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Henry David Thoreau's support of John Brown: the affinity of two reformers

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Henry David Thoreau's support of John Brown:
The affinity of two reformers

by

Neil Clarence Gustafson

A Thesis Submitted to the
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INTRODUCTION

Why Henry David Thoreau, the hermit philosopher, chose to support John Brown, violent abolitionist and convicted criminal, continues to be a controversial question. By titling his discussion of the men "An Eccentric Kinship," Herbert L. Carson has captured for many the inconsistency and improbability of such a match.¹ Vincent Buranelli, in an article entitled "The Case Against Thoreau," has stated that Thoreau's support of an obviously insane John Brown is indicative of Henry's ill-founded and impractical philosophic positions.²

However, other men, such as Franklin B. Sanborn, a friend and biographer of both Henry Thoreau and John Brown, found nothing eccentric about their kinship. "The two idealists, both in revolt against the civil government then established in this country, because of its base subservience to slavery, found themselves friends from the beginning of their acquaintance."³ Similarly, A. Bronson Alcott found reason for a positive relationship. "The men have much in common: the sturdy manliness, straightforwardness, and independence."⁴ Undoubtedly, Alcott's and Sanborn's strong abolitionist sentiments welcomed a positive relationship between Brown and Thoreau and perhaps caused them to magnify the similarities of the two.

For the most part, discussions of Thoreau's support of Brown, unfortunately, are based only on his few famous speeches in defense of Brown. It is my contention that a recognition of the similarities in the backgrounds of the two men and an acknowledgment of the importance
of the general reform atmosphere in the nineteenth century are es-
rential to an understanding of Thoreau's support for Brown. It is the
intent of this paper, then, to evaluate the association between Brown
and Thoreau in three steps: (1) A brief summary of the social climate
of the first half of the nineteenth century will be presented; (2) Brown
and Thoreau will be placed individually against this background, first,
by tracing the early life of each of them and, second, by delineating
their personal thoughts on slavery and their development as abolition-
ist; (3) Brown's activities from 1856-1860, which led to Thoreau's
appeals in his behalf, will be summarized, and then reasons for
Thoreau's support of Brown will be put forth — based on Thoreau's
long history of abolitionist sentiments and his Transcendentalist be-
liefs. Through such an approach it may be shown that the kinship be-
tween Henry Thoreau and John Brown was not so eccentric as it has been
judged to be.
NINETEENTH CENTURY REFORM

The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of humanitarianism and reform in America, a feeling and movement which perhaps had its roots in New England.

At the beginning of the decade of the 'thirties, William Ellery Channing, the New England liberal, summed up the spirit of the age. It was, he observed, "an age of great movement" which had shown, as had no other age, a "tendency to exalt a people." Channing discerned a common basis in a new perception of human brotherhood. "Every age teaches its own lesson," he declared, "The lesson of this age is that of sympathy with the suffering, and of devotion to the progress of the whole human race."5

William Lloyd Garrison echoed these sentiments in his lead editorial in the first issue of an abolitionist paper, Genius of Universal Emancipation (September 2, 1829). He stated that the paper was devoted to three causes: "The overthrow of slavery, the abolition of intemperance, and the outlawing of war."6 This was a time when "Morality bulked almost as large as public affairs, and was indeed a public issue."7

Many of the important people of that era are linked with reform movements. Wendell Phillips, Lydia Maria Child, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Theodore Parker, John Greenleaf Whittier, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, James Russell Lowell, and William Cullen Bryant were all either abolitionist leaders or had provided support for the abolitionist cause. But, as stated, the reform movement was larger than the antislavery cause. "Nineteenth-century reform touched on almost every aspect of American life—education, labor, politics, debt, war, dress, health, family life, church, prison, the poor, the crippled, and the
Reforms in education, the Unitarian developments in religion, the Associationist movements, and the growth of the Transcendental school of philosophy—to mention only a few—are all indicative of a moral, intellectual, and emotional evolution in America.

