, for one, am not interested to hear you define your position. I don't know that I ever was, or ever shall be. I think it is mere egotism, or impertinent at this time. Ye needn't take so much pains to wash your skirts of him. No intelligent man will ever be convinced that he was any creature of yours. He went and came, as he himself informs us, "under the auspices of John Brown and nobody else." The Republican party does not perceive how many his failure will make to vote more correctly than they would have them. They have counted the votes of Pennsylvania & Co., but they have not correctly counted Captain Brown's vote. He has taken the wind out of their sails,—the little wind they had,—and they may as well lie to and repair.

What though he did not belong to your clique! Though you may not approve of his method or his principles, recognize his magnanimity. Would you not like to claim kindredship with him in that, though in no other thing he is like, or likely, to you? Do you think that you would lose your reputation so? What you lost at the spile, you would gain at the bung.

If they do not mean all this, then they do not speak the truth, and say what they mean. They are simply at their old tricks still.

"It was always conceded to him," says one who calls him crazy, "that he was a conscientious man, very modest in his demeanor, apparently inoffensive, until the subject of Slavery was introduced, when he would exhibit a feeling of indignation unparalleled."

The slave-ship is on her way, crowded with its dying victims; new cargoes are being added in mid-ocean; a small crew of slaveholders, countenanced by a large body of passengers, is smothering four millions under the hatches, and yet the politician asserts that the only proper way by which deliverance is to be obtained, is by "the quiet diffusion of the sentiments of humanity," without any "outbreak." As if the sentiments of humanity were ever found unaccompanied by its deeds, and you could disperse them, all finished to order, the pure article, as easily as water with a watering-pot, and so lay the dust. What is that that I hear cast overboard? The bodies of the dead that have found deliverance. That is the way we are "diffusing" humanity, and its sentiments with it.

Prominent and influential editors, accustomed to deal with politicians, men of an infinitely lower grade, say, in their ignorance, that he acted "on the principle of revenge." They do not know the man. They must enlarge themselves to conceive of him. I have no doubt that the time will come when they will begin to see him as he was. They have got to conceive of a man of faith and of religious principle, and not a politician or an Indian; of a man who did not wait till he was personally interfered with or thwarted in some harmless business before he gave his life to the cause of the oppressed.

If Walker may be considered the representative of the South, I wish I could say that Brown was the representative of the North. He was a superior man. He did not value his bodily life in comparison with ideal things. He did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid. For once we are lifted out of the trivialness and dust of politics into the region of truth and manhood. No man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature, knowing himself for a man, and the equal of any and all governments. In that sense he was the most American of us all. He needed no babbling lawyer, making false issues, to defend him. He was more than a match for all the judges that American voters, or office-holders of whatever grade, can create. He could not have been tried by a jury of his peers, because his peers did not exist. When a man stands up serenely against the condemnation and vengeance of mankind, rising above them literally by a whole body,—even though he were of late the vilest murderer, who has settled that matter with himself,—the spectacle is a sublime one,—didn't ye know it, ye Liberators, ye Tribunes, ye Republicans?—and we become criminal in comparison. Do yourselves the honor to recognize him. He needs none of your respect.
As for the Democratic journals, they are not human enough to affect me at all. I do not feel indignation at anything they may say.

I am aware that I anticipate a little,—that he was still, at the last accounts, alive in the hands of his foes; but that being the case, I have all along found myself thinking and speaking of him as physically dead. I do not believe in erecting statues to those who still live in our hearts, whose bones have not yet crumbled in the earth around us, but I would rather see the statue of Captain Brown in the Massachusetts State-House yard, than that of any other man whom I know. I rejoice that I live in this age, that I am his contemporary.

What a contrast, when we turn to that political party which is so anxiously shuffling him and his plot out of its way, and looking around for some available slave holder, perhaps, to be its candidate, at least for one who will execute the Fugitive Slave Law, and all those other unjust laws which he took up arms to annul!

As insane! A father and six sons, and one son-in-law, and several more men besides,—as many at least as twelve disciples,—all struck with insanity at once; while the same tyrant holds with a firmer grip than ever his four millions of slaves, and a thousand sane editors, his abettors, are saving their country and their bacon! Just as insane were his efforts in Kansas. Ask the tyrant who is his most dangerous foe, the sane man or the insane? Do the thousands who know him best, who have rejoiced at his deeds in Kansas, and have afforded him material aid there, think him insane? Such a use of this word is a mere trite with most who persist in using it, and I have no doubt that many of the rest have already in silence retracted their words.

