

Misdirected Sentiment: Conflicting Rhetorical Strategies in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

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Abstract:

Harriet Beecher Stowe, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, used two different and conflicting rhetorical strategies in her novel's appeals to end slavery. To elicit sympathy for the slaves, she used persuasion, a process relying upon the perception of a sameness of substance among persons. To induce fear of damnation in Northerners who condoned or passively accepted Southern slavery, she used conversion rhetoric, a process relying upon the conviction that personal identity and value are derived entirely from the moral and social "system" that produces the individual. Because the novel projects Northern and Southern whites as belonging to the same system, and since its persuasive processes, by eliciting sympathy for slaves, bring them into the system, their suffering proves the system's corruption, while the Southerners' lack of sympathy proves their difference of substance—their lack of humanity. Since the logic of conversion requires condemning the corrupt self, the novel ultimately prepared Northern readers to condemn Southern whites, even though such condemnation went against Stowe's intentions.

Article:

Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel about the abuses of Southern slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, has been called "probably the most influential book ever written by an American"¹ precisely because it made her into, as President Lincoln supposedly said, "the little lady who made this big war."² Certainly, the novel was only one of innumerable influences upon Northerners' and Southerners' attitudes in the years immediately preceding the American Civil War. Yet, since Stowe's "great object" for writing the novel, as she articulated it in her *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was "to bring this subject of slavery, as a moral and religious question, before the minds of all those who profess to be followers of Christ, in this country,"³ the fact that it disposed Northerners to wage war against the South suggests a rhetorical conflict within the novel that has never been examined. This conflict, at least in part, results from Stowe's use of Puritan conversion strategies that Jonathan Edwards had developed in their most sophisticated form, strategies he had designed specifically in order to undercut and destroy faith in the kind of substantive, sympathetic self Stowe's benevolent moralism promoted.

Harriet Beecher Stowe never intended to incite her readers to war. She did advocate individual action in the form of "active resistance against the law of the land,"⁴ specifically against the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, but before the war began, she never advocated forcing the South to abolish slavery. She hoped her book would "provoke . . . a voluntary act of mass emancipation by the people of the South, but she stressed the North's guilt as much as the South's."⁵ Primarily, Stowe intended to save souls, Southern and Northern, black and white. This intention is the germ of the novel's conflicting rhetorical tendencies. Like her sister Catherine Beecher, Stowe believed that living in an orderly domestic universe promoted the soul's salvation. In Stowe's view, the South's moral world had always been disordered, but after 1850, that disorder had come crashing into the North, affecting her world. As scholars have often noted, Stowe's immediate motivation for writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act.⁶ The contemporary social situation, as Stowe saw it, divided individuals and separated them into categories that made goodness, defined as benevolent action, nearly impossible. Until the Fugitive Slave Act passed, it had seemed possible to be Northern and believe oneself to be able to act benevolently, responsibly, and legally. After its passage, Stowe tries to show, this became

impossible. A Northerner, like a Southerner, whether black or white, male or female, could no longer act benevolently (act toward others as they would have others act toward them), responsibly (fulfill their duties as their place in the social system demanded), and legally (uphold the laws and exert whatever authority the legal system has given them).

In this respect, every human type with which Stowe's novel is concerned is in the same situation—everyone's duty to act benevolently and responsibly conflicts with his or her duty to act legally. Contradiction was inescapable, persuasion to the good impossible. Stowe's primary aim, politically, was to encourage the dismantling of the "system," as she called it, that caused the moral mess. She did not, however, seek to force its dismantling. She hoped for a voluntary, nonviolent solution, through individual non-cooperation with the system.

To this end, her primary rhetorical aim was to erase the moral significance of the differences that produced the categories supporting the system, most especially, the categories of color. Stowe seems to have believed that if she could just get Southerners to see blacks as belonging to the same human category as whites, they would voluntarily give up slavery. Edward Wagenknecht gives a telling example of Stowe's way of thinking when he quotes from Stowe's *Key* "a remarkable passage on a young Southerner who had killed a Negro and escaped punishment. She granted that in himself this young man might be 'as generous-hearted and as just . . . as any young man living; but the horrible system under which he has been educated has rendered him incapable of distinguishing what either generosity or justice is, as applied to the negro.'" ⁷ Because of the poor moral training authorized by the "system," the young Southerner, a good boy at heart, simply misclassified the Negro as a thing instead of as a man.