The controversy caused by this evolution was considerable. The result was a breed of stubborn individualists who acted according to their beliefs whether or not they were in accord with the majority opinion. Such a result is to be expected. Most of the reform movements stressed the sanctity of the individual, the right of all men to be equal, the necessity of obeying the dictates of one's conscience. "It was now argued that no single code fits all situations adequately and that each individual must be left perfectly free to judge for himself what his actual duty on any given occasion is."9

Men who felt strongly about a cause were willing to risk the threat of violence and death. In 1835, the building in which the Liberator was published was attacked by a mob wanting to tar and feather Garrison, who escaped with the help of police through a back window.10 Elijah Lovejoy was murdered by a mob in 1837 when he attempted to defend the press of his abolitionist newspaper, The Observer, in Alton, Illinois.11 In 1831, Nat Turner led a revolt of slaves that "resulted in the massacre of nearly sixty whites, most of whom were women and children, in Southampton County, Virginia."12

A catalyst for most reform movements was religion. Many of the reformers—even when they were not ministers like Lovejoy, Emerson, Parker, and others—were deeply religious. Garrison was exemplary as
a devout man of unwavering religious principles. But like many reformers in his day, Garrison became dissatisfied with the church's conservative approach to reform. Garrison, and other radical abolitionists, considered conservatism in reform a hypocritical stand for an institution which preached love and brotherhood between all men. The result was that the churches experienced much controversy leading to the founding of new religious and philosophic factions.

Such was the time in which John Brown and Henry Thoreau grew up and attained adulthood—a time of country-wide concern for the underdog; a time of both religious fervor and controversy; a time of ingrained individualism and a belief in "the right" and the individual's duty to strive toward it.
John Brown's American ancestry can be traced to Peter Brown, one of the Puritan dissenters who made passage on the Mayflower. Peter Mills, on the maternal side, immigrated from Holland early in the eighteenth century. Both families were Puritan in theology, and the records indicate several ministers on the Mills' side. John Brown and his father, Owen, held important offices in local congregations. Both of Brown's grandfathers served as officers in the American Revolution in which his paternal grandfather, Captain John Brown, died. 13

Owen Brown, father of John Brown of Harpers Ferry, was a man of strong Calvinist beliefs. He had been raised in a devoutly religious home, and after his father's death in the Revolution was forced early in life to work hard and pray for the mercy of God to maintain his physical and spiritual existence. But the loss of his father also caused in Owen what he recognized as religious uncertainty. Constantly questioning his position over the fires of hell, he sought the help of ministers who strengthened his resolve against temptation and sin. Owen also developed his first abolitionist sentiments under the tutorship of one of these ministers, the Reverend Jeremiah Hallock. 14

In 1793, Owen married Ruth Mills, the daughter of a Congregational minister, in West Simsbury, Connecticut. In 1799, after developing a successful tanning business in Norfolk, Virginia, the Browns arrived in Torrington, Connecticut, where John Brown was born on May 9, 1800. 15

As can be seen, John Brown was born into a traditionally respectable, Puritan, hard-working family—a family that was certainly patriotic, if
not, at times, militant. He, like his father, was very much a product of the New England moral code often labeled the Protestant Ethic. And John's father also provided him with an intense anti-slavery example. When Owen broke the family tradition of living in the East and generally in New England to move to Ohio in 1805, he took two hundred years of Calvinist morality and a personal hatred of slavery with him.

In imitation of his father, John was true to the family pattern in his religious and slavery attitudes. At the age of twelve he witnessed the beating of a Negro boy with an iron fire shovel, an act which he insisted made him "a most determined foe of slavery from then on." At about the age of nineteen, Brown and a friend hid a runaway slave in their cabin. At about this same time Brown showed a general humanitarian attitude by getting a young horsethief indentured to his victim, thereby keeping the youngster out of jail. Undoubtedly, the fact that Owen Brown had settled in Hudson, Ohio, a strong abolitionist town, worked to strengthen John's anti-slavery position.

