

*Authority, Autonomy,
and Radical Commitment*
Stephen and Abby Kelley Foster

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I

Your last letter, in connection with our recent interview has satisfied me that I can now throw myself into your arms without guilt. . . . [N]ow you are my *own*. . . . I have made good my title to you and now I shall hold you *fast*. . . . I positively will never sell you your Freedom, short of the services of your *whole life*. . . . I shall henceforth claim and hold you as my *own property*, which all may be free to enjoy, but none but myself can *possess*. . . . I have now found out that you are as completely in my power, as I am in yours, and I am satisfied. I shall now tyrannize over you to my heart's content, so you may prepare for it, and make a virtue of submission, if you please. . . . 'Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands,' you will bear in mind is the command.¹

THIS IS an excerpt from a letter written by Stephen Symonds Foster, the nineteenth-century American antislavery radical, to his future wife, Abigail Kelley, herself a well-known abolitionist and feminist. Foster's comparison of his

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¹ Stephen Symonds Foster to Abigail Kelley, August 10, 1843, Abigail Kelley Foster Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass. (hereafter cited Foster Papers, AAS).

relationship with his wife-to-be to that between master and slave may have been merely a humorous and provocative rhetorical device. But his linking of their future domestic life to the South's peculiar institution also suggests his sensitivity to the question of his own authority. The use of the analogy of slavery by an antislavery radical to embody his domestic relations offers one hint of the important and relatively unexplored connection between the goals of intimacy and social commitment.

Another hint is contained in Abigail Kelley's emotional rebuttal of Stephen Foster's analogy. It provides an insight into the complexity of their relationship and the intensity of her own strivings for personal autonomy:

[H]ad you been any other man than the man you was I would not have revealed myself to you. But having the highest and holiest confidence in your unbending devotion to duty, I had no fear that you would ever try to swerve me, who in such case might be too easily swerved, from this path of stern duty. Now, altho' I firmly believe you have been jesting with me for your own amusement, or perchance for the better purpose of studying character, I warn you to be careful how you push your jokes too far. I may demand of you, after the fashion of chivalry, that you bring me the trophies of victory, shackles broken, whips dust-trodden, collars severed, in the left hand, and a proclamation of emancipation in the right, before your lady love shall yield to her good knight the eager hand, although he holds her heart of hearts most truly. My domestic feelings are strong but my moral organization is stronger and far more active.²

The frequent repetition of the complementary themes of personal and social authority and autonomy in different contexts during the lives of Stephen and Abby Kelley Foster suggests that for both of them slavery had unconscious resonances as an expression of their self-perceptions and fantasies. This study of the Fosters' evolving commitments, and of their intimate and wider social relationships, argues that

² Kelley to Foster, August 13, 1843, Foster Papers, AAS.

there was an essential and logical connection between this personal meaning of slavery and their radical commitment. Courtship and marriage served as a testing ground for the same aspirations and fears that were publicly expressed as antislavery and nonresistance ideologies. While it is increasingly clear that no single social structural or individual psychological model can account for the commitment of all antebellum American radicals, the Fosters' struggles for authority and autonomy and their successes and failures in harmonizing social roles and ideals provide one insight into the many complex connections between radical commitment and personal identity in nineteenth-century America.

This essay focuses, first, on the early sources of individual commitment of Stephen Foster and Abby Kelley, separately, and second, on the interaction following marriage of their private needs and public commitments.

II

Stephen Foster was born in Canterbury, New Hampshire, in 1809.³ By the early 1830s, when Foster's generation reached maturity, the hill country of New England was stagnating. Farms in rural backwaters such as southern New Hampshire, isolated from commerce and urban growth by poor roads and unnavigable rivers, provided subsistence for only a few generations of settlers.⁴ The preindustrial cycle of population

³ Early biographical information on Stephen Foster is scanty. Some genealogical data are found in J. O. Lyford, *History of the Town of Canterbury, New Hampshire*, 2 vols. (Concord, N.H., 1912), 1:309-12; 2:131-42. For biographical details, see Parker Pillsbury, *Acts of the Antislavery Apostles* (Concord, N.H., 1883), esp. pp. 123-49; Pillsbury, 'Stephen Symonds Foster,' *The Granite Monthly* 5 (August 1882):369-75; Foster's brief summary of his prereform career is in *The Brotherhood of Thieves or a True Picture of the American Church and Clergy* (1843; reprint ed., Concord, N.H., 1884), p. 5. A brief biographical sketch written by his wife is in *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York, 1900), 2:514-15. A useful account of Foster's public career is William H. and Jane H. Pease, *Bound with Them in Chains: A Biographical History of the Antislavery Movement* (Westport, Conn., 1972), pp. 191-217.

⁴ On the decline of towns in southern New Hampshire see Harold Fisher Wilson, *The Hill Country of Northern New England: Its Social and Economic History, 1790-1930* (New York, 1936), pp. 21, 23, 26, 30-31; for Canterbury, see Lyford, *History of*

growth, pressure on scarce land, and the eventual migration of younger sons coincided with the third generation of New Hampshire Fosters.⁵ A respectable farmer of limited means such as Asa Foster, Stephen's father, did well to secure for his sons the competence of a common school education and apprenticeship. Only one of his sons inherited the family farm. The other children—ten of them besides Stephen—married and settled into farms or professional careers outside New Hampshire, or remained paternal dependents at home. When Stephen left it was to become a carpenter and builder.⁶

Social activism was in large degree an inheritance rather than a matter of individual choice for Asa Foster's children. The elder Foster was a veteran of the Revolution 'noted for his rugged honesty,' in the words of a local historian. He was a prominent member of the Canterbury Congregational Church holding strong radical beliefs of his own and attempting to convert his church and community to various social reforms. Besides presenting temperance and antislavery resolutions regularly before the church, he served as an officer of the local antislavery society and a delegate to antislavery, nonresistance, and woman's rights conventions.⁷

Canterbury, 1:292–93. Percy Bidwell's observations on the decline of rural economy in southern New England are equally valid for New Hampshire. See *Rural Economy in New England at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 1916), p. 318 and passim.

⁵ See Philip Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970). The case for colonial New England as a whole is made in Kenneth Lockridge, 'Land, Population, and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630–1790,' *Past and Present* 39 (April 1968):32–80. E. A. Wrigley notes the diversity of preindustrial demographic patterns. The American case is characteristic of societies of high fertility and low mortality. See his *Population and History* (New York and Toronto, 1969), esp. pp. 135–43.

⁶ Lyford, *History of Canterbury*, 2:136–37, 140–42; Pillsbury, 'Stephen Symonds Foster,' p. 370.

⁷ Lyford, *History of Canterbury*, 1:309–11 (church resolutions); *Herald of Freedom*, March 11, 1837 (Col. Asa Foster, treasurer of the Canterbury Anti-Slavery Society); Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al., *History of Woman Suffrage*, 2d ed., 3 vols. (Rochester, N.Y., 1887), 1:824–25 (Asa Foster in attendance at the first National Woman's Rights Convention in 1850). See also Henry C. Wright in *The Non-Resistant and Practical Christian*, March 4, 1848, for a reference to the elder Foster's support for his

Passive acceptance of inherited ideals is one form of belief, but active engagement to further these ideals is another. It is the crucial distinction between belief and commitment that concerns us here. The consuming quality of Stephen Foster's later radicalism in comparison with other members of his family, region, and social class suggests that familial or broader social influences could not fully determine commitment. Although his brothers and sisters were active in a variety of reforms, their beliefs coexisted with the leading of more normal lives.⁸ None disrupted church services, as he eventually would, to lecture unwilling congregations on their participation in the sin of slavery; none was beaten or jailed. They did not travel and lecture in virtually every northern state for more than thirty years. Radicalism was not their vocation, but it was Stephen Foster's.

Lacking a large body of early evidence from which to generalize, one vivid event nevertheless suggests that the special intensity Stephen Foster brought to his beliefs may have been the result of a strong current of anger against parental authority that underlay his affinity for his father's ideals. On this occasion, the son explicitly attacked parental control, which he conflated with other forms of authority, in a speech at a non-resistance convention. Because the record indicates that his father (and perhaps his mother) were actually attending the convention and therefore presumably heard him speak, the event takes on a personal, not merely symbolic, importance. Speaking in support of a resolution that 'for human beings, as individuals or communities, to claim domination over each other, is an usurpation of the prerogative of Jehovah,' Ste-

children's radical activities. Nonresistance was the philosophical opposition to all forms of coercive authority and affiliation, extending to all civil and virtually all religious associations.

⁸ For the radical sympathies of Stephen Foster's siblings, see Lyford, *History of Canterbury*, 1:311 (Adams), 2:142 (Newell, spiritualism); *National Antislavery Standard*, May 18, 1848 (Newell, antislavery); Stanton et al., *History of Woman Suffrage* 3:370 (Galen and Caroline), 3:374 (David, misidentified as Galen: see Lyford, *History of Canterbury*, 2:142).

phen told the delegates 'that by the resolution parents could exercise no more authority over their children than children over their parents. The one are the equal brothers of the other. . . . He said the child was the creature of God and it was for the parent to so regard him. He was to teach him his accountability to God, not to his earthly parent.'⁹ Thus, Foster's hyperlogical reading of Christian morality affirmed the *substance* of his father's beliefs while denying his father's authority and ultimately that of ministers and magistrates to carry them out.

This interpretation is abundantly supported by Foster's actions after leaving home. His rebelliousness was initially channeled by the nationwide outpouring of religious revivalism during the 1820s and 30s. The social and economic changes drawing farmers' children into a market economy weakened the influences of family authority and orthodox religion. Personal anxiety found frequent outlet in religious rebirth, as potential converts sought stability and autonomy by shifting primary moral allegiance to sacred texts or moral precepts unmediated by traditional authority. Personal need and vocational dissatisfaction often converged.¹⁰ Foster was converted and decided to become a minister. 'At the age of 22,' he wrote, 'I left the allurements of an active business life, on which I had just entered with fair prospects. . . . The only object I had in view in changing my pursuits, at this advanced period in life, was to render myself useful to the world, by extending the principles of Christianity, as taught and lived out by their great Author.'¹¹

⁹ *The Non-Resistant*, January 13, 1841. Asa, Adams, and Sarah Foster (Stephen's mother or sister) are listed among the delegates to the convention.

