

Southern Proslavery Thought and Hawthorne's *Life of Franklin Pierce*

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New England will still have her rocks and ice, and I should not wonder if we become a better and a nobler people than ever heretofore. As to the South, I never loved it. We do not belong together; the Union is unnatural, a scheme of man, not an ordinance of God; and as long as it continues, no American of either section will ever feel a genuine thrill of patriotism, such as you Englishmen feel at every breath you draw.

Don't you think England (if we petition her humbly enough) might be induced to receive the New England States back again, in our old Provincial capacity? What a triumph that would be! Or perhaps it would be a better scheme to arrange a kingdom for Prince Alfred by lumping together Canada, New England, and Nova Scotia. Those regions are almost homogeneous as regards manners and character, and cannot long be kept apart, after we lose the counterbalance of our Southern States. For my part, I should be very glad to exchange the South for Canada, though I have not quite made up my mind as to the expediency of coming either under the Queen's sceptre or Prince Alfred's. But if any such arrangement takes place, I shall claim to be

made a peer for having been the first to suggest it. (Hawthorne's letter to Henry A. Bright of December, 17, 1860)¹

Nathaniel Hawthorne found the United States "too various and too extended to form really one country" (CE XVIII 8). The aristocratic Southern planter, he says in "A Book of Autograph," stayed aloof from "the New-Englander with his hereditary Puritanism" (CE XI 360). He mentions in *The House of the Seven Gables* in an assertive though jocular tone that "the descendants of a Pyncheon who had emigrated to Virginia, in some past generation, and become a great planter there--hearing of Hepzibah's destitution . . . would send her a remittance of a thousand dollars" with "the splendid generosity of character, with which their Virginian mixture must have enriched the New England blood" (CE II 65). The North and the South were inevitably opposed to each other for hegemony in politics: Massachusetts struggled, as he wrote in *Grandfather's Chair*, with South Carolina for the chair which "like the wooden Palladium of Troy, was connected with the country's fate" (CE VI 136).

Some recent approaches to the antebellum North and South question the difference between the sections in terms of economic, social, and institutional structures, but despite many similarities the regional distinctiveness ranged from "manners and character" to clusters of traits such as liberalism and anticentralism. In Hawthorne's universe of discourse the South represented everything alien to New England and acted as "the counterbalance" to the North. When the rivalry and heterogeneity among Yankees and Cavaliers extended into the slavery question, resulting from a clash of their visions of social order, he used the South as the counterbalance of Abolitionists who "look at matters with an awful squint"(CE XVIII 89).

Hawthorne's view of the South at the most tempestuous period in the nation's history can be clearly identified in his *Life of Franklin Pierce* (hereafter cited as *Life*). This campaign biography has been discussed exclusively in terms of the American politics in the 1840s and early 1850s, and the scope of Hawthorne's logic of heterogeneity has been narrowed down to his detached attitude to reform and his reconfirmation of Providence and human arrogance. In the pages that follow I will point out that he considered the year 1850 solely from a standpoint of the conflict between the North and the South in the 1830s, and then argue that the South and Southern proslavery thought played a major part in his strategy of logic of heterogeneity.

"Compromise and Other Matters," the sixth chapter of the *Life*, frequently refers the roots of Pierce's attitude toward slavery to the first half of the 1830s which involved the intensification of the slavery controversy. Pierce's opinions on the slavery question, says Hawthorne, have "never since swerved a hair's breadth"(CE XXIII 292) since he was elected member of the lower house of Congress in 1833:

When the series of measures, known under the collective term of the Compromise, were passed by Congress, in 1850, and put to so searching a test, here at the North, the reverence of the people for the Constitution, and their attachment to the Union, General Pierce was true to the principles which he had long ago avowed. At an early period of his Congressional service, he had made known, with the perfect frankness of his character, those opinions upon the slavery question, which he has never since seen occasion to change, in the slightest degree. There is an unbroken consistency in his action with regard to this matter. It is entirely of a piece, from his first entrance

upon public life until the moment when he came forward, while many were faltering, to throw the great weight of his character and influence into the scale in favor of those measures, through which it was intended to redeem the pledges of the Constitution, and to preserve and renew the old love and harmony among the sisterhood of states. . . . In the days when, a young member of Congress, he first raised his voice against agitation, Pierce saw these perils and their consequences. (CE XXIII 350-51)

The source material of the *Life* other than Pierce's Mexican diary has been traced to interviews, letters, and articles in the 1840s and early 1850s, to which Hawthorne acknowledges his indebtedness in his preface and elsewhere, but he makes it clear in the above passage that he has a greater interest in the 1830s, when Pierce "first raised his voice against agitation" because he "dared to love that great and sacred reality--his whole, united, native country--better than the mistiness of a philanthropic theory" (CE XXIII 292). "[A] Union wonderful in its formation, boundless in its hopes, amazing in its destiny" (CE XXIII 368) was preserved through "those measures, through which it was intended to redeem the pledges of the Constitution."

