

Review Essay

Transcendental Politics and Reform in Black and White

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Peter Wirzbicki, *Fighting for the Higher Law: Black and White Transcendentalism Against Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 325pp., \$39.95 hardcover.

This study is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship that is aimed at recovering the lost history of the Black experience in America. It opens with a reference to the Northampton (Massachusetts) Association for Education and Industry, an antebellum utopian socialist community. As Wirzbicki notes, in this Association “black abolitionists such as David Ruggles and Sojourner Truth lived and worked side by side with educated and ‘well-to-do in the world’ white men and women” (2). Less well known than Truth, Ruggles was a notable black abolitionist who is mentioned several times by Frederick Douglass in his famous 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. He sheltered Douglass when he arrived in New York City after his escape from slavery. Ruggles also arranged for Douglass’s move to New Bedford where his abolitionist career would begin.

Ruggles later moved to Western Massachusetts and joined the Northampton Association. Members of this group were inspired in their work

by Transcendentalism, which emphasized the unity and equality of the human family. The story of this Association was only recently recovered from the so-called dust bin of history largely due to the determined efforts of a group of local, homegrown historians. They eventually founded the David Ruggles Center for History and Education (<https://davidrugglescenter.org/>), which has worked to restore the history of Black America that has been neglected or, worse yet, deliberately ignored over the years. Indeed, it is largely due to the efforts of this organization that I discovered that the house I grew up in had been David Ruggles's home in the 1840s and that Northampton was well known as a haven for fugitive slaves at that time. The present study is then especially welcome, not only because it helps to recover that lost history, but also because it breaks a good deal of new ground in establishing the key role played by Transcendental ideology and Black Transcendentalists in stimulating antebellum reform, especially antislavery.

Wirzbicki states at the outset that this study "centers abolitionism in the story of American Transcendentalism." Throughout the antebellum period, he argues, the "philosophy of Transcendentalism and the politics of abolitionism [...] were mutually reinforcing," reaching a critical mass during the Civil War (3). A central goal of this study is to show that, throughout the antebellum period, Black Transcendental activists played an important role in creating and shaping New England intellectual life. Throughout the period, there was significant interaction between white and Black thinkers, more than previously noted by scholars. For example, Black intellectual William C. Nell "participated in 'conversations' led by his friend A. Bronson Alcott; the African American doctor and activist John S. Rock debated race and racism with Theodore Parker," and Lewis Hayden "fought alongside white Transcendentalists to free fugitive slaves." During the Civil War, Charlotte Forten, who was strongly influenced by Emerson through his writings and his lectures, developed a Transcendental "Higher Law vision" that informed her role as a teacher and mentor to recently emancipated slaves in South Carolina (4). According to Wirzbicki, this "Higher Law Ethos," which was the common property of both white and Black Transcendentalists, constitutes the movement's "central contribution to the American radical intellectual

tradition" (10). It was key to the abolitionist impulse because it "contained a radical humanism" that led naturally to a "social critique" and a demand for radical reform (11).

Another important intellectual quality that Transcendentalists brought to abolitionism was "a critical style of thought that rejected instrumental logic" in favor of a more intuitive perception of truth. This, in turn, led to a "politics of idealism" that demanded society be judged by the standards of a "higher law" of human conduct, the dictates of which were perceived intuitively. Both Transcendentalists and abolitionists were "outraged that the ideals of the Declaration of Independence" were not upheld in American society. Additionally, because it held that "everyone from the greatest intellectual to the humblest washerwoman was capable of channeling and expressing" such moral truths, "Transcendentalist epistemology [...] encouraged a democratic egalitarian approach to moral problems" (14, 15). The fusion of these intellectual and moral qualities created a synergy that accelerated the impulse for reform that is so characteristic of the antebellum period. The resulting Transcendental abolitionism, Wirzbicki argues, reached a climax in the Civil War during which "Transcendentalists and abolitionists fought to ensure that the Northern war effort remained devoted to a set of high moral and political principles" (21).

The story of Transcendentalism's influence on antebellum politics and reform as presented here is strongly revisionist for several reasons. As the author points out, while the "Transcendentalists occupy a central place" in American intellectual history, their political vision has often been depicted as "obtuse, self-indulgent, and irresponsible" (2). Wirzbicki cites two examples. Stanley Elkins considered the affinity between abolitionists and Transcendentalists, both (in Elkins' words) "men without responsibility," to be "the best evidence for the anti-institutional recklessness and excessive individualism of antebellum reform." Robert Penn Warren "saw abolitionists as classically tragic figures whose admirable courage and righteousness grew 'so distempered by impatience' that they became proponents of violence and intolerance, their Transcendentalist individualism corrosive of the institutions of American life that perhaps could have kept the nation together" (16).

One might add here that many historians in the past actually denied that the Transcendentalists showed any interest in active reform. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., was one. In his influential *The Age of Jackson* (1945), he states that the Transcendentalists “from their book-lined studies or their shady walks in cool Concord woods, [...] found the hullabaloo of party politics unedifying and vulgar.” For Schlesinger, this rejection of direct social engagement was “a failure they were seeking to erect into a virtue.” Of Emerson in particular he says bluntly that “he failed himself and ignored the responsibilities of his own moral position.”¹ Henry Nash Smith followed along these lines, referring to Transcendentalism as “a cult of solitude and contemplation.”² But even back then, there were exceptions. Charles Griffin points out in his 1967 study *The Ferment of Reform, 1830-1860* that “some historians take the opposite position, insisting that New England transcendentalism was largely responsible for the reform impulse” of the antebellum period. Among these is Henry Steele Commager, who argues in his work *The Era of Reform* (1960) that the urge to reform, so characteristic of the period, was the “product of [...] Transcendentalism.”³ Indeed, Commager goes so far as to insist that “Emerson [was] the cow from which they [the reformers] all took their milk,” an observation that several more recent studies, including this one, confirm.⁴ Literary historians have been recounting in detail the story of Transcendental political activism since the 1990s, noting in particular the role that Emerson played in promoting social reform, especially antislavery.⁵

Some scholars, however, continue to argue that Transcendentalism, rather than stimulating active reform, was antithetical to it. In order to make this argument in the face of so much recent research recounting in detail Emerson’s long career as an active reformer, these scholars argue that such activism was exceptional. Thus, John Carlos Rowe, in his study *At Emerson’s Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (1997), holds that “Emersonian transcendentalism and Emerson’s political commitments from 1844 to 1863 are fundamentally at odds with each other” and that “Emersonianism is ill suited to social and political reform.”⁶ Rowe goes on to contend that “pressed by his own personal commitment to the cause of

antislavery, Emerson leaps from philosophical abstractions to specific legal, economic, and political remedies that contradict the 'spiritual progress' he had advocated so passionately in his earlier writings." Rowe insists that when Emerson attempts "to synthesize his Transcendentalism with the practical demands of the new age," he must subordinate his philosophy "to the progressive forces of the new urban capitalism in ways that contradict his own earlier contempt for material wealth and commercialism." Indeed, for Rowe, any attempt to conjoin Transcendentalism and social reform is doomed to failure because "More often than not, Transcendentalism works to rationalize present wrongs rather than bring about actual social change."⁷

Similarly, George Kateb sees Transcendentalism as inimical to social reform. In *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (1995), he describes Emerson's participation in reform movements as a "deviation" from the doctrine of self-reliance, that essential cornerstone of Transcendentalism.⁸ For Kateb, the Transcendental emphasis on self-reliance was antithetical to the goals and methods of social reformers. From this view, reform activism threatens the self-reliant individual with self-fragmentation as one attempts to bridge the gap between the private realm of thought and the public realm of political activity. Furthermore, for Kateb, democracy itself depends upon the preservation of a rugged self-reliance to insure the continued independence and political autonomy of all citizens. He argues that association would cause a diminution, or even loss, of the integrity of the individual.⁹

In this study, Wirzbicki argues the opposite, namely, that Transcendentalists were able to achieve a dynamic balance "between the rough embrace of the world" and "serene self-contemplation." The latter led to a perception of transcendent ideals and values that provided both a basis for reform and the moral energy to fuel it. Most importantly, Wirzbicki supports his argument by citing new evidence in the form of Black Transcendentalists who centered their revolutionary thinking "much earlier and with more consistency than their white colleagues on racism and slavery" (26). He reports that as early as the mid-1830s, activists like Alexander Crummell and Henry Highland Garnet "helped to create a series of black intellectual organizations in New York that organized lectures, created

libraries, and discussed everything from British poetry to the *Amistad* captives” (23). Crummel, described here as “one of the most important black intellectuals of the nineteenth century,” is a central figure (39). Raised among abolitionist activists, he achieved an early but limited education in New Hampshire and Upstate New York. By the age of twenty-five he had already made a name for himself among Black intellectuals in Manhattan. Eventually, he would become a mentor to W.E.B. Du Bois. Drawing from a variety of sources that included “New England Transcendentalism, British Romanticism, German idealistic philosophy, and traditions rooted in the black Atlantic,” Crummell promoted a “Higher Law Ethos that came to dominate American abolitionism” (24).