¹⁰ The psychology of religious conversion is discussed at length in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; reprint ed., New York, 1958), Lectures IX-X. Foster bears marked resemblances to James's 'sick soul,' for whom the burden of the world's evil predominates. A very suggestive dynamic view of the relationship between antebellum economic change and the psychology of conversion is Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York, 1978).

¹¹ Foster, *Brotherhood of Thieves*, p. 5.

Foster entered Dartmouth College as one of the growing number of farmers' sons who quit their old occupations and flocked to the newer New England colleges, 'a rural intelligentsia . . . aspiring to the middle class professions.'¹² Most of them were poor and many like him earned their way by teaching school. Many of them also became interested in extending Christian principles to social goals, and Foster soon joined the recently formed Dartmouth Antislavery Society. Different versions of his first open conflict with public authority exist. According to Parker Pillsbury, his lifelong friend and fellow radical, Foster while still a student refused to perform the militia duty required of all male citizens, citing the biblical precept 'Resist not evil.' He was jailed briefly and, writes Pillsbury, quickly turned the opportunity to advantage, writing a letter to a local newspaper to protest conditions at the jail.¹³ However, other evidence indicates a more mundane transgression caused the imprisonment: failure to pay a debt. A letter written by a local lawyer, several years after Foster's death, indicates that in his senior year at Dartmouth Foster was apparently jailed for \$12.14 'debt or damages' and \$2.21 costs, on complaint of a clockmaker. He was released on bail a few weeks later.¹⁴ Whether the dramatic version of the incident was his own or Pillsbury's and whether his default was due to poverty, irresponsibility, or a philosophical unconcern with the

¹² On the striking similarities between Foster's college experiences and those of other mature students of rural origin who became active abolitionists, see David F. Allmendinger, *Paupers and Scholars: The Transformation of Student Life in Nineteenth Century New England* (New York, 1975), pp. 8 (quotation), 9-18, 91-94, and passim. For antislavery sentiment at Dartmouth, see John King Lord, *History of Dartmouth College, 1815-1909* (Concord, N.H., 1913), esp. pp. 248-53.

¹³ Pillsbury, *Acts of the Antislavery Apostles*, pp. 124-25.

¹⁴ A letter in Stephen Foster's alumni file at Dartmouth, written by Charles B. Griswold and addressed to 'My dear Judge,' dated Haverhill, March 5, 1889, tells of this conclusion from a search of the Haverhill jail records. It cannot rule out another jailing for militia refusal, although it makes it improbable. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the Dartmouth faculty voted to refund Foster's tuition for his entire four years of study—presumably to further his ministerial studies. See 'Records of the Faculty of Dartmouth College,' 4 vols. in ms, 3 (July 6, 1838), in Baker Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H. Since the refund depended upon favorable action by the trustees, it may not have been made.

workings of a capitalist economy, his arrest did not prevent him from graduating from Dartmouth a month later or from continuing to contemplate a ministerial career. Arrest for a trifling debt was already an anachronism, but the existence of another version of Foster's imprisonment illustrates the way in which personal embarrassment at the sequel to a minor default could eventually be transformed into a moral judgment against social authority.

Foster's rebellious bent soon outstripped any residual institutional loyalties. After spending a year preparing for the ministry at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, he once again switched course on moral grounds. When the seminary's faculty refused students the use of rooms for discussion of the controversial subject of slavery, Foster abandoned his chosen career. According to an obituary published many years later in the *Worcester Daily Spy*, he was offered funds to continue his ministerial studies if he would forgo expressing his abolitionist views. He refused on the grounds that 'he could not be bought to hold his peace' (quoted in the obituary) and that 'although he needed the money and desired the education, he declined staying the subsequent two years at so great a moral sacrifice.' By late 1839, when Foster began lecturing as an agent for the New Hampshire Antislavery Society, he had come to view church and state merely as 'the devices of men to gain influence and power.'¹⁵

As an antislavery lecturer, Foster adopted a revivalistic, denunciatory style designed to stun unwilling listeners into an awareness of their personal implication in slavery, however remote. Along with other 'come-outers' he demanded that individuals disaffiliate from churches whose members in the

¹⁵ *Worcester Daily Spy*, September 9, 1881; Foster, *Brotherhood of Thieves*, p. 5. Foster's account of his reasons for leaving is found in his handwritten reply to an 1876 alumni questionnaire in his alumni file at Union Theological Seminary. See also 'Records of the Faculty, 1837-1908,' 3 vols. in ms, 1 (January 31, March 4, 1839), Union Theological Seminary, New York City. The reason for his departure is wrongly attributed in Pillsbury, 'Stephen Symonds Foster,' pp. 370-71.

South held slaves, and that they neither vote nor hold office because the Constitution tolerated slavery. He soon became notorious, even among his antislavery colleagues, for his aggressive mode of operation and violent rhetoric.¹⁶ The ministry, he wrote in his pamphlet *The Brotherhood of Thieves; or, A True Picture of the American Church and Clergy*, were 'thieves, adulterers, manstealers, pirates, and murderers'; he singled out the Methodist Church as 'more corrupt and profligate than any house of ill-fame in the city of New York'; he accused conservative English abolitionists of being worse than the pro-slavery mobs in the United States.¹⁷ Foster described his own tactics in a revealing military metaphor as 'Bonapartean.' 'The watchwords of our enterprise,' he wrote, 'should be conviction and reproach. . . . [T]he more bitter and withering our reproaches, the more effectual our efforts as reformers.'¹⁸ Entering church services, even after he was refused permission to speak, Foster exhorted congregations to renounce their ties to sinful institutions. When asked to leave he refused, when arrested he went limp, when brought to trial he spurned the services of a lawyer and turned cross-examination into a moral forum, when convicted he often went to jail rather than pay a fine.¹⁹

Although numerous sympathetic or curious clergymen and congregations opened their meetinghouses to abolitionist lecturers, enough refused so that Foster could catalogue in detail for readers of the radical *Herald of Freedom* his mishaps in fifteen months of lecturing:

¹⁶ Not all come-outers believed in confrontation. William Goodell, a come-outer but not a nonresistant, disputed with Foster his right to disrupt church services. See *Herald of Freedom*, June 24, July 8, 1842. For disapproval of Foster's tactics by other abolitionists, see Ellis Gray Loring to Kelley, September 27, 1841, and F. F. Richardson to Kelley, June, 1841, Foster Papers, AAS.

¹⁷ Foster, *Brotherhood of Thieves*, pp. 5-6 and passim.

¹⁸ *The Non-Resistant and Practical Christian*, August 5, 1848.

¹⁹ I have modified somewhat the succinct formulation of the Peases, *Bound with Them in Chains*, p. 205.

[F]our times have [prisons] opened their dismal cells for my reception. Twenty-four times have my countrymen dragged me from their temples of worship, and twice have they thrown me with great violence from the second story of their buildings, careless of consequences. Once in a Baptist meeting house they gave me an evangelical kick in the side, which left me for weeks an invalid. Times out of memory have they broken up my meetings with violence, and hunted me with brick-bats and bad eggs. Once they indicted me for assault and battery. . . . Once in the name of outraged law and justice they attempted to put me in irons. Twice they have punished me with a fine for preaching the gospel; and once in a mob of two thousand have they deliberately attempted to murder me.²⁰

An enormous anger, only partially moderated and channeled by idealism, dominated Foster's behavior. While his bearing in church may have been 'serene, gentle, orderly, and respectful' and his manner of speaking 'solemn and impressive' (Pillsbury's description),²¹ the tactics of confrontation did communicate to his audience an underlying aggressive message which in part undercut his professed nonresistance. He *forced* his audience to listen and he obviously gained a measure of power from his successes. But the alternative result—active resistance and eventual punishment—called forth another sort of defense to maintain the conviction of having gained a moral victory. Through literal identification of his dilemma with bodily slavery he sought a transcendent spiritual victory:

I have been given up to the power of my enemies [he wrote from the Amherst, New Hampshire, jail], arrested and confined within the walls of a loathsome cell. But though captured, I am not conquered; nay, I am a conqueror. My body is indeed encased in granite and iron, but I was never more free than this moment; I have at length triumphed over my servile slavish fear of man, and all the instruments of torture and death, which his malicious

²⁰ Foster to Nathaniel Rogers, *Herald of Freedom*, February 3, 1842. Pillsbury cites many examples of friendly or acquiescent ministers in *Acts of the Antislavery Apostles*, e.g., p. 163 (Congregationalist, Calvinist Baptist), p. 164 (Methodist, Baptist), p. 192 (Methodist).

²¹ Pillsbury, *Acts of the Antislavery Apostles*, pp. 130–31.

passions have invented. The *yoke* which, for years, has galled my neck to the quick, now lays in scattered fragments at my feet. I *was* a slave. I am one *no longer*. My lips *have been* sealed by man. They never will be again, till sealed in death. My body I freely yield to my persecutors to torture at pleasure, but my spirit *must and shall* be free.²²

But this transcendence of, to a large degree, self-willed adversity involved high psychic costs. In moments of uncertainty, sickness, or depression his own suffering seemed not just one measure of commitment, but the only measure. In the letter from jail he accused other abolitionists of turning their backs on the 'synagogues' and 'sitting silent spectators of their hypocritical worship, while the dying wail of millions of your countrymen is borne to your ears on every southern breeze.'²³ Suffering itself became the vehicle for the expression of his underlying anger, this time directed at fellow workers. If non-resistant beliefs often forestalled naked aggression, anger frequently reemerged, not only in the disruption of churches, but through self-righteousness toward co-workers who insufficiently appreciated his sacrifices.