The "old love and harmony among the sisterhood of states" performed its vital function when it went through a very testing ordeal in the 1830s. During this decade the slavery controversy involved the North and the South on a large scale. From the viewpoint of "the social dynamics of controversy," as Bertram Wyatt-Brown puts it, "proslavery and antislavery writers wrote for a common, generally well-read, and civically engaged public, North *and* South"(333). Hawthorne definitely points out that it was "comparatively an easy thing"(CE XXIII 292) for statesmen to fully

recognize "the rights pledged to the south by the constitution"(CE XXIII 292) concerning the slavery question in the 1830s. In this manner he centers his discussion of the slavery question on the controversy of the 1830s rather than that of 1850 when "any great and radical principles" ceased to be "at present in dispute between [the two great parties of the nation]"(CE XXIII 369).

"Compromise and Other Matters" sets forth two views of the slavery question. One of them is clearly identified by Hawthorne as antislavery thought in the North. Conventionally antislavery around the 1830s was divided into three factions: "William Lloyd Garrison the radical, Lewis Tappan and Theodore Dwight Weld the evangelicals, and James G. Birney the political abolitionist"(Walters 17). One of the two main antislavery arguments propounded by him in this chapter of the *Life* is represented by Garrison, while the other can be exemplified by Charles Sumner, with whom Hawthorne established an acquaintance through his oldest friend George Hillard in the late 30s. Sumner criticized "the symbiotic relationship between the slave-holding plantation owners and Northern manufacturers"(Mellow 290), just as the evangelicals and political abolitionists saw in their country "lust for gain and the willingness to sacrifice all to selfish ends"(Scott 68). For the social dynamics of controversy Hawthorne sets each of these two antislavery arguments against proslavery thought.

Hawthorne illustrates the first antislavery argument by citing "[t]he fiercest, the least scrupulous, and the most consistent of those" who are prepared to subvert slavery "by tearing to pieces the Constitution, breaking the pledges which it sanctions, and severing into distracted fragments that common country, which Providence brought into one nation"(CE XXIII 350-51). "The fiercest, the least scrupulous" fervor and radicalism of antislavery

thought emerged in the 1830s. Leader of this radical group, Garrison took the stand of legal positivism and propounded the immediate emancipation of slaves and the demolition of the immoral Constitution which was to him nothing less than a proslavery document. Government and law in American society, he believed, were "fundamentally immoral, with slavery only the worst of its many sins" (Kraditor 8).

As for the counterargument against Garrisonian radicalism, Hawthorne avoids direct reference to any particular theoretical or practical advocate of Southern proslavery thought. It is true that Pierce opposed slavery, but Hawthorne emphasizes in the *Life* that in the early 1830s Pierce "fully recognized, by his votes and by his voice, the rights pledged to the south by the constitution," and that "His approval embraced the whole series of these acts,--as well those which bore hard upon Northern views and sentiments, as those in which the South deemed itself to have made more than reciprocal concessions" (CE XXIII 350). Unlike John Atwood, who "entangled himself in an inextricable knot of duplicity and tergiversation, by an ill-advised effort to be two opposite things at once" (CE XXIII 355), Pierce is the statesman "of practical sagacity--who loves his country as it is, and evolves good from things as they exist, and who demands to feel his firm grasp upon a better reality before he quits the one already gained" (CE XXIII 351):

He considered, too, that the evil would be certain, while the good was, at best, a contingency, and to the clear, practical foresight with which he looked into the future scarcely so much as that;--attended as the movement was, and must be, during its progress, with the aggravated injury of those whose condition it aimed to ameliorate, and terminating, in its possible triumph--if such possibility there were--with

the ruin of two races which now dwelt together in greater peace and affection, it is not too much to say, than had ever elsewhere existed between the taskmaster and the serf. (CE XXIII 351)

The dichotomy between the theorist (philanthropist) and the statesman of practical sagacity was a dispassionate logic often used by proslavery Southerners as well as Northern conservatives in the 1830s. Immediate emancipation for colonization and deportation, for example, led Thomas Roderick Dew, a Virginian, to denounce it as a threat to the economy and labor supply in the South. Working and sounding the problem of slavery and its social evils in the framework of political economy, he openly admitted slavery in Virginia as an evil system:

The evil of *yesterday's* growth may be extirpated to-day, and the vigour of society may heal the wound; but that which is the growth of *ages* may require *ages* to remove. . . . In our southern slave-holding country, the question of emancipation had never been seriously discussed in any of our legislatures, until the whole subject, under the most exciting circumstances, was, during the last winter, brought up for discussion in the Virginia legislature, and plans of partial or total abolition were earnestly pressed upon the attention of that body. . . . But however fine might have been the rhetorical display, however ably some isolated points might have been discussed, still we affirm, with confidence, that no enlarged, wise, and practical plan of operations, was proposed by the abolitionists. . . . We have no doubt that they were acting conscientiously for the best; but it often happens that frail imperfect man, in the too ardent and confident pursuit of imaginary good, runs upon his utter destruction. . . . We shall endeavour to prove,

that the attempt to execute these plans can only have a tendency to increase all the evils of which we complain, as resulting from slavery. If this be true, then the great question of abolition will necessarily be reduced to the question of emancipation, with a permission to remain, which we think can easily be shown to be subversive of the interests, security, and happiness, of both the blacks and whites, and consequently hostile to every principle of expediency, morality, and religion. (Faust 24-27)

Pierce's sentiments about abolition, which Hawthorne claims to be "the Author's own speculations upon the facts before him"(CE XXIII 274) and reaffirms to be "my real sentiments"(CE XVI 605) in a letter of October 13, 1852 to Horatio Bridge, closely parallel those of the above passage by the prominent defender of Southern slavery who strongly influenced the post-1830 proslavery movement.² In this essay, which was published in the *American Quarterly Review* in 1832, Dew discusses and maintains the productiveness of slave labor, and yet considers slavery to be the evil "which is the growth of *ages*." He argues that "something else is requisite to convert slavery into freedom, than the mere enunciation of abstract truths divested of all adventitious circumstances and relations," or "the maxims that 'all men are born equal,' that 'slavery in the abstract is wrong,' that 'the slave has a natural right to regain his liberty,' and so forth"(Faust 28). Thus he contrasts "the rhetorical display" of abolitionists and "the too ardent and confident pursuit of imaginary good," with the "enlarged, wise, and practical plan of operations." Hawthorne observes as cynically that "The theorist may take that view in his closet; the philanthropist by profession may strive to act upon it, uncompromisingly, amid the tumult and warfare of his life" (CE XXIII 351).

Against Southern proslavery thought which stresses practical sagacity, Hawthorne concedes that there is "another view of all these matters" (CE XXIII 351). This view, representing the other of the two main antislavery arguments, belongs to Northern men "who deem the great cause of human welfare all represented and involved in this present hostility against Southern institutions--and who conceive that the world stands still, except so far as that goes forward" (CE XXIII 352). Sumner, a subscriber of the *Liberator* since 1835, never approved its "vindictive, bitter, unchristian" tone (Donald 132), nor attended the abolition meetings held in Boston during "these martyr years of the antislavery movement" (Donald 132). Opposed to approving Garrisonianism, he chose as his model Channing's moderate idea of moral blockade. He held fast to "the Constitution of the United States [which] does not recognize man as *property*" and urged "[t]he moralist, the statesman, the orator, the poet, all in their several ways and moods . . . [to] surround the Southern States with a moral blockade" (Donald 133). His first political speech in November 1845 was still tinged with "Channing's moral blockade against evil" (Donald 140), and even after he began to regard the Free Soil movement as an American counterpart of the European revolutions, and attacked the new Fugitive Slave Act, even willing to sacrifice the Union, he remained a conservative reformer; he never joined Garrison in his attack of the Constitution and the Union; he believed in the Declaration of Independence which pledged to "promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity" (Donald 230) and he saw in American history the possibility of improvement, advancement and betterment.

Hawthorne, however, does not afford liberal space for Sumner's hostility against Southern institutions. On the contrary, he takes no time to proffer "still another view" in the early part of the paragraph which represents

Sumner's ardor for the Northern cause of human welfare:

But there is still another view, and probably as wise a one. It looks upon Slavery as one of those evils, which Divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses shall have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream. There is no instance, in all history, of the human will and intellect having perfected any great moral reform by methods which it adapted to that end; but the progress of the world, at every step, leaves some evil or wrong on the path behind it, which the wisest of mankind, of their own set purpose, could never have found the way to rectify. (CE XXIII 352)