Contrary to Kateb’s argument that self-reliance was an impediment to reform, Wirzbicki shows how essential it was for Black reformers. He points out that Crummell understood that African Americans, because they lived in a white-dominated culture, “needed some transcendent source of selfhood beyond the world as it existed around them” (25). An empowering sense of selfhood was essential for all Transcendentalists, as Emerson makes clear. His most famous treatment of the subject is his classic essay “Self-Reliance.” There he argues that it is only by developing a strong sense of self that the individual can effectively address the challenges that life brings. For reformers, self-reliance is a necessary predicate for association. Margaret Fuller expressed this idea succinctly when she observed that before you can experience unity you must first be a unit, a self-defined and self-confident individual. Emerson offered a practical example of the power of self-reliance in his 1 August 1844 address on Emancipation in the British West Indies where he celebrated “the rise of the anti-slave.”¹⁰ Crummell included a lengthy quotation from this address in an early lecture on the importance of education for Colored men (25).

Wirzbicki shows that Crummell and other Black thinkers and reformers like Thomas Sidney, William C. Nell, and Charlotte Forten consistently employed this and other core Transcendental concepts in pursuing a social reform agenda. They were “intellectually sophisticated radicals in touch with revolutionary philosophical and political thought” (26). It required a special

effort for Black intellectuals to reach this point. Because the educational resources routinely available to the white population were frequently closed to them, free blacks created intellectual clubs that became venues for "education and self-improvement, sociability, and the development of political consciousness." Most of these combined "lectures, reading rooms, debates, and theatrical performances" (27). Wirzbicki reports that there were at least forty-five such clubs throughout the North. The Adelpic Union in Boston and the Phoenixian Society in New York City were important centers of Black intellectual discourse. The Boston group was closest to Concord and the cultural influence of white Transcendentalists, while the New York group, led by Alexander Crummell and Thomas Sidney, played a pivotal role in the development of Black Transcendental politics (31).

Boston's Adelpic Union promoted cultural development in various ways. Among other things, it sponsored a "lecture series that competed with the most prestigious in the city, attracting famous scholars and activists (both black and white) to speak before integrated audiences" (27). These private clubs were essential for Black educational purposes because, as noted above, African Americans were often excluded from white public facilities. Boston schools, for example, were not integrated until 1855, and white-run lyceums and libraries often did not admit Blacks. It is not surprising, therefore, that most Black abolitionist leaders were at one time members of a Black intellectual club.

The intellectual sources Wirzbicki associates with the evolution of Black Transcendentalism are almost exclusively British and German. He points out that Thomas Sidney, a Romantic idealist who "dreamed of leading a rebellion of Southern slaves, wiping away monstrous injustice with one heroic act of righteousness," was greatly influenced by his reading of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*, which "helped introduce Kantian metaphysics to American audiences" (34). Similarly, Alexander Crummell "was obsessed with Coleridge, quoting [Coleridge] throughout his long life." The same was true for many other Black intellectuals. Frequently, "black thinkers in New York" used Coleridge "to think philosophically about politics" and reform (35). Wirzbicki notes that three early Black reformers,

Crummell, Sidney, and Henry Highland Garnet, were introduced as young men to Coleridge's philosophy at the Oneida School in Upstate New York where they studied for a time under Beriah Green, a professor of "Mental and Moral Philosophy." Green was inspired by Coleridge's *Aides to Reflection* from which he absorbed the idea that the mind functioned through the interplay of two distinct forces, the Understanding and the Reason. Coleridge derived this idea from his reading of Kant, and from him it was passed along to Transcendentalists like Emerson through John Marsh, a New England scholar who wrote an influential introduction to Coleridge's work, and Frederick Henry Hedge, who discussed both Coleridge and Kant in the pages of the *Christian Examiner* (30).

Although not noted in this study, Emerson offers what is probably the most succinct definition of these key concepts as they were understood by Transcendentalists. In a letter to his younger brother Edward in May of 1834 he states "Now that I have used the words, let me ask you to draw the distinction of Milton, Coleridge & the Germans between Reason & Understanding. [...] Reason is the highest faculty of the soul—what we mean often by the soul itself; it never *reasons*, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision." On the other hand, "the Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues, near sighted but strong-sighted, dwelling in the present the expedient the customary." "Reason," Emerson notes, "is potentially perfect in every man—Understanding in different degrees of strength. The thoughts of youth, & 'first thoughts,' are the revelations of Reason. The love of the beautiful & of Goodness as the highest beauty, the belief in the absolute & universal superiority of the Right & the True. But understanding, that wrinkled calculator, the steward of our house to whom is committed the support of our animal life, contradicts evermore these affirmations of Reason & points at Custom & Interest & persuades one man that the declarations of Reason are false & another that they are at least impracticable."¹¹

The implied universality of this formula, the idea that this construct of the mind was common to all people, was especially appealing to Black reformers who saw it as evidence of equality. As Wirzbicki reports, a series

of philosophical texts published in *The Colored American* in 1839 explained that the "constitution of the mind is *universally identical*," and that "the inhabitants of Central Africa' would be just as capable of reasoning as any European" (35 emphasis original). That reasoning power was a combination of traditional ratiocination and intuition that allowed every individual to perceive, and act on, universal truth. Thus, Green described the Reason to his students as a "clear, unerring light" that shines "throughout the Universe." As the author notes, for Green the Reason was nothing less than "a portal to God, a manner in which God's truth was replicated and republished in the individual conscience" (32). It is through the Reason that the universal "Higher Law," humanity's ultimate moral guide, is revealed to all, even the unlettered and unschooled. From this, Green's student reformers developed what Wirzbicki calls "an abolitionized version of the British poet, in which Coleridge's notion of the power of intuitive Reason underlay the antislavery project" (32). Empowered by the authority of this intuitively-perceived Higher Law, Black Transcendental reformers were able to challenge the compromised morality of the established Northern churches, which the author describes as "bastions of white supremacy" (73).

As described here, the influence of Coleridge on Black abolitionists was powerful. It resulted in the formation of what Wirzbicki refers to as the "Abolitionist Romantic Self" (39). Alexander Crummell was a key figure in bringing this about. His major contribution to "black Transcendentalist politics" was his argument for the value of "intuitive non-instrumental forms of reasoning," a style of thinking that he described as "intuition," which "transcended the limited instrumental logic of Anglo-American empiricism," that was then dominant (39). Emerson was making a similar argument at this same time. In "Self-Reliance," he defines a self-reliant person as one who "'knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due'" (qtd 41). In light of this shared concern for personal autonomy and intellectual integrity, it is not surprising that Emerson's essay was "read and referenced by black leaders throughout the antebellum period" and that "abolitionists frequently spoke of 'self-reliance' to describe their political and social goals" (57).

With so much in common intellectually, it is not surprising that white and Black Transcendentalists eventually developed a shared commitment to abolitionism. William C. Nell, a printer, activist, and historian, played a key role in linking Transcendentalism with abolitionism. Nell grew up as a free Negro in Boston. By the early 1840s he led Boston's Adelpic Union which, as noted earlier, on occasion invited prominent Transcendentalists like Theodore Parker and William Henry Channing to lecture. Eventually, Nell formed "long and lasting connections" with these men and others who were major contributors to cause of abolition (55). He was particularly drawn to Emerson, who was the star around which so many other thinkers and reformers revolved. Nell probably first met Emerson through his position in the Town and Country Club. This combination reading room and intellectual club was formed in Boston in 1848. Until being disbanded sometime in the 1850s, the club brought together, in Emerson's words, "Socialists, [...] Abolitionists, [...] and Artists." As Wirzbicki states, the club "was a veritable who's who of Boston radicalism." Its membership included William Lloyd Garrison, Charles Sumner, Theodore Parker, Elizur Wright, Samuel May, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Emerson, and others (98). It was open to African Americans, but there are no records showing that any joined. Nell, who probably could not afford the membership fee, became part of the group, nevertheless, through his position as the club's librarian and general caretaker. He "was drawn to" Emerson in particular through his writings and lectures and no doubt appreciated his activism in the abolition movement, which grew steadily throughout the time of the club's existence. In 1857, Nell, a printer by trade, began selling "lithographic Prints" featuring the images of prominent "Champions of Freedom," one of which included Emerson, Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Gerrit Smith (55).