Although recognizing racial and gender categories as productions of the "system," *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does not support them. The novel breaks all the stereotypical expectations: the Northerner Legree's evil, the free St. Claire's moral bondage, the Southern Eva's saintliness, the enslaved George's decisive action, the feminine Mrs. Bird's political involvement—all undercut the categories supporting the system.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from such "de-constructions" that Stowe is seeking either a permanent erasure of these differences or a reversal of their implied hierarchies—by replacing patriarchy with matriarchy, for example. Stowe's aim was really quite "reactionary." She wanted to restore her world to a system in which patriarchal powers—law, order, reason, authority—no longer conflict with legal, benevolent, responsible action.

Basically, Stowe wanted to reinstate the encyclopedic social order promulgated by Puritan New England ministers for hundreds of years. As Jonathan Edwards described this order of mutual dependency in *The Nature of True Virtue*, "There is a beauty of order in society . . . [a]s, when the different members of society have all their appointed office, place and station, according to their several capacities and talents, and everyone keeps his place and continues in his proper business."⁸ Within this order were three governing institutions—family, church, and state—each with its prerogatives and peculiar responsibilities. In Edwards' time, this order had already begun to break down. In Stowe's, it was completely rent asunder. The capitalist free-market system, the republican separation of church and state, and most especially in Stowe's eyes, the slavery system, had made it impossible to behave coherently and at the same time responsibly within the areas the three major institutions traditionally governed. Stowe came to see the domestic household, because it was delegated to women and therefore isolated from the other areas' powers and responsibilities, as the "saving remnant" of the system, the model upon which the others could be reconstituted.

To be the model, however, is not to be the ideal. The ideal in Stowe's vision is a household headed by the father. As Myra Jehlen has forcefully argued, "[T]he necessity of restoring men to the right conduct of society is incarnate in the novel's very plot."⁹ In Stowe's view, historical contingencies had forced men—unfortunately, even those sharing Stowe's domestic ideal—to relinquish their paternal obligations and temporarily entrust them to women.

Stowe's futural vision was literally radical, but as a return to roots, it was not one of a revolutionary reformation. Myra Jehlen has put this even more strongly: "The world [Stowe] ultimately reconstructs does not . . . feature an altered hierarchy; white men pursuing the rewards of self-reliance are still the world's rightful masters."¹⁰ Stowe conceived the ideal future in terms of an idyllic, romanticized past, stripped of certain elements she found distasteful. The future she wanted to create was essentially a redeemed past, and the path to that past vision was neither political persuasion nor war, but the old path, conversion.

Thus, just as Stowe had inherited her vision of a restored encyclopedic social order from Jonathan Edwards and the Puritans, she also inherited their rhetorical techniques for establishing that order. This inheritance, however, is the root of the ideological conflict that produced the unwanted effects of Stowe's rhetoric.

Stowe's immersion in, influence by, and ultimate rejection of Edwards' theology has been documented for decades. As Vernon Louis Parrington noted as early as 1927, her book *Oldtown Folks* "sketches that influence in bold outline"; and as Lawrence Buell has recently confirmed, based on his analysis of her novel *The Minister's Wooing*, "Jonathan Edwards . . . in Stowe's literary universe has a mythic founding-father status."¹² More important to the present argument, as Dorothy Berkson has pointed out in her introduction to the most recent edition of *Oldtown Folks*, is that Stowe's relationship to Edwardsean Calvinism is very conflicted. In this novel, for instance, Grandmother Badger is both "the pre-eminent example of the nurturing ethic" Stowe believes in *and* "an ardent advocate of Edwardsean theology."¹³ Stowe was hardly alone in her confusion about Edwards. By the mid-nineteenth century, Jonathan Edwards, as the famous theological defender of the Great Awakening, had become perceived as the model evangelical preacher. Unfortunately, his followers had misread him badly for years, beginning with the New Divinity ministers—such as Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, Jonathan Edwards, Jr., and Nathaniel Emmons—who influenced Lyman Beecher, and through him, his daughter Harriet Beecher Stowe. As James Hoopes has argued, because Edwards' private notebooks were as yet unpublished, New Divinity theologians were "unaware of his idealist meta-physics" and consequently "unwittingly played into enemy [i.e., Arminian and Antinomian] hands by accepting the Lockean notion of the soul as a substance formed by experience."¹⁴ As a result, post-Edwardseans would find cause to repudiate those Edwardsean doctrines—such as those on original sin, free will, and infant damnation—that relied upon Edwards' refutation of Locke's definition of self-identity.

As John C. Adams and I have argued,¹⁵ from his early break with Locke,¹⁶ Edwards held that one's present disposition toward a system of ideas, not the continuity of one's remembered particular ideas, constitutes one's identity. This definition of the self—the kind of self that conversionist rhetorical techniques were designed to address—is antithetical to the empirical psychology appropriate to benevolent moralism, which defines the self in terms of a continuity of experience in memory. By employing persuasive techniques that rely upon the assumption that the sameness of individuals is a product of shared experience, and also by employing conversion techniques that rely upon the contrary assumption that sameness is a product of the joint subordination to a system, Stowe forced upon her readers a logic running counter to the logic of the benevolent moralism she espoused.