Later, after his marriage, John Brown moved to Pennsylvania in 1826 where he built into his new barn a secret room for runaway slaves. There he was constantly concerned with abolitionist activities and in spreading his own religious beliefs among his neighbors.

Theologically Brown was an orthodox nineteenth-century Calvinist who believed in foreordination and providential signs, in the doctrine of election, innate depravity, and in man's total dependence on a sovereign and arbitrary God. He believed, too, that once an individual had "experienced religion" through "God's infinite grace and mercy," then God became for that person a constant, all-powerful, directive presence in his life.
Brown's neighbors were to receive his word of God from his own mouth when he organized a church on the second floor of his tannery and preached to them. He also built a school and dedicated much of his time to instructing the young and old in religious and moral principles.²⁰

Brown's own children, of course, were to receive strict religious instruction and an equally severe indoctrination to the evils of slavery, as is witnessed by his son, John Jr., who led his own legion in the Kansas wars, and his other sons, some of whom followed their father to Harpers Ferry and died.

It took five and one-half decades to create "Brown of Ossawatomie." His hatred of slavery and his staunch belief that God had created him for the destruction of that vile institution was molded by an anti-slavery and deeply religious family, by his abolitionist environment in Ohio and Pennsylvania, and by personal encounters with the cruelty of slavery. In 1837, Brown listened to the sermon of an abolitionist minister who was denouncing the recent murder of Elijah Lovejoy, the anti-slavery editor. "As the meeting drew to a close, Brown suddenly stood up, raised his right hand, and vowed that here, before God, in this church, in the presence of these witnesses, he would consecrate his life to the destruction of slavery."²¹ So, a full twenty years before his "insane and impulsive" actions at Harpers Ferry and in Kansas, Brown made a public avowal of his intentions.

John Brown was a young man of seventeen, already deeply involved in religion and abolition, when Henry Thoreau was born. But Henry was
eventually to acquire attitudes similar to Brown's from his parents, John and Cynthia. John Thoreau was a quiet man who early in life had difficulty making a living, but by taking over a pencil factory started by his brother-in-law, he was to find reasonable financial security. Perhaps John's most dominant attribute was that of honesty. "His neighbors thought of him as 'an amiable and most lovable gentleman, but far too honest and scarcely sufficiently energetic for this exacting yet not over scrupulous world of ours.'"22 According to one account "he even sold his gold wedding ring to satisfy his creditors."23 Not only did John suffer from over-honesty, but also from recurring illness.

But if John was quiet and at times sickly, his wife was the opposite. Cynthia was social, strong-willed, and energetic. Her house was always filled with her own family and the boarders she took in to supplement the family income. Henry was raised in a home of bustling activity with his mother, the ardent reformer, often causing the turmoil. When writing of the Thoreaus, Henry S. Salt said: "It must be added that they entered with such zeal into the agitation for the abolition of slavery, that when that question began to be debated in Massachusetts, they were willing to make their house a rendezvous for abolitionist conspirators."24

The Thoreaus were also in the center of the religious turmoil over the switch from Trinitarianism to Unitarianism in Concord's Congregationalist church, in 1826. While the stricter Calvinist members of the congregation, including two of Henry's aunts, broke away and formed their own church, Cynthia adopted the Unitarian creed. Later,
under the influence of her sisters-in-law, she attempted to switch her membership to the Trinitarian church but was denied membership. Sophia, Henry's sister, once illustrated her inherited family independence by choosing to walk out of church rather than take communion, a sacrament she did not accept.

The Thoreau children grew up in a happy, religious home where they developed a rigorous individualism. Henry's early education consisted of both public and private schooling. He was a good student, but his serious attitude and sombre look, along with his reluctance to participate in the activities of the other students, earned him the title of "judge." Little is said of his formal religious training, but in later life he took the example of his father, who apparently never formally joined a church.