These examples of Foster's self-dramatization could be taken as conclusive proof of the neurotic core of his personality and perhaps as a model for the commitment of other abolitionists. A number of earlier attempts to apply psychology to the abolitionists have suggested as much. No such view is advanced here. Foster's 'martyrdom' was certainly the expression of an important aspect of his character. But as will become clearer, these cyclical depressions fluctuated according to circumstance and were generally succeeded by new bursts of activity. The full scope of his radical activism is better viewed as an attempt at psychic reconstruction—the rechanneling of his energies away from narcissistic suffering and his reengage-

²² Foster to Rogers, *Herald of Freedom*, May 13, 1842. For similar incidents, see issues of September 17, October 1, November 19, 1841; June 11, 1842; see also Pillsbury, *Acts of the Antislavery Apostles*, pp. 129-49, 344-49.

²³ Foster to Rogers, *Herald of Freedom*, May 13, 1842.

ment in more constructive social activities mediated by his ideals. The fragility of this effort—the degree to which this reconstruction was only partially successful—is what marked Foster's distinctive radical style. For him, and perhaps for other abolitionists, empathy for the slave expressed in active solidarity with fellow believers was a constructive alternative to feelings of impotence or isolation.²⁴ No aspect of Stephen Foster's commitment reflected this need more than his eventual marriage to Abigail Kelley.

III

Abigail Kelley was born in Pelham, Massachusetts, in 1810. The fifth of seven children of an Irish Quaker father, she was forced to become self-supporting at an early age when the family's farming fortunes declined.²⁵ Although traditional expectations of marriage and dependence remained strong for girls of her generation, rural decline and urban opportunity, especially in teaching and factory work, allowed farmers'

²⁴ My ideas on the dynamics of Stephen Foster's commitment owe much to Sigmund Freud and Theodor Reik. See Freud, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction,' *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953-74), 14: esp. 92-102; 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,' 14:117-40; 'Mourning and Melancholia,' 14:243-58. See Reik, *Masochism and Modern Man* (New York, 1941). Freud offers a useful caution in *Totem and Taboo* against too readily equating religious or social movements with neurotic behavior: '[T]he neuroses are asocial structures; they endeavour to achieve by private means what is effected in society by collective effort. If we analyze the instincts at work in the neuroses, we find that the determining influence in them is exercised by instinctual forces of sexual origin; the corresponding cultural formations [i.e., art, religion and philosophy], on the other hand, are based upon social instincts, originating from the combination of egoistic and erotic elements.' Freud, *Standard Edition*, 13:73-74.

²⁵ Biographical information on Abigail Kelley Foster is taken from a manuscript in her handwriting (ca. 1885) in the Foster Papers, Worcester Historical Museum, Worcester, Mass. (hereafter cited Foster Papers, WHM), and a memoir by her daughter, Paulina Wright (Alla) Foster, in *The Woman's Journal*, February 7, 1891. For her birthdate, see *Vital Records of Pelham, Massachusetts to 1850* (Boston, 1902), p. 52. Further genealogical data are found in 'Uncatalogued Materials,' Box 1, File 1, Foster Papers, AAS. There is a brief biographical sketch, perhaps written by herself, in *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York, 1900), 2:514, and a longer one by Keith E. Melder in Edward T. James, ed., *Notable American Women 1607-1750*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 1:647-50. A useful account of her career is Jane H. Pease, 'The Freshness of Fanaticism: Abby Kelley Foster, an Essay in Reform' (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1969).

daughters to consider moving outside the household to supplement family income or to accumulate money before marriage. According to a brief memoir by her daughter, Abby Kelley was only fourteen when she first left home to live and work in the home of a sister in order to continue her schooling. For a time she taught in a Quaker school in Providence, then returned to Worcester to live with her family and teach locally, and about 1832 moved to Lynn to take charge of another Friends' school.²⁶ Unmarried and financially independent, Abby Kelley lived intermittently with her parents until they died and she was almost thirty.²⁷

The conflict between the domestic ideals engendered in a female-dominated household of six daughters and one son and the independence encouraged by an attachment to her 'impulsive,' 'kindly,' and 'affectionate' father were perhaps the defining themes of Abby Kelley's life. Her daughter's memoir reveals that although Abby Kelley's mother set the moral tone of the household, an important childhood model was masculine. Her mother, 'the strictest of orthodox Friends, taught her children to follow with unquestioning obedience the leadings of "the Spirit". . . . It was to this early training of the conscience and the will that [she] attributed her moral strength in later life.' A stronger paternal influence upon Abby Kelley than upon her sisters is suggested by her daughter's recollection that 'she used to tell me that she constantly rebelled against the limits set to the physical activity of girls. . . . [S]he would climb trees and fences, and coast down hills on barrelstaves, undeterred by the epithets "hoyden" or "tomboy" heaped

²⁶ On the economic origins of changing female roles, see Percy Bidwell, 'The Agricultural Revolution in New England,' *American Historical Review* 26 (July 1921): esp. 694-97. According to a recent estimate, as many as one in five white women in ante-bellum Massachusetts was a schoolteacher at some period in her life. See Richard M. Bernard and Maris A. Vinovskis, 'The Female Schoolteacher in Ante-Bellum Massachusetts,' *Journal of Social History* 10 (Spring 1977): 333. See also Alla Foster in *The Woman's Journal*, February 7, 1891.

²⁷ Alla Foster in *The Woman's Journal*, February 7, 1891.

upon her by the girls who only played with dolls in the house.'²⁸

The Quakerism of Abby Kelley's parents also provided somewhat more scope for female activism than did the beliefs of other American sects. Her growing dissatisfaction with the life of a single female teacher evolved within a religious tradition that strongly sanctioned the spiritual independence of the Inner Light for both men and women. Moreover, in the Quaker community of Lynn where she arrived as a young woman, religious disputes and schisms had already occurred between conservative elders and younger, less sectarian Friends, many of whom were women. In the early 1830s temperance, peace, and antislavery societies were either newly formed or already flourishing.²⁹ Her first exposure to abolitionism came when she heard William Lloyd Garrison speak, perhaps as early as 1832. Along with many other young, educated, female Quakers she became active in the female auxiliaries of the antislavery and peace societies, within which women solicited funds and subscriptions to antislavery publications, organized bazaars and lectures, and circulated petitions.³⁰

Strong parental models, a Quaker inheritance, new oppor-

²⁸ Ibid. For an instructive comparison with similar parental influences upon a woman whom Abby Kelley resembled in many ways, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catbarine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, 1973), esp. chap. 1.

²⁹ On Quaker female benevolence, see Sydney V. James, *A People among Peoples: Quaker Benevolence in Eighteenth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), esp. pp. 13-14, 48, 50-52, and Janis Calvo, 'Quaker Women Ministers in Nineteenth Century America,' *Quaker History* 63(1974): esp. 83-87, 92-93. For the Lynn Quaker community, see Frederick B. Tolles, 'The New Light Quakers of Lynn and New Bedford,' *New England Quarterly* 32(September 1959):291-319. Abby Kelley's friendships with her Quaker contemporaries and the growing strains within the sect over slavery can be traced through her early correspondence. See Anna Breed to Kelley, November 1838; William Bassett to Kelley, November 12, 1838; November 6, 1839; Aroline H. Chase to Kelley [May or June?] 1843, all Foster Papers, AAS. The Breeds, Bassetts, and Chases were all well-established Lynn Quaker families, and the elements of a generational revolt were very pronounced in the affiliation of their younger members in antislavery societies.

³⁰ Abby Foster's ms 'Reminiscence' misdates this as 1829 or 1830. It was possibly Garrison's July 4, 1832, speech at Lynn. See the Record of the Anti-Slavery Society, Lynn Historical Society, Lynn, Massachusetts. Abby Kelley was elected corresponding secretary of the Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society. See its Record, May 27, 1836, Lynn Historical Society.

tunities for female independence in New England, and the Lynn social milieu all drew Abby Kelley away from a more typical life of married domesticity. Her parents' deaths within several years of each other severed the few remaining social constraints upon a dutiful unmarried daughter. Her father's death in 1836, when she was twenty-six, initiated a period of tormenting self-appraisal and a shift in emotional authority from him to herself that was akin to a process of religious conversion. A year afterward she wrote to her sister: 'I have been compelled to look for support beyond what earth can afford, and I trust I have found it. . . . Father's death taught me the necessity of looking beyond earthly things for a support. I am happy now, even when the severest trials come upon me, for God, my heavenly Father, is my *refuge*. . . .' She was increasingly caught up, she wrote, in 'watching the progress of moral enterprises—the Temperance reform, embracing Grahamism and Abolition and Peace.'³¹ But her mother's slow decline placed an obstacle in her path. Her autonomy was constrained by continuing acceptance of filial responsibility and she returned home to take charge of the household. 'Whether I shall ever enter into the work that I felt so deeply on when I was with you,' she wrote to her sister, 'I cannot now tell. I hope to be strengthened to do my duty.'³²

Abby Kelley later wrote that her mother sympathized with her feelings on slavery. Sometime after returning home she read a biblical passage which she recalled as: 'Not many wise men, after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called, but God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.' She experienced that sudden moment of Quaker-sanctioned illumination that she too possessed a call to go forth and lecture. 'I closed the book,' she recalled, 'and said to my mother, my way is clear, a new light has broken upon me; how true it is, as all history records, that

³¹ Kelley to Newbury Darling, December 10, 1837, Foster Papers, WHM.

³² Kelley to Darling, July 22, 1838, *ibid.*

all great reforms have been carried forward by despised and weak means. The talent, the learning, the church, and the state are pledged to the support of slavery. I will go out among the honest-hearted, common people, into the high ways and by ways and cry, "Pity the poor slave," if I can do nothing more."³³ Shortly afterward she left home to live with a sister and begin antislavery lecturing in Connecticut.

