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## Antislavery Ambivalence: Immediatism, Expediency, Race\*

OF CONSTANT DISTRESS TO STUDENTS OF THE AMERICAN ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT has been its ambivalence, especially its ambivalence over the term, Immediatism. The term had originally defined a means to end British colonial slavery, but it failed to be similarly applicable to emancipation in the American South. Therefore the antislavery movement strained to give new meaning to emancipation "*instant and universal*." Did it not really mean gradual emancipation immediately begun or, perhaps, immediate emancipation gradually achieved? But no less than over immediatism, antislavery crusaders were beset by a fundamental ambivalence in their attitude toward the Negro himself. At the simplest level there was no issue. Slavery was sin; and the crusaders were moved to free the slave by a humanitarianism too genuine to be doubted.<sup>1</sup> Yet, sympathetic as they might appear and believe themselves to be toward the Negro, the abolitionists were, as Leon Litwack and others have shown, in part at least prejudiced against him.<sup>2</sup> And the variety of their response toward him demonstrates the ambivalence so characteristic of the antislavery movement as a whole.

\* This article was read, in a slightly modified form, at the annual meetings of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, April 1965.

<sup>1</sup> The abolitionists were defined and set off from their contemporaries by their opposition to slavery and their concern for the welfare of the slaves, a concern which usually embraced the free Negroes as well. This article is not, however, designed to compare abolitionists as a group with nonabolitionists but rather to explore the variations within the group.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Leon Litwack, "The Abolitionist Dilemma: The Antislavery Movement and the Northern Negro," *New England Quarterly*, XXXIV (1961), 50, and his *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, 1961). See also Larry Gara, Louis Filler, Gerda Lerner, Stanley Elkins for considerations of prejudice. For psychological probing see David Donald, Hazel Wolf, Clifford Griffin, Martin Duberman.

Endemic was the abolitionists' tendency toward abstraction. Frequently they so abstracted both the "Negro" and the "Crusade" that they dealt not with people in a situation but only with intellectualizations in a vacuum. John Thomas has recently noted that William Lloyd Garrison failed "to understand people, black or white" and used them simply "as counters in the grim business of reform."<sup>3</sup> His analysis echoes publisher James Gordon Bennett's conclusion made one hundred years earlier that to Garrison "nothing [was] sacred . . . but the ideal intellect of the negro race."<sup>4</sup>

This preoccupation with the ideal is reflected by the American Anti-Slavery Society, which, at its inception in 1833, resolved that to guarantee education to the Negro was more important than to end "corporeal slavery itself, inasmuch as ignorance enslaves the mind and tends to the ruin of the immortal soul."<sup>5</sup> And, on the very eve of Emancipation, Philadelphia antislavery leader James Miller McKim, although emphasizing the importance of slave rehabilitation and active in prosecuting it, thought that it was "not the place . . . of [the] abolitionists to descend to the details of th[e] work, teaching, and the like; let this," he added, "be attended to by the neophytes and others. We are to continue to be what we always have been," he concluded, "a wheel within a wheel: an original motive power."<sup>6</sup> Thus for thirty years abolitionists, to a greater or lesser extent, heeded the kind of exhortation which Henry C. Wright enunciated so forcefully:

Watch, Sister, & pray that you enter not into temptation. Watch, not . . . for Abolition as an Organization, not even for our millions of crushed & bleeding slaves . . . , but watch for the eternal, immutable Principles of Justice & Right—watch for *Humanity*. . . . We are seeking an object that must command the respect of the world—i.e. *the redemption of man from the dominion of man*. This is Abolition.<sup>7</sup>

The abolitionists did, of course, at least partly understand their own position. They may not have realized just how fully they were depersonalizing the Negroes; but they were quite aware that they had difficulties

<sup>3</sup> John L. Thomas, *The Liberator, William Lloyd Garrison, A Biography* (Boston, 1963), p. 153.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Wendell Phillips Garrison and Francis Jackson Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879: The Story of His Life as Told by His Children* (4 vols.; New York, 1885-89), III, 283.

<sup>5</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention, Assembled at Philadelphia, December 4, 5, and 6, 1833* (New York, 1833), p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> James Miller McKim to Samuel J. May, May 20 [1862], in Samuel J. May Papers, Cornell University.

