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# From Body Reform to Reforming the Body Politic: Transcendentalism and the Militant Antislavery Career of Thomas Wentworth Higginson

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*Second-generation Transcendentalist minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson played a leading role in the latter stages of the struggle against slavery. A principal member of the Boston Vigilance Committee, which resisted attempts to capture fugitive slaves, Higginson also provided support for John Brown's assault at Harpers Ferry and served as colonel of the Union's first regiment of African Americans during the Civil War. Building on recent scholarship that portrays Transcendentalists as sympathetic to the antislavery cause, this essay argues that Higginson's militant approach to abolitionism drew directly on key components of Transcendentalism. It thereby offers a fresh interpretation of the emergence of antislavery violence in the 1850s, while underscoring a fundamental connection between the philosophy of Transcendentalism and radical abolitionism.*

*Keywords: Higginson; Thomas Wentworth; Transcendentalism; Abolitionism; Slavery; Civil War*

On 22 May 1856 South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks marched into the Senate chamber in Congress, raised a wooden cane, and beat Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner until he was bloody and senseless. Provoked by a vitriolic speech in which Sumner had castigated South Carolina Senator Andrew P. Butler, Brooks's assault underscored the inherent brutality of Southern culture for many in the North. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, announced that the incident left him unsure about the longevity of the republic. 'I do not see,' reasoned Emerson, 'how a barbarous community and a civilized community can constitute one state.'<sup>1</sup> To fellow Transcendentalist and radical abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Sumner's prostrate form underlined not so much the incompatibility of the North and South, but rather the passive and embarrassing moral high ground to which the North had retreated by the 1850s. Northerners fought with words, Higginson lamented, southerners with canes, at the very least. The political and legal defeats of the antislavery movement in the 1850s—the Compromise of 1850, the rendition of several fugitive slaves in Boston, and the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act—showed that slavery was hardly a dying institution: both its influence and jurisdiction were growing. Yet with each victory by the Slave Power, as Higginson put the case two years before the assault, abolitionists utter 'the same indignation...and each time men have eaten the bravest words they ever spoke, with the same quiet resignation.'<sup>2</sup> Neither pacifistic methods, nor political bargaining, seemed to tame the ferocity natural to those engulfed by the system of slavery. Far too often, Higginson insisted, abolitionists meekly turn the other cheek to

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the blows of the Slave Power. So, while the caning of Sumner was certainly a tragic event, Higginson concluded that in the end it might be a necessary one. 'The assault on Mr. Sumner,' Higginson wrote not long after the incident, 'has done more than all the outrages of the Slave Power put together to divide this Union...[because]...men will bear an injury to their principles or their interests more easily than a wrong done their pride.'<sup>3</sup> Finally, he hoped, antislavery forces would adopt a more forceful response to slavery. Finally, they would hit back.

Over the course of the 1850s Higginson had been doing just that. Although he was a Harvard-educated Unitarian minister and member of the Transcendentalist circle that included Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau, Higginson had gained a national reputation as an actively engaged reformer rather than as a theologian or scholar by the late 1850s. A Free Soil Party candidate for Congress in 1850, Higginson would eventually play a leading role in the fugitive slave cases in Boston, travel to 'Bleeding Kansas,' and help to plan and finance John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry.<sup>4</sup> More to the point, as Higginson was drawn into the center of the nation's firestorm over slavery, he found the tactics of moral suasion—favored by radical abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison—and those of legislation and compromise—preferred by moderate abolitionists—increasingly inadequate. In their place, Higginson began extolling a resistant, at times violent, response to slavery. Furthermore, he often pushed beyond the reform-oriented intellectual's customary pursuits—critique, exhortation, even theoretical support of violence—literally to take up arms in the name of the slave. By 1862, United States Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson was headed to the South Carolina Sea Islands to assume command of the nation's first regiment of African Americans: the First South Carolina Volunteers.

What would lead a Harvard-educated minister like Higginson—a man of the mind and soul—to trade his pen for a sword? His decision was not merely a rash response to the caning of Sumner or any other isolated incident. Although Higginson hoped the assault on Sumner would finally ignite a fire in the hearts of his fellow northerners, his own turn to antislavery violence in the 1850s had deeper roots. To be sure, the tumultuous events of the 1850s, including Brooks's assault on Sumner, fueled his own militancy. But, unlike Garrisonians, many of whom abandoned their pacifistic commitments in the face of an emboldened enemy, Higginson did not need to alter or ignore his fundamental ideological perspective, for it easily accommodated his resistant response to slavery.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as much as the pacifism of abolitionists like Garrison grew out of their Christian perfectionism, Higginson's turn to antislavery violence drew directly upon his own religious and philosophical beliefs, namely, Transcendentalism. Higginson's militant drift was rooted in several core commitments that were fundamentally Transcendentalist: to universal laws rather than compromise and expediency; to the organic connection between the material and spiritual realms; and to the heroic capabilities and obligations of individuals, free and slave alike, to build better selves and thereby a better society. This essay, in short, will explain how the frustration that Higginson expressed in the wake of the attack on Charles Sumner—the desire to see northerners hit back—resonated with his Transcendentalism.

## Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Thomas Wentworth Higginson was a latecomer to Transcendentalism. Born in 1823, Higginson enrolled at Harvard College in 1837 amid the confrontation between leading first-generation Transcendentalists and conservative Unitarian powers that controlled the college.<sup>6</sup> He did not, however, catch the Transcendentalist bug until after he graduated in 1841, when he discovered European Romantic writers such as Madame de Staël, Coleridge, and Goethe. Higginson would soon count Transcendentalist ministers James Freeman Clarke and William Henry Channing as close friends, visit the experimental community at Brook Farm, and become a regular reader of the *Dial*, which exposed him to the work of leading Transcendentalist writers. Later in life, Higginson cited Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker, and Margaret Fuller as his most significant intellectual influences.<sup>7</sup>

Although Transcendentalism eventually grew into a wide-ranging revolt against a range of American social, political, and intellectual ideals, it began as a doctrinal dispute within the Boston-centered Unitarian Church. In the late 1830s a number of liberal Unitarian ministers, Emerson, Parker, and George Ripley among them, started publicly criticizing the ‘corpse-cold’ nature of Unitarianism, which they held destroyed Christianity’s vitality by making religion dependent on text rather than individual experience.<sup>8</sup> Dissatisfied with the Lockian empiricism that prevailed in Unitarian circles, Transcendentalists found a far more satisfactory explanation of the workings of the world in European Romantics’ emphasis on emotion, organicism, and intuition.<sup>9</sup> And, over the course of the 1840s and 1850s, leading Transcendentalists like Emerson, Ripley, Parker, Fuller, and Henry David Thoreau combined European Romantic ideas with American traditions, such as Jeffersonian Democracy and liberal Unitarianism, as well as Eastern religion, to form a cosmopolitan intellectual tradition that engaged a panoply of topics—from philosophy to theology, social reform to literary theory.

A notoriously heterogeneous group, Transcendentalists nonetheless shared several fundamental commitments.<sup>10</sup> They believed, for one, in the unity of the material and spiritual realm, insisting that divine truth did not exist apart from the natural world. Instead, Transcendentalists held that God could be found within each and every individual as well as in the natural world in which they lived. In addition, Transcendentalists typically translated their monistic philosophy and belief in divine immanence into various forms of social and cultural critique, experimenting with literary forms and creating utopian communities such as Fruitlands and Brook Farm. Finally, Transcendentalists sought institutions that gave the individual greater freedom to express his or her spirit—transforming the moderate Unitarian goal of self-culture into a radical, all-encompassing effort to unite the self with the divine, which they believed could be found in the natural world around them as well as within their soul.

Yet these commitments—to cultural reform and individual self-cultivation, on the one hand, and social reform, on the other—often pulled Transcendentalists in opposite directions. Devoted to self-reliance, for example, Emerson was a life-long skeptic of organized reform. He found the perspective of communitarian efforts and organized abolitionism myopic, and, at times, monomaniacal. Social change for him was futile if undertaken before

individual reform, for if individuals did not start by transforming themselves, then they risked being used and degraded by reform movements. 'Though I sympathize with your sentiment and abhor the crime you assail,' Emerson wrote of reform movements like abolitionism, 'I shall persist in wearing this robe, all loose and unbecoming as it is, of inaction.'<sup>11</sup> Fellow Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller was also critical of abolitionists in the early stages of her career. She worried about the excessive attention they paid to the cause of the slave at the expense of all other political, social, and cultural concerns, objecting specifically to the hyperbolic language of radical anti-slavery leaders. 'We look upon him with high respect,' wrote Fuller of pioneering abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, yet 'like a man who has been in the habit of screaming himself hoarse to make the deaf hear, he can no longer pitch his voice in a key agreeable to common ears.'<sup>12</sup>

Such statements have led a number of scholars to conclude that Emerson, Fuller, and their colleagues rejected social reform entirely.<sup>13</sup> Fortunately, recent scholarship has done much to debunk this specious interpretation, making a convincing case that despite their reservations Transcendentalists played a key role in a range of antebellum social movements, including abolitionism.<sup>14</sup> A good deal of this work has focused on Transcendentalism's most famous voice—Emerson—who became a vigorous critic of slavery during the latter stages of his public career.<sup>15</sup> Yet for all his antislavery sympathies, Emerson remained aloof from the abolitionist movement throughout his life. He rarely took the antislavery stage and never joined an abolitionist society.