Although his parents were obviously abolitionists, whether or not Thoreau should be included as a proponent of that movement has been a source of controversy. Canby, a major biographer of Thoreau, declared that "Henry Thoreau was never an abolitionist." An article entitled "Henry David Thoreau, Abolitionist," suggests otherwise, a position I agree with. Omitting the fact that he was raised in an abolitionist home in a town which in 1837 had formed an anti-slavery society of which his mother was a charter member, and also overlooking the fact that he early associated with Emerson and others of anti-slavery sentiments, Mr. Canby's statement can be refuted easily by a review of Thoreau's own writing and actions.

When, in 1842, Henry was elected curator of the Concord Lyceum, he
arranged for Wendell Phillips, a famous abolitionist, to speak on December 21 of that year. He also got Theodore Parker, the abolitionist minister and eventual stout supporter of John Brown, to speak on March 22 of the following year. When certain townspeople who had been upset by the content of Phillips' speech discovered that Henry had invited Phillips to speak again, they organized a special meeting of Lyceum members, hoping to persuade them that Phillips should not be allowed to speak again later that year. But Thoreau informed Phillips of the gathering, and the abolitionist came to the meeting and won, in debate, the right to make his second speech. "The very next day a triumphant Thoreau sent off his first and only known letter to the editor—an epistle to William Lloyd Garrison of the anti-slavery Liberator eloquently and vigorously defending Phillips' right to speak." Garrison subsequently published the entire letter in the Liberator.

In April, 1844, Thoreau's review of the anti-slavery publication, the Herald of Freedom, was published in The Dial. The essay is basically a critique of editor Nathaniel P. Rogers' style and his editorial policies. But it also indicates a strong affirmative attitude on the part of Thoreau toward the content of the paper. "Mr. Rogers seems to us to have occupied an honorable and manly position in these days, and in this country, making the press a living and breathing organ to reach the hearts of men." Thoreau, later in the essay, asserted that the Herald was closest to the sentiment of a restless New England public, and he closed by quoting several of Rogers' announcements.
of abolitionist meetings.\textsuperscript{33}

Thoreau's journal entry of October 1, 1851, began as follows: "Just put a fugitive slave, who has taken the name of Henry Williams, into the cars for Canada."\textsuperscript{34} Thoreau certainly felt satisfaction at being able to help the runaway, for earlier that year, in April, he had been mortified by the return of a young slave, Thomas Sims, into bondage. He devoted several pages of his journal to the action taken by the Boston authorities. He denounced the Fugitive Slave Law, passed in the previous year; he declared that the law must be trampled into the dust. Finally, he discussed the do-nothing, say-nothing stand of the press, stating that "The Commonwealth, and the Liberator, are the only papers, so far as I know, which make themselves heard in the condemnation of the cowardice and meanness of the authorities of Boston as lately exhibited." He made a recommendation. "I would advise abolitionists to make as earnest and vigorous and persevering an assault on the press, as they have already made, and with effect too, on the church." This rather poorly written passage betrays his enthusiasm; and in the height of his enthusiasm, he suggests a boycott of those papers which did not speak out against this act of tyranny.\textsuperscript{35}

The evidence of his writings and actions would seemingly negate Canby's assertion that "Thoreau was never an abolitionist." It is true that Thoreau did not join an organization, but he obviously supported and participated in abolitionist activities. Perhaps two reasons kept Thoreau from joining abolitionist groups: Thoreau, the extreme
individualist, had little faith in organizations; and Thoreau was unable to dedicate himself to any single cause, believing that the institution of slavery was a significant, but single, manifestation of a decadent society. Only during a few months in 1859 was he able to drop everything else in deference to his concern for John Brown and the abolitionist cause. 36
REASONS FOR SUPPORT