<sup>7</sup> Henry C. Wright to Maria Weston Chapman, May 2, 1839, in Weston Papers, Antislavery Collection, Boston Public Library.



in matching their protestations to their actions. "We are," said the Connecticut crusader Samuel J. May with a Zolaesque directness, "culpably ignorant of, or shamefully indifferent to the wrongs which are inflicted upon our colored brethren. . . . We are prejudiced against the black, and our prejudices are indurated . . . by the secret, vague consciousness of the wrong we are doing them. Men are apt to dislike those most whom they have injured most."<sup>8</sup> And despite the teaching of the anti-slavery periodical, the *Abolitionist*, that the antislavery enthusiast ought "to banish from his own mind the unworthy feelings which would lead him to regard any human being with contempt merely on account of his color," New York abolitionist Lewis Tappan admitted "that when the subject of acting out our profound principles in treating men irrespective of color is discussed heat is always produced."<sup>9</sup>

This much, then, the abolitionists themselves perceived. But for the student of the antislavery movement it is also imperative to recognize that prejudice and abstraction were but the obvious symptoms of an ambivalence which gives to the antislavery crusade in the expedient and temporizing of its actions and in the complexity of its thought an architecture baroque in the richness of its variations.<sup>10</sup>

It was, for example, relatively simple to accept the humanity of the Negro; but then how did one account for his patently submerged position vis-à-vis the whites? Abolitionists like Lydia Maria Child of Northampton, Massachusetts, tried to link the two elements by admitting that while all Negroes were not "Scotts or Miltons," they were "men, capable of producing their proportion of Scotts and Miltons, if they could be allowed to live in a state of physical and intellectual freedom."<sup>11</sup> At the other extreme the New York Whig politician, William Henry Seward

<sup>8</sup> Samuel J. May, Sermon delivered May 29, 1831, in Boston, as reported in *Liberty*, July 23, 1831.

<sup>9</sup> *Abolitionist*, I (Jan. 1833), as quoted in Merton L. Dillon, "The Failure of the American Abolitionists," *Journal of Southern History*, XXV (1959), 167. Lewis Tappan Diary entry [Apr. 1836], as quoted in Litwack, *North of Slavery*, p. 218. See also Garrison's July 4, 1829 oration (*Garrison*, I, 133-34); Susan Cabot, *What Have We, as Individuals, To Do With Slavery* (American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tracts* No. 15, New York, 1855), pp. 3-4; Beriah Green, *American Anti-Slavery Reporter*, I (Jan. 1834), 88; and Birney to William Wright, June 20, 1845, in *Letters of James Gillespie Birney, 1831-1857*, ed. Dwight L. Dumond (2 vols.; New York, 1938), II, 947.

<sup>10</sup> This ideological ambivalence is reflected in the cleavages within the antislavery movement over the appropriate courses of action to be pursued. These cleavages have already been well examined in a variety of studies on antislavery published since 1950. Whether to take political action or to regard it as damaging to the requisite moral fervor, whether to expend time and funds on schools, give aid to fugitives and buy freedom for individual slaves or to work exclusively to propagate the antislavery faith are debates not only about means but also about the basic concepts of antislavery.

<sup>11</sup> Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (orig. ed. 1833. New York, 1836), p. 171.

defending the mentally deranged William Freeman in 1846, tried to subordinate intellectual lack to simple humanity and to separate it from race. He pleaded with the jury that

the color of the prisoner's skin, and the form of his features, are not impressed upon the spiritual, immortal mind which works beneath. In spite of human pride, he is still your brother, and mine, in form and color accepted and approved by his Father, and yours, and mine, and bears equally with us the proudest inheritance of our race—the image of our Maker. Hold him then to be a MAN.<sup>12</sup>

In denying, furthermore, that the apparent differences between Negroes and whites were not inherent the abolitionists became environmentalists. John Rankin, ex-slaveholder from Virginia and an ardent abolitionist, asserted with good will but dubious logic that if racial inferiority were a valid criterion, then all Negroes would be inferior to all whites if but one was. Clearly this was not so. Therefore existing inferiority was explainable only in environmental terms.<sup>13</sup> Slavery it was, asserted German refugee Charles Follen of Boston, that debased and degraded the Negroes and generated among whites an "absurd and cruel prejudice against color."<sup>14</sup> The antislavery solution to prejudice was clear once the cause was thus linked to slavery. Charles Calistus Burleigh of Connecticut optimistically exhorted his fellow whites to "give [the Negro] his liberty, and as strong a motive to exertion as you have;—a prospect of reward as sure and ample; not only wages for his toil, but respect and honor and social standing according to his worth, and see what he can then become."<sup>15</sup>

Yet, for all their exuberance, for all their belief in equality, for all their efforts to raise the Negro above the debilitating influences of adverse environment, the abolitionists were never wholly convincing. Much of what they said betrayed an implicit and at times explicit belief in racial

<sup>12</sup> William Henry Seward, *Argument in Defense of William Freeman on his Trial for Murder* . . . (4th ed.; Auburn, N. Y., 1846), pp. 8-9. See also C. T. C. Follen, *Works, with a Memoir of His Life* [by Mrs. E. L. Follen] (5 vols.; Boston, 1841), I, 627-28.