Conversion and persuasion are entirely different rhetorical processes. Persuasion is largely a process of discovering common ground and then working from that ground toward mutually sharable attitudes and ideas that can induce mutually desirable actions. Kenneth Burke has located the central principle of persuasion in what he calls "identification." "You persuade a man," says Burke, "only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his."¹⁷ When considered as identification, persuasion must presume that beneath divisiveness and disagreement is an underlying cohesiveness, a sameness of substance, as Burke would put it, that, once made present, allows transformations to be worked that more coherently unify postures, ideas, goals, and concepts that initially seemed incommensurate. For this reason, although "the rhetorician may have to change the audience's opinion in one respect . . . he can succeed only insofar as he yields to that audience's opinions in other respects."¹⁸ Persuasion works to resolve superficial, although perhaps divisive, differences among people who are, or who can perceive themselves as being, fundamentally identical.

Without question, Stowe employs the rhetoric of identification throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Rader-Konofalski has shown impressively that there are at least two major rhetorical strategies employed in the novel. One is "forming clear and outspoken parallels and points of unarguable identification."¹⁹ Stowe employs the values embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Bible less to convince her white readers "to uphold those traditional values" than to convince them "that the values could and should be applied to blacks."²⁰ This strategy, directed toward those inclined to perceive slaves as less than human, attempts to persuade them toward "experiencing the plight of the black characters as if it were their own."²¹ The second major rhetorical strategy was the threat "of damnation on Judgement Day, or more imminent destruction through a slave revolution the likes of which brought Haiti to its knees."²²

Rader-Konofalski treats the threats of damnation and revolution as if they were two instances of the same strategy. They are, however, quite different. The threat of revolution is another appeal to identity, for the threat, embodied in George Harris' character, is effective only insofar as white readers can see themselves acting as George would if they were to find themselves in his situation. The threat of damnation, however, required a different strategy altogether—conversion.

Whereas the motive to persuade assumes that rhetor and audience are fundamentally the same, conversion assumes that although members of a community may share the same opinions, attitudes, ideas, language—everything—in common, they may in substance be fundamentally different. Moreover, the superficially shared surface may conceal that crucial difference. Accordingly, conversion entails a systematic exposure of the grounds upon which individuals found historically their values and purposes, revealing the inadequacy of those grounds and the incapacity of the individual to establish proper grounds, thus preparing the individual to surrender unconditionally to an exterior, transcendent authority. Edwards' conversion sermons, both with imagery (as in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God") and with logic (as in "True Grace Distinguished from the Experience of Devils"), strive persistently to undercut the individual's confidence in his or her opinions, values, and attitudes. Such an exposure of the abyss over which the forms of personal and social identity hover is especially necessary to Calvinist conversion because the doctrine of God's sovereignty implies that finite beings are ultimately without free will. "Persuasion," as Burke reminds us, "involves choice, will; it is directed to a man only insofar as he is *free*."²³ But conversion sermons are directed to the bound will of their listeners. The sermons do not attempt to persuade listeners to choose rightly but to convince them that since they cannot choose rightly they should submit to God's will.

Of course, in an eighteenth-century, encyclopedic Puritan community like Edwards' Northampton, the ministerial and civic authorities represented God's will. Accordingly, the self-loathing accompanying the conversion experience could not be deflected toward the social structure that conditioned the self being loathed. At the same time, however, the self could not surrender to the social system either, even though the system stood for the transcendent authority being sought. Encyclopedic society was a complex of symbolic substitutions for an ideal subordination of self to God. For this reason, although taken with seriousness, temporal relationships were not taken too seriously, for in the afterlife they would mean nothing. "The things and relations of this life," said Thomas Hooker, "are like prints left in Sand, there is not the least appearance or remembrance of them. The King remembers not his Crown, the Husband the Wife, Father the Child. . . ."²⁴ As Edmund S. Morgon has explained:

For a child to make too much of its parents, a wife of her husband, a subject of his King was to place the creature before the creator, to reverse the order of creation, to repeat the sin of Adam. All social relations must be maintained with a respect to the order of things, in full recognition of the fact that man 'ought to make God his immediate end.'²⁵

When such an attitude toward social relationships, including authoritative ones, has been so longstanding, submission to a cult of personality or to a secular system is unlikely (although, one might argue, in George Whitefield's case it may have come close). Calvinist dogma militated against the individual's directing either loathing or adulation toward the social structure and its representatives.