According to Wirzbicki, several other prominent Black Transcendentalists were influenced by Emerson's writings and lectures as they pursued their abolitionist goals. Among them were Charlotte Forten and Jeremiah Burke Sanderson. The latter was a New Bedford minister who was a friend and associate of Nell. It was, perhaps, through Nell that Sanderson "became

interested in Transcendentalism," and when he began preaching in 1848, "his sermons were laced with quotations from 'Emerson, Carlyle, and Theodore Parker'" (55). Charlotte Forten, who "came from one of the wealthiest and most distinguished black families in the North," met Nell in 1854 when she moved to Salem, Massachusetts from Philadelphia to pursue an education. As often as she could, she attended lectures at the Salem Lyceum, which, the author reports, "fed her a heavy dose of Transcendentalism and abolitionist radicalism." Like so many others, Forten was particularly drawn to Emerson. She read from his works and mentions in her journal attending at least five of his lectures. At one of them, she had an opportunity to discuss politics and abolitionism with Wendell Phillips (59). Throughout the antebellum period, African Americans from varied backgrounds found a common interest in Emersonian Transcendentalism and reform. Emerson's influence reached an apex with the Civil War. A Black correspondent writing for the *Anglo American* in 1862 asserted that anyone who wondered why they were fighting the Civil War need only consult the words of prominent abolitionists and "muse over the philosophy of Emerson." Long before the firing on Fort Sumter, abolition had become, Wirzbicki argues, "Transcendentalized, and vice-versa" (61).

One of the things that brought about the fusion of Black and white abolitionism and Transcendentalism was their mutual antipathy toward the established churches of the day. Both Transcendentalists and abolitionists rebelled against the "mainstream forms of Christianity," which they saw as corrupted by compromises with America's booming capitalism. Transcendental philosophy by its nature encouraged liberation from all traditional forms. It is not surprising, therefore, that both abolitionists and Transcendentalists were prominent attendees at the Chardon Street Convention, an ad hoc gathering in Boston that brought together a remarkably diverse group of reformers. In Emerson's words, the gathering included "madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day-Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and Philosophers'" (qtd 79). In this environment, the established churches were easy targets. Black

political thinkers, especially, were fully aware of the ways in which Christian institutions served to “buttress slavery and racism” (81). Samuel Ringgold Ward, a black pastor to a largely white congregation, condemned the white churches for “‘the contempt they all alike maintain towards the Negro’ and their preferences for quiet harmony over justice” (82). Jeremiah Sanderson, a Black itinerant antislavery speaker, told William C. Nell that his plea to a white pastor that Christian churches should care about the injustice and inhumanity endured by millions of American slaves fell on deaf ears. Formal Christianity, he concluded, “‘has no humanity in it, no Sympathy with the suffering, and oppressed’” (qtd 82).

The reason for this indifference was that the established, formal churches were hand-in-glove with the material establishment that supported them. To challenge the slaveholders was to challenge the formidable “cottonocracy” that included prominent Boston bankers, manufacturers, and merchants. As Wirzbicki points out, “Boston capitalists got rich buying and selling raw cotton as well as by converting it, in their factories, into textiles.” Cotton was, as Wendell Phillips put it, the “‘fibre that bound Massachusetts and Carolina together’” (qtd 105).

Northern laborers also suffered from the business world’s ruthless pursuit of profit. The symbiotic relationship of Northern capitalism to Southern slavery and the simultaneous exploitation of Northern laborers eventually led to an alliance between abolitionists and supporters of the labor reform movement. Black abolitionists saw the connection between slaves and laborers early on. Eventually, much of the white Northern working class did also. As a result, “the phrase ‘Universal Reform’ became a rallying cry that denoted politics that included justice for the slave as well as for the Northern worker” (110). While some Black reformers had reservations about the role of white workers in their cause, most eventually embraced this *de facto* coalition.

William Powell, a Black leader from New Bedford, was one. It was clear to him what the common interest was. As he pointed out at a meeting of “Colored Citizens,” slavery was a threat to whites and Blacks alike. “‘If it is right to enslave black men in *South Carolina*, under the United States

Constitution, then it is right to enslave white laborers in Massachusetts'" (qtd 110, emphasis original). The Southern Lords of the Lash had much in common with the Northern Lords of the Loom. John Rock declared that "'the interest of the laboring classes is mutual'" regardless of color (qtd 111). White laborers agreed. When, bowing to Southern demands, Congress passed the infamous Fugitive Slave Law, the New England Workingmen's Convention issued a strongly worded condemnation calling it a "despotic enactment" (156).

Transcendental abolition took on an international dimension following the outbreak of the European Revolutions of 1848. Wirzbicki indicates that Black Northern reformers saw the struggle for democracy and self-determination in Europe as similar to their own (131). William C. Nell was inspired by the European revolutionaries and their demand for liberty and equality. Black abolitionists were especially drawn to the British working-class movement known as Chartism. The Chartists' protests in London and elsewhere sometimes turned violent as workers became increasingly militant in their demands for political recognition and work-place reforms. Frederick Douglass, who was an advocate as well as an avatar of Black militancy, went so far as to declare himself a Chartist at heart (133).

Perhaps with the European example in mind, it was becoming clear to many Transcendental abolitionists that the reform of American society could, in some instances, result in a physical confrontation with government authorities. It wasn't long before the ferment of unrest that shook the foundations of European governments was mirrored in America. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in September of 1850 precipitated a series of increasingly violent clashes between reformers and government authorities. Not surprisingly, it was Black abolitionists who took the lead in mobilizing resistance to the law. These Transcendentally inspired resisters were outraged that the corruption of Southern slavery had now spread to the North. By allowing Southern slavecatchers to pursue and reclaim their "property" within the borders of the nominally Free States, the law had the effect of nationalizing the institution of slavery in the eyes of many Northerners (156).

Lawmakers like Massachusetts Senator Daniel Webster were complicit in passing this immoral measure. Transcendental reformers, both Black and white, accused him of violating the “Higher Law” in order to preserve a morally flawed Constitution. Wirzbicki indicates that Webster, in turn, blamed Transcendental philosophy for the wide-spread resistance to the law (159). White and Black abolitionists in Boston joined forces to form a Vigilance Committee to protect fugitive slaves. They vowed that the new law would never be enforced in Boston. They were at first successful. Fugitives like William and Ellen Craft and Shadrach Minkins were wrested from the hands of Southern slavecatchers and transported to freedom in England and Canada. The Vigilance Committee’s luck turned, however, with the unfortunate Thomas Simms. In the spring of 1851, Simms was captured in Boston and forcefully returned to bondage. In the words of Frederick Douglass, Thomas Simms was “a living sacrifice to appease the slave god of the American Union” (175).

As Wirzbicki reports, civil disobedience soon became the rule for Transcendental reformers, both Black and white. For them, the dictates of the Higher Law both justified and necessitated their resistance to this immoral law. The Declaration’s assertion that all men are created equal was a universal moral truth. Any man-made law that denied this must be resisted, even if it meant that blood would be shed. Resistance grew. By 1854, the Vigilance Committee had assisted some 230 fugitive slaves (176). Concerned that the law would soon become a dead letter, Southern representatives demanded that Massachusetts and federal authorities take whatever measures were necessary to enforce it. The result was a historic confrontation. When fugitive Anthony Burns was seized in Boston in the spring of 1854, federal, state, and local authorities joined forces to ensure that the law would be obeyed. Members of the Vigilance Committee, Black and white, were determined that Burns would be freed. The result was a violent confrontation at the Court House. Before it was over, a federal marshal was shot and killed, and the would-be rescuers were driven off. Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott was among the last to retreat as bullets flew. Years later, Black abolitionist Lewis Hayden admitted that he had fired the shot that killed the federal marshal (176).

The episode at the Court House was a sign of things to come as the struggle against slavery became increasingly militant throughout the North. Irregular Black militias were formed giving themselves names such as the "Massasoit Guards," "The New Bedford Blues," and the "Liberty Guards." Charles Lenox Remond and Robert Morris had petitioned the Massachusetts legislature unsuccessfully in 1852 to formally recognize Black militias. Despite the lack of legal sanction, Black militias continued to be formed as abolitionists called for a more militant response to the growth of the slave power (178, 182).