<sup>13</sup> John Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery Addressed to Mr. Thomas Rankin* . . . (5th ed.; Boston, 1838), pp. 10-11. See also Lewis Tappan, *The Life of Arthur Tappan* (New York, 1870), p. 131; James A. Thome and J. Horace Kimball, *Emancipation in the West Indies. A Six Months Tour in Antigua, Barbadoes, and Jamaica in the Year 1837* (American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Examiner* No. 7, New York, 1838), p. 75; and Sallie Holley to Gerrit Smith, Nov. 17, 1865, in the Smith Miller Papers, Syracuse University.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Follen, "The Cause of Freedom in Our Country," *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, II (Oct. 1836), 65.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Calistus Burleigh, *Slavery and the North* (New York [1855]), p. 4. Rankin essentially held the same view, but thought that it would take a long time to raise the Negro; see *Letters on American Slavery*, pp. 10-11.



inferiority. Here again ambivalence emerged. That the abolitionists themselves were usually unconscious of their expression of prejudice and that they denied it when challenged should surprise no one. Nor, indeed, is the thoughtful student surprised to learn that such prejudice did in fact exist. Occasionally crude, more often hidden in underlying assumptions or in appeals to science, prejudice played a more pervasive role than the logic of consistency would admit.

Exasperated by poor printing, inferior paper and numerous misprints and spurred on by his own literary pride, Edmund Quincy lashed out in a letter to Caroline Weston in 1846 at "Wendell's nigger," whom he held responsible for botching an Antislavery Report. Never, he urged, let the printing out to "Smart people"; they get things up so poorly.<sup>16</sup> Her clearly was not only a rather vulgar display of prejudice but also of a value structure in which the typography of a convention's report weighed more heavily than economic opportunity for the free Negro.

The acerbity of these outbursts may be attributed to Quincy alone. The subterranean import, however, was common property among antislavery people. As late as 1860 Theodore Parker, a backer of John Brown, observed that "the Anglo-Saxon with common sense does not like the Africanization of America; he wishes the superior race to multiply rather than the inferior."<sup>17</sup> His neighbor, Samuel Gridley Howe, known for his multiple reform interests, accepted Parker's assumptions but rejected his predictions by observing that, particularly among young Canadian refugee Negroes, many succumbed to "mesenteric and other glandular diseases" and suffered from "phthisical diseases" and a "softening of tubercles." "Many intelligent physicians," he stated, "who have practiced among both [white and Negro] classes, say that the colored people are feebly organized; that the scrofulous temperament prevails among them; that the climate tends to development of tuberculous diseases; that they are unprolific and short-lived."<sup>18</sup>

Whether feebly organized in physique or not, the Negroes were certainly docile in temperament. "It is paying a very poor compliment, indeed, to the courage and superiority of us whites," Richard Hildreth said through the sympathetically portrayed Mr. Mason in *Archy Moore*. "No doubt whether we, superior as well in numbers as in every thing else

<sup>16</sup> Edmund Quincy to Caroline Weston, Feb. 1, 1846, in Weston Papers. A year later Quincy complained about Frederick Douglass' independence (what he thought was Douglass' overcharging the *American Anti-Slavery Standard* for copy supplied) by observing that "These niggers, like Kings, are kittle cattle to shoe behind." Quincy to Caroline Weston, July 2, 1847, in Weston Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Theodore Parker, *John Brown's Expedition Reviewed in a Letter from Theodore Parker, at Rome, to Francis Jackson, Boston* (Boston, 1860), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Gridley Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West. Report to the Freedmen's Inquiry Commission* (Boston, 1864), pp. 21-22.

could not inspire awe enough to maintain our natural position at the head of the community, and to keep these poor people in order without making slaves of them."<sup>19</sup> But, if Hildreth's Mason was fictional, the Lane Rebels were not. They had concluded, in their famous debates on slavery, that "the blacks are abundantly able to take care of and provide for themselves"; but had added immediately that they "would be kind and docile if immediately emancipated."<sup>20</sup> This emphasis on docility is important, for quite openly it reduced the status of the Negro below that of the white man. J. Miller McKim, for example, negated American standards of self-reliance and manly independence when he praised Negroes for "their susceptibility to control."<sup>21</sup>