Thus, in a Puritan community, conversion, when it goes wrong, can go one of two ways: it can become an extra-institutional revelling in emotion among individuals persuaded to share in presumably the same joyful experience, or, for those un-converted whose psychic defenses are nevertheless broken by the conversion process, it can become self-destructive, perhaps suicidal. In both cases, the energy released by the systematic break-down of the individual's self-mastery is directed inward. Conflict with others can result only when the legitimacy of the individual's experience is denied, as it was by the Old Lights. However, although an us-them mentality did arise from the Old Lights' denial, their denial could not prevent the experience. Since revivalist experience did not depend upon the cooperation of others, Edwardsean converts had no motive to coerce others to submit along with them.

For a number of reasons, the conversion strategy at work in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* produced quite different, more violent responses. Harriet Beecher Stowe may have rebelled against her father Lyman Beecher's Taylorism, his inflammatory anti-Catholic agitation, and his paranoid fears of a foreign, Roman Catholic conspiracy to control the Mississippi Valley; nevertheless, she inherited from him the keen sense of conversionist strategy that had made him the most successful revivalist of the Second Great Awakening. What Stowe wished to convert her audience to, however, was poles apart from the Calvinist God of Jonathan Edwards.

In the "Concluding Remarks" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* she addresses her readers directly, telling them exactly what they should do:

But, what can any individual do? Of that, every individual can judge. There is one thing that every individual can do, —they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily, and justly on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter!²⁶

Stowe, like many in the humanitarian movement, discounted original sin. Though believing in a permanent principle of self-love, she and others also believed in a natural, God-created principle of "disinterested benevolence," but as a seat of sympathy and compassion, a divine principle informing the conscience which, because she also believed in free will, enabled the individual to contradict self-interest. A heart kept free of self-interest could feel the difference between virtue and vice.

This view and similar ones developed during the eighteenth century by David Hume, Francis Hutcheson, William Wollaston, and others, came to Stowe primarily through her father and earlier New Divinity ministers who were greatly influenced by them. Wollaston's description in his *The Religion of Nature Delineated* is typical:

There is something in *human* nature . . . which renders us obnoxious to the pains of others, causing us to sympathize with them. . . . It is grievous to *see* or hear (and almost to hear of) any man, or even any animal whatever, in *torment*. . . . It is therefore according to *nature* to be affected with the sufferings of other people and the contrary is *inhuman* and *unnatural*.²⁷

Edwards attacked these writers' association of conscience and sympathy with virtue in *The Nature of True Virtue*. Their assumption that sympathy was God-given and therefore God-like led ultimately to the conclusion that a benevolent God would not condemn sinners to everlasting torment, especially for a sin they had inherited and not chosen to commit. Edwards' analysis sought to show that, as Norman Fiering puts it, "The highly touted moral sense is reducible to natural conscience, which is itself reducible to a primitive sense of desert and the natural desire for logical self-consistency, or rather, to the discomfort resulting from self-contradiction."²⁸ As a result, sympathy can be misplaced and self-serving.

Since sympathy, rather than piety, was Stowe's rhetorical aim, conversion was clearly the wrong strategy for her to employ if she aimed to avoid conflict. The pietist end of conversion is a subordination to God as symbolized

by voluntary, indeed joyful, subordination to the institutions of church, state, and family. In such obedience the question of the rightness or fairness of institutional laws is completely a non-issue. For Edwards, especially, morality is purely circumstantial and contingent—"there is no action [that] is either moral or immoral but considers things with their circumstances" —and circumstances change: "Thus the action of killing a man is in no wise a moral evil abstracted from its circumstances."²⁹ To Edwards and most pietists, to do the "right thing" in any absolute sense is impossible for finite beings. Authority serves as the symbolic representative of the truth, justice, and goodness available to God's infinite comprehension; therefore, obedience to authority for God's sake is the rule. Not *what* one does, but *for whom* one does it determines the state of the soul.

One may assume that conversion's inherent end in piety would counteract Stowe's political end of passive resistance to unjust institutional laws. It did, but it did not negate that resistance. The conversion techniques' tendency to produce self-loathing deflected that resistance toward an active opposition to whatever prevented the individual's sympathetic, saving response. Whereas piety specifically prohibits active alteration of the conditions that demand pious obedience, so that women, servants, and all subjects to authority were to regard their obedience as acts of faith, sympathy prohibits passive acquiescence to the conditions that elicit sympathetic benevolence. Piety demands devotion; sympathy demands action.