Throughout the balance of the decade, New England became more and more associated with antislavery. Defenders of the institution claimed Transcendentalism and other cultural factors were responsible for this growing demand for reform. Wirzbicki cites one Pennsylvania newspaper that blamed New England's common schools where students were taught from Yankee texts that were rife with the "driveling of abolitionism, transcendentalism, spiritualism, puritanism, and dawdling Christianity" (210).

The violence of the 1850s climaxed with John Brown's famous raid on the Federal Arsenal at Harper's Ferry in November 1859. Brown was supported and defended by New England Transcendentalists, both Black and white. For many, his bloody assault on the slave power was a sign that the end of slavery would come not through moral suasion but at the muzzle of a rifle. In April of 1861, the firing on Fort Sumter announced the outbreak of the war that many had, for some time, seen as inevitable.

From the beginning, New England reformers welcomed the war they hoped would become America's "Second Revolution." In order to achieve that goal, it would be necessary to turn the conflict into a war of ideas. Wirzbicki argues here that the Higher Law Ethos that Transcendental abolitionists had embraced for more than a decade dictated what those revolutionary ideas would be. Foremost among them were "emancipation, equality, and democracy" (222). Initially, in the North the war was understood by most as an effort to maintain the Union and to restore the *status ante*, "the Constitution as it is, the Union as it was." But the reformers

saw that Constitution as deeply flawed. Like true revolutionaries, they would not be satisfied with restoring what was. Both Black and white reformers were determined that a constitution that codified slavery could not and would not stand. As Wirzbicki reports, William Powell, a Black leader from New Bedford, declared to a group of colored citizens that legal “technicalities” or “constitutional prohibitions” would not be allowed to prevent true reform (229). Emerson agreed. Though not noted here, early in the war Massachusetts General Benjamin Butler refused to return Fugitive slaves who were fleeing to Union lines in ever-increasing numbers, declaring them contrabands of war. Others agreed. Eventually, on 6 August 1861, a federal policy was instituted that declared fugitive slaves to be “contraband of war.”¹² If their labor had contributed to the Confederacy’s war effort in any way, they were declared free, despite their “owners’ demands for the return of their “property,” as required by Constitutional law. Emerson was elated with this development. In his journal he noted that “all our action now is new & unconstitutional, & necessarily so,” which was “enough to drive a strict constructionist out of his wits.”¹³ Eventually, Wirzbicki states, “the idea of equality—as a legal, political, and spiritual value—came to dominate the Transcendentalist and abolitionist understanding of the war” (245). For these reformers, it was not the Constitution but the Declaration of Independence that would provide the true underpinning for this new America. John S. Rock declared that the Declaration’s promise of equality was the “great charter” of their cause (245).

Coming at the midpoint of the war, Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation provided a great boost to the cause of equality. It not only freed all slaves held in Confederate territory, but it also provided for the enlistment of Blacks. For the first time since the war began, those that would be most affected by its outcome were allowed to fight for the cause in the regular Union army. Wirzbicki indicates that some Northern Blacks had been skeptical at first that the war would actually improve their condition, but when the call went out for Black recruits, both white and Black reformers threw themselves into the effort enthusiastically. Not surprisingly, Massachusetts was in the forefront of the effort. Emerson and others

contributed generously to a fund to raise and equip a Black regiment. Frederick Douglass and Emerson both gave enlistment speeches encouraging African Americans to use this opportunity to disprove the racist meme that Blacks lacked courage and would quail before a white opponent.¹⁴

The first Black regiment to be formed was the Massachusetts 54th. The regiment would go on to distinguish itself by leading the charge in a horrific battle fought at Fort Wagner, South Carolina. Although the attack was ultimately unsuccessful, the regiment's courage, skill, and fortitude under fire were indisputable. The physical battle may have been lost, but a great moral victory was won. The service of Blacks in the Union army helped to change how they were viewed by Northern whites. This change accelerated as the war went on. Almost 200,000 Black volunteers signed up for service in the Union army, swelling its ranks and tipping the scales, finally, toward ultimate victory. Their sacrifices could not be ignored.¹⁵

The end of the war brought the end of slavery, but as Wirzbicki reports, by this time the demand of reformers was not only freedom. As John Rock told his audience at a Colored Convention in 1864, "our brave men [are] fighting for equal opportunities and equal rights" (253). The signs of progress toward this goal were everywhere. On February 1st, 1865, John Rock became the first African American lawyer to be approved to practice before the United States Supreme Court. His sponsor was Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner. Since by law only American citizens were allowed this honor, Rock's approval had the effect of nullifying, at last, the infamous Dred Scott Decision of 1857, which denied that any Negro could be considered a citizen. Rock's approval came the day after the United States House of Representatives passed the 13th Amendment, abolishing slavery forever (256).

Overall, Wirzbicki succeeds in presenting a convincing argument that Transcendentalism was a significant catalyst for active reform in the antebellum period and that Black Transcendental intellectuals played a critical role in the war against slavery by weaponizing Transcendental ideology. One limitation, however, is that he defines Transcendentalism almost exclusively as the product of Kantian philosophy as interpreted by

Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The German and British influence in the formation of Transcendentalism that he presents is well-established in the literature on the subject.¹⁶ There are, however, two other important elements involved in the evolution of New England Transcendentalism that are not accounted for here: Puritanism and Asian philosophy. Both are important in the formation of Transcendental ideology, generally, and its appropriation in the war against slavery in particular.

There was a distinct religious element in Transcendentalism that was derived from New England's Puritan past. In the seventeenth century, Puritan dissenters in England embraced a revolutionary theology that centered spiritual authority in the individual rather than the established church, which was the Church of England. They brought this revolutionary individualism with them when they migrated to the New World. When discussing "An Abolitionist Theology," Wirzbicki correctly observes that Transcendentalists were "mostly known as religious radicals," who attacked "the authority of the clergy," and that, eventually, they became allied with the abolitionists in a struggle "against the so-called Standing Order, the tight nexus of power between the Congregational and Unitarian Churches and the state government," but he offers no accounting of the source of this religious radicalism (72, 76). It is worth noting that this rebelliousness derived, in part, from a religious radicalism that flowed directly from Puritans, to Congregationalists, to Unitarians, and, finally, to Transcendentalists. This history of revolutionary theology contributed significantly to the appropriation of Transcendentalism to the purposes of reform, which is central to Wirzbicki's argument. As Perry Miller notes, "the most relevant respect in which the Transcendental movement has meaning for the whole sweep of American history [is] [...] the revolutionary threat to the established order contained in the Transcendental premises." It was inevitable that eventually that threat would be aimed most directly at the institution of slavery, and the result for Transcendentalists, notes Miller, was "the channelizing of reforming energies into the antislavery crusade."¹⁷ While Wirzbicki depicts the Unitarians as aligned with the Congregationalists in opposition to the Transcendental reformers, it should be borne in mind that

Unitarianism was a late and liberal offshoot of Congregationalism, which was itself an offshoot of early Puritanism.¹⁸ Most New England Transcendentalists were members of the Unitarian church at some point, and a good number remained there.

In addition to being religious radicals, the early Puritan settlers of New England were high-minded idealists. They were determined that their new civilization would be "as a city upon a hill," a moral exemplum to the rest of the world.¹⁹ Equality would be one of the hallmarks of this ideal society. Theologically speaking, every Puritan, regardless of social standing, had an equal opportunity for saintly salvation. Because of their emphasis on spiritual individualism, their colonial political structure provided an early prototype for democratic equality. The Mayflower pilgrims were self-governing. They elected their leaders and, as one historian reports, they became "symbols of American democracy" for later generations.²⁰ Not surprisingly, their activist descendants, like Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Theodore Parker, and others appropriated this idealism in their crusade against slavery.

Asian philosophy is another important element of New England Transcendentalism not accounted for in this study. Emerson and others developed a strong interest in Indian, Chinese, and Persian literature and thought in the 1840s. The Hindu sacred texts were a major influence. Emerson was especially taken with the classics the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the *Upanishads*. These works emphasize the oneness of life that derives from the universal spirit, the source of all life and all truth. Emerson called this spirit "the Over-Soul," and his poem "Brahma" celebrates its agency.²¹ It provided a strong counterargument to the pervasive racism of the time. Because the Over-Soul embraces all of humanity equally, distinctions based on race become irrelevant. Despite the claims of recent critics like John Carlos Rowe that Emersonian Transcendentalism is "ill suited to social and political reform," the political opponents of abolition at the time saw Transcendentalism as a primary adversary. For some, it was the Puritan and Asian influences in Transcendental ideology that were largely responsible for abolitionist radicalism as the following example shows.