There exists no controversy over whether John Brown was an abolitionist; rather, the question is, was he saint or Satan, inspired or crazed? Stephen B. Oates, biographer of Brown, has expressed the confusion and dissonance of opinion over the man. "Either he was an authentic and immortal hero who sacrificed his life so that America's 'poor despised Africans' might be free, or he was a 'mean, terrible, vicious man,' a demented horsethief, a murderer, a psychopath." Brown is often called insane; in fact, his own relatives and friends submitted personal accounts of their conviction of Brown's insanity in a last attempt to save him after his Virginia trial. Some who attack Thoreau's support of Brown do so on the strength of the argument that Thoreau should have recognized the insanity of Brown as well as the insanity of the Harpers Ferry raid. In general, the petitions presented after Brown's trial were based on the supposed insanity of several of Brown's family. Ironically, his first wife's purported insanity was cited as proof.

It was felt by many, especially Brown's enemies, that the impulsiveness of the Harpers Ferry raid and the early murders along the Pottawatomie river in Kansas were strong reasons for labeling Brown insane. And certainly, the Pottawatomie massacre remains unjustifiable, for the execution deaths of the five pro-slavery men were systematic and cold-blooded.

On the night of May 24, 1856, at about eleven o'clock, Brown and
sons Frederick, Owen, Salmon, Oliver, and son-in-law Henry Thompson, arrived at the cabin of James P. Doyle, a pro-slavery Kansan who had a few days earlier served as a juror in a trial attempting to take legal action against anti-slavery men. Brown's party forced Doyle and his sons, Drury and William, outside, after sparing a fourteen-year-old son. Brown's sons proceeded to execute the men with huge swords. Then the party proceeded to Allen Wilkinson's cabin. Wilkinson had served as district attorney, pro tem, at the trial in which Doyle had been a juror. After taking Wilkinson from his family, he was murdered in much the same manner as the Doyles had been. Shortly after midnight, Brown and his men had arrived at James Harris' cabin. Four men were there: Harris, who had also been a juror at the trial; Jerome Granville, a traveler; John S. Wightman, a local farmer; and William Sherman, a somewhat notorious pro-slavery man. After questioning the men, Sherman was executed while Harris and the others were spared. Thus ended the terror along the Pottawatomie. It is difficult to explain why Harris was not killed.39

To justify Brown's actions is impossible; to trace what may have caused him to carry out the murders—keeping in mind his deep hatred for the pro-slavery cause and his personal belief that God had chosen him for this work—is relatively simple. First one must remember that trouble over the slavery issue had existed in Kansas long before Brown's arrival. In fact, Brown came to Kansas at the beckoning of his sons, who had arrived earlier and already experienced difficulty with pro-slavery factions.
In the months between Brown's arrival in October, 1855, and the massacre in May of the next year, many events had occurred which were depressing to the abolitionists, particularly to Brown who believed that every pro-slavery success was a victory for the devil and a crime against God. The free-state cause in Kansas had suffered many setbacks which had not been revenged. Free-state Lawrence had just been attacked by anti-abolitionists from Missouri, and several buildings had been burned including two housing free-state newspapers. How much information Brown had about the Lawrence raid and how accurate it had been is uncertain, but upon hearing of it he left his son John's raiders, and with his other sons, he embarked upon the infamous massacre. Previous to the Lawrence attack, six free-state Kansans had been murdered; a free-state governor had been ousted by pro-slavery factions; a bogus legislature had been supported by President Pierce and a pro-South cabinet; and anti-abolitionist newspapers had long advocated all-out war against the free-staters. Even though Brown's Pottawatomie atrocity remains unjustifiable, the raid was not without considerable provocation—especially to a man who believed "it is infinitely better that this generation should be swept away from the face of the earth, than that slavery shall continue to exist." 40