Not unreasonably, many Negroes actively resented this abolitionist presumption about their "susceptibility to control." During the 1850s, in fact, this resentment was in large part responsible for the growth and activity of the Negro Convention movement, whose purpose it was to do for the Negroes themselves what they feared the whites, at last, would not accomplish for them. Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet, two Negro leaders of marked undocility, both took umbrage at Maria Weston Chapman for her paternal concern about their appropriate behavior; and Douglass, disillusioned with radical abolitionism in the face of growing political antislavery activity and ambitious himself to assert his independence from white abolitionist domination, defied the Boston hierarchy by establishing his own newspaper in Rochester, New York. Likewise, Martin Delany, a successful Negro doctor, resented the Negroes' exclusion from antislavery leadership and was highly dubious about the abolitionists' touted support of economic opportunity for free Negroes. Delany's disillusionment led him to abandon America as a viable home for the Negro and in the late 1850s to sponsor projects for African colonization.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Richard Hildreth, *Archy Moore: The White Slave* (1st ed.; 1836. New York, 1856), p. 264.

<sup>20</sup> As reported in Henry B. Stanton to Joshua Leavitt, Mar. 10, 1834, in *American Anti-Slavery Reporter*, I (Apr. 1834), 54.

<sup>21</sup> James Miller McKim, *The Freedmen of South Carolina . . .* (Philadelphia, 1862), p. 9. See also *Letters from Port Royal. Written at the Time of the Civil War*, ed. Elizabeth Ware Pearson (Boston, 1906), pp. 102-3, 315-16; *The Anti-Slavery Record III* (Feb. 1837), 15; *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844*, eds. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (2 vols.; New York, 1934), II, 524; and Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery*, p. 223.

<sup>22</sup> In the Weston Papers one may find numerous examples of the patronizing antislavery attitude and of Negro response to it. See also Filler, *Crusade Against Slavery*, p. 143. In particular note Frederick Douglass to Maria Weston Chapman, Mar. 29, 1846, Weston Papers; and Martin Robinson Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States Politically Considered* (Philadelphia, 1852), pp. 25-29.



Despite concepts of racial inferiority, further borne out by an almost universal preference for the lighter-skinned over the darker-skinned Negro,<sup>23</sup> abolitionists in fact did demand just and equitable civil liberties for colored persons. "The oppressive civil disabilities laid upon them in the non-slaveholding States, and the settled opposition to their education and elevation . . .," said the Andover Theological Seminary anti-slavery society,

are but glaring indications of the prevalent spirit of slavery. The same contempt of the black man—the same disposition to trample on his rights and to lord it over his person, follows him, whatever *degree* of emancipation he may have obtained, and in whatever part of the nation, he takes his refuge. Though we had in view only the wrongs of the colored people in New-England, we should feel ourselves compelled to take our present stand, and vindicate their rights as brethren, as men and as Americans.<sup>24</sup>

Abolitionists everywhere asserted that Negroes and whites should be judged and treated according to the same standards in the apportioning not only of civil rights but also of economic and educational opportunities. In its Declaration of Sentiments the American Anti-Slavery Society announced in 1833 that

all persons of color who possess the qualifications which are demanded of others, ought to be admitted forthwith to the enjoyment of the same privileges, and the exercise of the same prerogatives, as others and . . . the paths of preferment, of wealth, and of intelligence, should be opened as widely to them as to persons of a white complexion.<sup>25</sup>

Schools, like Oberlin College and the Noyes Academy in New Hampshire, which admitted Negroes on equal terms with whites,<sup>26</sup> bore out these principles, as did Charles Sumner's argument in the Roberts Case in 1819 that separate schools were unequal and threatened cleavages in

<sup>23</sup> Anti-slavery literature contains many illustrations of the preference for lighter-skinned Negroes. See Samuel May Jr., *The Fugitive Slave Law and Its Victims* (American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tract No. 18* [New York, 1855]); George Bourne, *Slavery, Illustrated in its Effects Upon Woman and Domestic Society* (Boston, 1857); Elizabeth's *Archy Moore*; and William L. Bowditch, *White Slavery in the United States* (American Anti-Slavery Society, *Anti-Slavery Tract No. 2* [New York, 1855]); see also in this connection Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery as it is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839); and the juvenile [Jonathan Walker], *A Picture of Slavery, for Youth*. By the Author of "The Branded Hand" and "Charity to Humanity" (Boston, n.d.).

<sup>24</sup> This is a summary given by D. T. Kimball and E. Laine to *Genius of Temperance*, Aug. 22, 1833, as reported in *Liberator*, Sept. 28, 1833. Similar demands for equality of treatment can be found in Child, *Appeal*, pp. 195-208.