Second-generation Transcendentalist Higginson, in contrast, was an uncompromising critic of slavery and active participant in the abolitionist movement from an early age. Like his mentor Theodore Parker, he became one of slavery's most dedicated and radical opponents in the 1850s.<sup>16</sup> And, as he became more deeply involved in the struggle against slavery, Higginson formulated a militant abolitionist philosophy that built upon Transcendentalist foundations. First, he displayed a basic commitment to transcendent values—to what nineteenth-century Americans tended to call 'the higher law.' While he flirted with political antislavery, Higginson eventually lost his taste for the expediency and compromise of traditional politics. Instead, he embraced extralegal solutions to the problem of slavery that if unconstitutional were nonetheless consonant with the higher law. Second, drawing on romantic ideas about the organic connection of the material and spiritual realms, Higginson stressed the importance of exercising one's body in order to maintain the mind, of being engaged in the material world so as to grapple properly with moral and spiritual questions. Thus, he concluded that by physically, indeed violently, resisting the forces of slavery, reformers could avoid the artificial separation of mind and body. Higginson's concern for the way that resistant abolitionism aided abolitionists' personal development, in turn, reflected the primacy Transcendentalists assigned to self-cultivation. But unlike Transcendentalists such as Emerson, Higginson saw no tension between self-culture and social reform.<sup>17</sup> Rather, he framed the use of physical force as the means by which abolitionists and slaves worked for freedom on two levels—the individual and social. On the one hand, by literally fighting against slavery, by heroically putting their own lives on the line, abolitionists and rebellious slaves alike were following a path towards a greater degree of personal freedom and individuality. On the other hand, resistant antislavery for Higginson turned the romantic desire for self-cultivation into the very means by which to achieve social

and political change for others. If antislavery forces—slave and free— would actively resist slavery they could not only break all the chains (literal and figurative) that bound them, they could also destroy the barriers that kept America from fulfilling its destiny. Eventually, Higginson concluded, the body politic, just like the human body, could benefit from a resistant response to slavery because such resistance would root out the corrosive institution and, at the same time, reinvigorate the waning civilization of the North.

If recent interpretations of Emerson point to an affinity between Transcendentalism and the antislavery impulse, then the militant abolitionism of Thomas Wentworth Higginson underscores a more fundamental connection. Transcendentalism, in short, fueled Higginson's fervent opposition to slavery and provided the intellectual scaffolding for his violent response to it.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Higher Law and Lower Powers**

Higginson's militant antislavery approach was rooted in the higher law doctrine, the idea that all human rules were valid only insofar as they dovetailed with the universal moral code. This appeal to a higher law by which to judge ideas, behavior, and laws, of course, was not a new development; rather, it had a long tradition in Western culture.<sup>19</sup> The most well-known invocation of higher law doctrine in antebellum America was made by New York Senator William Henry Seward, in a speech delivered in Congress in early 1850. Denouncing a recently proposed compromise bill, which included a new, more stringent fugitive slave law, Seward held that 'there is a higher law than the Constitution, which regulates our authority over the domain, and devotes it to the same noble purposes.'<sup>20</sup> Seward's insistence that there was a law higher than Constitution of the United States—a point he made from the Senate floor, no less—sparked flames across the North and South. The New Orleans *Picayune* called him an 'unscrupulous demagogue.'<sup>21</sup> Edward Bates, a Whig lawyer and politician from Missouri, privately concluded that 'he [who] would set himself above [the Constitution] claiming some *transcendental* authority for his disobedience, must be...either a Canting hypocrite, a presumptuous fool, or an arbitrary designing knave.'<sup>22</sup> Northern opponents of slavery, in contrast, championed Seward's principled stand. Horace Greeley put out a special edition of the *New-York Tribune* to circulate Seward's ideas throughout the Middle West and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society distributed 10,000 copies of the speech across the North.<sup>23</sup>

For all the commotion raised by Seward's higher law address, what is truly remarkable about the speech is that it did not accurately reflect the senator's personal stance on the issue of slavery. In fact, according to biographer Glyndon Van Deusen, Seward was a moderate opponent of slavery, endorsing gradual emancipation and compensation for slaveholders.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless Seward's higher law speech managed, in the words of an antislavery ally, to 'compress into a single sentence, a single word, the whole issue of the controversy.'<sup>25</sup> Seward, in other words, provided the verbal munitions of the moment.

It was the New England Transcendentalists who launched a full-scale barrage with these munitions. After the final passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in the fall of 1850, Emerson, Parker, Thoreau, and Higginson repeatedly made arguments against the bill in the name of a

higher law.<sup>26</sup> Three days after President Fillmore signed the new law, for example, Theodore Parker rejected it in no uncertain terms, insisting that 'the natural duty to keep the law of God overrides the obligation to observe any human statute.'<sup>27</sup> The following year, Emerson publicly lamented that 'the Higher Law was reckoned a good joke in the courts'—a development that reflected a repudiation of the basic fact that 'laws do not make right, but are simply declaratory of a right which already existed.'<sup>28</sup> And, in 1854, Emerson's protégé Henry David Thoreau argued that the higher law supercedes both constitutional provisions and democratic mandates.<sup>29</sup>

Higginson also developed a vigorous critique of the Fugitive Slave Law based on the higher law doctrine. In a series of articles written for the Newburyport *Union* in the fall of 1850, he outlined his objections to the new law and his commitment to higher law doctrine. The belief in a transcendent moral law was a deeply engrained belief in America, wrote Higginson, particularly in his home state of Massachusetts. He found it amusing that champions of the Fugitive Slave Law deemed the higher law doctrine 'a startling novelty,' insisting, instead, that it is 'a very old story,' rooted in both legal and Judeo-Christian tradition. Yet Higginson did not think that one could access the higher law through either an eternal text or established set of religious practices; it could only be found within the individual conscience. Indeed, Americans intuitively acted from higher law principles already. Few people, Higginson reasoned, would countenance committing abhorrent actions such as murder, even if compelled to by law. 'But sending men into slavery,' he unconvincingly argued, 'is worse than murder.' Thus, Higginson concluded, 'Our theory is simply that there may be cases where it is right to not obey a law.'<sup>30</sup>

Higginson's objections to the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law did not rest solely on higher law doctrine, however. He also insisted that the new law was unconstitutional. The Fugitive Slave Law denied basic constitutional protections by disregarding the right to a trial by jury and undermining the ability of citizens to protect themselves and their homes.<sup>31</sup> 'Is the escaping from slavery so much more sacred than all other property,' Higginson wondered, 'that the simplest and oldest safeguards of our rights in all other cases should be abolished in this?'<sup>32</sup> Yet arguments for the unconstitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law, Higginson recognized, meant little to African Americans who were put into jeopardy by its provisions. So, too, did claims that the law would never actually be implemented. In fact, not a month after its passage, Higginson stressed that the Fugitive Slave Law had already been put into practice and 'it will be again; or if not it will only be because the higher law triumphs in men's souls and defeats the statute.'<sup>33</sup> Thus for Higginson the higher law was both an argument for ignoring immoral rules like the new fugitive slave code and the very vehicle by which to resist them.

But Higginson was not one to leave doors untested. So, in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Law, he posited two different sets of duties for Americans: political and moral. In their roles as citizens and legislators, on the one hand, Americans must defend those arrested under the law, agitate for its repeal, and work to amend the Constitution so as to undercut any government participation in the capture of fugitive slaves. But 'as men,' in his words, Americans had a different duty: 'Disobey it, when needful, and show our good citizenship by taking the legal penalties.'<sup>34</sup> When he wrote these words, Higginson might have had fellow Transcendentalist Thoreau in mind. After all, Higginson had just recently met the man who had once dramatically refused to pay the poll tax and spent the night in jail as a result.<sup>35</sup> Thoreau's famous act of civil

disobedience, which was made in protest of the Mexican War, was premised on doing what was right regardless of the legal ramifications. 'Unjust laws exist,' wrote Thoreau, 'shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?' His answer, of course, was transgression, for 'if *one* HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts...were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America.'<sup>36</sup> Higginson, in 1850, was not yet ready to go this far. Though he also believed that immediate action was necessary, he retained a faith in the American political process.