Abby Kelley's commitment to antislavery activism was the means by which a strong personality expanded narrowly defined norms of female behavior. She identified as a young woman with the 'weak things of the world,' but she acted with the moral assurance of her Inner Light. She earned her new autonomy by a dutiful self-surrender that fused activism and self-sacrifice. In doing so, she preached the form but reversed the object of the passive domestic self-sacrifice idealized by more conservative writers on women's roles such as magazine editor Sarah Josepha Hale. Acceptance of the ethic of female self-abnegation was one way of mediating between 'unfeminine' egoism and her beliefs. The rationale for commitment was still duty, not self-fulfillment; but while other women sacrificed for their families, she sacrificed for the slave.

Because slavery served as both a personal and institutional analogue of the social position of women, her maneuver and that of other female abolitionists had revolutionary impli-

³³ Abby Foster, 'Reminiscence.' This brief document, written when she was very old, significantly understates the amount of early reinforcement that she received from her antislavery associates. She had already made one embattled speech to an antislavery convention while a mob milled outside. See *History of Pennsylvania Hall* (Philadelphia, 1838), p. 126. Among her early correspondents, see especially Sarah M. Grimké to Kelley, June 15, 1838; Lucretia Mott to Kelley, March 18, 1839; Angelina Grimké to Kelley, April 15, 1837, Foster Papers, AAS; Kelley to Maria Weston Chapman, December 19, 1837; Kelley to Anne Weston Warren, May 28, 1839, Antislavery Collection, Boston Public Library, Boston, Mass.; Kelley to Theodore Weld, January 14, 1839, in Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., *Letters of Theodore Weld, Angelina Grimké Weld, and Sarah Grimké, 1822-1844*, 2 vols. (New York, 1934), 1:746. In particular, Abby Kelley's lifelong reluctance to allow domestic responsibilities to interfere with her antislavery lecturing cannot be understood without reference to the strong effect upon her of the contrary example of Angelina Grimké Weld who retired after marrying Theodore Weld. The biblical passage cited by Abby Kelley is a paraphrase of 1 Cor. 1:26-29.

cations. As corresponding secretary of the Lynn Female Anti-Slavery Society, Abby Kelley referred to these similarities when she wrote in its second annual report:

We trust that what woman is doing in the present struggle, will accelerate the approach of that time, when instead of the contumely and scorn which are now heaped upon her who enlists in a moral crusade against wrong with a determination to do her whole duty, even should that duty require her to overstep the bounds 'prescribed by a corrupt public sentiment,' she shall be hailed as a minister of Heaven, sent on an errand of mercy to the erring and wandering of earth. When it shall be practically acknowledged, that man and woman are both one in Christ.³⁴

The restrictions on the expression of female benevolence toward slaves marked for her and other active woman their most visible conflict with a social ethic that otherwise strongly sanctioned female benevolence. And as the large number of female abolitionists who later became feminists demonstrates, it was a small psychological leap from asserting empathy with powerless slaves to asserting their own grievances as women.

IV

Early independence, an initial vocational commitment, and the delayed choice of a radical vocation marked the early stages of the lives of both Abby Kelley and Stephen Foster. Both were in their early thirties, well past the average age of marriage, when they met in the early 1840s. Abby Kelley was already well known as the only full-time female abolitionist lecturer and as a precipitating cause of the conservative split from the American Antislavery Society in 1840 over the issue of women's participation.³⁵ Stephen Foster was notorious as one of the

³⁴ The unsigned annual report is contained in the Record of the Female Anti-Slavery Society, June 21, 1837, Lynn Historical Society. The style is characteristic and it was Abby Kelley's duty as corresponding secretary to write the report.

³⁵ The events leading up to the split are summarized in Keith Melder, *Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1800-1850* (New York, 1977), pp. 95-112, and Aileen Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850* (New York, 1969).

most vehement and most frequently mobbed abolitionist lecturers. Both were nonresistants and soon forswore any further affiliation with 'corrupt' institutions, severing all connection with their churches and refusing to vote.³⁶

Courtship and marriage involved establishing new patterns of shared authority, and intimacy served as a test of the same impulses that were expressed in their activism. Both tried to balance acceptance of legitimate mutual demands with their rejection of the social constraints against which they were in shared rebellion. Because normal American courtship and marriage lacked this important social dimension, few relationships among nonradicals could have conformed to Abby Kelley's and Stephen Foster's. Their radical commitments influenced all aspects of their relationship: postponed their marriage, separated them, determined where they would eventually live, influenced their physical health and mental outlook, and, most centrally, determined the nature of the overt or covert struggle for authority and autonomy between them.

Because of the dominance of the man in traditional marriages, most courtships doubtless involved some bargaining on the part of the courted woman for territory of her own, at least within the domestic sphere. At stake was something more important for Abby Kelley: her ability to continue to fulfill a unique public role outside marriage. Given her conception of her 'duty' she had much more to lose from the terms of traditional marriage than did Stephen Foster. She insisted on circumspection when they were lecturing together, even after

³⁶ Stephen Foster was excommunicated by his Congregational meeting on March 24, 1841. On July 1 he appeared personally to complain that the regular disciplinary procedure had not been followed. The vote was reconsidered and a committee was appointed to confer with him. On November 10 he was excommunicated for good, the committee having received 'no evidence from him of a renunciation of his heresies.' See Church of Christ at Dartmouth, Manuscript Records, 1805-1850, Dartmouth College Archives, Baker Library, Hanover, N.H. See also Dartmouth College Church to Stephen Foster, October 4, 1841; E. D. Sanborn to Stephen Foster, April 7, 1842, Foster Papers, AAS. Abby Kelley disowned her orthodox Friends' meeting. See Kelley to Uxbridge, [Mass.], Monthly Meeting, March 22, 1841, in *The Liberator*, October 8, 1841.

their engagement. Naturally reserved, she was hurt by the popular view that she was, as one account had it, 'a worthless girl who was travelling around the country with young men, sometimes with one and then with another, in a disgraceful manner.'³⁷ A sister warned her of 'talk of Abby and Foster' and suggested that only if she conducted herself 'more properly in future' would her character 'in a measure be retrieved.'³⁸

Stephen Foster's insistence challenged her sensitivity to public disapproval. When he complained of her coldness, her response revealed her fears that social expectations and even her own feminine nature might compromise her activism. 'Is it possible,' she asked:

that Stephen S. Foster can ask me, who am hated and contemned, and whose name is the lothing [*sic*] of the people, who have suffered all matter of obloquy, 'if I am not conscious of a feeling of reluctance at the thought of sharing with him the *reproach and contempt* which his course of life has incurred?' . . . [*My feelings*] were always ardent and have been dammed up for so many years, the reservoir is full to overflowing, and it is difficult to restrain them. Nevertheless, I *can* and *ought* to *discipline myself*. . . . I think my usefulness in the antislavery field would be lessened. People wish me married to get rid of me, and did they know of our relation they would say that I was *under obligations to take care of your feeble constitution and nurse you*, and if I did it not they would call me unfeeling and brutal. Did you never know how much I was censured, and how much my influence was lessened by the reports that I neglected my dear mother?³⁹

Foster's response, quoted at the beginning of this essay, began 'My *own* dear Abby' and repeated over and over the theme of his absolute, unconditional possession of her. Although his underlining indicated that he was half-humorous, the message was received by Abby Kelley as he had intended.

³⁷ Quoted in a letter from William Corwin to *The Antislavery Bugle* [Salem, Ohio], October 31, 1846.

³⁸ Joanna Kelley Ballou to Kelley, August 7, 1844, Foster Papers, AAS.

³⁹ Kelley to Foster, July 30, 1843, *ibid.*

His demand for power in marriage might have translated into an equilibrium in which external struggle, even defeat, was balanced by domestic dominance. But Abby Kelley dubbed his letter and its demand that they marry immediately 'a bundle of experiments.' Rejecting his 'possession' of her through immediate marriage, she maintained her own autonomy by reasserting the priority of their external concerns, even at the expense of their mutual relationship, by imposing upon it the self-abnegating mode of her own commitment to slaves, not a husband.

It is important, however, not to stereotype this exchange solely as an example of masculine aggression. Abby Kelley also made attempts to define her authority to her own advantage. And she was equally capable of inventing metaphors, humorous or otherwise, to Foster or to others, to assert her independence or even dominance over him. To Wendell Phillips she explained that 'Foster came within the bounds of my diocese. I *sought* his company (i.e. he sought mine) and my spiritual influence over him has been most happy. He is regularly ordained a curate in my diocese.' A few months earlier she had written to Foster angrily: 'You amuse me when you talk of going to N.Y. to settle. You cannot *buy* a farm. Will you *hire* one? If you do you will get deep into the mud and I shall have to help you out.'⁴⁰

These exchanges during their courtship illuminate the single most important theme of their thirty-five-year marriage: how a man as preoccupied with the insecurities of his own authority and a woman as preoccupied with the struggle for her own autonomy could harmonize their personal preoccupations on the basis of their shared commitment to radical ideals. A pattern of insistence on the primacy of private or personal needs on his part and of public or social duties on hers had already

⁴⁰ Kelley to Wendell Phillips, March 23, 1845, Crawford Blagden Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; Kelley to Foster, February 2, 1845, Foster Papers, AAS.

been established. Eventually, in late 1843 his pleas moved her to agree that they would marry in two years, giving them a chance to accumulate some money.⁴¹ They were married during a lecture tour in the Midwest shortly before Christmas 1845. 'You see how it is,' Abby Kelley wrote apologetically to some friends in the East. 'I have got to be married on the wing, or not at the time we determined on some years ago.'⁴²

V

Initially, at least, marriage did not promise to bring much change to the Fosters' peripatetic lives. In fact, it could be justified as unselfishly furthering their work. By resolving immediate tensions and disarming popular recriminations it strengthened their public personas. The increased attendance at their lectures and meetings demonstrated to Abby Foster that 'even in the antislavery cause a whole man and a whole woman are far better than a half man and a half woman.' 'Had I time I would tell you the advantages of marriage even to myself,' she wrote Wendell Phillips. 'Those to the cause are too numerous to mention.'⁴³

Yet because defining her proper role as a woman had troubled Abby Foster before marriage, comparable sources of anxiety emerged afterward. It was rumored that she committed the impropriety of lecturing while pregnant, something she hotly denied, calling it 'another fabrication to destroy my influence from saving my sisters in chains.' Sustaining her view of commitment as dutiful sacrifice, she pictured her decision not to have a child as self-abnegation, a voluntarily imposed abstinence by which she placed herself in a special position of

⁴¹ Kelley to Foster, November 22, 1843; February 2, March 25, 1845, Foster Papers, AAS. See also Kelley to Elizabeth J. Neale, January 17, April 5, November 11, 1845, and Kelley to Sidney H. Gay, August 11, September 16, 1845, Sidney Howard Gay Collection, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York City.