The major difference between pietism and benevolent moral-ism is that the first assumes that individuals are the same to the extent that they identify with the same system, while the second assumes that individuals are the same to the extent that they identify with each other, whatever system they are associated with. Conversion to piety undermines those structures differentiating the self from the system to which pietist theology assumes the self should be an integral part; conversion to sympathy undermines those structures integrating the self with a system from which the theology assumes the self should disassociate —i.e., any system which denies, inhibits, or prohibits sympathetic responses to individuals.

Accordingly, Stowe's strategy of conversion to sympathy sought to undermine the grounds for overriding the primitive, immediate, sympathetic response to others' distress that she assumed all individuals but the most corrupt felt. Thus from the beginning the strategy's ends were more appropriately moralist than pietist, for, being a humanitarian and not strictly Calvinist, she assumed that her readers, Southerners included, possessed fundamentally and originally good inclinations. She further assumed that two related forces had worked against her readers' natural sympathy. One was the force of habit and tradition that allowed Southerners, who witnessed the horrors of slavery daily, simply not to feel with their hearts what they saw with their eyes. The other was the force of distance and abstraction that prevented Northerners from recognizing the basic humanity of slaves and allowed them to ignore the slaves' plight.

The latter case and Stowe's strategy against it are best illustrated by Chapter 9, "In Which it Appears that a Senator is But a Man." The chapter opens onto a domestic scene involving Ohio Senator Bird, who had recently returned from the state legislature after arguing and winning the case for the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, "a law," as his wife describes it, "forbidding people to give meat and drink to those poor colored people that come along" (p. 91). On the senate floor, Bird, we learn later, had been

as bold as a lion about [the Act], and 'mightily convinced' not only himself, but everybody that heard him; —but then his idea of a fugitive was only an idea of the letters that spell the word, —or at most, the image of a little newspaper picture of a man with a stick and bundle, with 'Ran away from the subscriber' under it. The magic of the real presence of distress,— the imploring human eye, the frail, trembling hand, the despairing appeal of helpless agony, — these he had never tried. (p. 102)

Stowe's employment of Edwards' distinction between speculative and sensible knowledge is obvious here. For Edwards, "speculative knowledge" of God's will is always mediated by signs, usually in the form of inferential conclusions; "sensible knowledge"— and divine grace imparts such knowledge—is immediate and sensory. His most famous analogy stresses the difference between merely "knowing" that honey is sweet from testimonial or other evidence and knowing it is sweet from actually having tasted honey. It can be, and has been, argued that

Edwards' entire theology of "experimental religion" rests upon this distinction. Although she literalizes Edwards' analogy, Mrs. Bird uses the distinction here much as Edwards used it, to destroy an auditor's confidence in the certainty of his or her rationally determined beliefs, not by demonstrating their logical inconsistency but by undermining their foundation. Accordingly, she implies that all the Senator's legal, rational argument is founded upon a secondary image of the fugitive, a mere sign, and that "the real presence" of one would confound all his logic.

This, in fact, is exactly the tactic Mrs. Bird uses in her "argument" against her husband's position. Better stated, Mrs. Bird refuses to argue at all. When the Senator tells her, "I can state to you a very clear argument, to show —," she interrupts, "Oh, non-sense, John! you can talk all night, but you wouldn't do it. I put it to you, John, — would *you*, now, turn away a poor, shivering, hungry creature from your door, because he was a runaway?" (p. 93). "Clear argument" is "nonsense." The Senator's contention that "we must put aside our private feelings" is overturned by Mrs. Bird's reply that "obeying God never brings on public evils" (p. 93). The issue becomes simply whether her husband is the kind of person who could act on mere law and reason in the face of human distress. Mrs. Bird refuses to believe that he could. She counters his every attempt to defer his *personal* feeling, whether to duty ("You know it isn't duty, —it can't be a duty") or to reason ("I hate reasoning, John, — especially on such subjects"). The husband is silenced; his status as a good man is, in his wife's eyes, on the line.

Shortly after this conversation, Eliza and her child appear at the Bird's home seeking asylum. The Senator sheds tears, hiding them, of course, at the sight of the slaves' misery. He has, as the novel has told us, "a particularly humane and accessible nature" (p. 93), so we are not surprised that without being asked he arranges to convey Eliza to safety. "Your heart is better than your head, in this case, John" (p. 100), his wife assures him, yet the reader is well aware that John's heart is in turmoil. As he sinks into "deep meditation" while "anxiously" putting on his boots before leaving with Eliza and her son, he mutters, "It 's a confounded awkward, ugly business . . . and that's a fact! . . . It will have to be done, though, for aught I see, —hang it all!" (p. 99). Because he "feels right," he has been thrown into the role of a hypocrite and criminal, and about that he cannot feel right. His "conversion" cannot be complete and satisfying because of the evil of the system he serves.