A second major argument of those who call Brown a murderer, and an obviously insane one at that, is based on the supposed impulsiveness of the Harpers Ferry raid. But the assumption that the Harpers Ferry raid was a matter of impulse is greatly exaggerated. It is known that
Brown had commenced planning an Eastern raid at least twelve years before Harpers Ferry; for in November, 1847, Brown met in Springfield, Massachusetts, with the prominent runaway slave, Frederick Douglass; and there Brown revealed a sketchy plan of such an attack in the Allegheny mountains. As Douglass recorded it, Brown said, "These mountains are the basis of my plan. God has given the strength of the hills to freedom; they were placed here for emancipation of the negro race; they are full of natural forts, where one man for defense will be equal to a hundred for attack." 41

The attack in Virginia had been Brown's major obsession since his first Kansas trip, and the raid itself was the subject of months of preparation. The excursion was well-ordered in accordance with Brown's general tendency to plan extensively and execute his plan. However, his plot was narrow and incomplete even though he did not hurry. As his business adventures in Ohio and Pennsylvania would indicate, Brown had a history of incompleteness and lack of insight and judgment. Also, he refused to listen to advice, believing, as always, that his decisions were inspired by God. For instance, after waiting months for recruits who never did show up for the Harpers Ferry raid, Brown was unhappy but certain that God wanted the attack to go on with the few men available. 42

The Virginia raid was not a matter of impulse, and it failed because Brown was an incompetent general and tactician, not because he suffered from insane impulses. One should be careful not to confuse lack of insight with insanity.
It is unlikely that Thoreau knew of Brown's involvement at Pottawatomie; Oates states that nobody in the Boston area knew of Brown's actions there.\textsuperscript{43} It is also improbable that Thoreau, at the time of his speeches in defense of Brown, knew either of the decade of planning in preparation for the Harpers Ferry raid or many of the details of the raid itself.\textsuperscript{44} Thoreau must have based his support of Brown on his personal observation of Brown during his speeches in Concord, the content of the Concord addresses, and his private discussions with the Captain.

Sanborn's account of the positive tenor of their first meeting was recorded earlier in this paper. Harding says only that Thoreau contributed a "trifle" when Brown pleaded for funds, because Brown would not state how he intended to use the funds. When Brown returned on May 8, 1859, Thoreau received his speech positively.\textsuperscript{45} But Thoreau's own words speak more accurately of his impression. In his "Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau sketches Brown's family history. Then he relates his summation of the character of Brown in several statements:

I should say that he was an old-fashioned man in his respect for the Constitution, and his faith in the permanence of this union. Slavery he deemed to be wholly opposed to these, and he was its determined foe.

A man of rare common sense and directness of speech, as of action; a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles,—that was what distinguished him. Not yielding to a whim or transient impulse, but carrying out the purpose of a life.

He was not in the least a rhetorician,... had no need to invent anything but to tell the truth, and communicate his own resolution; therefore he appeared incomparably strong.\textsuperscript{46}
Why would Brown impress Thoreau as a good man, strong and honest in his determination to destroy slavery? We must recall only that Brown had been raised in a home which systematically taught a hatred of slavery; that since childhood he had been a determined foe of that institution and had long been active in underground movements; that he was a devout Calvinist who believed in "providential signs" and that God guided the actions of those he elected. We must remember that Brown could not help being moved by the general reform atmosphere in the North. Keeping these elements of Brown's background in mind, and recalling that he had in the previous few years seen the cruelties of slavery and had faced and feared the growing strength of his slave-state enemies, it is then not difficult to understand how John Brown's inspired resolve against slavery should be convincing to the sensitive mind of Henry Thoreau.