When the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on 1 January 1863, Emerson celebrated the historic event by reading a poem that was written for the occasion to a large, racially mixed audience at Boston's Music Hall. The "Boston Hymn" related the revolutionary spirit of the early Puritans directly to the current struggle against slavery. Just twelve days later, Samuel "Sunset" Cox, a Representative from Ohio, unleashed a bitter attack on New England Transcendentalists in an address to a large gathering of the Democratic Union Association held in New York City. The address was titled "Puritanism in Politics."²² At the time, Cox was the leading conservative Democrat in Congress.²³ The focus of his address was on slavery, the threat of racial equality, and New England's opposition to the one and solid commitment to the other. Cox identified Puritanism and Asian philosophy as the primary driving forces behind New England's radical demand for racial equality and universal human rights. It was not the Puritanism of the past, but what Cox and other conservative Democrats at the time saw as its current and equally pernicious incarnation, Transcendentalism. As Wirzbicki points out in his study, virtually all Transcendentalists were, sooner or later, antislavery. Southern critics saw them in exactly that light. As Jay B. Hubbell notes, "Unitarianism, Universalism, and Transcendentalism were in the Southern view usually bound up with Abolition and all the other New England isms which seemed to threaten Southern society."²⁴ Northern conservatives also saw these as threatening because, like the Southerners, they were staunch defenders of white supremacy.

In his address, Cox identified Ralph Waldo Emerson and his radical followers, "the lesser spawn of Transcendentalism" as he calls them, as the ideological architects of the current seismic shift in the foundation of American democracy.²⁵ According to Cox, "Abolition is [...] the cause of the strife" that America was now caught up in, and "Abolition is the offspring of Puritanism" (5-6). "Until Abolition arose, the Union was never seriously menaced," he declared, and "the Constitution was never endangered. Puritanism introduced the moral elements involved in slavery into politics, and thereby threw the church into the arena." Cox made it clear throughout that the current generation of Transcendental reformers are the direct

descendants of the Puritan moralists who imposed their iron will on the early settlers of New England. "Applying the old doctrines of Puritanism to our established order," he asserted, they "began, on moral grounds, to undermine the structure of our civil society."²⁶

Cox then identified more specifically the roots of the liberal ideology that was working such mischief in the nation. "The source of this egotistic and arrogant philosophy," he asserted, "is not from the Gospel. It is not even a bad exaggeration of the old Puritanism, for that had many harsh and rigid virtues. It comes from that coterie known around Boston as Transcendentalism. Its first organ was the devil. [...] Its most clever exponent was Emerson."²⁷ It has its priests, high and low, [...] [from] the great [William Ellery] Channing, [...] to the little [William Henry] Channing, who foists himself into the Senate room at Washington of Sundays, to preach that Abolition hate and retail such slander against the Democracy as the powers at Washington seem most to relish."²⁸

Cox then asked rhetorically, "But what is this Transcendentalism?" In answering, he ignored the German and British sources and instead chose to emphasize its Asian element from which Emerson derived his idea of the all-encompassing divine Over-Soul. It was this element in Transcendentalism more than any other that informed the ideal of universal human equality that, in turn, lent moral support to measures like the Emancipation Proclamation. According to Cox, this pernicious spiritual concept was common to both systems. "All the poetic prose and prosaic poetry of Emerson; all the infidelity of Parker; all the sentimentalism of [Wendell] Phillips," Cox observed, "come from the Dialogues of Kreesna and Arjoon, called Bhagvat-Geeta, [...]. This philosophy cannot be called Pantheism," he noted, "for that absorbs nature and man in God. It is not Materialism for that absorbs man and God in nature. But it is the absorption of God and nature in man, and that man, the Brahmin or the Puritan!—believes in nothing but the soul. The soul of man is God and nature. No matter, *no color*, nothing but the soul in man; he is all; it is all." For Cox, it was this toxic mix of seventeenth-century Puritanism and ancient Hindu philosophy that made Transcendentalism such a threat to the standing social order.²⁹

According to Cox, it was this perverse belief in a universal, colorless soul and Transcendental oneness that led these dreamers to embrace the bizarre and noxious notion of racial equality.³⁰ “Do you wonder, therefore,” he asked, “that since [Emerson] makes the negro a part of himself, that he holds him to be his equal?”³¹ [...] Do you wonder at the imperturbable impudence and self-sufficiency of the Puritan thus indoctrinated?”³² It was just such idealistic, moonshiny delusions as these, Cox believed, that led directly to such disruptive and divisive foolishness as the recent Emancipation Proclamation and the radical push for equal rights.³³

Another subject treated in this study that deserves reconsideration is Emerson’s view of race, equality, and reform. While it was obvious to contemporary critics like Cox that Emerson believed in and fought for racial equality, Wirzbicki’s take on the matter is somewhat conflicted. On the one hand, he is very positive. We are told, for example, that Theodore Parker and Emerson were key figures in the alliance of Transcendentalists and abolitionists (19); that Emerson and Black reformers like Alexander Crummell had a “shared idealism” (25); that William C. Nell referred to Emerson as one of the ““ever-to-be-honored friends of equal rights”” (qtd 54); that Emerson’s classic essay “Self-Reliance” was read and referenced by Black leaders throughout the antebellum period (57); that Black reformers like Charlotte Forten were “particularly drawn to Emerson” (59); that Frederick Douglass, like other Black leaders, was “an avid reader of Emerson” (60-61); that Emerson’s notion of the Over-Soul “encouraged an implicit egalitarianism” (78); that when the Town and Country Club was considering standards for membership, Emerson insisted that ““with regard to color [...] there should be no exclusion,”” and ““if any distinction be made, let it be in the colored man’s favor”” (qtd 98); that by the end of the 1840s Emerson “was a regular at antislavery rallies,” appearing along with Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and others (95); that by 1850 Emerson had “gained the confidence of most radical abolitionists” (158); that on the eve of the Civil War Emerson “stared down an angry mob who had invaded his speech before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society” where he insisted the North should make no concessions to the slaveholder in order to keep the

Union whole (226); that he "befriended Harriet Tubman," who stayed at his house and was "another model for violent resistance that Emerson embraced" (193); and that near the end of his long career he gave a talk to an audience of Black students at Howard University, the main theme of which was the "universality of human dignity and intellectual creativity" (258).

On the other hand, however, we are told that Emerson was a rather timid reformer and that witnessing the street demonstrations by the Chartists in England and the revolutionaries in France in 1848 "made the cerebral Transcendentalist a bit nervous"; that he reacted by developing an "unfortunate admiration" for "the slow liberal change of the British system" (126); that after "receiving a warm embrace from the English aristocracy" during his trip, he turned into "a bit of an anglophile" (101); that he had to be "pulled out of his lethargy" to come to the defense of John Brown in 1859 (216); that he "embraced a 'kind of scientific racism' that 'tied antislavery to a celebration of whiteness'" (197); that he "never embraced black equality" (200-201); and that he celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation by reading his poem "Boston Hymn" to the (presumably white) "Boston elite" from the "safe confines of Tremont Temple" (220). Most of these statements are the result of a lack of information, or simply misinformation. Regarding the last, for example, as noted earlier, Emerson actually read his "Boston Hymn" at the Music Hall to an audience that included both Black and white Bostonians.³⁴

Regarding Emerson's reaction to the Chartists and the French revolutionaries, it was just the opposite of what Wirzbicki states. While Emerson was in England, the Chartists were agitating for greater working-class representation in government. There were demonstrations in London almost every day. On 7 March 1848, Emerson attended a meeting of the Chartists and was positively impressed by what he saw and heard. He wrote to his wife Lidian that the meeting "was crowded, and the people very much in earnest." Among the featured speakers was Ernest Jones. At this time, Jones was associated with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. He openly supported their social reform agenda. Like Emerson, Jones appreciated the importance of "physical force" in the pursuit of reform.³⁵ In his addresses, he

routinely attacked aristocratic privilege and the oppression of the working class.³⁶

Eventually, Emerson had the opportunity to speak with some of the Chartist leaders. On the night before a huge demonstration in London (10 April 1848), he met Thomas Cooper, a Chartist with some reputation as a workingman's poet.³⁷ Cooper had recently spent two years in prison because of his involvement in radical protests. He and Emerson met at a gathering at the home of one of Emerson's English friends. The following day they walked to London together. Cooper later remarked that Emerson was "the only American in whose company I ever felt real enjoyment" and that Emerson "seemed eager to learn all he could, and willing to communicate all he could."³⁸