Senator Bird's predicament typifies that of Stowe's entire Northern audience. Since prior to the novel's publication the Fugitive Slave Act had been passed, what was once a Southern problem was now incontrovertibly an American problem: "Nothing of tragedy can be written, can be spoken, can be conceived, that equals the frightful reality of scenes daily and hourly acting on our shores, beneath the shadow of American law, and the shadow of the cross of Christ" (p. 471). The North could no longer deny the slavery on our shores; it could no longer separate itself psychologically from the South. As Ward says, "No longer could it be maintained that it was 'they,' the Southerners, who supported slavery; it was 'we,' the people of the United States, who did."³ Stowe's novel, by making present the suffering of a people who for most Northerners had been only abstract, distant figures—"only an idea of the letters that spell the word" —had made it possible for Northerners to feel for the slaves, but it was impossible for Northerners to "feel right" without first rectifying the system. Like Edwards, Stowe had sought to convert, to undermine the grounds for Southerners' justifications for slavery and Northerners' justifications for tolerating it. Stowe's call in the novel was for individuals to "see . . . to [their] sympathies." Yet she identified her audience as the "men and women of America" (p. 471). Their social identity responded since it was their social identity that was implicated.

The psychology of sympathy explains why, although the novel encourages Northerners to see Southerners as part of "us" rather than as "them," it could also have encouraged Northerners to exert violence toward their Southern counterparts. In Stowe's book sympathy arises from the imaginative projection of oneself into another's situation, and the capacity for sympathy increases to the extent that the experience calling for compassion is shared. In Chapter 9, Mrs. Bird, who only a few pages before had told her husband that "folks don't run away when they are happy" (p. 93), asks Eliza why she had run away when by her own admission her master and mistress had been kind. Eliza responds by asking, "Ma'am, . . . have you ever lost a child?" Mrs. Bird, bursting into tears, answers, "Why do you ask that? I have lost a little one." And to this Eliza says

confidently, "Then you will feel for me" (p. 97). Consistently throughout the novel the slaves' misery demands sympathy, whereas the slave owners' misery, such as that of Eliza's owners, the Shelbys, who might have been candidates for sympathy in other circumstances, find their demands for it undercut. Shelby, who sells Eliza's child out of the "cruel necessity" of impending foreclosure, shares his wife's self-condemnation for being "a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil" as slavery "under laws like ours" (p. 45). Their kindness is rendered cruel by the system with which they comply.

Far more unsympathetic than the Shelbys, however, is the disgusting slave trader who forced Shelby to sell the child. "A man of leather, —a man alive to nothing but trade and profit, — cool, and unhesitating, and unrelenting, as death and the grave" (p. 46), Haley, more than any other single character, represents the slavery system, and he is, as Wollaston said of the unsympathetic, "*inhuman* and *unnatural*."

That the novel encourages readers to sympathize with slaves and withhold sympathy from slave owners and traders is almost too obvious for comment. Less obvious, yet more dangerously influential, is that a characteristic of those who are capable of sympathy is that they respond passionately and sometimes violently toward those who act unsympathetically. Mrs. Bird, for example, was ordinarily a quiet, restrained woman: "There was only one thing that was capable of arousing her, and that provocation came in on the side of her unusually gentle and sympathetic nature; —anything in the shape of cruelty would throw her into a passion . . ." (p. 92). Once, upon finding out her sons had been involved in "stoning a defenseless kitten," Mrs. Bird "whipped them" and "tumbled" them off to bed without any supper. The moral was that the "boys never stoned another kitten" (p. 92).

Beyond implying that cruelty can be stopped only if violent punishment is enforced upon those who cause it, this little tale also suggests that a violent reaction to another's cruelty is even more understandable when the cruel party is part of oneself, part of the sympathetic one's family or nation. Just as Edwards' conversions produced self-loathing toward the convert's sinful self, Beecher's, too, produced self-loathing, but toward that part of "us" that necessitated the Northern sympathetic response—the Southern slave owners. In effect, Stowe's novel implicitly demands that its Northern readers obey the Biblical injunction "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out" —in short, to force an end to slavery.