The most obvious manifestation of this faith was Higginson's candidacy for Congress on the Free Soil ticket that fall. But Higginson was a reluctant candidate whose platform put more stock in moral consistency than in gaining votes. 'We go for the right...[and] so long as we believe in political action we will act alone,' he held.<sup>37</sup> Refusing to consider political compromise on the issue of slavery, Higginson admitted that he did not 'believe in half way measures.'<sup>38</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Higginson was not elected. Yet he soon found a more suitable outlet for militancy—one that was hardly a half-way measure. In the wake of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in the fall of 1850, several hundred antislavery Bostonians formed the Boston Vigilance Committee. Higginson was among the most militant voices on the Vigilance Committee, which sought to aid black Bostonians made vulnerable by the new law. Although the committee managed to assist, shelter, or free hundreds of freedmen and women threatened by the new law, the Transcendentalist minister maintained that it was not vigilant enough.<sup>39</sup> He was frustrated, for example, by the Committee's inability to unite behind a plan to free former slave Thomas Sims, who was arrested in Boston in April 1851. 'Each [member of the Committee] had his own plan or theory, perhaps stopping even for anecdote or disquisition,' wrote Higginson, 'when the occasion required the utmost promptness of decision and the most unflinching unity in action.'<sup>40</sup>

By 1854, Higginson was determined not to let the Vigilance Committee get bogged down in debate. When former slave Anthony Burns was captured that year, he led a group of abolitionists in a failed attempt to free Burns, which ended with one guard dead and Higginson, among others, bloodied. Though he was disappointed by the failure to liberate Burns, he relished the symbolic power of the event. 'The strokes on the door of the Court House that night,' he declared, 'went echoing from town to town, from Boston to far New Orleans, like the first drum beat of the Revolution—and each reverberation throb was a blow upon the door of every Slave-prison of this guilty Republic.'<sup>41</sup> Higginson did not overtly embrace this first act of bloodshed. 'I do not like even to think of taking life,' he admitted several days after the incident, 'only of giving it.'<sup>42</sup> Yet he also emphasized the emerging physical nature of the movement, concluding:

words are nothing—we have been surfeited with words for twenty years. I am thankful this time there was action also ready for Freedom. God gave men bodies, to live and work in....He gave us higher powers, also, but, in using those, we must not forget to hold the lower ones also ready. <sup>43</sup>



Seemingly rejecting Emerson's dictum that 'to think is to act,' Higginson chose the methods of the body over those of the mind, acting over thinking.<sup>44</sup> Conventional political behavior, too, appeared impotent, as Higginson concluded that the Fugitive Slave Law would never be defeated by legislative means—it can only be repealed by ourselves, upon the soil of Massachusetts.<sup>45</sup>

Two years later, Higginson again demonstrated his commitment to physical resistance to—even violent confrontation with—the Slave Power, though this time on altogether different soil. Collecting money and purchasing supplies (including Sharp's rifles) for the Massachusetts Kansas Aid Committee, which supported the emigration of abolitionists and Free Soilers to the Kansas territory, Higginson traveled to what became known as 'Bleeding Kansas' in the fall. Recounting the events of his journey in articles written for the *New-York Tribune*, he insisted that Kansas was a defensive campaign, though hardly a passive or pacifistic one. The Kansas antislavery man was a dove, he asserted, but one who 'carried a Sharp's rifle under his wing.'<sup>46</sup> Higginson himself spent little time in Kansas, firing his gun only once—at a hawk. Nonetheless, he wrote to his mother of the fantasy he seemed to be living: 'Imagine me also patrol-ling as one of the guard for an hour every night, in high boots amid the dewy grass, rifle in hand & revolver in belt.'<sup>47</sup>

This militant drift left Higginson increasingly at odds not only with moderate, political abolitionists, but also with the dominant radical abolitionist faction in New England: Garrisonian non-resistants. A pacifist reform philosophy, non-resistance, according to historian Lewis Perry, 'derived from Christ's injunction to individuals not to resist evil.'<sup>48</sup> Non-resistants rejected the use of coercive force, whether through traditional political channels or extralegal violence, in favor of sparking a change of heart through moral suasion. But Higginson questioned the slow pace of change produced by a strategy premised on the conversion of hearts and minds, asking an antislavery crowd in 1855, 'how long, do you think, are the labors and sacrifices of the future to continue, before the work is done?'<sup>49</sup> Though he valued moral suasionists' efforts, as the 1850s wore on, they seemed to be hangers-on to Higginson. 'Every Massachusetts freeman, not a non-resistant,' he insisted in 1856, 'must long to take his share of the defence [sic] of freedom in Kansas,' thereby singling out non-resistants as unhelpful in what he thought was 'the only work worthy to be done.'<sup>50</sup> By 1858, Higginson put the question directly to Garrisonians, declaring at a Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society meeting that the 'moral position of this Society is the highest and noblest possible; but their practical position does not take hold of the mind of the community.'<sup>51</sup>

By the late 1850s, then, Higginson concluded that both political negotiation and moral suasion were laudable but bankrupt tactics. Having once endorsed a two-pronged antislavery approach comprising political and moral agitation, Higginson found the use of such 'higher powers' equally wanting.<sup>52</sup> Committed like his fellow Transcendentalists to the higher law, he eventually settled on what he termed 'lower powers.' Higginson dismissed the power of the pen for that of the sword.

## Nature, Body Culture, and the Body Politic

This growing commitment to physical confrontation with the Slave Power did not necessitate a radical change in philosophy. Rooted in a commitment to transcendent truths, Higginson's emerging antislavery militancy also drew directly upon Transcendentalist ideas about the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of communing with nature. Since Transcendentalists rejected dualistic notions of the separation between the mind and the body, or the material and spiritual world, they tended to look to the natural world for clues to spiritual matters. As Emerson put it, 'Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us and no man touches these divine natures, with-out becoming, in some degree, himself divine.'<sup>53</sup> Higginson also thought that nature was a vital path to divine wisdom, insisting that the natural world was an 'inexpressible wonder & delight' overshadowing everything else. 'Were it possible to eliminate from my writings—such as they are—the element contributed by woods, the boat & the gymnasium—there would not be much left,' he concluded in 1861.<sup>54</sup> The physical world was his muse. Higginson, following the ideas of Emerson and Emanuel Swedenborg, also believed that there was a basic correspondence between the material and spiritual world.<sup>55</sup>

Turning this preoccupation with the natural world in on itself, Higginson wrote a series of articles in the *Atlantic Monthly* in the late 1850s and early 1860s that expounded upon the importance of physical exercise. To Higginson, the maintenance of the mind, body, and soul were all closely connected and thus one should pay careful attention to the material world in order to grapple properly with moral and spiritual questions. He worried that Americans 'have no active physical habits; their intellects are sharpened, but their bodies, and even their hearts, are left untrained, they learn only...the fear of God and the love of money.'<sup>56</sup> Anticipating the widespread attempts by turn-of-the-century men to counter the stultifying effects of modern society by cultivating their bodies, he held that in the nineteenth century saintly asceticism had been secularized and transformed into the obsessive work habits of the businessman and the scholar.<sup>57</sup> 'Among Americans,' he wrote, 'all hand-work is constantly being transmuted into brain-work; the intellect gains, but the body suffers, and needs some other form of physical activity to restore equilibrium.'<sup>58</sup> In a letter to a fictional dyspeptic office worker named Dolorosus, Higginson decried the toll exacted by the days and nights spent working at a desk. Go west, he urged Dolorosus, with just a horse and a revolver, 'with distinct instructions to treat any man as a Border Ruffian who should venture to allude to the subject of disease in your presence.'<sup>59</sup> Coupling the physical benefits of western adventure with the antislavery fight he had witnessed first-hand in Kansas, Higginson suggested that northerners could reap personal as well as social benefits from a direct confrontation with pro-slavery forces.