This passage has been read as typical of Hawthorne's view of reform at large. Seeing indeterminacy in the politics of the 1850s, Jonathan Arac identifies the passage as Hawthorne's "fantasy of evanescence" (254) identical with the extinction of Chillingworth and death of Colonel Pyncheon. Sacvan Bercovitch, admitting that the *Life* presents "a certain choice" while *The Scarlet Letter* represents "a metaphysics of choosing," says "skeptical, many faceted Hawthorne remained ideologically fixed," and his "centrist convictions" led him to stick to the Compromise (88). Jennifer Fleischner goes so far as to say that in the *Life* Hawthorne displaces Pierce into "the Victorian angel of the house . . . by virtue of Hawthorne's emphasis on Pierce's passivity and private virtues" (105).³

Radical reformation including philanthropy aroused healthy skepticism in Hawthorne and led to his reconfirmation of Providence and human arrogance in his romances and tales. In this sense the above passage is

Hawthornesque in its detached attitude to reform and its emphasis on Providence, yet it is not to be ignored that "still another view" comes in the same paragraph just after the Northern antislavery argument which mirrors Sumner's faith in the general welfare and progress guaranteed by the Constitution and a moral blockade against the Southern States. "Still another view" contrasts dramatically with this Northern view and yet bears several similarities: both see in the Union the possibility of improvement and progress. "Still another view" which trusts in Providence is "probably as wise a one" as "this present hostility against Southern institutions."

The following quotation from *Memoir on Slavery*, printed in pamphlet form early in 1838 in Charleston, bears a startling similarity to Hawthorne's "still another view." William Harper, author of this essay, rejects the Revolutionary heritage of "the *inalienable* right of liberty"(Faust 86) as "well-sounding, but unmeaning verbiage of natural equality and inalienable rights" (Faust 87), but following Dew, Harper proclaims that "the institution of Slavery is a principal cause of civilization" (Faust 81) and that "Since the existence of man upon the earth, with no exception whatever, either of ancient or modern times, every society which has attained civilization, has advanced to it through this process" (Faust 81):

That there are great evils in a society where slavery exists, and that the institution is liable to great abuse, I have already said. To say otherwise, would be to say that they were not human. But the whole of human life is a system of evils and compensations. We have no reason to believe that the compensations with us are fewer, or smaller in proportion to the evils, than those of any other condition of society. Tell me of an evil or abuse; of an instance of cruelty, oppression, licentiousness, crime or suffering, and I will point out, and often in

five fold degree, an equivalent evil or abuse in countries where Slavery does not exist! (Faust 96)

Like Dew, Harper considers "the actual and alleged evils of Slavery" (Faust 96) and "the comparative good and evil of the institution of slavery" (Faust 126), but stresses that "such is the impotence of man to remedy the evils which the condition of his existence has imposed on him, that it is much to be doubted whether the attempts by legislation to, [sic] improve their situation, will not aggravate its evils" (Faust 98). He blames the denouncers of slavery for assuming that "the truth is known and settled, and only requires to be enforced by denunciation" (Faust 81):

But most deeply criminal are they who give rise to the enormous evil with which great revolutions in society are always attended, without the fullest assurance of the greater good to be ultimately obtained. But it can be made to appear, even probably, that no good will be obtained, but that the results will be evil and calamitous as the process, what can justify such innovations? No human being can be so mischievous--if acting consciously, none can be so wicked, as those who finding evil in existing institutions, rush blindly upon change, unforeseeing and reckless of consequences, and leaving it to chance or fate to determine whether the end shall be improvement, or greater and more intolerable evil. . . . Thus, if in the adorable providence of God, at a time and in a manner which we can neither foresee nor conjecture, they are to be rendered capable of freedom and to enjoy it, they would be prepared for it in the best and most effectual, because in the most natural and gradual manner. But fanaticism hurries to its effect at once. . . . The beneficent process of nature are not apparent to

the senses. . . . Such would be the desolation, if the schemes of fanatics were permitted to have effect. They do all that in them lies to thwart the beneficent purposes of providence. The whole tendency of their efforts is to aggravate present suffering and to cut off the chance of future improvement. . . . (Faust 126-34)

The historical importance of this passage by Harper lies in his development of Dew's dichotomy between "the too ardent and confident pursuit of imaginary good" and the "wise, practical plan of operations" into a sharp divergence between the fanaticism of human reform and the beneficent, natural process of Divine Providence. Evils in human institutions are too "human" to be remedied by any hasty innovation. "The institution of domestic slavery . . . is deeply founded in the nature of man and the exigencies of human society" (Faust 79-80), he writes.