⁴² Abby Kelley Foster to Sidney H. Gay and Elizabeth N. Gay, November 10, 1845, Sidney Howard Gay Collection.

⁴³ Abby Foster to Sidney H. Gay, January 22, 1846, *ibid.*; Abby Foster to Wendell Phillips, April 11, 1846, Crawford Blagden Collection.

empathy with childless slave mothers. 'If I am not mistaken in physiological facts,' she wrote feminist Lucy Stone, 'I can never be a mother while I work so hard in this cause. And I must exercise self-denial for the sake of the mothers who are childless. God forgive those who make them so, and persecute me.'⁴⁴ Her unintentional commentary on the limitations of contemporary contraception was soon confirmed, for she did become pregnant after lecturing with her husband for a year and a half. Her previous attitude of stoic self-denial and the resulting guilt accompanying her pregnancy strained her acceptance of a maternal role.⁴⁵

Abby and Stephen Foster were approaching middle age when they began a stage in their life cycles that most married couples begin ten or fifteen years earlier—establishing a home and raising a family. Prospective parenthood forced them to change their itinerant livelihood. In April 1847 they bought a farm on the outskirts of Worcester, not far from where Abby had grown up and within the abolitionist heartland around Boston. While promising some stability and independence from the fluctuating fortunes of the antislavery enterprise, a farm entailed responsibilities that diverted them both from lecturing. Because good land in Massachusetts was expensive, it is not unlikely that the farm they bought had '*third or fourth*' rate soil, as Abby Foster complained when she heard what Stephen had found. Moreover, the buildings were in poor repair and improvements required hired labor as well as the help of his brothers.⁴⁶ But the arrival of a baby daughter, called Paulina (Alla), provided a new source of mutual affection and responsibility. 'I trust yourself and Lizzie are as happy as Stephen and myself, tho', of course, I think it improbable,' she wrote another abolitionist couple. 'Tell Lizzie I want she

⁴⁴ Abby Foster to Lucy Stone, August 15, [1846], Blackwell Family Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁵ Abby Foster to Lucy Stone, March 27, 1847, Blackwell Family Papers.

⁴⁶ Abby Foster to Stephen Foster, April 7, 1847; Newell Foster to Stephen Foster, September 12, 1847, Foster Papers, AAS.

should see our dear baby. She would envy me my happiness in her.'⁴⁷

But a dependent child also complicated the balance between intimacy and activism. For a time Abby Foster limited herself to the domestic, supportive role she had previously rejected. Nevertheless, she decided to wean her daughter at nine months, leave her in the care of Stephen's sister, and 'engage in the field warfare again.'⁴⁸ So strong were the strictures against work outside the family by middle-class women, especially mothers, that her decision drew criticism even from other female abolitionists. 'I long to hear of thee in the field again,' wrote one, 'but then there's the dear baby. *That* duty I would not have neglected. . . . [Motherhood] is a relation not to be entered into lightly without consideration and care and without proper physical and moral fitness for the duties belonging to a parent.'⁴⁹ The strains of her decision to lecture and her frequent subsequent absences from home found expression in the note of guilt that crept into her letters to her daughter over the years. 'Do you begin to think that I shall never get ready to keep house?' she wrote five-year-old Alla. 'I had told you I intended to come home when your father did and then you and I would keep house together. Well, I intended, really, to do so, but then, as your aunt Diama concluded to come and keep house for me I thought I would stay a little longer, and preach to these wicked men, and make them good, so that they would let the poor slave mothers go home to their children. Do you often think of the little slave girls who can never see their dear mothers again?'⁵⁰ The conflict between domestic motherhood and activism continued to be a dilemma in a way that marriage

⁴⁷ Abby Foster to Sidney H. Gay, February 1848, Sidney Howard Gay Collection.

⁴⁸ Abby Foster to Gay, September 19, 1847, *ibid.* See also Abby Foster to Stephen Foster, August 18, September 3, 9, 28, 1847, Foster Papers, AAS.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Gay to Abby Foster, February 11, 1848, Foster Papers, AAS. See also J. Elizabeth Jones to Abby Foster, January 23, 1848, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Abby Foster to Alla Foster, April 17, 1852, Foster Papers, WHM. See also Abby Foster to Alla Foster, January 6, 1854, *ibid.*

without a child would not have been. Motherhood for her, much more than fatherhood for her husband, was an alternating source of guilt and fulfillment. 'I have been enjoying a visit from my little daughter and busying myself with other domestic matters,' she wrote from Worcester between lecture tours. ' 'Tis good to get into the quiet.'⁵¹

VI

The reflection of their personal strivings within marriage expressed an essential dimension of the Fosters' radical identities, but not the only one. Radical commitment was embodied in the full range of their social relationships. Their activism involved not merely projecting ideals in obedience to the dictates of inner emotional necessities, but also the *social* validation of these ideals through membership in a larger movement. Radical commitment was not merely activity directed toward social ends, it was activity pursued socially. The success of Stephen Foster's psychic returns from narcissism to social commitment and of Abby Foster's balancing of domestic and social duties required and evoked emotional solidarity and economic support from their families and friends. These were essential buffers against the public disapproval and financial worries accompanying their joint careers. Parents and siblings of Abby and Stephen Foster provided a cushion against adversity by helping with the farm, providing money and sometimes accommodations during lecture tours, taking care of Alla or more generally providing the emotional support that has always been within the capacity of healthy kinships.⁵²

⁵¹ Abby Foster to Sidney H. Gay, May 24, 1849, Sidney Howard Gay Collection.

⁵² Abby Foster to Alla Foster, January 6, 1854; Stephen Foster to Alla Foster, October 5, 1857; Stephen Foster to Abby Foster, August 17, 1851, Foster Papers, WHM. Abby Foster to Stephen Foster, June 22, [1850]; Abby Foster to Stephen Foster, April 20, [1850]; Sarah Foster to Stephen Foster, June 28, 1847; Newell A. Foster to Stephen Foster, September 12, 1847, Foster Papers, AAS. Two of Abby Foster's sisters were members of the Christian socialist Hopedale Community. See Adin Ballou, *History of the Town of Milford, Worcester County, Massachusetts*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1882), 2:559.

Moreover, friendships formed as a result of the Fosters' antislavery work provided another sort of emotional support and activity. Antislavery meetings, fairs, bazaars, and anniversaries created occasions for the faithful to fraternize and renew their commitments. Salaries, loans, and an eventual bequest from the estate of wealthy abolitionist Charles Hovey sustained the Fosters through periods of financial need. Because these friendships were founded on ideological grounds they were subject to many vicissitudes, but it was more than flattery that made Stephen Foster sign one of the many letters he wrote to Wendell Phillips to complain of the policies of their associates, 'Your friend and admiring pupil.'⁵³ Furthermore, the Fosters' correspondence with other abolitionists suggests how fluid was the distinction between male and female friendships within the antislavery movement in contrast to the larger social world. Abby Foster maintained a far greater number of correspondents than her husband, but also a greater number of male than of female correspondents. Yet female friendships played an especially important role in Abby Foster's life. Their importance dated at least from the friendships she formed with the other Quaker teachers of her own age at Lynn and continued with the encouragement she received from the Grimké sisters and other abolitionists before she committed herself to

⁵³ Stephen Foster to Wendell Phillips, [1857?], Crawford Blagden Collection. For examples of the Fosters' abolitionist-linked friendships, see Paulina S. Wright to Abby Kelley, [1843]; Susan Fulton and Lukens Pierce to Stephen Foster and Abby Kelley, May 4, 1845; Anna Gardner to Abby Kelley, May 4, 1845; Jessie H. Donaldson and Nancy H. Donaldson to Abby Foster, February 14, 1846, Foster Papers, AAS; M. M. Moore to Abby Kelley, April 4, 1843, Foster Papers, WHM. Agents for the American Antislavery Society generally received a salary and a share of their sales of newspapers and pamphlets. See, e.g., Stephen Foster to Wendell Phillips, September 14, 1846, Crawford Blagden Collection. The Society occasionally provided extraordinary financial aid in cases of ill health: '[O]ur friends in Boston have . . . decided that it is best for us to winter in Jamaica . . . and for this purpose they propose to present us with an outfit of \$150 or more.' Stephen Foster to Abby Foster, December 2, 1851. The Fosters did not go. For examples of solicitude at the Fosters' overwork, see S. May, Jr., to Stephen Foster, December 1, 1851; Wendell Phillips to Abby Foster, May 31, 1855, May 19, 1858, Foster Papers, WHM. For the Hovey Bequest, see C. J. Hovey to Stephen Foster, August 8, 1855, *ibid.*

lecturing. She also corresponded with female abolitionists who, like herself, were married to men active in the cause.