Despite her insistence that she was attacking the "system" rather than the individuals in it, and despite her stated intent to persuade individuals to alter their relationship to the system—to say, in effect, you don't owe allegiance to the system to the extent that the system prevents your sympathetic response—Stowe's rhetoric worked to deny her Northern readers the option to change the system politically through compromise or other forms of persuasion. In fact, the conversionist rhetoric forced readers into the same logical constraints Edwards employed in *The Nature of True Virtue* against the view that sympathy toward fellow humans is the source of virtue. To the contrary, Edwards said that "virtuous benevolence" will "seek the good of every *individual* being unless it be conceived as not consistent with the highest good of Being in general. In which case the good of a particular being, or some beings, may be given up for the sake of the highest good of Being in general."³¹

When the good of Being, the total system—rhetorically in this case *both* the United States and the Kingdom of God—is at stake, sympathy cannot be felt for those infecting the system. Stowe, in an 1853 letter to Daniel R. Goodloe, seems to be using this same Edwardsean logic: "It seems to me that truly noble minds ought to consider that the best friendship . . . refuses to defend their [Southerners] faults, but rather treats them as excrescences which ought to be severed, and what is true of individuals is true of countries."³² She, of course, hoped one could sever the "excrescence" without killing the person. But history proved this hope to be unfounded.

Stowe, through persuasive processes, brought the slaves into the system(s) so that enslavers became visibly inconsistent with it, yet still part of the system in which Christian Northerners found their identity. Lincoln's insistence before and during the Civil War that the Union, not slavery, was the paramount issue precluded Southern secessions from resolving the Northerners' dilemma. Stowe's rhetoric, in turn, forced Northerners to

realize that union, as national identity, was incompatible with slavery if slaves were indeed within the moral system associated with the national identity.

Thus, Stowe's conversion tactics misdirected the sentiment meant to "save" her readers. They encouraged a return to old motives and modes of action—to defense of the community understood as a closed system of beliefs and social practices requiring patriarchal subordination of its elements and separatist exclusion from, disciplinary action toward, if not condemnation of, insubordinate elements. Today we are inclined to see the emancipation of the slaves as a great humanitarian and democratic victory. But how could it have been when it emerged not from humanitarian or democratic rhetorical processes but from war?

We can more easily see why Stowe's rhetoric could not have helped Americans to resolve the slavery issue peacefully if we contrast her social aims with those recommended by John Dewey in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Dewey locates the "real difficulty" of earlier social philosophy in its assumption that the individual is "something given, something already there" as opposed to something created, constructed, "something wrought out."³³ The notion that the individual is a given involves us in unanswerable questions such as whether the state is the product of the individuals in it or the individual a product of the state that forms it, whether the state should serve the individual or the individual the state, whether virtue lies in self-interest or in self-effacement, and whether "reform should start with the individual or with the institutions."³⁴ Dewey notes that when the self is viewed as something given, as "complete within itself, then it is readily argued that only internal moralistic changes are of importance to reform."³⁵ The reverse perspective (which Dewey doesn't discuss) would regard the self as dependent, as a function in a larger system. In this case, the only way to change the self would be to change the system. The first would, as Dewey says, "throw the burden of social improvement upon free will in its most impossible form"³⁶; the second would throw the burden entirely upon the system—so, since the self is a product of its system, some exterior agency like "grace" would be required to allow an individual to perceive the need to change systems.

That Stowe's novel is inextricably involved in this impossible problematic should be abundantly clear. Its assumptions about self-identity and self-change—revealed in the competing rhetorics of persuasion and conversion—leave its characters and readers with only three options: submission, escape, or destruction. By presenting politics as an intrusion upon personal life and compromise as an infection of self and national identity, Stowe's plea that Southerners were themselves victims of the system to which they submitted rings hollow. The Southern system was an infection and Southern whites its cause and effect. Ultimately, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* encouraged readers to perceive that, like a gangrenous limb, slavery could not be cured and had to be excised.

The rhetorical forces converging upon *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are, of course, an historically specific combination. First is the force of a social vision strongly rooted in the encyclopedic structure of Puritan society that Stowe shared with her readers. This was the vision of an integral community of individuals who derived their identities from their place and function within the whole and their personal value from the value of the whole to which they belonged. In such a vision, if the whole from which one's identity was derived was damned, he or she was damned. This vision produced a special set of rhetorical practices, here called conversion rhetoric, specifically designed to undercut one's faith in an inadequate system, thus preparing the individual to surrender to a greater system. Puritan ideology had held that individuals could not choose to belong to the higher system of beliefs because, being products of inferior systems, they could understand only what the systems defining them allowed them to understand. This meant that damned individuals, although they could reject inferior systems when shown their inconsistencies, remained damned unless God conferred upon them the grace to accept the true system.