Emerson's experience in Paris, where violent demonstrations were an almost daily occurrence, also had a positive effect. In a long letter to his wife, he described the excitement of the place, where he witnessed "streets full of bayonets, and the furious driving of the horses dragging cannon towards the National Assembly." He noted that he found "the clubs the most interesting—the men are in terrible earnest. The fire & fury of the people, when they are interrupted or thwarted, are inconceivable to New England. [...] and every body suppose[d] to have a pistol in his pocket." Emerson was also impressed by "the deep sincerity of the speakers who are agitating social not political questions, and who are studying how to secure a fair share of bread to every man, and to get the God's justice done through the land."³⁹

These experiences intensified Emerson's appreciation of the plight of English laborers and his antipathy toward the aristocrats. They also deepened his admiration of the earnestness of the French revolutionaries. In his journal he noted, "I have been exaggerating the English merits all winter & disparaging the French. Now I am correcting my judgment of both, & the French have risen very fast."⁴⁰ Emerson also began to perceive a sharp cultural and social contrast between democratic America and aristocratic England. He noted in his journal that "it is not fit to tell Englishmen that America is like England. [...] England is the Paradise of the first class; it is essentially aristocratic. In England, every man you meet is some man's son; in America, he may be some man's father."⁴¹

This growing awareness of British class consciousness further enhanced Emerson's sympathy for the Chartists. It also made him increasingly critical of the British literary class for their failure to support the Chartists. Earlier, in 1839, Thomas Carlyle had published a lengthy essay on "Chartism," a copy of which he sent to Emerson. Wirzbicki refers to it as "one of the first serious critiques of capitalism that most New England intellectuals had ever read" (116). If that is so, it is a curious critique, indeed, at least from a working-class point of view. In it, Carlyle shows little sympathy for the working poor, recommending education for some and emigration for others. In Carlyle's view, surplus British laborers could be a valuable export commodity. "The stupid black African man brings money in the market," he observed, "the much stupider four-footed horse brings money:—it is we that have not yet learned the art of managing our white European man!"⁴² Emerson responded to this harsh commentary with telling restraint. He advised Carlyle that "We seemed to have a right to an answer less concise to a question so grave & humane."⁴³

Emerson also became more critical of the aristocrats who were uncaring toward the poor and oppressed. In his lecture "Natural Aristocracy," composed primarily while he was in Manchester, he maintained that "the upper class should be distinguished by merit; any class not so distinguished ceases in fact to be the upper." The privileged élite have an obligation to serve others who are less fortunate. If these "perfumed gentlemen" fail to do so, Emerson asserted, "and instead go about to set ill examples and corrupt them, who shall blame them if they shoot him in the back or burn his barns, or insult his children. [...] Not I."⁴⁴

Emerson never forgot the vivid contrast between rich and poor that he witnessed in England in the 1840s. When the *Atlantic Monthly* published its first issue in 1857, it included a poem by Emerson titled simply "The Chartist's Complaint." It was a piece that he had first drafted during his stay in England.⁴⁵ In the poem, Emerson described the painful class divide in Great Britain where privileged aristocrats enjoy sunny comfort in a world "where roses grow," while workingmen toil in a world that is "chill and wet, unlighted, mean."

As for Wirzbicki's allusion to Emerson's "lethargy" regarding John Brown, both he and Thoreau were outspoken in defending Brown at a time when it was unpopular, and even dangerous, to do so. Brown lectured in Concord in May of 1859 in order to raise money for his campaign. Emerson, who had him as a guest twice, was supportive of the cause. He was collecting money for Brown as late as 11 October 1859, just 8 days before his attack on the Harper's Ferry arsenal.⁴⁶ After the failed attack, on 26 October Emerson presided over a meeting at his house regarding the growing crisis. It included Franklin Sanborn, one of Brown's "Secret Six" supporters, Ellery Channing, Alcott, and possibly Thoreau. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the situation and what could be done. Shortly after this, Emerson defended Brown on multiple occasions in public addresses that brought expressions of outrage from Boston conservatives. He also raised money for Brown's defense and for the support of his family. After Brown's execution, his two daughters, Anne and Sarah, lived with the Emersons in Concord while attending Sanborn's school.⁴⁷ It is difficult to see any "lethargy" in all this.

Wirzbicki's criticism of Emerson as a racist, the most serious charge of all, is in keeping with certain earlier studies. Lewis Simpson, for example, asserts that Emerson "was fundamentally a white supremacist and never free from a degree of Negrophobia."⁴⁸ Cornel West describes Emerson as "a racist in the American grain" whose "notion of human personality is, in part, dependent on and derived from his view of the races."⁴⁹ Anita Haya Patterson maintains that Emerson's writings on "democratic values" show a "consistent pattern of contradiction" that is "expressed precisely by means of [his] recourse to racist language and values."⁵⁰ Among the most recent and harshest of all Emerson's critics on this subject is Nell Painter, who describes Emerson as "the philosopher king of white race theory" in her *History of White People*.⁵¹ What all of these critics have in common is a tendency to focus on fragmentary journal comments and to generalize from them. Wirzbicki, for example, relies primarily on the Library of America's *Selections* from Emerson's Journals and Works rather than the authoritative sixteen-volume *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* and the ten-volume *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, the definitive scholarly editions

published by Harvard University Press. These critics also, for the most part, ignore Emerson's long and active career in the antislavery movement. For earlier critics like Simpson and West, this omission can be accounted for, in part at least, by the fact that the historical record on these matters was, until the 1990s, incomplete. The publication of the *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* led to a renaissance of Emerson scholarship and a reassessment of his thinking in many areas, including race. It also helped in the re-discovery of his long career in the antislavery movement. This, in turn, led to the publication, for the first time, of a collected edition of *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*.⁵² Unfortunately, some scholars have failed to take into account these new materials. In the case of Painter, who is cited as a source by Wirzbicki, this has led to a number of misinterpretations and even factual inaccuracies.⁵³

While Wirzbicki claims here that Emerson embraced a "kind of scientific racism" that "tied antislavery to a celebration of whiteness" (197), his journals in the comprehensive Harvard edition tell a different story. They show that Emerson was conversant with the various "scientific" theories of race current at the time. In addition to Chambers' *Vestiges of Creation* (1844), he read Robert Knox's *Races of Men* (1850) and several other works on the topic. In his work, Knox insists that "human character, individual and national, is traceable solely to the nature of that race to which the individual or nation belongs." For Knox, "race is everything."⁵⁴ However, unlike Knox and the others, Emerson saw the classifications of race as "mutable" rather than fixed. As one scholar notes, he believed that all "races" were changing and evolving in a process of amelioration that depended on "racial assimilation and amalgamation."⁵⁵ This is in keeping with Emerson's broader belief in nature's "flowing law" whereby all forms are in a constant state of change.⁵⁶ Thus, he observed as early as 1846 that "Nature loves to cross her stocks. A pure blood, Bramin on Bramin, marrying in & in, soon becomes puny & wears out. Some strong Cain son, some black blood must renew & refresh the paler veins of Seth."⁵⁷ This intermixing, Emerson believed, was ongoing through the eons of human evolution. The concept is reflected in his assertion in "Self-Reliance" (1841) that "All men have my

blood, and I have all men's."⁵⁸ As David Robinson points out, this belief, in turn, "helped to bolster his antislavery commitment," which was "grounded in a larger conception of the evolution of human society through an expanding egalitarianism and inclusiveness."⁵⁹

This idea is apparent in his 1844 antislavery address on "The Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies." In this address, he celebrated "the arrival in the world of such men as Toussaint, and the Haytian heroes, [...] [and] the leaders of their race in Barbadoes and Jamaica." These self-reliant, militant Black revolutionaries won their freedom through their own determination, courage, and strength. For Emerson, they represent the future of the Negro race. "The anti-slavery of the whole world," he insists, "is dust in the balance before this,—is a poor squeamishness and nervousness: the might and the right are here: here is the anti-slave: here is man: and if you have man, black or white is an insignificance."⁶⁰

Emerson's journals show that in the 1850s he was revisiting the question of race. As Wirzbicki notes, the scientific community at this time was, once again, speculating on the origins and characteristics of various racial groups (197). (The number of presumed "races" varied.) All of these theories depicted the Anglo-Saxon Caucasian as the most advanced race, while the Negro was consistently deemed inferior. One of the most prominent voices in this debate was that of Louis Agassiz, a professor of natural history at Harvard and a longtime friend of the Emerson family. Agassiz believed that humankind had originated as separate and distinct types. Among these "types," Caucasians were deemed superior and Negroes vastly inferior. In 1854, he published an essay to that effect in a volume titled *Types of Mankind*, edited by John C. Nott and George R. Glidden. The former is described by Carolyn Karcher as "the most racist among the pioneers of American ethnology."⁶¹