Read his admirable answers to Mason and others. How they are dwarfed and defeated by the contrast! On the one side, half-brutish, half-timid questioning; on the other, truth, clear as lightning, crashing into their obscene temples. They are made to stand with Pilate, and Gesler, and the Inquisition. How ineffectual their speech and action! and what a void their silence! They are but helpless tools in this great work. It was no human power that gathered them about this preacher.

What have Massachusetts and the North sent a few sane representatives to Congress for, of late years?—to declare with effect what kind of sentiments? All their speeches put together and boiled down,—and probably they themselves will confess it,—do not match for manly directness and force, and for simple truth, the few casual remarks of crazy John Brown, on the floor of the Harper’s Ferry engine-house,—that man whom you are about to hang, to send to the other world, though not to represent you there. No, he was not our representative in any sense. He was too fair a specimen of a man to represent the like of us. Who, then, were his constituents? If you read his words understandingly you will find out. In his case there is no idle eloquence, no made, nor maiden speech, no compliments to the oppressor. Truth is his inspirer, and earnestness the polisher of his sentences. He could afford to lose his Sharp’s rifles, while he retained his faculty of speech,—a Sharp’s rifle of infinitely surer and longer range.

And the New York Herald reports the conversation verbatim! It does not know of what undying words it is made the vehicle.

I have no respect for the penetratio of any man who can read the report of that conversation, and still call the principal in it insane. It has the ring of a saner sanity than an ordinary discipline and habits of life, than an ordinary organization, secure. Take any sentence of it,—"Any questions that I can honorably answer, I will; not otherwise. So far as I am myself concerned, I have told everything truthfully. I value my word, sir." The few who talk about his vindictive spirit, while they really admire his heroism, have no test by which to detect a noble man, no amalgam to combine with his pure gold. They mix their own dross with it.

It is a relief to turn from these slanders to the testimony of his more truthful, but frightened jailers and hangmen. Governor Wise speaks far more justly and appreciatingly of him than any Northern editor, or politician, or public personage, that I chance to have heard from. I know that you can afford to hear him again on this subject. He says: "They are themselves mistaken who take him to be madman…. He is cool, collected, and indomitable, and it is but just to him to say, that he was humane to his prisoners…. And he inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth. He is a fanatic, vain and garrulous," (I leave that part to Mr. Wise,) "but firm, truthful, and intelligent. His men, too, who survive, are like him…. Colonel Washington says that he was the coolest and firmest man he ever saw in defying danger and death. With one son dead by his
side, and another shot through, he felt the pulse of his dying son with one hand, and held his rifle with the other, and commanded his men with the utmost composure, encouraging them to be firm, and to sell their lives as dear as they could. Of the three white prisoners, Brown, Stephens, and Coppic, it was hard to say which was most firm.

Almost the first Northern men whom the slaveholder has learned to respect!

The testimony of Mr. Vallandigham, though less valuable, is of the same purport, that "it is vain to underrate either the man or his conspiracy... He is the farthest possible removed from the ordinary ruffian, fanatic, or madman."

"All is quiet at Harper's Ferry," say the journals. What is the character of that calm which follows when the law and the slaveholder prevail? I regard this event as a touchstone designed to bring out, with glaring distinctness, the character of this government. We needed to be thus assisted to see it by the light of history. It needed to see itself. When a government puts forth its strength on the side of injustice, as ours to maintain slavery and kill the liberators of the slave, it reveals itself a merely brute force, or worse, a demoniaca force. It is the head of the Plug-Uglies. It is more manifest than ever that tyranny rules. I see this government to be effectually allied with France and Austria in oppressing mankind. There sits a tyrant holding fettered four millions of slaves; here comes their heroic liberator. This most hypocritical and diabolical government looks up from its seat on the gasping four millions, and inquires with an assumption of innocence: "What do you assault me for? Am I not an honest man? Cease agitation on this subject, or I will make a slave of you, too, or else hang you."