As one of the few women of her generation who ventured into public life, Abby Foster benefited from the identification made with her by many women whom she scarcely knew. 'I should still feel more inclination to beguile a lonely leisure moment in expressing thoughts and feelings to you,' wrote a young teacher in a village in New York, 'than to any other friends even to those just my own age.' The message conveyed to other women by Abby Foster's compromise between female self-denial and social commitment was a complicated one. As a platform speaker, Abby Foster evoked reserves of female pride and emotion which undermined the normal definition of the sexual 'spheres.' To receptive women in her audiences she embodied a new transcendent principle of activist womanhood. 'I always *loved you*, and *always loved to hear you speak*,' wrote one woman, 'but I never realized how glorious, a noble hearted, selfdenying, principled woman was, until I saw you stand before that large audience, so beautifully calm yet strong, in the consciousness of right doing, and heard from your lips that tribute to your Husband, the equal of which was never uttered before, and *then*, I thanked God, I too was a woman.'⁵⁴

More complex, perhaps, was the influence that Abby Foster exercised over younger women such as Lucy Stone and Susan B. Anthony who became leaders of the first generation of American feminists.⁵⁵ Although a model of female activism,

⁵⁴ Jeanette Brown to Abby Kelley, July 19, 1843, Foster Papers, AAS; Lora M. Taft to Abby Foster, June 1, 1856, Foster Papers, WHM. See also Mary Jane and Lizzie Tappan to Abby Kelley, November 23, 1844; 'Laura' to Abby Kelley, June 29, 1843, Foster Papers, AAS. The importance of these female relationships is illuminated in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,' *Signs* 1 (Autumn 1975):1-29.

⁵⁵ Abby Foster's formative influence on feminist Lucy Stone was particularly important. Stone was a student at Oberlin College when she heard the Fosters lecture. She did some abolitionist lecturing but soon devoted herself entirely to women's rights. See Stone to Abby and Stephen Foster, March 25, 1846; Stone to Abby Foster, July 9, 1846, Foster Papers, AAS; Stone to Abby Foster, August 3, 1851, Foster Papers, WHM. See also her remarks at Abby Foster's funeral: 'The world of women owe her a debt which they can never pay. . . . She had no peer and she leaves no successor.' *The Woman's Journal*, January 22, 1887.

she nevertheless had a somewhat anomalous relationship to those women who expressed in primarily feminist, not anti-slavery, terms the underlying basis of their grievances. When she offered a resolution at the second national woman's rights convention in 1851 that 'Woman lacks her rights because she does not feel the full weight of her responsibilities,' and argued for greater female initiative and fewer complaints, she was attacked by some of the women who believed that rights, not responsibilities, were the real issue. And when she further told the delegates that 'Bloody feet, sisters, have worn smooth the path by which you have come up hither,' she was offering a contrast between what she took to be the easy choice they had made and the painful personal consequences of her own choice ten years earlier. For although she was a feminist, and the origin of her empathy with her slave 'sisters' was the emotional resonance between their status and hers, one result of years of struggle in pursuit of autonomy was the suppression of self-doubt and an impatience with much feminist self-advocacy, especially perhaps as it came from leisured women of different backgrounds than her own. Consequently, her continuing choice of abolitionism rather than feminism as a vehicle for self-expression, at least until the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, provided a necessary psychic guarantee of her disinterestedness.⁵⁶

VII

While Abby Foster occupied a position of some esteem among their antislavery associates, Stephen Foster did not. She was appointed a general agent of the American Antislavery Society shortly before the birth of their daughter. But he remained on the periphery of the movement and her efforts to gain him an agency were of no avail. His frequent public outbursts at asso-

⁵⁶ *Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention held in Worcester, Massachusetts, October 15th and 16th, 1851* (New York, 1852), pp. 99-102. For the contrasting emphasis on 'rights,' see Ernestine Rose's rejoinder (pp. 103-4) and the resolutions presented by the business committee (pp. 11-13).

ciates and his self-dramatization alienated many co-workers. Although other members of the Society did not deny his courage, they regarded him as unstable. In Edmund Quincy's mocking phrase, he was 'St. Stephen, the connoisseur in martyrdom.' Wendell Phillips, a sympathetic friend, wrote that Foster was a 'devoted, noble, single-eyed, pure, eloquent John-the-Baptist character,' whose actions Phillips still thought 'wild and illogical.'⁵⁷

To a much greater degree than his wife's, Stephen Foster's radical commitment always partook of his unresolved conflicts. For the most part he directed his anger outward at a larger audience of the 'guilty' or merely complacent. But he also directed it at her or at friends, and sometimes at himself. Temperamentally unable to compromise, he turned increasingly to the farm. The natural cycle of planting and harvesting occupied him in season, and the difficulties of wringing a living from its poor soil provided him with strong reasons to forgo lecturing. After returning from one disappointing lecture tour which his wife continued successfully, he wrote bitterly to her: 'I have often told you that you could accomplish more alone than with my aid. So you have additional evidence not only that I am not fit for general agent, but that I am not fit for lecturing agent. Of this I have long been conscious, and I now hope and trust you will not again urge me into the field.'⁵⁸

The farm's inability to support them and pay for improvements prevented Stephen Foster from developing a compensatory source of self-esteem, pursuing what he had once called 'the ennobling occupation of cultivating the soil.'⁵⁹ His lack of

⁵⁷ Edmund Quincy to Caroline Weston, June 2, [1843]; Wendell Phillips to Elizabeth Pease, June 29, 1842, Antislavery Collection. For other unfavorable reflections on Foster, see Maria Weston Chapman to Abby Kelley, September 9, 1843, Foster Papers, WHM; October 12, 1843, Foster Papers, AAS; William Lloyd Garrison to Helen Garrison, November 27, 1842, in *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, ed. Walter M. Merrill, 6 vols. to date (Cambridge, Mass., 1971-), 3:113-14.

⁵⁸ Stephen Foster to Abby Foster, April 11, 1850, Foster Papers, AAS.

⁵⁹ Stephen Foster to Nathaniel Rogers in *Herald of Freedom*, July 1, 1842 (quotation). On the Fosters' farm, see Stephen Foster to S. J. May, Jr., June 14, 1853, Antislavery Collection; Abby Foster to Samuel J. May, September 18, 1852, *ibid.*; Stephen Foster to Abby Foster, August 17, 1851, Foster Papers, WHM.

success as a provider was magnified by his wife's accomplishments. Consequently, the years following the purchase of the farm were unhappy ones for him. Abby Foster often sent money back from her lecture tours and he worked the farm, lecturing locally. William Lloyd Garrison remarked that Stephen Foster put all of his combativeness into his farm and made it one of the best, but this was making a virtue of frustration. Certainly Foster did not always consider it so, although he came to be known as a fine horticulturalist whose samples frequently won prizes at local exhibitions. But the remarkable stone walls which he built around his fields which, according to the compliment of his Worcester neighbor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, would last as long as the Roman roads, were more than just tangible indications of good husbandry; they were also testimony of his frustrated determination to construct a personal space of his own.⁶⁰

Recurrent sickness, his wife's frequent absences, and his alienation from the antislavery society led to frequent periods of depression. 'Among other letters at the office,' he wrote her:

I found yours of the 28th ult. and the very sight of it thrilled me with emotion, and awakened feelings that I never experienced before, and which only the most peculiar circumstances can ever awaken again. When I wrote the letter to which yours is an answer, I was unusually sad. I saw before me a long Winter of the most *intense suffering*, and no very strong probability that the return of summer would bring permanent relief. These *cold night sweats* and that *terrible cough* were more than I felt capable of enduring, and yet I saw no way of escape. . . . But now I am *so well*—the scene has changed *so suddenly*—and I feel so free, the sight of your letter reminding me of the past and the deep sympathy and devotion which it breathes, deeply affected me.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 'Antislavery Days,' *The Outlook* 60(1898):51; Stephen Foster to Wendell Phillips, October 8, 1864, Crawford Blagden Collection; obituary of Stephen Foster in *Worcester Daily Spy*, September 9, 1881 (success in horticulture).

⁶¹ Stephen Foster to Abby Foster, December 2, 1851, Foster Papers, WHM. Freud's discussion of the relationship between depression, object loss, anger, and guilt in 'Mourning and Melancholia' (fn. 24) is very relevant here. See also Stephen Foster to Samuel J. May, Jr., September 24, October 3, 1851, Antislavery Collection.

The emotional dependence of the husband and daughter focused on the absent wife and mother. Normal gender roles were reversed: she earned a salary and acquired public recognition and he cared for their home and child. 'Alla talks much of you,' he wrote, 'and says she has often cried because you were gone, but I have not seen her tears. She is very happy and is a great comfort to me in your absence.'⁶²

VIII

Even a partial resolution of this conflict between social activism and self-preoccupation might never have occurred if Stephen Foster had not found new measures to increase his distinctive role in the antislavery movement by channeling his energies in a direction more emotionally compatible than orthodox nonresistance. Although it can be misleading to attribute too much importance to a specific event in the life of an individual, there was an incident that brought to consciousness latent impulses and allowed Foster to redirect his public activities and to achieve a new feeling of independence and competence.

In late October 1854 a federal marshal came to Worcester in search of fugitive slaves. A vigilance committee of abolitionists, including Foster, was formed to frustrate the marshal's efforts. After he attempted to make an arrest a hostile crowd gathered. Foster and other abolitionists escorted the marshal through the crowd, extracting a promise from him to leave town. After a brief speech by Foster, the marshal was allowed to depart. The following day a local paper lauded the 'moral influence' of the men who had 'periled their lives to shield the kidnapper.'⁶³

In a letter to his absent wife the next day, Foster extolled the 'glorious result.' The event had buoyed his self-confidence:

⁶² Stephen Foster to Abby Foster, July 27, 1851, Foster Papers, AAS.

⁶³ On the so-called 'Butman Riot,' see Albert Tyler, 'The Butman Riot,' *Collections of the Worcester Society of Antiquity* 1 (1879):85-94; *Worcester Daily Spy*, October 31, 1854.