Stowe, like many of her time, could not accept this harsh Calvinist reality and so promoted the modifications of benevolent moralism. In her view, the self was not entirely determined by its function in a system: there was a substantive core, essentially the same for all human beings, and this self was capable of sympathizing with fellow human beings and of choosing to act rightly toward them. Thus, although the quality of the self was in

part determined by its position in a social and ethical system, it was also determined by its sympathetic response to others. At the time she wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe could accept slavery since slaves, like everyone else in an encyclopedic society, were subordinate to a whole; but she could not accept unsympathetic slavery, the kind produced by the Southern slavery system which allowed families to be broken up and cruel masters to mistreat and torment their slaves. Stowe's benevolent moralism therefore demanded her use of a rhetoric of identity, one that emphasized the blacks' sameness of substance with the whites and thus generated the whites' sympathy toward blacks.

However, Stowe also used conversion rhetoric, discursive techniques that urged Northerners to identify themselves with the American system of government but undermined their faith in that system. Her conversion rhetoric sought to convince Northerners that as individuals they were only as good as the system to which they belonged, but her identity rhetoric brought the suffering of blacks into the system, thus proving the system foul and fouling the Northerners' self image. Northerners, who owned no slaves, could do nothing themselves to cleanse the system except to eliminate the source of the filth—the attitudes of Southern slave-owners. Since the rhetoric of sympathy was decidedly non-rational (sympathy, like grace, was something you either had or did not have), persuading Southerners to change their attitudes was out of the question. If Northerners could not eliminate the offending attitudes, the only remaining alternative was to eliminate or control those who held the attitudes.

Although this particular set of forces—a formula for war—is historically highly specific, one may draw from these circum-stances at least one general rule of thumb for the study of rhetorical history: the conflict between humanitarian persuasion and Calvinist conversion techniques in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suggests that rhetorical practices are never ideologically neutral and that when techniques developed to promote one set of aims and beliefs are unconsciously marshalled to promote a different set of beliefs, then the effects are likely to be quite contrary to what the rhetor expects. For historians of rhetoric, this means that we cannot legitimately think of rhetoric as an independent discipline or set of practices over and against those of theology, politics, or any other organized human endeavors. There is a rhetoric of every politics and a politics of every rhetoric; the discursive practices of theologians are integral to their theology, and the theology of speakers and writers is integral to their rhetoric. As *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows, novelists, like historians, sometimes forget this, and some-times the results are deadly.

Notes:

- 1 Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 122
- 2 John William Ward, "Afterward" to Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York and Toronto: New American Library, 1966), p. 480.
- 3 (Boston: John P. Jewett and Co., 1853), pp. iii—iv.
- 4 Wendy Rader-Konofalski, "Radicalism and Traditionalism in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," in *Radikalismus in Literatur und Gesellschaft des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Gregory Claeys and Liselotte Glage (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1987), p. 159.
- 5 Steven Sarson, "Harriet Beecher Stowe and American Slavery," *New Companion*, 7 (Summer 1989), 40, 43.
- 6 See, for example, Jean Fagan Yellin, *The Intricate Knot: Black Figures in American Literature, 1776-1863* (New York: New York University Press, 1972), p. 121, and Edward Wagenknecht, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: The Known and the Unknown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 181.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 183.
- 8 In *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 568.
- 9 "The Family Militant: Domesticity Versus Slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *Criticism*, 31 (Fall 1989), 392.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 385.
- 11 *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginning to 1920*, vol. 2: *The Romantic Revolution in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), p. 373.
- 12 *New England Literary Culture from Revolution through Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 262.

13 (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. xxviii.

14 *Consciousness in New England: From Puritanism and Ideas to Psychoanalysis and Semiotic* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 208, 215.

15 Portions of this article are derived from Stephen R. Yarbrough and John C. Adams, *Delightful Conviction: Jonathan Edwards and the Rhetoric of Conversion* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1993).

16 See "The Mind," in Jonathan Edwards, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 385-86.

17 Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950; rpt. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1969), p. 55.

p. 56.

19 "Radicalism and Traditionalism," p. 181.

20 Ibid

21 Ibid

22 Ibid

23 *A Rhetoric of Motives*, p. 50.

24 Quoted in Edmund S. Morgon, *Visible Saints. The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), p. 20.

25 Ibid.

26 (New York and Toronto: New American Library, 1966), p. 472. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

27 Quoted in Norman Fiering, *Jonathan Edwards's Moral Thought and Its British Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), p. 249.

28 Ibid., p. 147.

29 *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from His Private Notebooks*, ed. Harvey G. Townsend (Eugene, OR: University of Oregon Press, 1955), p. 298.

30 "Afterword," p. 488.

31 *The Nature of True Virtue*, p. 545.

32 Quoted in Wagenknecht, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, p. 182.

33 *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920; Enlarged edition, Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), pp. 193, 194.

34 Ibid, p. 196.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.