<sup>25</sup> American Anti-Slavery Society, *Proceedings of the Anti-Slavery Convention Assembled at Philadelphia*, contains the Declaration of Sentiments.

<sup>26</sup> See *Liberator*, Oct. 25, 1834, for information about the Noyes Academy.

society.<sup>27</sup> And Samuel J. May, summing up the concept in a statement which avoided many of the pitfalls of prejudice into which his colleagues fell, averred that "all we demand for them is that negroes shall be permitted, encouraged, assisted to become as wise, as virtuous, and as rich as they can, and be acknowledged to be just what they have become, and be treated accordingly."<sup>28</sup>

Yet these appeals to the efficacy of education and economic betterment reveal the middle-class values to which almost all abolitionists subscribed and which both compound and explain much of the ambivalence in the antislavery movement. As middle-class Americans, abolitionists, naturally enough, measured the Negroes against middle-class standards, and to those standards they expected the Negroes to conform—Negroes who were generally ex-slaves from the lowest and most abject class in America. Assuredly the American Anti-Slavery Society was eager to uplift them to "an equality with the whites" but only after carefully disclaiming that it approved any such non-middle-class shenanigans as adopting colored children, encouraging interracial marriages or "exciting the people of color to assume airs."<sup>29</sup>

It was expected, then, that the Negroes should adapt themselves to the values of the white community, should, as one abolitionist advised, submit to prejudice "with the true dignity of meekness" so that their critics might be stilled. Thus was fulfilled the stereotype of the malleable, willing and docile colored man. Still, on limited occasions, the same writer observed, the Negroes should take a positive stand. They should demand admission to the public schools, they should organize or join lyceum groups, they should acquire knowledge and education. And, he said in a condensed version of a middle-class *Poor Richard's*, they should organize uplifting visits to their poor and degraded brethren and teach them "temperance . . . cleanliness, neatness, strict honesty, and all that belong to good morality."<sup>30</sup> In addition to these virtues, the American Anti-Slavery Society agents were admonished to instill in the free people of color

<sup>27</sup> Charles Sumner, "Equality before the Law: Unconstitutionality of Separate Colored Schools in Massachusetts. Argument before the Supreme Court of Massachusetts in the Case of Sarah C. Roberts v. The City of Boston . . ." in *The Works of Charles Sumner* (Boston, 1872), II, 327-76.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Joseph May, *Some Recollections of Our Anti-Slavery Conflict* (Boston, 1869), p. 29. See also Barney, *Letters*, II, 945; and Garrison, *Garrison*, I, 148.

<sup>29</sup> Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society to Mayor Cornelius Lawrence of New York, July 16, 1834, included in the microfilm printing of *Liberator*, between 1838 and 1834, reel 1.

<sup>30</sup> This entire argument appeared in a series of articles, signed "S. T. U.," which appeared in *Liberator*, Feb. 11, 18, 25, and Mar. 3, 1832. The quotations are from the first and last issues, respectively.

the importance of domestic order, and the performance of particular families of correct habits, command of servants and money matters. Also the dress and advantages of industry and superior provisions and facilities in the fulfillment of contracts to recognize whether winner or loser, and encourage them in the acquisition of property, especially of real estate in fee simple, particularly property for their own families. Present their slaves and provide for them, and encourage them to become voters, and in various other particulars with other citizens. . . .<sup>81</sup>

Others, varying little from the standard reforming tradition of the 1830s, spent their efforts making the Negro in the middle class appear to adopt their own conception of bourgeois standards. He would be a trader and become a mechanic. Since these individuals transported their ideas, where it was that the party mechanic always fell, not only below the white middle class, the Negro was considered, as when the Irish had earlier, and as best left identified with the bottom of the hierarchy of the antislavery argument, the lowest and ugliest class of ordinary white citizens. The *Anti-Slavery Advocate* assured readers, for example, that emancipated Negroes would not have to be fed. Let us not be perturbed, the *Advocate* urged in another issue, "if slaves are gradually set free, they must leave the place where they are, and will be likely to go to the north, that they may not interfere with the slavery which remains. But if they are all set free at once, they will continue where they are. Putting the argument in other terms, emancipated Negroes would be a great boon to the economy not only of the South but in the North as well."<sup>82</sup> The southern laborers, when they paid, C. C. Burleigh had said, would buy of us many wonderful conveniences not allowed them now . . . which would give new

<sup>81</sup> Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society to a report (1834-5) included in the mimeoed printing of *Liberator*, between 383 and 384.