We talk about a representative government; but what a monster of a government is that where the noblest faculties of the mind, and the whole heart, are not represented. A semi-human tiger or ox, stalking over the earth, with its heart taken out and the top of its brain shot away. Heroes have fought well on their stumps when their legs were shot off, but I never heard of any good done by such a government as that. The only government that I recognize,—and it matters not how few are at the head of it, or how small its army,—is that power that establishes justice in the land, never that which establishes injustice. What shall we think of a government to which all the truly brave and just men in the land are enemies, standing between it and those whom it oppresses? A government that pretends to be Christian and crucifies a million Christs every day!

Treason! Where does such treason take its rise? I cannot help thinking of you as you deserve, ye governments. Can you dry up the fountains of thought? High treason, when it is resistance to tyranny here below, has its origin in, and is first committed by, the power that makes and forever recreates man. When you have caught and hung all these human rebels, you have accomplished nothing but your own guilt, for you have not struck at the fountain-head. You presume to contend with a foe against whom West Point cadets and rifled cannon point not. Can all the art of the cannon-founder tempt matter to turn against its maker? Is the form in which the founder thinks he casts it more essential than the constitution of it and of himself? The United States have a coffle of four millions of slaves. They are determined to keep them in this condition; and Massachusetts is one of the confederated overseers to prevent their escape. Such are not all the inhabitants of Massachusetts, but such are they who rule and are obeyed here. It was Massachusetts, as well as Virginia, that put down this insurrection at Harper’s Ferry. She sent the marines there, and she will have to pay the penalty of her sin.

Suppose that there is a society in this State that out of its own purse and magnanimity saves all the fugitive slaves that run to us, and protects our colored fellow-citizens, and leaves the other work to the government, so-called. Is not that government fast losing its occupation, and becoming contemptible to mankind? If private men are obliged to perform the offices of government, to protect the weak and dispense justice, then the government becomes only a hired man, or clerk, to perform menial or indifferent services. Of course, that is but the shadow of a government whose existence necessitates a Vigilant Committee. What should we think of the Oriental Cadi even, behind whom worked in secret a vigilant committee? But such is the character of our Northern States generally; each has its Vigilant Committee. And, to a certain extent, these crazy governments recognize and accept this relation. They say, virtually, "We'll be glad to work for you on these terms, only
don't make a noise about it.” And thus the government, its salary being insured, withdraws into the back shop, taking the Constitution with it, and bestows most of its labor on repairing that. When I hear it at work sometimes, as I go by, it reminds me, at best, of those farmers who in winter contrive to turn a penny by following the coopering business. And what kind of spirit is their barrel made to hold? They speculate in stocks, and bore holes in mountains, but they are not competent to lay out even a decent highway. The only free road, the Underground Railroad, is owned and managed by the Vigilant Committee. They have tunelled under the whole breadth of the land. Such a government is losing its power and respectability as surely as water runs out of a leaky vessel, and is held by one that can contain it.

I hear many condemn these men because they were so few. When were the good and the brave ever in a majority? Would you have had him wait till that time came—till you and I came over to him? The very fact that he had no rabble or troop of hirelings about him would alone distinguish him from ordinary heroes. His company was small indeed, because few could be found worthy to pass muster. Each one who there laid down his life for the poor and oppressed was a picked man, culled out of many thousands, if not millions; apparently a man of principle, of rare courage, and devoted humanity; ready to sacrifice his life at any moment for the benefit of his fellow-man. It may be doubted if there were as many more their equals in these respects in all the country—I speak of his followers only—for their leader, no doubt, scoured the land far and wide, seeking to swell his troop. These alone were ready to step between the oppressor and the oppressed. Surely they were the very best men you could select to be hung. That was the greatest compliment which this country could pay them. They were ripe for her gallows. She has tried a long time, she has hung a good many, but never found the right one before.