Higginson's concern with the corruption of the body was not limited to the poor health that the North's commercial and intellectual culture promoted in figures such as Dolorosus. Many of his abolitionist speeches and essays, some written several years before he initiated his series of *Atlantic Monthly* physical culture articles, discussed the United States as a body afflicted with the disease of slavery—'a gangrenous excrescence,' as he put it.<sup>60</sup> By the middle of the 1850s, he worried that contact with slave culture had tainted even his cherished home state of Massachusetts, where 'the dead and moldering remains of what

once was beautiful...is fast ceasing to be so from the polluting contact of sad decay.<sup>61</sup> Just as the body of Dolorosus became sick from lack of exercise and excessive mental exertion, the body politic had become corrupted by the political victories of the Slave Power.

Early on, Higginson thought that the disease of slavery should not be confronted head on. In the wake of passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, for example, he concluded that 'this disease is so placed that we cannot touch the main strength of it *directly*, but we can cut off the supplies, prohibit its extension one inch further, and extirpate it in some members.'<sup>62</sup> By 1854, however, Higginson began prescribing a different treatment. Stephen Douglas's recently proposed Kansas-Nebraska Act, which would make possible the expansion of slavery into the Kansas and Nebraska territories by organizing them on the basis of popular sovereignty, seemed to provide an opportunity for antislavery forces. So, in a sermon on the proposed legislation, Higginson expressed 'profound gratitude to the movers of the measure,' for their proslavery agitation might have been the first step in curing the body politic. Rejecting what he deemed the allopathic method, which put faith 'in curing by contraries...aim[ing] at the suppression of agitation in the system,' Higginson embraced a homeopathic treatment to the problem of slavery. When applied to the political problem of slavery, the homeopathic approach, which 'gives for any symptom the medicine that would produce the symptom, and cures the disease by helping it to do its work in the shortest possible time,' meant matching agitation with agitation. Proslavery measures like the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he concluded, only confirm that 'there is no such thing as peace for us, on the present terms.'<sup>63</sup>

Higginson, thus, embraced disunion, a sort of radical amputation that would provoke a final showdown with the Slave Power. Disunion had long been a stance of Garrisonians, who rejected the Constitution as a pro-slavery document and found the maintenance of the union with slaveholders morally bankrupt. Practically, they believed that slavery in the South could only survive with the help of the North, and, as Garrison put it, 'the dissolution of the Union will paralyze the power of the master,' which will 'therefore, render emancipation certain, by a geographical necessity.'<sup>64</sup> Higginson did not envision so rosy an outcome. While he agreed with Garrison's conclusion that freedom would eventually triumph over slavery, the Transcendentalist minister nonetheless held that disunion would precipitate a conflict between the Slave Power and abolitionist forces. 'The vast antagonistic powers are brought into collision—the earthquake comes,' Higginson argued at the 1857 Disunion Convention in Worcester, 'and all we disunionists say is, if it is coming, in God's name, let it come quickly!'<sup>65</sup> Disunion, he held, would undermine the economy of the South while, more importantly, setting the stage for a slave rebellion.

By 1858, Higginson believed he had finally found the medicine that would cure the American body politic: John Brown. Along with Theodore Parker, Samuel Gridley Howe, Franklin Sanborn, and George Stearns, Higginson sat down with the militant abolitionist who had been making a name for himself in Kansas. As was the case with the Boston Vigilance Committee, Higginson quickly became the most militant voice in this group of Brown supporters who, along with Gerrit Smith, would become known as the 'Secret Six.' He helped to plan and raise funds to support the raid, though he declined to play a personal role in Brown's mission to capture

weapons from the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and use them to foster a slave rebellion.<sup>66</sup> In terms of this immediate goal, Brown's assault was a failure. Although he succeeded in securing the arsenal for a time, federal forces captured or killed all of his men less than 48 hours after the attack began. Stabbed in a showdown with U.S. marines, Brown himself ended up in chains in a Charles Town, Virginia, jail. And, on 2 December 1859, he was executed for treason.

Despite failing to spark a slave rebellion, the Harpers Ferry assault (and Brown's subsequent execution) nonetheless delivered the very homeopathic dose to the American body politic for which Higginson yearned. After all, the incident proved a rallying point for proslavery and antislavery forces alike. Opponents of slavery, led by Transcendentalists Emerson, Thoreau, and Higginson, championed Brown as a heroic martyr. Indeed, in the aftermath of the assault, Thoreau called Brown 'a transcendentalist, above all a man of ideas and principles.'<sup>67</sup> At the same time, proslavery forces, particularly secessionists such as Edmund Ruffin and Robert Barnwell Rhett, seized on Harpers Ferry as evidence of widespread antislavery fervor in the North. Southern secessionists successfully managed to link John Brown's actions with the North, in general, and the emerging Republican Party, in particular. As the *Richmond Enquirer* put the matter, 'The Harpers Ferry invasion has advanced the cause of disunion more than any other event.'<sup>68</sup> In short, Harpers Ferry stoked sectional fires to the point that secession seemed almost inevitable. In search of a homeopathic remedy that would produce disunion in the body politic, Higginson could not have asked for a better tincture than John Brown's raid.

### **Heroism, Self-culture, and the First South Carolina Volunteers**

The image of John Brown constructed by Transcendentalists in the wake of Harpers Ferry raises yet another way in which their philosophy shaped violent strains of radical abolitionism. For, if Brown was 'a man of ideas and principles,' he was also a heroic man of action. And the concomitant possibilities for self-development proffered by such individual heroism dovetailed with the Transcendentalist goal of self-culture.

References to individual heroism peppered Higginson's antislavery writing. Characterizing Wendell Phillips and John Brown as 'the heroic type' and 'one of the age's prime heroes,' respectively, he insisted that the dangerous mobs that pioneering abolitionists such as Garrison braved gave 'the early anti-slavery period...something of the heroic quality.'<sup>69</sup> To further accentuate abolitionist heroism, Higginson often cast the antislavery movement in the light of a prior generation of reformers. 'Have you looked lately at the early history of the American Revolution?' he asked a crowd of antislavery sympathizers in August 1856. 'Take the Diary of John Adams, or Frothingham's "Siege of Boston," and you will start back astonished to see how precisely, step by step, the earlier Revolution indicates and predicts the newer one that is coming upon us now.'<sup>70</sup> These sentiments, to be sure, did not set Higginson apart from the abolitionist crowd; rare was the antislavery voice that did not link the fight against slavery to Revolutionary cause of liberty. Frederick Douglass, for example, insisted that 'Washington and Lafayette have no better representatives now in the United States' than Theodore Parker and Wendell Phillips. Douglass only wished that his fellow

abolitionists 'had a little more of the manly indifference to death, which characterized the Heroes of the American Revolution.'<sup>71</sup> Higginson, for his part, found the battles raging in the Kansas territory more instructive in America's heroic past than any history book. 'A single day in Kansas makes the American Revolution more intelligible than all Sparks and Hildreth can do,' he wrote. 'In Kansas, nobody talks of courage, for everyone is expected to exhibit it.'<sup>72</sup>

Yet Higginson's vision of antislavery heroism was neither backward-looking nor selfless; he also maintained that resistant abolitionism would pay critical dividends for reformers. The revolutionary struggle in Kansas was important not only because it finally represented abolitionists taking a practical stand, but also because it was trans-forming its participants. 'Ever since the rendition of Anthony Burns, in Boston,' Higginson wrote in 1856, 'I have been looking for *men*.' In Kansas, he concluded, 'I have found them.'<sup>73</sup> In less than a year, Free Soilers had become truly heroic. 'It is like waking up some morning and stepping out on the Battle of Bunker Hill,' he insisted, 'one learns in a single day more about Greeks and Romans and English Puritans and Scotch Jacobites, and Hungarians and all heroic people, than any history course can teach.'<sup>74</sup>

This concern for the transformative power of resistant abolitionism underscores Higginson's commitment to the goal of self-culture, a key point of emphasis for Transcendentalists and Unitarians alike. In contrast to the evangelical emphasis on immediate conversion, liberal Christians tended to stress that salvation was achieved through a process of gradual self-improvement. Underscoring the horticultural nature of self-culture, leading Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing wrote in an 1838 lecture, 'to cultivate anything, be it a plant, an animal, a mind, is to make grow.' Self-culture, Channing concluded, is 'the care which every man owes to himself, to the unfolding and perfecting of his nature.'<sup>75</sup> Transcendentalists took the idea of self-culture to its logical extreme, touting the cultivation of individuality as the highest ideal to which one could strive. Emerson, for example, maintained that to embrace self-culture was to recognize the divine nature of every individual: 'There are in each of us all the elements of moral and intellectual excellence, that is to say, if you act out your-self, you will attain and exhibit a perfect character.'<sup>76</sup>