'I am now fully satisfied that the only thing necessary to render the abolitionism of this city fully equal to any possible emergency is a compitent [*sic*] leader; and the experience of yesterday has given me to believe that in the absence of another I could fill that place.' His description of the physical confrontation with the marshall was especially revealing:

I felt assured from the aspect of our meeting that the only thing necessary to bring him a suppliant at our feet, was to place him face to face with the abolitionism of Worcester and to this end I directed all my energies. . . . I did not expect the privilege of standing between him and certain death and taking upon my own person the blows which were aimed at his recreant head. . . . Scenes of excitement and peril are not new to me, but in all my past experience I have seen nothing like this. . . . In looking over the field I have already discovered work enough to occupy my time for several weeks after my labors on the farm are through, but I cannot say how long I think it best to remain here.⁶⁴

Foster had once again performed the role of the nonresistant agitator, a role publicly sealed when he was arrested for incitement to riot.⁶⁵ He had mobilized the crowd's anger and then interposed himself between it and its object. The sense of manipulating the anger of a crowd of citizens against a common, visible antagonist foreshadowed a new resolution to an old dilemma. It brought Foster to a qualified advocacy of coercion against slavery, and the more direct expression of anger which he had controlled only incompletely through non-resistance. If previously he had suffered *for* the slave, now he was, in a sense, the slave's avenger.

Against the orthodoxy of other nonresistants, including his wife, Stephen Foster began to advocate the violent overthrow of slavery by those who were not, like himself, nonresistants. This compromise allowed him to mediate between the impulse

⁶⁴ Stephen Foster to Abby Foster, October 31, 1854, Foster Papers, AAS.

⁶⁵ For the sequel to the riot, see *Worcester Daily Spy*, November 8, 14, 16-27, 1854. However, no bills were returned by the grand jury. See, *ibid.*, January 24, 1855. Foster demanded the right to appoint his wife as defense counsel. The judge refused.

towards violence and the ideal of nonresistance. Not long after the Worcester riot he began work on a second pamphlet, *Revolution the Only Remedy for Slavery*, a verbal assault upon the Union and Constitution almost as bitter as *The Brotherhood of Thieves* had been upon the church and clergy.⁶⁶ The meaning of 'revolution' was gradually made explicit when he argued elsewhere that northerners should resort to 'the same measures for the relief of slaves, that they would adopt, if their own liberties were cloven down, namely *Revolution*.' And eventually, by 1860 he urged: 'I would give our movement a bolder tone—would make it smell of *revolution*, if not of *blood*.'⁶⁷

At the 1855 annual meeting of the moribund New England Non-resistance Society, Stephen Foster tried to justify his new views on nonresistance:

In relation to nonresistance he had been so situated of late that he hardly had time to stop to reason upon the subject and he had followed his *instincts*. . . . He did not now receive nonresistance as a principle. . . . Every man should act according to his convictions, whether he believed in using moral or physical forces. So far as he was concerned, personally, his whole life was an argument for nonresistance; but he could stir up others to fight who believed in fighting, and he had labored diligently to bring the fighting men of Worcester up to the point of killing the kidnapper, rather than letting a fugitive slave be carried out of the city.

Other members of the Society argued as orthodox nonresistants that all life was inviolable. Abby Foster also spoke against her husband. 'None of us wanted to be killed,' she said, 'and therefore none of us should kill. . . . We should ever be ready to submit to death in a spirit of martyrdom.'⁶⁸

⁶⁶ [Stephen Foster], *Revolution the Only Remedy for Slavery* (New York, [1855]) p. 19, and *passim*.

⁶⁷ Stephen Foster to Elizabeth Buffum Chace, June 10, 1857, in L. B. C. Wyman and Arthur C. Wyman, *Elizabeth Buffum Chace*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1914), 1:190; *Liberator*, March 9, 1860.

⁶⁸ *Liberator*, March 30, 1855. See also issues of October 11, 1850, and June 6, 1856; Stephen Foster to Lysander Spooner, January 8, 1859, Antislavery Collection.

Stephen Foster's increasingly less-qualified advocacy of violence—and later, another nonresistant heresy, political organization—allowed him a measure of principled independence from his wife and co-workers.⁶⁹ 'My greatest embarrassment in pursuing the course I have marked out for myself is the position and feelings of my wife,' he confided to Wendell Phillips, not entirely ingenuously: 'She is, as I think, unfortunately the victim of two errors—first, in sympathizing with the non-resistant policies of the [American Antislavery] society, & secondly, in attaching undue importance to my cooperation, feeling that she can hardly go on without it. I am sorry that we cannot see eye to eye in this matter, but as we differ in our convictions, we must also in our course of action, that each may be true to himself.'⁷⁰

IX

Despite their differences, however, Stephen and Abby Foster were both vehemently opposed to the rising Republican Party during the late 1850s. From Abby Foster's position of opposition to *all* political parties and Stephen Foster's position espousing a genuinely radical political party, Republicanism was only the latest of a series of opportunistic political responses to slavery. They jointly opposed what they believed to be the increasingly conciliatory attitude of the leadership of the American Antislavery Society to the new party. Their disagreement culminated in a bitter public split between Abby Foster and

⁶⁹ For Foster's support of a radical antislavery party, see *Liberator*, June 23, 1857; February 5, 1858; June 3, 1859; S. May, Jr., to Stephen Foster, February 12, 1857; C. J. Hovey to Stephen Foster, October 15, 1858, Foster Papers, WHM. Stephen Foster to Gerrit Smith, June 8, 1856, Smith Family Papers, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, N.Y. On the eve of the Civil War, Foster tried to form a radical Union Democratic Party. See *Liberator*, September 8, October 5, 1860; *Douglass' Monthly* [Rochester, N.Y.] (November 1860), pp. 354–55, 361. On Foster's eventual acceptance of an antislavery interpretation of the Constitution, see *Liberator*, February 3, 24, March 9, 30, 1860; Stephen Foster to Lysander Spooner, January 8, 1859, Antislavery Collection. For the disagreement between Stephen and Abby Foster over voting, see *Massachusetts Spy*, February 3, 1858.

⁷⁰ Stephen Foster to Wendell Phillips, [1857?], and November 8, 1861, Crawford Blagden Collection.

Garrison in 1859 and her refusal to accept a position on the executive board of the Massachusetts Antislavery Society.⁷¹ The split provided them with grounds for their radical opposition to the hesitant policies of the government in regard to emancipation during the Civil War and eventually to political rights for freedmen during Reconstruction. At the war's end, they and other radicals, led by Wendell Phillips, wrested control of the American Antislavery Society from Garrison and other 'moderates' in order to continue the work of political and social agitation.⁷² All remnants of the ideology of nonresistance had been swept away in the war's holocaust. The Fosters were still radical opponents of established authority, but they were also political agitators seeking to secure the ideals of what Abby Foster called, in a rare burst of patriotism after Emancipation, 'the most glorious country the sun ever saw.'⁷³

By 1865, the Fosters were both well into middle age; yet instead of taking a stoical or retrospective view of their lives and perhaps writing testamentary autobiographies, they broadened their reform objectives. After the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, Foster outlined their concerns: 'The woman suffrage movement for the last year and a half, has sat *heavily* on my shoulders. The labor question, just struggling into existence, but still enveloped in midnight darkness, demands both sympathy and work; while the appalling evils of drunkenness which already threaten the overthrow of the republic call loudly for fresh consecration to the temperance cause.'⁷⁴

⁷¹ On the bitter split between Garrison and Abby Foster, see *Liberator*, June 3, 1859; Wendell Phillips to Abby Foster, June 19, 30, 1859; Abby Foster to Phillips, June 24, July 22, 25, September 8, 1859 (drafts), Foster Papers, AAS. Garrison to Abby Foster, July 22, 25, August 8, 1859, *ibid.*; Abby Foster to Garrison, July 24, [September] 1859 (drafts), *ibid.*; Abby Foster to Samuel May, June 9, 1859, and Abby Foster to the Board of Managers of the Massachusetts Antislavery Society, January 15, 1860, Crawford Blagden Collection.

⁷² On the debates within the American Antislavery Society leading to the split, see *Liberator*, December 18, 1863; January 8, 15, 22, May 20, June 3, 10, 1864; January 13, 27, February 5, May 26, June 2, 1865.

⁷³ Stephen and Abby Foster to Wendell Phillips, February 1, 1864, Crawford Blagden Collection.

⁷⁴ Stephen Foster to George Thompson, January 15, 1870, Foster Papers, AAS; Abby Foster to Anne Phillips, January 19, 1871, Crawford Blagden Collection.

Economic anxiety had never been far from Stephen Foster's mind, and after the war his concerns extended beyond slavery to class oppression: freedmen without land and workingmen without capital. The crusade against slavery had evolved into a struggle against a 'landed aristocracy' and 'land monopolists.'⁷⁵ The aim of abolitionists, he had written, should extend to the 'elevation of the laboring classes to an equality with the capitalists, and the professions.' He believed that the underlying issues were not those of race, but between 'labor, on the one hand, and capital, learning and gentility, on the other—the former contending for equality, the latter for supremacy and prerogative.'⁷⁶ But Foster's identification with the dispossessed of Worcester, many of whom worked in the shoe industry, was cramped by his opposition to labor unions, a position reminiscent of his wife's individualistic attitude toward other feminists. Opposition to the authority of owners was one element of his radical beliefs, but a refusal to surrender his autonomy to uncertain affiliations was another. Although he said he favored a labor party 'on a broad moral basis' he distrusted trades' unions as '*narrow and clannish*.'⁷⁷

Despite Stephen Foster's occasional travels on behalf of woman's suffrage, the couple's lives were increasingly centered around the farm. The deterioration of the health of both Abby Foster and their daughter had been another factor in reorienting relationships within the family. By the late 1850s, Abby Foster's years of wearing travel and public speaking had made her prematurely old. During and after the war she rarely spoke in public, engaging primarily in fund raising. Because she was a partial invalid, her increasing physical dependence modified the anxieties her success had generated in her hus-

⁷⁵ *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 22, 1869. See also issues of June 5, 1869; February 5, 1870.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, April 20, 1843.