When I think of him, and his six sons, and his son-in-law, not to enumerate the others, enlisted for this fight, proceeding coolly, reverently, humanely to work, for months if not years, sleeping and waking upon it, summering and wintering the thought, without expecting any reward but a good conscience, while almost all America stood ranked on the other side—I say again that it affects me as a sublime spectacle. If he had any journal advocating 'his cause,' any organ, as the phrase is, monotonously and wearisomely playing the same old tune, and then passing round the hat, it would have been fatal to his efficiency. If he had acted in any way so as to be let alone by the government, he might have been suspected. It was the fact that the tyrant must give place to him, or he to the tyrant, that distinguished him from all the reformers of the day that I know. It was his peculiar doctrine that a man has a perfect right to interfere by force with the slaveholder, in order to rescue the slave. I agree with him. They who are continually shocked by slavery have some right to be shocked by the violent death of the slaveholder, but no others. Such will be more shocked by his life than by his death. I shall not be forward to think him mistaken in his method who quickest succeeds to liberate the slave. I speak for the slave when I say that I prefer the philanthropy of Captain Brown to that philanthropy which neither shoots me nor liberates me. At any rate, I do not think it is quite sane for one to spend his whole life in talking or writing about this matter, unless he is continuously inspired, and I have not done so. A man may have other affairs to attend to. I do not wish to kill nor to be killed, but I can foresee circumstances in which both these things would be by me unavoidable. We preserve the so-called peace of our community by deeds of petty violence every day. Look at the policeman’s billy and handcuffs! Look at the jail! Look at the gallows! Look at the chaplain of the regiment! We are hoping only to live safely on the outskirts of this provisional army. So we defend ourselves and our hen-roosts, and maintain slavery. I know that the mass of my countrymen think that the only righteous use that can be made of Sharp's rifles and revolvers is to fight duels with them, when we are insulted by other nations, or to hunt Indians, or shoot fugitive slaves with them, or the like. I think that for once the Sharp’s rifles and the revolvers were employed in a righteous cause.

The tools were in the hands of one who could use them.

The same indignation that is said to have cleared the temple once will clear it again. The question is not about the weapon, but the spirit in which you use it. No man has appeared in America, as yet, who loved his fellow-man so well, and treated him so tenderly. He lived for him. He took up his life and he laid it down for him. What sort of violence is that which is encouraged, not by soldiers, but by peaceable citizens, not so much by laymen as by ministers of the Gospel, not so much by the fighting sects as by the Quakers, and not so much by Quaker men as by Quaker women?
This event advertises me that there is such a fact as death,—the possibility of a man’s dying. It seems as if no man had ever died in America before; for in order to die you must first have lived. I don’t believe in the hearses, and palls, and funerals that they have had. There was no death in the case, because there had been no life; they merely rotted or sloughed off, pretty much as they had rotted or sloughed along. No temple’s veil was rent, only a hole dug somewhere. Let the dead bury their dead. The best of them fairly ran down like a clock. Franklin,—Washington,—they were let off without dying; they were merely missing one day. I hear a good many pretend that they are going to die; or that they have died, for aught that I know. Nonsense! I’ll defy them to do it. They haven’t got life enough in them. They’ll deliquesce like fungi, and keep a hundred eulogists mopping the spot where they left off. Only half a dozen so or so have died since the world began. Do you think that you are going to die, sir? No! there’s no hope of you. You haven’t got your lesson yet. You’ve got to stay after school. We make a needless ado about capital punishment,—taking lives, when there is no life to take. Memento mori! We don’t understand that sublime sentence which some worthy got sculptured on his gravestone once. We’ve interpreted it in a grovelling and snivelling sense; we’ve wholly forgotten how to die. But be sure you do die nevertheless. Do your work, and finish it. If you know how to begin, you will know when to end.

These men, in teaching us how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live. If this man’s acts and words do not create a revival, it will be the severest possible satire on the acts and words that do. It is the best news that America has ever heard. It has already quickened the feeble pulse of the North, and infused more and more generous blood into her veins and heart, than any number of years of what is called commercial and political prosperity could. How many a man who was lately contemplating suicide has now something to live for!

One writer says that Brown’s peculiar monomania made him to be “dreaded by the Missourians as a supernatural being.” Sure enough, a hero in the midst of us cowards is always so dreaded. He is just that thing. He shows himself superior to nature. He has a spark of divinity in him.

"Unless above himself he can
Erect himself, how poor a thing is man!"

Newspaper editors argue also that it is a proof of his insanity that he thought he was appointed to do this work which he did,—that he did not suspect himself for a moment! They talk as if it were impossible that a man could be “divinely appointed” in these days to do any work whatever; as if vows and religion were out of date as connected with any man’s daily work; as if the agent to abolish slavery could only be somebody appointed by the President, or by some political party. They talk as if a man’s death were a failure, and his continued life, be it of whatever character, were a success.