And, also, one must not forget that Thoreau had not been raised in a vacuum. He and his family, as earlier documented, had long been involved in the reform movement. Thoreau had lately been greatly frustrated by the Fugitive Slave Law, and as a result, had helped runaways escape to Canada. In his speech "Slavery in Massachusetts," he attacked his own state for its inactivity and its willingness to submit to the "fugitive" law and to actually aid in the return of runaways to the South. He discussed the shame of a state that allowed Anthony Burns and Thomas Sims to be carried off. 47

Truly, there was much to explain Thoreau's support of Brown. Thoreau was a perceptive man. It is possible, if the writer may here
be allowed to conjecture, that during his long discussion with Brown in his mother's home, Thoreau could have heard much that convinced him. And even though much would necessarily remain unsaid in the course of a single evening's discussion, it is possible that Thoreau could discern in Brown's character those things which mark an individual as a man of principle. For Brown had shown himself to be a man of principle. For example, in 1858, while in Kansas, Brown and his raiding party had come upon the murderer of his son, Frederick, sitting alone on the porch of his home. Brown refused to kill the man and would allow no one in his party to even harm him. "I would not go one inch to take his life; I do not harbour the feelings of revenge. I act from a principle. My aim and object is to restore human rights." Thoreau was later to read an account of Brown's supposed recruiting policy which he included in his "Plea." "I would rather," said he, 'have the small-pox, yellow fever, and cholera, all together in my camp, than a man without principle. . . . Give me men of good principles,—God-fearing men,—men who respect themselves."

Thoreau's search for a man of principle, a transcendental individual who knew the right and pursued it, had its beginnings years before he met Brown. Thoreau had become interested in the writings of Carlyle. In an article, "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," published in 1847, Thoreau illustrated that he found much of Carlyle excellent in philosophy as well as style. "A Carlylean doctrine Thoreau heartily approved of was the insistence that each man search for that one work which fits him best, then enter wholeheartedly into it." This sentiment was echoed
when Thoreau spoke of Brown in his "Plea" as "a man of principles. . . .
carrying out the purpose of a life," a statement earlier cited. Thoreau
seemed to espouse Carlyle's doctrine of heroes. His journal is filled
with entries concerning Carlyle's doctrines (though these entries are
undated, they are included in Volume I of his Journal, and are presumed
to be from the 1845-47 period). Thoreau, at this time, makes an ob-
servation of his own which seems to summarize the necessary attributes
of the transcendental man, the hero: "A man must only be virtuous
enough." Several years earlier, when discussing "Bravery and
Cowardice" in his journal (December, 1839), Thoreau seemed to fore-
shadow his search for the good man. "There is no ill which may not be
dissipated like the dark, if you let in a stronger light upon it." A
journal entry of May, 1850, further illustrates Thoreau's faith in
the hero and belief in his unique characteristics:

Nothing memorable was ever accomplished in a prosaic mood
of mind. The heroes and discoverers have found true more
than was previously believed, only when they were expecting
and dreaming of something more than their contemporaries
dreamed of,—when they were in a frame of mind prepared in some
measure for the truth.

As Harding asserts, Thoreau's Transcendentalism caused him to have faith
in the individual's ability to right social problems. "He believed
firmly that reform always began with the individual."

In his most famous essay, "Civil Disobedience," published in 1849,
Thoreau demands that the individual resist an immoral government:
"I think that it is enough if they have God on their side."
In
"Slavery in Massachusetts," delivered on July 4, 1854, he echoes this
attitude. "What is wanted is men, not of policy, but of probity,—who recognize a higher law than the Constitution, or the decision of the majority."  

"When John Brown visited Concord, Thoreau met a man ready to act his belief." Brown believed himself inspired by God, and Thoreau seemed to recognize this. True, Brown based his belief in inspiration on the Calvinist attitude that God guided those whom he had chosen, while Thoreau's belief in inspired ones was grounded in Transcendentalism. Thoreau believed, as Emerson stated in "Self-Reliance," that every man, if he trusted himself and his intuition, might perceive "that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within." Or, as Thoreau had written in Walden, "No man ever followed his genius till it misled him." But both men, though their theologies differed, knew that slavery was the great evil of the day, and both strongly felt that it was the individual's responsibility to obey the dictates of his conscience.