Higginson, for his part, came to see abolitionism as a means by which not only to combat encroachments upon liberty, but also to pursue the project of self-culture. Just as 'Bleeding Kansas' was transforming Free Soilers into heroes, Higginson thought that the antislavery effort as a whole provided an opportunity for personal development to all of its sympathizers. In 1855, for example, he insisted that the fight against slavery was *the* enlightened avenue out of the dusty library that constrained the American mind. 'We have something more important to do in this age than be mere scholars,' he announced, 'for without the antislavery movement, our literary men would have been what the literary men of England in the last century were, a slavish race.'<sup>77</sup> Higginson did not worry about the personal consequences of heroic action like some Transcendentalists; rather, he insisted that 'we all need action' because it 'transforms us.'<sup>78</sup> Participation in the movement to abolish slavery, for him, was a path by which abolitionists could free bondsmen as well as themselves. Moreover, Higginson insisted that the struggle against slavery served as a counterbalance to romantic selfishness and indifference, repeatedly forcing reformers to reckon with a pressing social question. 'At every crisis brought on by [the anti-slavery movement],' he later wrote, 'it turned out that mere moral purpose

might impart to these pacific social reformers a placid courage which rose on occasion to daring.<sup>79</sup> The antislavery cause was Higginson's solution to the impasse that too often left the North shrinking from the blows of the South. As Higginson put the point a year after the assault on Sumner: 'If we have not got the tongue of Stephen Foster, we must take the next sharpest thing; if we cannot roll out the cannon balls that come, every week, out of *The Liberator*, we must take pistol bullets. Anything, any weapon, so that for one instant in our lives we may know the sensation of being free men.'<sup>80</sup> Antislavery violence, in short, was the means by which abolitionists could simultaneously work to rebuild themselves and society.

As much as Higginson argued that heroic resistance was crucial to abolitionists' personal cultivation, he insisted that it was doubly important to slaves themselves. In fact, he had a firm faith that to topple slavery, black rebellion had to be the driving engine. 'We white Anglo-Saxon Abolitionists are too apt to assume the whole work as ours,' he worried, thus ignoring 'the great force of the victims of tyranny,' who, in Romantic poet Byron's words, 'to be free themselves must strike the first blow.'<sup>81</sup> A simple survey of the past, Higginson implied, showed that freedom was not granted but taken. To prove this point, he published a series of slave rebellion narratives in the *Atlantic Monthly* that emphasized the bravery, heroism, and fighting prowess of the Maroon communities of Jamaica and Surinam as well as of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and their co-conspirators.<sup>82</sup> These essays walked a narrow tightrope, trying to undermine romantic racialist notions of black docility, while not depicting rebellious slaves as irrational, bloodthirsty savages. Of the Denmark Vesey plot, he wrote, 'in boldness of conception and thoroughness of organization there has been nothing to compare with it.'<sup>83</sup> He cast Nat Turner's insurrection and John Brown's raid in equally positive terms, stating that 'each plan was deliberately matured; each was in its way practicable.'<sup>84</sup>

More importantly, the narratives suggested that by striking for their own freedom, slaves dropped the baggage that went hand-in-hand with bondage. Slavery, to Higginson's mind, emasculated the slave to a far greater extent than civilization did the northern reformer, businessman, or intellectual. Yet Higginson did not think such evidence corroborated pervasive racial stereotypes such as the 'Uncle Tom' or the even nastier 'Sambo'; rather, he insisted that slaves tended to overcome the negative effects of bondage. 'Desperate emergencies,' wrote Higginson, often spurred a remarkable transformation in slaves: 'The black man seems to pass at one bound...from cowering pusillanimity to the topmost height of daring. The giddy laugh vanishes, the idle chatter is hushed, and the buffoon becomes a hero.'<sup>85</sup> In short, what many in nineteenth-century America took to be an inescapable fact—slave docility—could be thrown off at a moment's notice.

Higginson, in turn, found direct evidence of the transformation engendered by resistance while serving as the colonel of the First South Carolina Volunteers. Two months after taking command of the Volunteers in late 1862, he led about 100 of his troops on a late-night expedition in search of lumber. His real goal, however, was not gathering wood but getting his men 'under fire as soon as possible...[teaching] them, by a few small successes, the application of what they had learned in camp.'<sup>86</sup> The Transcendentalist colonel was not disappointed that night. After being surprised by Confederate soldiers, his men had stood their ground and repelled their opponents, corroborating the idea that black men had every bit the fighting prowess of their white counterparts. 'To me personally the event was of the

greatest value,' wrote Higginson of the skirmish, because 'it had given us all an opportunity to test each other, and our abstract surmises were changed into positive knowledge.'<sup>87</sup> The proud spirit emphasized in his slave rebellion narratives had been confirmed.

Writing of this episode in an 1865 *Atlantic Monthly* article, Higginson paid particular attention to the corporal, Robert Sutton, who had guided the expedition. A local freed-man, Sutton, in Higginson's eyes, was both the embodiment of black achievement and the representation of black potential. His description of a meeting between Sutton and his former plantation mistress, Mrs A, is telling. When Sutton was introduced to Mrs A, a look of 'unutterable indignation came over the face of [his] hostess, as she slowly recognized him.' Mrs A quickly blurted out, 'we called him Bob.' This scene—a slave mistress being confronted by her former property, now dressed in the uniform of the conquering army—was 'a group for a painter,' wrote Higginson. It illustrated the crucial precipice the war represented for race relations in America, for the future of America itself. 'The whole drama of the war,' he insisted, 'seemed to reverse itself in an instant and [the] tall, well-dressed, imposing, philosophic Corporal dropped down the immeasurable depth into mere plantation "Bob" again.' But Higginson was quick to add, this backsliding was 'in his imagination; not the personage himself.'<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the very corporeality of Corporal Sutton—his dignified self-presentation—demonstrated the progress freedmen could make by participating in the war.

Sutton was not the only representation of blackness that Higginson painted while in the Department of the South, however. As much as Higginson's *Atlantic Monthly* slave rebellion narratives steered clear of the waters of nineteenth-century racial stereotyping, his Civil War letters and journal were awash in them. At times, in fact, he embraced racial stereotypes that appear to contradict his larger vision of black transformation. The First South Carolina Volunteers, he wrote, 'seem[ed] the world's perpetual children.' They displayed irrational attachment to their leaders, were unable to master their emotions, and tended to be 'cruel to animals,' reminding the Transcendentalist of 'children pulling off flies legs, in a sort of pitiless untaught experimental way.'<sup>89</sup> This seeming immaturity, moreover, reinforced a paternalistic bent that Higginson had displayed since his earliest days in uniform. As a captain in the all-white Fifty-First Massachusetts Volunteers, for example, he wrote to his mother that he felt 'just like a father of a family.'<sup>90</sup> In South Carolina, Higginson played the paternalist more fully, taking special satisfaction in his guidance of a downtrodden black race who, as he put it, 'bear in silence with the hopelessness of centuries of wrong.' If the First South Carolina Volunteers proved themselves heroic on the battlefield, they appeared quite the opposite in the pages of Higginson's journal devoted to daily camp activities. 'I like to go round the tents of an evening & hear them purring,' he recorded, '& know that they are happy, and happier for seeing me pass.'<sup>91</sup>

Beyond trafficking in such widespread stereotypes, Higginson, at least in his Civil War journal and letters, also proved unable to get skin color off his mind. Higginson hoped the exploits of the Volunteers would remove the 'stain' of racial prejudice from the freedmen, to be sure. Still, he often found indelible that which marked them as physically different. References to skin color, such as 'dusky,' 'grimy,' and 'inky,' pervade his personal writings from the war. Higginson also exhibited a fascination with his black soldiers' bodies at times.<sup>92</sup> 'They look magnificently often, to my gymnasium trained eye,' he wrote of the First South Carolina Volunteers, '& I

always like to see them bathing.’ Yet Higginson was quick to add that his black troops also displayed a predisposition towards ‘pulmonary weakness,’ which he believed corroborated his own ‘theory of the physical superiority of the civilized man.’<sup>93</sup> All told, Higginson’s intellectual dissection of his soldiers, from the dignified corporal to the naked black male form of the enlisted man, reflects the various roles that the body played in his imagination. While obviously central to physical resistance and violence, the body was also essential as a ‘before’ picture of the pre-emancipation state of existence—in both grotesque ignorance and enviable simplicity—and an ‘after’ picture of the well-groomed, civilized black soldier.