Dew, Harper and other proslavery apologists in the 1830s also proclaimed "the validity of a posteriori utilitarian judgments" (Freehling 328). Their reasoning reveals the South's shift from the liberal doctrine of the Revolution to the reactionary ideology in slavery's defense. It led to an idyllic praise of the South in the leading proslavery apologists in the 1850s who defended slavery strongly to attack free society. These spokesmen embraced "a corporatist solution to the 'social question' (the relation of capital to labor" (Genovese 62); in other words, they defended "slavery in the abstract" as Fitzhugh called it. Harper also says in his tract that he will consider "the present position of the Slave-Holding States" "as a naked, abstract question" (Faust 90): he attacks industrial society and wage-earners, saying "The employer of free laborers obtains their services during the time of their health and vigor, without the charge of rearing them from infancy, or supporting them in sickness or old age" (Faust 94), while he

defends slavery as a system in which "[t]o receive the benefit of the services of which they [our laborers] are capable, we must provide for maintaining their health and vigor" (Faust 95).

Despite numerous Northern charges of social stratification and intellectual inconsistency and retrogression in the South in the 1850s, as Eugene Genovese maintains, it was clear to the leading theologians like James Henley Thornwell and Thornton Stringfellow that "even in the reading of the strictest adherents of the literal interpretation of the Word, God had not required that chattel slavery, in contradistinction to less vigorous systems of servitude, remain forever in a morally progressing Christendom" (62). Harper hints more strongly the progress of human society to an emancipation. He starts his proslavery argument against the radical abolitionist critique of slavery with a rather uncertain tread: "let me not be understood as taking upon myself to determine that it is better that it [slavery] should exist" (Faust 90). That is why he concludes his reasoning by saying that hasty reform is fanaticism while progress comes "in a manner which we can neither foresee nor conjecture," since "the adorable providence of God" "affords the fullest assurance of the greater good to be ultimately obtained" in "the best and most effectual, because in the most natural and gradual manner." Hawthorne echoes Harper and other proslavery apologists in the 1830s, when he says that Divine Providence does not leave evils to be "remedied by human contrivances" but causes them to vanish "in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses shall have been fulfilled."

Providence left slavery to flourish not only in the South but also in the North "through a continued miracle of almost two hundred years, from the first settlement of the American wilderness until the Revolution" (CE XXIII 351). In 1835 Hawthorne wrote in "Old News" that New England society

"modified and softened the institution [of slavery], making it a patriarchal, and almost a beautiful, peculiarity of the times" (CE XI 139). The Constitution came out of "the mutual steps of compromise" and preserved "the old love and harmony among the sisterhood of States," along with slavery. Antislavery or proslavery, all white Americans are, Hawthorne sums up an unending argument over the slavery question in "Compromise and Other Matters," "the lover of his race, the enthusiast, the philanthropist of whatever theory" (CE XXIII 352). The Northerners cannot "conceive . . . how little the North really cares for the negro-question" (CE XVIII 591). The arena of public controversy demands much diversity of opinion to probe for the truths of history. "[O]ur sacred Union" is thus "the immovable basis from which the destinies, not of America alone, but of mankind at large, may be carried upward and consummated" (CE XXIII 370). Thus Pierce, who supports Southerners "by his votes and by his voice," has qualities of "the leadership of the world's affairs" (CE XXIII 352).

The *Life* never offers a certain choice. Hawthorne's strategy of intermingling the two opposite views of the slavery question detaches itself from the Hegelian dialectic. His dialectic is, as James Bense says, "most penetrating when it remained unresolved" (214). Or strictly speaking, it comes closest to Hegel's, because the latter uses "Aufheben" to give a double meaning: negation and preservation. Contradiction and opposition are a way to totality of life, unification of objectivity and subjectivity. The great cause of good can be pursued, Hawthorne argues calmly, in different forms which contribute to "all its divisions and varieties" (CE XXIII 352). The Southern proslavery thought in the 1830s offered him the chance of freedom of opinion in the person of Pierce and helped him probe for truths of the Compromise.

Notes

- 1 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Eds. William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, and Claude M. Simpson. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1962-, 23 vols. to date), vol. XVIII, 355. References to Hawthorne's works are to this edition, abbreviated as CE and cited in the text by volume and page number.
- 2 For some current views and interpretations which question Dew's proslavery position and his justification of the institution, see Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1987), 70-74 and 388.
- 3 I do not argue that Arac, Bercovitch and Fleischner offer radical interpretations in relation to "still another view." At least on this point they accept, for example, the New Criticism readings such as Hyatt Waggoner, *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap P, 1955), 200-01, and Roy R. Male, *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1957), 139-40.

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