<sup>82</sup> Like, for example, the *Anti-Slavery Record*, 1 June 1835, 58, urging that they be appreciated as good trades. And see also the commentary reproduced in *ibid.*, Mar. 3, 1837, from the *Bangor Mechanic*, in which it is made quite clear that employers are quite aware that the middle class looks down on and working men are, by comparison with the Irish, hillbush. *Anti-Slavery*, p. 26, June 1, 1837. See also *Record*, "May 29, 1834," in *Wells-Bronner Letters*, II, 179; William Lloyd Garrison, *Massachusetts Historical Society of Wisconsin*.

<sup>83</sup> *Anti-Slavery Almanac*, 1837 and 1839. The quotation is from the volume p. 44. The billiardroom showed in other ways as well. *Deborah*, at the teenage Radical Republican Bourne Maria Weston Chapman wrote of her own man, *Harper*, Sept. 24, 1862, that "black soldiers would save our armies, & do for our republic, the commutation." Weston Papers. And Wendell Phillips also means to suggest the same prior self-our term when he spoke in the *Liberator*, 200 (1848) 178, concerning "My friends if we never free a slave, we have at least freed a soldier: the effort to emancipate our brother man." Quoted in Garrison, *Garrison*, III, 294.

to our shops and mills and shipping, and steadier employment, and, most likely, higher wages, to all kinds of labor here."<sup>84</sup> Thus emancipation would not inconvenience the North with a mass of freed slaves; it would rather prove quite profitable.

Still, there was the thorny issue of defining the social position of the Negro in a predominantly white society. Many of the same abolitionists who demanded so unfalteringly no association with slaveholders found it ticklishly difficult to espouse social intercourse with Negroes and almost impossible to champion holy wedlock with those of black skin. In theory and in conscience, of course, they deplored the bans on interracial marriage; yet in practice they as often betrayed an opposite sentiment.<sup>85</sup> For his own part, Garrison defended the ideal goal but reconciled it with practical reality. "At the present time," he said expediently, "mixed marriages would be in bad taste. . . ."<sup>86</sup> Eliza Wright, however, scornfully ridiculed such temporizing over prejudice. "Pray, what is the matter? we ask of a generous and enlightened public," he snapped viciously,

The reply is couched with quaking apprehension, in the appalling interrogatory; *would you have your daughter marry a negro?* And the utter slavery to which this tyrant prejudice has reduced everything that is noble and good in the land, is evinced by nothing more clearly than by the pains taking of even abolitionists to show that colored men *may be* enfranchised and elevated without bringing on the dreaded consequence.<sup>87</sup>

It seemed necessary, in the end, to plaster over the issue and to allay white fears. Mrs. Child, echoing the frequent antislavery assertion that there were scarcely enough abolitionists in the South to account for the evidences of miscegenation there, insisted that to say that abolitionists wished amalgamation was "a false charge, got up by the enemies of the cause, and used as a bugbear to increase the prejudices of the community." In fact, she added, "by universal emancipation we want to *stop* amalgamation."<sup>88</sup> More reassuring to those who hoped that the issues raised by social equality would fail to materialize was Samuel G. Howe's

<sup>84</sup> Burleigh, *Slavery and the North*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>85</sup> See Birney, *Letters*, I, 397; Garrison, *Garrison*, II, 356; *Anti-Slavery Record*, 1 June 1835, 71; and Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York, 1913), p. 274, note 20. See also Louis Ruchames, "Race, Marriage and Abolition in Massachusetts," *Journal of Negro History*, XI, 1935, 250-73, on the fight for repeal of discriminatory marriage laws.

<sup>86</sup> *Liberator*, Aug. 13, 1831.

<sup>87</sup> Eliza Wright Jr., "Caste in the United States: A Review," *Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, II (Jan. 1837), 177.

<sup>88</sup> Lydia Maria Child, *Anti-Slavery Cause* (Newburyport, 1838), pp. 31-32.



commentary made after a close study of Canadian Negroes. "Upon the whole," he observed,

. . . the experience of the Canadian refugees goes to show that there need be no anxiety upon the score of amalgamation of races in the United States. With freedom, and protection of their legal rights; with an open field for industry, and opportunities for mental and moral culture, colored people will not seek relationship with whites, but will follow their natural affinities, and marry among themselves.<sup>39</sup>