Higginson’s conclusions about the physical superiority of civilized man, however, did not stop him from flirting with the prospect of becoming black himself. ‘If I don’t come home jet black you must be very grateful,’ he wrote his mother shortly after arriving in South Carolina.<sup>94</sup> When he led his black troops at dress parade, Higginson felt indistinguishable from his men: ‘It is not till the line of white officers comes forward as the parade is dismissed, that I am reminded that my own face is not black as coal.’<sup>95</sup> To some extent, this momentary loss of racial identity resonated with the most popular entertainment of the period: blackface minstrelsy. Like both the white performers who painted their face with burnt cork and mocked African Americans on stage and the audiences who flocked to see them, Higginson seemed to enjoy the tantalizing possibilities of masquerading as a racial other. Yet it would be a mistake to conflate Higginson’s mental masquerade with blackface minstrelsy. For, despite its complex combination of attraction and revulsion for white Americans, blackface minstrelsy worked to reinforce widespread assumptions of black inferiority.<sup>96</sup> In contrast, Higginson’s civil war letters and journal, though rooted in similar assumptions of white cultural superiority, were devoted to quite different ends. Ever the paternalist, Higginson hoped to assist ‘his boys,’ as he repeatedly called them, to follow in the footsteps of their ‘father.’ And on this score he thought he was succeeding. In early 1864, for example, he wrote approvingly that the Volunteers were ‘growing more like white men; less naive & less grotesque.’<sup>97</sup> As his soldiers became more disciplined, better organized, and more sophisticated, they appeared almost whitewashed to Higginson. So, even though he enjoyed playing with the idea of becoming black on occasion, in the end the colonel placed greater emphasis on helping his black soldiers turn white.

Still, Higginson’s paternalism left him of two minds about the progress displayed by the Volunteers. He was pleased by their development, but the transformation they were undergoing was not without its downsides. As he put it, ‘In every way I see the gradual change in them, sometimes with a sigh as parents watch their children & miss the droll speeches & confiding ignorance of childhood.’ His racial imagination also had its limits. Higginson was comforted by the conclusion that some things never change, insisting that his soldiers’ ‘joyous buoyancy will hold out while life does.’<sup>98</sup> More often than not, though, his reflections on the strides made by his men were positive. Indeed, the colonel was so convinced of the success of his regiment that by the first anniversary of his command, he noted how the ‘grand experiment’ that shined so brightly in the public eye just a year ago had lost its luster. ‘Now the experiment is tried, the case settled,’ Higginson concluded, ‘this particular body is lost in the multiplicity of colored regiments & we are in the shadow of



comparative privacy.’ Happy to be outside the public gaze, he worried that his men, ‘in more perfect condition than ever before’, were losing their motivation.<sup>99</sup>

### Swimming Alone

Higginson’s concern about waning enthusiasm among his men also reflected his own disappointment with military life, which did not live up to his lofty expectations. If fighting had proved a transformative event for his men—and indeed the nation—it had no such effect on Higginson himself. He often complained of the tedious nature of his military command. ‘So far as love of adventure goes,’ he wrote in journal, ‘it must yield less & less enjoyment as one goes up.’ Higginson was jealous of the possibilities a private had to ‘run many risks’ and ‘go out by night on scouts.’ Even the company chaplain, ‘who comes & goes at all hours, like a wild man, galloping on a lean horse, wearing a pistol in each side of his belt & a rifle on his shoulder’ seemed to play a more exciting role. Higginson, by contrast, felt overburdened by clerical duties, complaining that ‘the great drawback of these Southern col’d regt’s will always be the severe burden of writing they throw on officers.’<sup>100</sup> He would later lament that his army experience

had been, after all, one mainly of outpost and guerrilla duty, and I had shared in none of the greater campaigns of the war....I came nearest to this larger experience in the case of the aimless but bloody engagement of Olustee, where I should have commanded a brigade had not my regiment been ordered back, even after being actually embarked for Florida.<sup>101</sup>

Shortly after leaving his command, Higginson recounted his frustration with the tantalizing opportunities that seemed just out of reach. ‘Every grove in that blue distance appears enchanted ground,’ he wrote, ‘and yonder loitering gray-back, leading his horse to water in the farthest distance, makes one thrill with a desire to hail him, to shoot at him, to capture him, to do anything to bridge this inexorable dumb space that lies between.’ But as a colonel, Higginson explained, he had little if any opportunity to hail, shoot, or capture. Nevertheless, what he admitted was a ‘boyish’ impulse could not be entirely suppressed, and thus Higginson decided to go out on a scouting mission alone one night. Slipping naked into the shallow waters of the river near his camp was an exhilarating experience, he suggested, for ‘all the excitements of war [were] quadrupled by darkness.’<sup>102</sup> Of course, this episode—whether real or imagined—did little to bring Higginson’s boredom to an end.

By 1864 the young colonel’s command was headed into a steady denouement. After several short expeditions in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida in early 1863, the Volunteers fulfilled mainly police duties. Furthermore, Higginson struggled with his health. Grazed by a bullet or shell during an expedition up the South Edisto River in the summer of 1863, he would soon catch malaria. Ill for most of the winter of 1863–4, Higginson took a six-month furlough in the spring of 1864, though he had no intention of returning. ‘I have never regained my health since I was wounded last summer,’ he explained to fellow abolitionist Wendell Phillips, ‘& though I am slowly gaining now, yet it is so very slowly that I am about to resign.’<sup>103</sup> Ironically, as much as Higginson went to war with visions of visceral confrontation with the enemy, of the

revitalizing influence of the physical aspects of battle, injury and illness undid him. Ultimately, his body let him down.

In the first years of his post-war career, Higginson repeatedly drew on his experience in the Civil War in essays that he wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly*. He published a number of them as *Army Life in a Black Regiment* in 1869. Gradually, though, his efforts on behalf of the freedmen dwindled because, as Higginson put it, he did not ‘want to give any more years of my life exclusively to those people now, much as I am attached to them.’<sup>104</sup> Ten years later, the former radical abolitionist demonstrated only a passing interest in what had been so important to him before the war. After touring the post-Reconstruction South in 1878, he concluded that ‘when [African Americans] have once enlisted the laws of political economy on their side, this silent ally will be worth more than an army with banners.’<sup>105</sup> Southern blacks, Higginson implied, no longer needed to take up arms; instead, they should put their faith in the laws of the market.

By the 1870s, in fact, Higginson had become more interested in cultural rather than social or political reform. Increasingly the exemplary genteel man of letters, he championed a different sort of self-cultivation in postbellum America than the kind he had stressed in the 1850s. Whereas his antebellum emphasis on self-cultivation was rooted in its relationship to social reform—in the possibility of changing society and self simultaneously—Higginson had, by the late 1860s, divorced self-culture from its social and political ramifications. Postwar America seemed to him a new world where the opportunities for heroic self-fulfillment were harder to come by—it was no longer a place where, in his words, ‘great public wrongs....require a moral earthquake to end them.’<sup>106</sup> Indeed, he concluded that slavery had been a social problem like no other: ‘There never was a great moral movement so logically simple as the anti-slavery reform; once grant that a man could not hold property in man, and the intellectual part of the debate was settled; only the moral appeal remained.’<sup>107</sup> What would take the place of this ‘great tonic’ for subsequent generations, Higginson wondered. ‘The pursuit of Science and Art’ was his answer.<sup>108</sup>

In the end, then, Transcendentalism not only informed Higginson’s militant abolitionist career, it also defined the limits of his commitment to social reform. Absent a clear moral problem like slavery, militant action in the name of the higher law no longer appeared so pressing. Furthermore, by placing the goal of self-culture at the center of his militant antislavery approach, Higginson made it contingent on his own experience. Once going to war with slavery stopped paying personal dividends, it no longer seemed worth all the effort. And, in the new context of postwar America, the possibilities of personal transformation through social reform seemed increasingly futile. It was hard to be a heroic individual—to strike the first blow, as he once put it— in the Age of Capital. Or, to be more accurate, it was easier to be a different kind of heroic individual—a Carnegie, a Rockefeller, or, in Higginson’s case, a literary man with a gym membership—than it was to be a John Brown.