In addition to Agassiz, several other members of Emerson's social circle held distinctly racist beliefs. Theodore Parker, whose thinking on race Wirzbicki often attributes to Emerson, believed that there was "no doubt [that] the African race is greatly inferior to the Caucasian in general intellectual power, and also in that instinct for liberty which is so strong in

the Teutonic family."⁶² Obviously, Emerson could not help but be affected in some way by these opinions and the "science" upon which they were based. His journals at this time reveal comments of the type that some critics have seized upon in casting him as a racist. In 1853, for example, he records the following: "the brute instinct rallies & centres in the black man. He is created on a lower plane than the white, & eats men & kidnaps & tortures, if he can. The Negro is imitative, secondary, in short, reactionary merely in his successes, & there is no origination with him in mental & moral sphere."⁶³

While statements such as these would appear to confirm that Emerson was a racist, it should be borne in mind that these are not his conclusions but reflective of the scientific discussion of race that was taking place around him at the time. Emerson was a dialectical thinker. He attempted to see not only both sides but all sides of an issue. His journals (in the Harvard edition) show that these comments are elements of an extended thought process and not a final product. Emerson, in fact, heads the statement quoted above with the designation "*The sad side of the Negro question.*" In a later journal entry, he observes on the "Affirmative" side that barbarism evolved not from race but from environment. Thus, "Negro & Negro holder are of one class," he insists, and in their present situation "they are mutually destructive" due to the pernicious influence of slavery.⁶⁴

Ultimately, despite the prevalence of the "scientific" findings of his day, Emerson based his view of race on intuitive morality. Like slavery itself, he found theories of deterministic racial inferiority simply inconsistent "with the principles on which the world is built," and he rejected all such theories outright.⁶⁵ For Emerson, moral intuitions, which Wirzbicki correctly identifies as the keystone of Transcendental reform, told him that racial inequality was neither the law of God nor the law of nature. Thus, he considered the Supreme Court's infamous Dred Scott decision (1857), which held that "The black man has no rights which the white man is required to respect," to be a "blasphemy" that "does not honor the moral perceptions of the people."⁶⁶

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Emerson became a national spokesperson for emancipation and the rights of the Freedmen. In the fall of 1862, he called for full and equal rights for African Americans in his lecture

“Perpetual Forces,” which he delivered more than fifteen times. The lecture was a model of Transcendental idealism deployed in the service of social and political reform. In his address, Emerson developed the idea that “moral forces” were at work in the war. These forces were moving the country toward establishing a society where freedom and equal rights were guaranteed to all. This was the dictate of the “Higher Law” that must be obeyed if justice is to be served. “The man must bend to the law,” Emerson declared.⁶⁷

At the conclusion of his lecture, Emerson looked to post-war America as he raised the question, “How then to reconstruct?” His advice was to avoid repeating the error of the Founders. This meant that you must “Leave slavery out. Since nothing satisfies men but justice, let us have that.” In addition to universal freedom, Emerson, also took the decidedly radical step of calling for equal voting rights, regardless of race. “Let us stifle our prejudices against commonsense and humanity and agree that every man shall have what he honestly earns, and, if he is a sane and innocent man, have an equal vote in the state, and a fair chance in society.” “This time,” he demanded, there will be “no compromise, no concealments, no crimes.”⁶⁸

Not every Northerner was willing to take such a radical step. Lincoln himself had not yet articulated the notion of total emancipation. And Negro suffrage would never receive more than a limited and highly qualified endorsement from him.⁶⁹ Following Emerson’s impassioned address, a conservative Democratic paper in Albany, New York, the *Argus*, described his lecture as “a re-hash of his Abolition sophistry” and pointed out, “When he argued in favor of forcible emancipation, a few old ladies and gentlemen applauded; but when he insisted that the Negro should have ‘an equal chance with the white man,’ even they were indignantly silent.”⁷⁰ Despite such resistance, Emerson was convinced that these reforms would come and that African Americans would eventually assume their rightful place in American society. In his lecture “Books,” which was delivered in Boston on 25 December 1864, he declared,

There is much in the calamities we have suffered which is
disinfecting [...]. We have grown internally—have begun to

Len Gougeon, "Transcendental Politics and Reform in Black and White"

feel the strength of our strength. While European genius is symbolized by some majestic Corinne crowned in the capitol at Rome, American genius finds its true type—if I dare tell you—in the poor negro soldier lying in the trenches by the Potomac, with his spelling book in one hand and his musket in the other.⁷¹

Finally, in one of his last public lectures, "The Fortune of the Republic" (1878), Emerson summarized his Transcendental vision of a new America where all people, regardless of race, would enjoy freedom, equal rights, and equal opportunity. "The genius of the country has marked out our true policy," he notes, "opportunity. Opportunity of civil rights, of education, of personal power, and not less of wealth; doors wide open. If I could have it,—free trade with all the world without toll or custom-houses, invitation as we now make every nation, to every race and skin, white men, red men, yellow men, black men; hospitality of fair field and equal laws to all."⁷²

Putting aside the issues noted above, Wirzbicki succeeds admirably in making a compelling argument for his primary thesis: that Transcendentalism was a major catalyst for reform in the antebellum period and that Black Transcendentalists played an important role in deploying Transcendental ideology in the crusade against slavery and in the pursuit of equal rights. His recovery of a previously "lost history" of important Black intellectual contributions to Transcendental reform is a major achievement. The primary sources that he has uncovered in support of his argument will provide a solid grounding for other studies that will undoubtedly build on his work. Stylistically, the study is well-written. The argument is clearly presented, well supported, and free of the kind of jargon that all too often is made to substitute for substance in scholarly works. This is a book that every serious student of the antebellum period will welcome.

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Notes

¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, *The Age of Jackson* (New York: Little, Brown, 1945), 382, 385.

² Henry Nash Smith, "Emerson's Crisis of Vocation," in *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Milton Konvitz and Stephen Whicher (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 64.

³ Charles Griffin, *The Ferment of Reform* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), 22.

⁴ Henry Steele Commager, *The Era of Reform* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1960), 7.

⁵ See, for example, Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery and Reform* (1990), David M. Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life* (1993), Albert von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns* (1998), David Reynolds, *John Brown Abolitionist* (2005), Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord* (2006), Barbara Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (2007), Philip Gura, *American Transcendentalism, A History* (2008), Neal Dolan, *Emerson's Liberalism* (2009), *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, Sandra Petrulionis, and Laura Dassow-Walls (2010), and *Emerson in Context* (2013), ed. Wesley Mott, to name but a few.

⁶ John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997), 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸ George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (London: Sage, 1995), 178.

⁹ Other critics have reached the opposite conclusion regarding the dictates of self-reliance. David Robinson asserts that "the internal logic of Emerson's program of self-culture inevitably dictated social justice as a means of willed enactment of the ideal." He goes on to note "that logic was sharpened by the building movement of political dissent in the 1840s. By 1841, a political response was emerging in Emerson's work, which became an important ethical concern" (*Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Works*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1993, 40). Wesley Mott also points out that for

Emerson, "the virtuous individual is not self-seeking but selfless, acting according to principle" and that the "responsibility of self-reliance [...] led him inexorably to speak out on matters of social injustice, especially slavery." Mott's conclusion is that "For Emerson [...] genuine individualism was not narcissism, monomania, or isolation. Indeed, it was the *answer* to these diseases of the self as well as the remedy for the 'existing evils' of institutional social life" ("The Age of the First Person Singular": Emerson and Individualism," in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 75, 77-78, 91).

¹⁰ Len Gougeon, "Militant Abolitionism: Douglass, Emerson, and the Rise of the Anti-Slave," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No. 4 (December 2012), 622-57.

¹¹ *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 10 Vols. ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939, 1990-1995), 1:412-13 [Hereafter *L*].

¹² Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 341.

¹³ *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 16 Vols., ed. William H. Gilman, Ralph Orth, A.W. Plumstead, et al (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960-1982), 15:301. [Hereafter *JMN*]

¹⁴ Gougeon, "Militant Abolitionism," 656.

¹⁵ James McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 159.

¹⁶ See, for example, Paul Boller, *American Transcendentalism: 1830-1860: An Intellectual Inquiry* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974), 175-76; Philip Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 53-56; Barbara Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 25-26.

¹⁷ Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists, An Anthology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 12-13.