When I reflect to what a cause this man devoted himself, and how religiously, and then reflect to what cause his judges and all who condemn him so angrily and fluently devote themselves, I see that they are as far apart as the heavens and earth are asunder.

The amount of it is, our "leading men" are a harmless kind of folk, and they know well enough that they were not divinely appointed, but elected by the votes of their party.

Who is it whose safety requires that Captain Brown be hung? Is it indispensable to any Northern man? Is there no resource but to cast this man also to the Minotaur? If you do not wish it, say so distinctly. While these things are being done, beauty stands veiled and music is a screeching lie. Think of him,—of his rare qualities!—such a man as it takes ages to make, and ages to understand; no mock hero, nor the representative of any party. A man such as the sun may not rise upon again in this benighted land. To whose making went the costliest material, the finest adamant; sent to be the redeemer of those in captivity; and the only use to which you can put him is to hang him at the end of a rope! You who pretend to care for Christ crucified, consider what you are about to do to him who offered himself to be the savior of four millions of men.
Any man knows when he is justified, and all the wits in the world cannot enlighten him on that point. The murderer always knows that he is justly punished; but when a government takes the life of a man without the consent of his conscience, it is an audacious government, and is taking a step towards its own dissolution. Is it not possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong? Are laws to be enforced simply because they were made or declared by any number of men to be good, if they are not good? Is there any necessity for a man’s being a tool to perform a deed of which his better nature disapproves? Is it the intention of law-makers that good men shall be hung ever? Are judges to interpret the law according to the letter, and not the spirit? What right have you to enter into a compact with yourself that you will do thus or so, against the light within you? Is it for you to make up your mind, to form any resolution whatever, and not accept the convictions that are forced upon you, and which ever pass your understanding? I do not believe in lawyers, in that mode of attacking or defending a man, because you descend to meet the judge on his own ground, and, in cases of the highest importance, it is of no consequence whether a man breaks a human law or not. Let lawyers decide trivial cases. Business men may arrange that among themselves. If they were the interpreters of the everlasting laws which rightfully bind man, that would be another thing. A counterfeiting law-factory, standing half in a slave land and half in free! What kind of laws for free men can you expect from that?

I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character,—his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least. Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light.

I see now that it was necessary that the bravest and humanest man in all the country should be hung. Perhaps he saw it himself. I almost fear that I may yet hear of his deliverance, doubting if a prolonged life, if any life, can do as much good as his death.

"Misguided"! "Garrulous"! "Insane"! "Vindictive"! So ye write in your easy-chairs, and thus he wounded responds from the floor of the Armory, clear as a cloudless sky, true as the voice of nature is: "No man sent me here; it was my own prompting and that of my Maker. I acknowledge no master in human form."

And in what a sweet and noble strain he proceeds, addressing his captors, who stand over him: "I think, my friends, you are guilty of a great wrong against God and humanity, and it would be perfectly right for any one to interfere with you so far as to free those you willfully and wickedly hold in bondage."

And, referring to his movement: "It is, in my opinion, the greatest service a man can render to God."

"I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them; that is why I am here; not to gratify any personal animosity, revenge, or vindictive spirit. It is my sympathy with the oppressed and the wronged, that are as good as you, and as precious in the sight of God."

You don’t know your testament when you see it.

"I want you to understand that I respect the rights of the poorest and weakest of colored people, oppressed by the slave power, just as much as I do those of the most wealthy and powerful."

"I wish to say, furthermore, that you had better, all you people at the South, prepare yourselves for a settlement of that question, that must come up for settlement sooner than you are prepared for it. The sooner you are prepared the better. You may dispose of me very easily. I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled,—this negro question, I mean; the end of that is not yet."

I foresee the time when the painter will paint that scene, no longer going to Rome for a subject; the poet will sing it; the historian record it; and, with the Landing of the Pilgrims and the Declaration of Independence, it will be the ornament of some future national gallery, when at least the present form of slavery shall be no more here. We shall then be at liberty to weep for Captain Brown. Then, and not till then, we will take our revenge.