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## Notes

- [1] Emerson, 'Assault on Charles Sumner, May 26, 1856,' in *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, 111. For more on Brooks's attack on Sumner, see Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, 278–311 and Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 209–11 and 220–21.
- [2] *Liberator*, 2 Feb. 1854. The idea that what was called 'the Slave Power' dominated antebellum America was widely held by opponents of slavery. The United States, according to the Slave Power thesis, was really run by slaveholders, who used measures such as the 3/5ths clause to control national politics despite numerical inferiority. For more on the Slave Power, see Davis, *The Slave Power Conspiracy* and Richards, *The Slave Power*.
- [3] *Liberator*, 8 Aug. 1856.
- [4] See Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm*, esp. 100–220.
- [5] The frustrating political defeats of the 1850s, particularly the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, have long been cited as the primary explanation for abolitionists' increasing willingness to turn to violence despite their traditional antipathy to such methods. Although a few evangelical perfectionist reformers, such as William Lloyd Garrison, steadfastly refused to abandon non-resistance, many others, so the story goes, shrugged off pacifistic stances, experimenting with—and sometimes embracing unabashedly—violent tactics in the 1850s. Such reversals tend to be framed by scholars as the product of ideological compromise, the accommodation of violence through the exploitation of 'intellectual loopholes' (Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 239). For more on the rise of antislavery violence in the 1850s, see Demos, 'The Antislavery Movement'; Stewart, 'Peaceful Hopes and Violent Experiences,' 293–309; and Pease and Pease, 'Confrontation and Abolition,' 923–37. For recent works that give the rise of antislavery violence in the 1850s more in-depth analysis, see McKivigan and Harrold, eds., *Antislavery Violence*; Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*; and Harrold, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism*.
- [6] See Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm*, 18–37.
- [7] See Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm*, 35–50 and Higginson, *Margaret Fuller Ossoli*, 2.
- [8] Emerson, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 9: 381.
- [9] See Capper, 'Transcendentalism,' 683–5.
- [10] Given its wide-ranging influences and the idiosyncratic nature of its proponents, Transcendentalism resists easy definition. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who lived at Brook Farm for a short time, called Transcendentalism 'a heap of fog and duskiess' that 'nobody has ever been able to describe' (Hawthorne, 'The Celestial Rail-Road,' 815).
- [11] Emerson, 'Reforms,' 3: 266. Despite his reservations about organized social reform, Emerson neither supported, nor turned a blind eye toward, the institution of slavery. He opposed slavery from his early days and, from the mid-1840s to the end of the Civil War, he found himself drawn to the antislavery stage despite stating a preference for 'inaction' on such issues. Although he never joined an abolitionist society and remained skeptical about certain aspects of reform, Emerson, like most Transcendentalists, found slavery to be antithetical to the ideals he cherished: introspection, originality, and self-reliance.
- [12] Margaret Fuller, quoted in Packer, 'The Transcendentalists,' 460. See also Capper, *Margaret Fuller*, 223–5.
- [13] See Kraditor, *Means and Ends*; Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson*; and Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War*.
- [14] See, for example, Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement*; Teichgraeber, *Sublime Thoughts*; and Garvey, ed., *The Emerson Dilemma*.
- [15] Most Emerson scholars now agree that when faced with the enormity of the problem of slavery and the victories of its proponents, Emerson came (either gradually or in a dramatic moment) to abandon the selfish and passive aspects of his individualistic philosophy for its more positive and proactive elements. See Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero*; Teichgraeber, *Sublime Thoughts*; Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns*; and Garvey, ed., *The Emerson Dilemma*.

- [16] Parker's antislavery career was remarkably similar to that of his Transcendentalist junior. Both became nationally known abolitionists in the 1850s, played leading roles in the Boston Vigilance Committee, and were members of the 'Secret Six' that supported John Brown. Moreover, both Parker and Higginson found moral and political agitation increasingly ineffectual in the face of the Slave Power's victories. Yet there were some crucial differences between the two antislavery ministers. Chief among them, according to Higginson, was the fact that he came from 'the younger school of abolitionists who believed in physical opposition to the local encroachments, at least, of the slave power' (Higginson, *Contemporaries*, 262). In contrast, Parker, in Higginson's eyes, was a 'connecting link' between non-resistants such as Garrison, and his new generation of resistant abolitionists. Although sympathetic to resistant abolitionism, the elder Transcendentalist, in a number of key moments throughout the 1850s, demonstrated an unwillingness to translate his militant antislavery philosophy into concrete action.
- [17] Orestes Brownson, an early participant in the Transcendentalist club and later critic of the movement, wrote that 'self-culture is a good thing, but it cannot abolish inequality, nor restore men to their rights' (quoted in Delano, *Brook Farm*, 117). Higginson's militant antislavery philosophy was—in effect, if not in intent—an effort to prove Brownson wrong on this point.
- [18] Recently Caleb Crain has argued that Higginson's engagement with the antislavery cause was a 'highly personal...alternative to Transcendental detachment,' concluding that he ultimately deemed Transcendentalism 'a destructive idealism, a romantic experiment that turned out to be dangerous' (Crain, 'The Monarch of Dreams,' 43–4). Although Higginson certainly recognized the pitfalls of Transcendentalism as a social reform philosophy, particularly in reflections on the movement that he wrote later in life, he nonetheless insisted that most of its proponents did not turn away from social engagement. Higginson underscored, on the contrary, examples such as Thoreau's championing of John Brown, despite his 'seeming theories of self-absorption' (Higginson, 'The Sunny Side of the Transcendental Period,' in *The Magnificent Activist*, 572).
- [19] In the ancient world, societies were often organized around, if not governed by, higher laws, from the Code of Hammurabi to the Hebrew Torah. Christian theologians, too, appealed frequently to the higher law. Classical liberal theorists such as Locke, in turn, naturalized— and to a certain degree secularized—the Christian higher law tradition, substituting natural law for God's law as the wellspring of the universal moral code. Yet they still insisted that there existed a single, overarching set of rules by which to judge human laws. See Carter, 'The Use of the Doctrine,' esp. 1–52. For a discussion of uses of the higher law doctrine by antebellum Americans in both the North and the South, see Szasz, 'Antebellum Appeals,' 33–48.
- [20] Seward, 'Freedom in the New Territories,' 74–5.
- [21] Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward*, 127. The Richmond *Enquirer* argued that the speech undermined the rule of law by implying that 'at any moment [individuals can] relieve them-selves from the duty of obedience, and the responsibility of rebellion, by announcing that their conscience...forbids the compliance which the law demands' (Crane, *Race, Citizenship, and Law*, 14).
- [22] Edward Bates, quoted in Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 159. Emphasis added.
- [23] Horace Greeley's *New-York Tribune* wrote, 'We cannot but feel that Gov. Seward has in the main spoken the word the Ages will balm and Eternity approve' (Tuchinsky, 'Horace Greeley's Lost Book,' 391). For more on abolitionists' response to Seward's speech, see Taylor, *William Henry Seward*, 85.
- [24] See Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward*, 128. In fact, in an exchange with Owen Lovejoy just after Lincoln's inauguration in 1861, Seward demonstrated as much of a commitment to unionism as to the antislavery cause. See Foner, *Free Soil*, 140.
- [25] Carl Schurz, quoted in Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 14. Schurz referred here not only to Seward's 'higher law' phrase but also his famous reference to 'an irrepressible conflict' between the North and the South.
- [26] For a persuasive argument that that the higher law doctrine belonged more to New England Transcendentalism than any other intellectual tradition, see Von Frank, *Trials of Anthony Burns*, esp. 96–106.
- [27] Parker, 'The Function of Conscience,' 11: 302–3.