¹⁸ David Walker Howe notes that "Transcendentalism was descended from Unitarianism" (*The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy*

(Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 10. In another work, Howe states that “Except for James Marsh [...] all the Transcendentalists were either Unitarians or ex-Unitarians,” [*What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 619]. Lawrence Buell draws a direct line of descent from Puritans to Transcendentalists: “Transcendentalism,” he asserts, is basically “a re-energized expression of Puritan spirit,” [“The Literary Significance of the Unitarian Movement,” *American Unitarianism, 1805-1865*, ed. Conrad Edick Wright (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989)], 169. On the historical progression from Puritanism, to Congregationalism, to Unitarianism and Transcendentalism see also David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), and “‘A Religious Demonstration’: The Theological Emergence of New England Transcendentalism,” *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts* (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 2011); Dean Grodzins, “Unitarianism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, as well as Gura, *op cit.*, Packer, *op cit.*, and Frank Shuffleton, “Puritanism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, Sandra Petruionis, and Laura Dassow-Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Boller, *op cit.*, 172-80; Gura, *op cit.*, 261; Packer, *op cit.*, 35-36, and Shuffleton, *op cit.*, *passim*.

²⁰ John G. Turner, *They Knew They Were Pilgrims: Plymouth Colony and the Contest for American Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 363.

²¹ Boller, *op cit.*, 59. Packer, *op cit.*, 120. For Emerson and Hinduism see Alan Hodder’s authoritative “Asia in Emerson and Emerson in Asia,” in *Mr. Emerson’s Revolution*, ed. Jean McClure Mudge (Cambridge, England: Open Book Publishers, 2015), and “Asian Influences” in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, Steven Adisasmith-Smith, “Transcendental Brahmin: Emerson’s ‘Hindu’ Sentiments,” in *Emerson for the Twenty-First Century: Global Perspectives on an American Icon*, ed. Barry Tharaud (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press,

2010). For the Eastern religious influence in American Transcendentalism, see Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Frederic Ives Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), and Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963). Emerson's poem "Brahma" can be found in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 10 Vols. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, Joseph Slater, Douglas Emory Wilson, Ronald Bosco, Joel Myerson, Barbara Packer, Albert von Frank, et al (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971-2013), 9:363 [Hereafter *CW*].

²² Cox, Samuel S. "Puritanism in Politics," *Speech of Hon. S.S. Cox, of Ohio, Democratic Union Association, January 13, 1863* (New York: Van Evrie, Horton & Co., 1863).

²³ David Lindsey, "Sunset" Cox, *Irrepressible Democrat* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), 49.

²⁴ "Literary Nationalism in the Old South," in *American Studies in Honor of William Kenneth Boyd*, ed. David Kelly Jackson (1940; Rpt Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1980), 192.

²⁵ Cox refers to Emerson by name no fewer than eight times in his address.

²⁶ Cox, *op cit.*, 6.

²⁷ Michael Bernath indicates that Emerson was also seen as a major threat by Southerners. He quotes a writer from the *Southern Literary Messenger* who argued that Emerson should be placed in "perpetual confinement with plenty of pens, ink and paper. Burn his writings as fast as they come from his table and bury the writer quietly in the back yard of the prison as soon as he is dead." Emerson, he contended, "is a moral nuisance. He ought to be abated by act of Congress, and his works suppressed" (*SLM*, April 1861), qtd *Confederate Minds: The Struggle for Intellectual Independence in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 65.

²⁸ Cox, *op cit.*, 11.

²⁹ Ibid., emphasis original. Cox's analysis of the influence of Asian works such as the *Bhagavad Gita* on American Transcendentalism is essentially correct. See Hodder, "Asia in Emerson and Emerson in Asia."

³⁰ This idea is reflected in Emerson's journal at the time. In October 1864, he met with George Stearns, Wendell Phillips, and others to discuss the politics of reconstruction. On this topic Emerson insisted on the need for "absolute Emancipation,—establishing the fact that the United States henceforward knows no color, no race, in its law, but legislates for all alike,—one law for all men" (*JMN* 15:445).

³¹ Wirzbicki notes that in February of 1864 Cox "took to the house floor to denounce the 'new system, called by the transcendental abolitionists,' *Miscegenation*.'" (249).

³² Cox, *op cit*, 11.

³³ Ibid., 12. Cox was a consistent opponent of emancipation. His congressional colleague from Kentucky, John Jordan Crittenden, observed that Cox "opposed steadily that abolition policy which sought to convert this holy war for the defence of the government into a mere anti-slavery party war." When the 13th Amendment was eventually voted on and passed in the House of Representatives in January of 1865, Cox voted against it because he saw it as "an obstacle to peace" [William van Zandt Cox and Milton Harlow Northrup, *Life of Samuel Sullivan Cox* (Syracuse, NY: M.H. Northrup, Publisher, 1899), 90, 91].

³⁴ Thomas H. O'Connor, *Civil War Boston: Home Front and Battlefield* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997), 127.

³⁵ For Emerson on the use of physical force, see Gougeon, "Militant Abolitionism."

³⁶ Daniel Koch, *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Europe: Class, Race and Revolution in the Making of an American Thinker* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 127, 96; Philip Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc. 1981), 71-72.

³⁷ Robert Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 451; Koch, *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Europe*, 130.

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³⁸ Thomas Cooper. *The Life of Thomas Cooper, Written by Himself* (London: Hodden and Stroughton, 1879), 312.

³⁹ *L* 4: 73-74.

⁴⁰ *JMN* 10:327.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10:329.

⁴² Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism, Second Edition* (London: James Fraser, Regent Street, 1840), 108.

⁴³ *Emerson-Clough Letters*. ed., Howard Lowry and Ralph Rusk (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1968 [1934]), 266.

⁴⁴ Qtd Koch, *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Europe*, 151, 154.

⁴⁵ M.A. De Wolfe Howe. *The Atlantic Monthly and its Makers* (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1909), 24. The poem can be found in *CW* 9:429. The first draft can be found in *JMN* 10:49.

⁴⁶ Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero*, 238.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁴⁸ Simpson, *Mind and the American Civil War: A Meditation on Lost Causes* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 53.

⁴⁹ *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 28.

⁵⁰ *From Emerson to King: Democracy, Race, and the Politics of Protest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

⁵¹ Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 151.

⁵² *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995. [Hereafter *AW*]).

⁵³ For example, despite his numerous antislavery addresses praising, defending, and encouraging them, Painter contends that "Emerson had little to say about black people" (185). She also claims that Emerson never advocated suffrage "for either white women or black people of any sex" (185) while, in fact, the public record shows that he did both. In the post-war years, following his long antislavery career, Emerson continued to lend his authority to liberal causes, including racial integration. In his address at Harvard in July 1867, appropriately titled "Progress of Culture,"

he celebrated the “fusion of races and religions” in America. He also supported woman’s suffrage and applauded “The new claim of woman to a political *status*.” He saw this development as “an honorable testimony to the civilization which has given her a civil *status* new in history” (*The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. 12 Vols. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co. 1903-1904), 8:108, 109). [Hereafter *W*] For Emerson, equality was not bounded by race or gender. [See, Len Gougeon, “Emerson and the Woman Question: The Evolution of His Thought,” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 4 (December 1998), 570-92].

⁵⁴ Knox, *Races of Men: A Fragment* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1850), 7.

⁵⁵ Ian Finseth, “Evolution, Cosmopolitanism, and Emerson’s Antislavery Politics,” *American Literature*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (2005), 731.

⁵⁶ Christopher Windolph, *Emerson’s Nonlinear Nature* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 132.

⁵⁷ *JMN* 9:365.

⁵⁸ *CW* 2:41.

⁵⁹ Robinson, ““For Largest Liberty:’ Emerson, Natural Religion, and the Antislavery Crisis,” *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (March 2009), 5.

⁶⁰ *AW*, 31.

⁶¹ Karcher, *Shadow Over the Promised Land: Slavery, Race, and Violence in Melville’s America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 22.

⁶² Qtd Douglas C. Stange, *Patterns of Antislavery among American Unitarians, 1831-1860* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977), 153.

⁶³ *JMN* 13:198.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 14:221.

⁶⁵ *AW*, 86-87.

⁶⁶ *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson: 1843-1871*. 2 Vols., ed. Ronald Bosco and Joel Myerson (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 2:140. [Hereafter *LL*]

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⁶⁷ Ibid., 2:292.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 300.

⁶⁹ Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None: A Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977), 424-25.

⁷⁰ Qtd Emerson, *LL* 2:288.

⁷¹ *Uncollected Lectures by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Clarence Gohdes (New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1932), 41-42.

⁷² *W* 11:541.

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