To Thoreau, Brown was the man of principles, the man who recognized and obeyed the higher law. Brown was a Carlylean hero, the man who had acknowledged his life's work and pursued it relentlessly. Thoreau's belief in Brown's heroism was made clear in his speech, "The Last Days of John Brown": "Look not to legislatures and churches for your guidance, not to any soulless incorporated bodies, but to inspired or inspired ones." Henry even chided the weakness of those who called Brown insane. "Editors persevered for a good while in saying that Brown was
crazy; but at last they said only that it was 'a crazy scheme,' and the only evidence brought to prove it was that it cost him his life. 60 Those who had doubts about Brown's sanity, he felt, should question their own position, as a statement recorded in Thoreau's journal a decade before indicates: "Referred to the world's standards, the hero, the discoverer, is insane, its greatest men are all insane." 61 Thoreau was intimating that the effecting of monumental and necessary change demands actions and men that most will label insane because of the novelty and force of the action, the strength and spiritual power of the men.

The difficulty encountered by those who would understand the actions of men in the past—in this instance, Thoreau and Brown—results from the inability of investigators to adopt the possibly archaic beliefs of the men or to understand the sociological climate of the era in which the men lived. The twentieth-century writer may not comprehend the vastness and pervading character of the nineteenth-century reform movement. He will have difficulty accepting the Calvinist or Transcendental ideas of inspiration. But Calvinism was adhered to in 1800-1860 by millions, and the Transcendental philosophy had captured the minds of Coleridge, Carlyle, Emerson, and many other intellectuals besides Thoreau.

It was the intention of this writer to investigate why Thoreau supported Brown, not why his support may seem unreasonable in 1971. And, in fact, the Civil War may have proven the validity of the approach
Brown took and Thoreau supported, for the ultimate solution to that "ir-repressible conflict" was a violent one, the approach of John Brown. We may not accept the Calvinism of Brown nor the Transcendentalism of Thoreau that, to them, made their positions justifiable. But, when one considers the backgrounds of the two—which include for both a family grounded in abolitionist activities and a personal belief in the duties of a divinely inspired individual—plus their easy willingness to disobey governmental law in deference to a higher law, then their kinship seems much less improbable.
NOTES


2 Vincent Buranelli, "The Case Against Thoreau," Ethics, 67 (1957), 257-68.


8 Nye, William Lloyd Garrison, p. 36.

9 Spiller, p. 348.


15 Oates, To Purge This Land, pp. 6-7.

16 Oates, To Purge This Land, p. 12.

Brown had long desired to preach the word of God and at the age of sixteen had decided to enter the ministry. An eye ailment forced him to leave the school after a few months (see p. 13).


Harding, p. 11.


Harding, p. 24.

Harding, p. 13.


Ford, pp. 361-62. Ford has sketched Thoreau's development as an abolitionist by noting the anti-slavery activities of his family, and by illustrating that many of his Concord friends were strongly abolitionist. Also, in his attempt to disprove Canby's statement, Ford has traced several early writings which are indicative of strong abolitionist sentiments.

Harding, pp. 142-45.


Harding, p. 119.


38 Oates, To Purge This Land, pp. 329-33.

39 Oates, To Purge This Land, pp. 132-37.


41 Oates, To Purge This Land, p. 62.

42 Oates, To Purge This Land, p. 286.

43 Oates, To Purge This Land, p. 186.

44 "As for his recent failure, we do not know the facts about it," Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Cape Cod and Miscellanies, p. 415.

45 Harding, p. 416.


47 Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," Cape Cod and Miscellanies, pp. 388-408.

48 Oates, To Purge This Land, p. 257.


50 Spiller, p. 393.


52 Thoreau, Journal, I, 100.

54Harding, pp. 120, 126.

55Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," Cape Cod and Miscellanies, p. 369.


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