- [28] Emerson, 'Address to the Citizens of Concord,' in *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, 59, 57.
- [29] See Malachuk, *Perfection*, 112.
- [30] Newburyport *Union*, 5 Nov. 1850.
- [31] Higginson, *Address to the Voters*, 5.
- [32] Newburyport *Union*, 11 Oct. 1850.
- [33] Newburyport *Union*, 14 Oct. 1850.
- [34] Higginson, *Address to the Voters*, 5.
- [35] Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm*, 97.
- [36] Thoreau, 'Civil Disobedience,' 92, 93.
- [37] Newburyport *Union*, 8 Oct. 1850.
- [38] Higginson, quoted in Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm*, 101.
- [39] Von Frank, *Trials of Anthony Burns*, 19.
- [40] Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterdays*, 145.
- [41] Higginson, *Massachusetts in Mourning*, 4–5.
- [42] Higginson, *Massachusetts in Mourning*, 4.
- [43] Higginson, *Massachusetts in Mourning*, 4.
- [44] Emerson, 'Spiritual Laws,' 2: 94.
- [45] Higginson, *Massachusetts in Mourning*, 11–12.
- [46] *New-York Tribune*, 9 Oct. 1856.
- [47] Higginson to Louisa Higginson, 24 Sept. 1856, Houghton Library.
- [48] Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 56. For more on radical abolitionist tactics, see Perry, *Radical Abolitionism* and Kraditor, *Means and Ends*. For a recent study that highlights the occasional moments in which Garrison equivocated on his non-resistant stance, see Harrold, *The Rise of Aggressive Abolitionism*, esp. 17–29.
- [49] *Liberator*, 2 Nov. 1855.
- [50] *Liberator*, 9 May 1856, 8 Aug. 1856.
- [51] *Liberator*, 5 Feb. 1858.
- [52] See Higginson, *Address to the Voters*, 3.
- [53] Emerson, 'Nature,' 1: 34, 37.
- [54] Higginson, Field Book, 23 July 1861, Houghton Library.
- [55] In the mid-1700s, Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg outlined what he called 'the doctrine of correspondence,' which looked to nature rather than Scripture for fundamental moral truths (Packer, 'The Transcendentalists,' 2: 378). Emerson made the same point quite simply, writing, 'Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact' (Emerson, 'Nature,' 1: 18). Higginson, for his part, thought the doctrine of correspondence was an idea that was readily apparent to all, concluding that it was hardly a novel theory, but rather 'as old and familiar as the senses of mankind' (Higginson, 'Man and Nature,' 123).
- [56] Higginson, *Massachusetts in Mourning*, 14–5.
- [57] For more on turn-of-the-century male body projects, see Kasson, *Houdini*.
- [58] Higginson, 'Gymnastics,' 285.
- [59] Higginson, 'A Letter to a Dyspeptic,' 468–9.
- [60] Newburyport *Union*, 6 Nov 1850.
- [61] *Liberator*, 2 Nov. 1855.
- [62] Newburyport *Union*, 6 Nov. 1850.
- [63] *Liberator*, 2 Feb. 1854.
- [64] *Proceedings of the State Disunion Convention*, 41.
- [65] *Proceedings of the State Disunion Convention*, 31. For more on Higginson's commitment to disunion, see Mary Thatcher Higginson, *Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, 76.
- [66] Higginson explained his decision not to join Brown as follows: 'Did I follow only my own inclination, without thinking of other ties, I should join you in person if I could not in purse....But for the present, I am restrained' (Higginson to [John Brown], 1 May 1859, Boston Public Library). Most likely his wife Mary's poor health was the preeminent 'tie' that

kept him from joining Brown, but Higginson also expressed concern that his fellow ‘Secret Six’ conspirators’ reluctance might have undermined the prospects of the mission. For more on John Brown and the ‘Secret Six,’ see Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators* and Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*.

- [67] Henry David Thoreau, quoted in Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 232.
- [68] Potter, *The Impending Crisis*, 384.
- [69] Higginson, *Contemporaries*, 278, 238, 245.
- [70] *Liberator*, 8 Aug. 1856.
- [71] *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 2 June 1854; *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 9 June 1854. For similar efforts to link abolitionism to the American Revolution, see the *Liberator*, 14 Dec. 1833.
- [72] *New-York Tribune*, 17 Oct. 1856. Jared Sparks, a Harvard historian in the 1840s and 1850s, wrote and edited a number of collections on the American Revolution and its leading figures; Richard Hildreth, an antislavery activist and historian, published the popular six-volume *History of the United States of America between 1849 and 1853*.
- [73] *New-York Tribune*, 17 Oct. 1856. Emphasis in original.
- [74] Higginson to Dabney family, 9 Oct. 1856, in Higginson, *Letters and Journals*, 142.
- [75] Channing, *Self-Culture*, 10, 15. For more on self-culture, see Robinson, *Apostle of Culture* and Howe, *Making the American Self*.
- [76] Emerson, quoted in Robinson, *Apostle of Culture*, 55.
- [77] *Liberator*, 8 June 1855.
- [78] Higginson, Journal, 2 May 1849, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
- [79] Higginson, ‘The Sunny Side of the Transcendental Period,’ in Higginson, *Magnificent Activist*, 571–2.
- [80] *National Antislavery Standard*, 20 June 1857. Here, as he had in his Kansas articles, Higginson framed the transformation he hoped for in gendered terms, suggesting that the change he sought to cultivate would not so much create better people as better men. And this interpretation, in turn, dovetails with recent arguments that the many references to manhood or manliness in the 1850s, when coupled with the conflict and violence of that decade, suggest a ‘masculinization’ of abolitionism in that decade. Masculinized rhetoric, so the argument goes, went hand-in-hand with masculinized tactics, which departed from the ‘feminine’ tactics of Garrisonian moral suasion. Yet to apply such an interpretation to Higginson would ignore some critical facts about the Transcendentalist. First, his conception of the term ‘manliness’ was quite capacious. Higginson contrasted manliness with playfulness, childhood, even artifice or machinery, indicating that at the very least it was not a wholly gendered term for him. Second, Higginson was an early and strong supporter of women’s rights. He regularly argued against the circumscription of women’s roles to the domestic sphere, holding that success in a variety of typically male roles was more than enough to prove that women deserved every opportunity as men. As he put it, ‘If Maria Mitchell can discover comets, and Harriet Hosmer carve statues; if Appolonia Jagiello can fight in one European revolution...and Lucretia Mott...can preach good sermons; then all these are points gained forever, and the case is settled so far’ (Higginson, *Woman and Her Wishes*, 8). He even wrote a hagiographic article about the heroic military leadership displayed by Anne Marie Louise D’Orléans in the Second War of the Fronde in seventeenth-century France (see Higginson, ‘Mademoiselle’s Campaign’). For arguments for the masculinization of the antislavery movement in the 1850s, see Horton and Horton, ‘The Affirmation of Manhood,’ 128–50 and Dixon, *Perfecting the Family*, 157–202.
- [81] *Liberator*, 28 May 1858.
- [82] See McPherson, ed., *Black Rebellion*.
- [83] Higginson, ‘Denmark Vesey,’ 730.
- [84] Higginson, ‘Nat Turner’s Insurrection,’ 175.
- [85] Higginson, ‘Physical Courage,’ 732.
- [86] Higginson, ‘Up the St. Mary’s,’ 422, 425. See also Scott, ed., *The War of the Rebellion*, 14: 195.
- [87] Higginson, ‘Up the St. Mary’s,’ 427.
- [88] Higginson, ‘Up the St. Mary’s,’ 432.

- [89] Higginson, *Journal*, 85.
- [90] Higginson to Louisa Higginson, 26 Sept 1862, in Higginson, *Complete Civil War Journal*, 235.
- [91] Higginson, *Journal*, 156, 155.
- [92] See, for example, Higginson, *Journal*, 144, 167 and Higginson to James T. Fields, n.d., in Higginson, *Complete Civil War Journal*, 249.
- [93] Higginson, *Journal*, 87. It is important to note that this interest in the male physique also extended to his white soldiers. In 1862, for example, he wrote to his mother in Massachusetts of the 'splendid physique' of a white lieutenant who trained under him (Higginson to Louisa Higginson, 7 Sept. 1862, in Higginson, *Complete Civil War Journal*, 233). For a provocative, though not entirely convincing, argument that Higginson's fascination with his black soldiers' bodies reflected a 'proto-Mapplethorpean' gaze, see Looby, 'As Thoroughly as the Most Faithful Philanthropist,' 71–115. Looby, unfortunately, too easily conflates aesthetic appreciation with erotic desire. In fact, the lone instance in his Civil War journal in which he raised the issue of sexual desire explicitly focused on a black woman rather than a black man. After discussing the wife of one of his men—'a superb looking woman' who is 'jet black, with good features, & a figure & gait which are queenly'—Higginson concluded, 'One can easily see how men must degenerate into vices as planters on these solitary estates.' Such evidence would point more to a fascination with black women than black men, though Higginson also added that 'most of the black women here are utterly repulsive in aspect & attire' (Higginson, *Journal*, 58).
- [94] Higginson to Louisa Higginson, 28 Nov. 1862, in *Complete Civil War Journal*, 248.
- [95] Higginson, *Journal*, 47.
- [96] For more on blackface minstrelsy, see Lott, *Love and Theft* and Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*.
- [97] Higginson, *Journal*, 193.
- [98] Higginson, *Journal*, 192–3.
- [99] Higginson, *Journal*, 106, 176–7.
- [100] Higginson, *Journal*, 111, 143.
- [101] Higginson, *Cheerful Yesterdays*, 267–8.
- [102] Higginson, 'A Night in the Water,' 393–5.
- [103] Higginson to Wendell Phillips, 11 July 1864, Houghton Library.
- [104] Higginson to Mary and Susan Louisa Higginson, 9 Oct. 1865, Houghton Library.
- [105] Higginson, 'Some War Scenes Revisited,' 9.
- [106] Higginson, 'Literature as an Art,' 745.
- [107] Higginson, *Contemporaries*, 275–6.
- [108] Higginson, 'Literature as an Art,' 745.

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