The social distance decreed by class identification provided perhaps the most common and satisfactory framework for abolitionists' contact with free Negroes. Thus, steeped in middle-class values and having identified the Negroes with the laboring classes, the antislavery band frequently assumed the patronizing air of the uplifter and the saved toward the downtrodden and unwashed. James G. Birney, speaking from a slaveholding background, observed that without question emancipation would "where the superior intelligence of the master was acknowledged, produce on the part of the beneficiaries, the most entire and cordial reliance on his counsel and friendship."<sup>40</sup> And Sumner, in the Roberts Case urged that "the vaunted superiority of the white race imposes corresponding duties. The faculties with which they are endowed, and the advantages they possess, must be exercised for the good of all. If the colored people are ignorant, degraded, and unhappy," he asserted with a sense of noblesse oblige, "then should they be especial objects of care."<sup>41</sup>

Such paternalism was, to be sure, most benign. At times, however, it was most insufferable. "The more I mingle with your people," Angelina Grimké wrote to Sarah Douglass in a display of tactlessness as gargantuan as it was overbearing,

the more I feel for their oppressions and desire to sympathize in their sorrows. Joshua Leavitt threw out a new and delightful idea on the subject on our way to Bloomfield. He said he believed the Lord had a great work for the colored people to do, and that your long continued afflictions and humiliations was the furnace in which He was purifying you from the dross[,] the tin[,] and the reprobate silver, that you might come out like gold seven times refined. I Hav[e] thought of this and fully believ[e] you will after all get up abov[e] us and be the favored instruments [to?] carry pure and undefiled Religion to the Heathen.

<sup>39</sup> Howe, *Refugees from Slavery*, p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in *The Legion of Liberty and Force of Truth, Containing the Thoughts, Words, and Deeds, of Some Prominent Apostles, Champions and Martyrs* (New York: 1843), n.p.

<sup>41</sup> Sumner, "Equality before the Law," II, 376.

World. May the Lord lift you from the dung hill and set you among princes. . . .<sup>42</sup>

Helping the Lord hoist the poor Negroes off the dung hill was, as it often turned out, an arduous and dangerous chore, but one which gave the abolitionists a chance many of them coveted to become martyrs in the cause. To defend the Negro in court, to speak on his behalf before hostile audiences, to be harried from town after town by the frenzied mob was the stuff of which martyrdom was made. And the genuine joy in the experience of such martyrdom only enhanced the rewards of protective guardianship, as those who braved the mob when Pennsylvania Hall was burned well knew. Confronting the hostile elements, the stalwart women of the Female Anti-Slavery Convention "maintain[ed] the perilled cause to the last." As they adjourned "the colored members of the convention were protected by their white sisters, and Oh! Shame to say," one of the white sisters wrote, "at both were thrown a shower of stones."<sup>43</sup> And then, Oh! Shame to say, the brand new hall was set ablaze and totally destroyed.

In their enthusiasm to elevate the Negro, the abolitionists frequently carried on their shoulders an early version of the White Man's Burden. They taught their children in heavily freighted moral tales that "negroes, even poor, degraded, despised slaves, are not without reason and understanding. [And that] many of them have a large share of sagacity." Go forth, they directed even the toddlers, instruct the poor and ignorant; become teachers, and help train the Negroes themselves to become missionaries that they may enlighten "their countrymen who are in ignorance and darkness."<sup>44</sup> The adults themselves set the initial example. When Helen Benson, daughter of Rhode Island abolitionist George Benson, was married to Garrison, she refused to allow cake at her wedding or to wear fancy clothes lest she be a poor model for the Negroes to follow.<sup>45</sup> Theodore Weld also cast himself as an exemplar of the good. "I attend Church with our colored friends," he wrote: "but," he honestly

<sup>42</sup> In Angelina and Sarah Grimké to Sarah Douglass, Feb. 22, 1837, *Weld-Grimké Letters*, I, 364-65. Gerda Lerner contends that the Grimké sisters were almost if not totally above prejudice in "The Grimké Sisters and the Struggle against Race Prejudice," *Journal of Negro History*, XLVIII (1963), 277-91.

<sup>43</sup> Letter from a New York woman, May 18, 1838, in *Liberator*, May 25, 1838.

<sup>44</sup> From a story in the Juvenile Department, signed "H. Sabbath School Treasury," *Liberator*, Jan. 14, 1832. The Juvenile column was a regular feature in the early years of the *Liberator*. Henry C. Wright was designated American Anti-Slavery Society agent to children.

<sup>45</sup> Garrison, *Garrison*, I, 427.



admitted, "I do it to cast my lot with them; and," he contentedly concluded, "tho not spiritually edified, I find joy and peace in it."<sup>46</sup>

It was, however, a far more difficult thing for the same abolitionists to follow through, unhesitatingly and courageously, the implications of their theories, to work unfalteringly and without equivocation, straight on to free the slave and obtain equality for the free Negro. Certainly the abolitionists were almost universally too forthright and too dedicated to be faithless to their ideals; certainly they did not knowingly forsake their pledged word. Still it was a constant fact of the antislavery crusade that it was clearly marked by the constant temporizing of its participants. In Ohio, some Lane students objected when one of their number took up residence with Cincinnati Negro families while he was working among them because they thought it would be harmful to their project. Throughout the North antislavery societies debated the questions "Ought abolitionists to encourage colored persons in joining Anti-Slavery Societies?" or "Is it expedient for Abolitionists to encourage social intercourse between white and colored families?" And their composite response was at best an equivocal "perhaps."<sup>47</sup>

This political temporizing was not, of course, without its reasons, particularly in the light of mobs and physical violence provoked by extremists. Some abolitionists, of course, merely thought of public relations and how best to draw support to the cause. Birney, for his part, thought enough to strive for equal civil rights without, at the same time, trying for social equality. Too much too soon, he argued, would mean a denial of all rights to the Negro.<sup>48</sup> So too the American Anti-Slavery Society after the serious antiabolitionist riots in New York in 1834, rejected charges that they supported amalgamation or attacked the Constitution. "We disclaim, and entirely disapprove," they asserted, "the language of a hand-bill recently circulated in this City the tendency of which is thought to be to excite resistance to the Laws. Our principle is, that even hard laws are to be submitted to by all men, until they can by peaceful means be altered."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Weld to Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Dec. 15 [1837], in *Weld-Grimké Letters*, I, 496. A similar viewpoint turns up in Unitarian observations quite frequently as a rejection of emotional-evangelical enthusiasms.

<sup>47</sup> In a letter to Lewis Tappan, Weld, for example, wrote concerning a slave case in Connecticut that "not one of the Abolitionists here [in Hartford] was willing to appear openly in the matter as the friend of the compl[ai]nant. Brother Tyler and myself were the only persons known publickly in the case as friends of the compl[ai]nant, having been and are still plentifully threatened with mob vengeance." June 8, 1837. *Weld-Grimké Letters*, I, 399.

<sup>48</sup> *Liberator*, Jan. 10, 1835.

<sup>49</sup> From Litwack, *North of Slavery*, p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> Birney to Weld, July 26, 1834, *Weld-Grimké Letters*, I, 163.

<sup>51</sup> *Liberator*, July 19, 1834.

The abolitionists were painfully aware of their actions, yet in good conscience they believed that their course was the better part of wisdom and thus did not compromise their valor. Arthur Tappan for one was so fearful lest his earlier activities be misconstrued that he assured A. F. Stoddard of Glasgow in 1863 that "if . . . you should know of any one's charging me with any gross assault on the fastidiousness of the age, when I became the avowed friend of the colored man, you may set it down to the score of ignorance or malignant falsehood."<sup>52</sup> But Sarah Forten, member of the actively antislavery Negro family of Philadelphia, understood. "How much of this leaven still lingers in the hearts of our white brethren and sisters is oftentimes made manifest to us," she wrote, referring specifically to an abolitionist who was comfortable with Negroes only under cover of night; "but when we recollect what great sacrifices to public sentiment they are called upon to make," she generously added, "we cannot wholly blame them."<sup>53</sup>

Briefly, then, the antislavery movement was beset, throughout its history, by a fundamental ambivalence. Never could the abolitionists decide collectively, and infrequently individually, whether the Negro was equal or inferior to the white; whether social equality for the Negro should be stressed or whether it should be damped; whether civil and social rights should be granted him at once or only in the indefinite and provisional future; whether, in fact, social and civil rights should be granted or whether only civil rights should be given him. The abolitionists, furthermore, were torn between a genuine concern for the welfare and uplift of the Negro and a paternalism which was too often merely the patronizing of a superior class. And their forthright concern for the Negro was still more qualified by an unhappy degree of temporizing.

These are the hallmarks of a critical and fundamental ambivalence. When such a quandary existed over the position and treatment of the free Negro and over the very nature of the beings to be freed, abolitionist temporizing becomes understandable. When immediate emancipation as a plan of abolition was translated to mean only immediate repentance of the sin of slavery, the needs of the human beings who were slaves were ignored. The abolitionists had sought solace in abstractions about humanity. And their hesitancy and confusion about the question of race illuminate much of the contention and indecision within the antislavery movement—a movement baffled and torn by ambivalence.

<sup>52</sup> Arthur Tappan to A. F. Stoddard, Aug. 27, 1863, in Tappan, *Tappan*, pp. 201-2.

<sup>53</sup> Sarah Forten to Angelina Grimké, Apr. 15, 1837, *Weld-Grimké Letters*, I, 380.