⁷⁷ Stephen Foster to editor, *Worcester Daily Spy*, February 18, 1870. See also issue of February 19, 1870. On Foster's temperance activity, see, *ibid.*, May 5, 19, 1874.

band.⁷⁸ Moreover, the development of a spinal deformity in their daughter required continual care over a period of several years. Both dependencies required a retrenchment of outside activity and closed domestic ties. '[F]or one with a small farm like mine and no other resources,' Foster wrote another abolitionist, 'and whose only auxiliaries are an invalid daughter and a wife already sadly worn and exhausted by excessive public labors . . . there is no alternative but for heads and hands to mark each day with long and busy hours.'⁷⁹

Weightier domestic responsibilities provided further opportunities for self-dramatization on Stephen Foster's part, but the resolution of domestic conflicts may also have accounted for the way in which he sought to distance himself from their memory. In 1858 he attended a 'Free Convention' held in Rutland, Vermont, which gathered together radicals of every stripe—nonresistants, free traders, land reformers, marriage reformers, antisabbatarians, and spiritualists. Among the subjects discussed was 'free love' and a resolution was presented defining a position on marriage. Foster moved an amendment to this resolution 'that the only true and mutual marriage is an exclusive and conjugal love between one man and one woman, *based upon the principle of perfect and entire equality* [Foster's addition], and the only true love is the isolated home, based upon exclusive love.' He defended his amendment, arguing that without complete equality in marriage every husband was a 'tyrant in his own family' and the family itself a 'little embryo plantation, and every woman . . . a slave breeder.' From the

⁷⁸ Stephen Foster to Abby Foster, April 16, 1854; William Lloyd Garrison to Abby Foster, August 12, 1851; Stephen Foster to Abby Foster, September 14, October 12, 1855, Foster Papers, AAS; Abby Foster to Olive K. Darling, November 3, 1846; Wendell Phillips to Abby Foster, May 31, 1855; May 19, 1858, Foster Papers, WHM; Alla Foster in *The Woman's Journal*, February 7, 1891; Stephen Foster to Wendell Phillips, November 8, 1861; Abby Foster to Wendell Phillips, July 28, [1867?], Crawford Blagden Collection.

⁷⁹ Stephen Foster to George Thompson [or R. D. Webb?], March 16, 1862, Foster Papers, AAS. See also Stephen Foster to Richard Webb, June 8, 1858, University of Rochester Library; Abby Foster to Wendell and Anne Phillips, August 20, [186-], Crawford Blagden Collection.

beginning of his own marriage, he said, he had made a 'solemn vow' to treat his wife as an equal. For him marriage was 'the glory of this fallen world' and the 'only type of perfect paradise.'⁸⁰

This was not necessarily hypocrisy or faulty memory on his part; it was a picture of a utopia, an intellectual ideal for which he and his wife had striven since the 'bundle of experiments' of their courtship. And they often showed flashes of awareness at the distance between their ideals and the emotional springs of their commitment, which Abby Foster once expressed as a conflict between 'natures': 'It will not do for us to think our "second natures" can be put off, for our first and true ones, with great ease. I think it will take generations to do it.'⁸¹

Moreover, their eventual secure acceptance of the priority of their radical over domestic commitments in their old age, with their daughter grown, was exemplified one final time when the Fosters refused to pay taxes on their farm and personal property in 1873 to protest the denial of the vote to women. The city of Worcester responded by putting their farm and property up for auction. The day before the tax sale of the farm the Fosters called an 'Anti-Tax' convention in Worcester. 'Half the Commonwealth are slaves,' Stephen Foster told the mostly local delegates. 'The men have exercised absolute authority over the women.' He accused the men of Massachusetts of committing the 'highest public crime known to human law' by taking the homestead of his wife (jointly owned by himself) and that of two other women for nonpayment of taxes voted without their representation.⁸² The next day the farm was sold for \$100 at auction. The local buyer

⁸⁰ *Proceedings of the Free Convention Held at Rutland, Vt., June 25th, 26th, 27th, 1858* (Boston, 1858), pp. 56-57. For a skeptical account of the convention, see *New York Weekly Tribune*, July 3, 1858.

⁸¹ Abby Kelley to Stephen Foster, March 28, 1843, Foster Papers, AAS.

⁸² *The Woman's Journal*, February 28, 1874. Garrison sent a reconciliatory letter of support. See Garrison to Abby Foster, February 16, 1874, Foster Papers, AAS. The Fosters' tax protest can be followed in *Worcester Daily Spy*, February 20, March 18, June 24, 27, July 21, 1874.

almost immediately transferred it back to the city, explaining: 'After purchasing S. S. Foster's farm on Saturday last (sold for non-payment of taxes) I was, through your politeness, introduced to that individual, who at once took occasion to blow one of his characteristic blasts, and as you are well aware, used language that was anything but gentlemanly. He impeached my motive in buying the place, and stated "he should treat me as a robber both in private and in public". . . . I have no desire to "rob him of his hard earning."' ⁸³ Moral suasion had won a final victory. For the next several years, the taxes on the farm were not paid, it was auctioned off, and the Fosters bought it back from the city.⁸⁴ Stephen Foster died in 1881 and Abby Foster died six years later at the home of a sister.

X

A recent study of the 'moral choices' of American abolitionists describes their commitment as 'an imaginative act designed to yield them the greatest possible "freedom"': 'On the evidence [writes Peter Walker], there is ample reason to believe that they were compelled to seek their own freedom from intolerable "enslaving" circumstances by freeing other enslaved people. It is here that a crucial relationship was made: what they imaginatively desired for themselves was stated socially, and personal needs were given substance by a social enterprise.'⁸⁵

⁸³ *Ibid.*, March 4, 1874.

⁸⁴ Alla Foster to editor, *ibid.*, September 13, 1881, explains and justifies the protest.

⁸⁵ *Moral Choices: Memory, Desire, and Imagination in Nineteenth-Century American Abolition* (Baton Rouge and London, 1978), p. 267. Walker's perceptive study rightly emphasizes the self-fulfilling and imaginative dimensions of antislavery commitment. There are marked similarities between the lives of Abby and Stephen Foster and Jane Swisshelm and Henry C. Wright, two of the figures he discusses. However, in my view, Walker's chosen focus on autobiographical writings (p. xviii) inevitably leads him to slight the important role of social communion or solidarity in radical commitment. This bias, I think, is intrinsic to reminiscences written in old age, and is marked in Abby Foster's own reminiscence written in 1885. It needs to be compensated for by closer attention to correspondence and events contemporary with the commitment itself.

Furthermore, Walker may assign too much importance among the abolitionists to their 'accommodating and synoptic' role (p. 303) as middle-class apologists for the

This study of the radical commitments of Abby and Stephen Foster confirms Walker's broad view of abolitionist commitment. Stephen Foster's humorous suggestion that he would 'tyrannize over' his wife; his notice to his father that 'parents could exercise no more authority over their children than children over their parents'; his cry while in jail that 'I *was* a slave. I am one *no longer*'—all accord with this insight. Abby Foster's initial conviction that she was one of the 'weak things of the world' called upon to confound the mighty; her continuing identification with her 'sisters in chains'; even her analogy of her unsettled relationship with her young daughter to that between a slave mother and daughter—all confirm this insight. The comparison which occurred so frequently in the Fosters' writing and speaking between slaves and slavery and their own lives was not merely an apt expression made natural by pre-existing commitment. It was the source of that commitment itself. Radicalism for them, from their early nonresistance to their last tax protest, was the willingness to suffer as an expression of opposition to forms of authority that made them feel powerless.

But conversely, and equally importantly, the Fosters' radicalism was also a search for personal autonomy through voluntary, emotionally fulfilling *social* ties. They worked hard, if not always successfully, at turning their marriage into such a union. The acutely felt, but no less introspectively realized, conflict between authority and autonomy, between private and social goals, was the essential tension of their lives. Their

semi-laissez-faire industrial state. This results, in part, from his too hasty dismissal of nonresistance (p. 288) and his ignoring various anarchist or communistic explorations by some abolitionists of alternatives to capitalistic statism. Their compromises or failures notwithstanding, these experiments should not be conflated with willful apologies for their opposite. Walker's approach to the similarities between laissez-faire ideology and abolitionism does not sufficiently distinguish, in my view, between these compromises and failures, what was taken from antislavery ideology and put by others to their own uses, and the motives of abolitionists themselves. The Fosters are instructive counterexamples to the assimilation of some other abolitionists following the Civil War. They demonstrate what Walker shows so well: the personally charged, self-creative impulse of abolitionism and of much other radicalism as well.

commitment was neither solely a private 'compulsion' made public nor an idealization of 'the broad nineteenth century middle class.' Nor, for the Fosters at least, was it a means for achieving social respectability.⁸⁶ Instead, it was a profound, lifelong disagreement with every canon of respectability and marketplace wisdom that frustrated their single-minded quest for personal freedom and the freedom of those slaves, women, workers, even drunkards with whom they identified.

Eventually, after the fiasco of American post-Emancipation policy had been sealed by the election of 1876, surviving radicals such as the Fosters were among those protesting most vehemently the decision to abandon freedmen. And from that retrospect the Fosters' vigorous, unrelenting tirades against authority divorced from morality dissolved any appearance of self-complacency and regained an aura of foresight. So, at least, one radical emeritus believed. In late 1877, William Lloyd Garrison wrote Abby Foster an implicit retraction of his own temporizing belief, expressed in 1865 against the 'radicals,' that Emancipation alone might be sufficient. 'Never have I known you 'he wrote', or either of you, to be lacking in vision, or mistaken in interpreting the signs of the times, since your early whole-souled espousal of the antislavery cause. Whoever else may have been beguiled or led astray, you have never ceased to remember those in bonds *as bound with them*, and so have carried with you a discerning spirit and a true standard of judgment in every phase of the conflict.'⁸⁷ It was an epitaph to their faith that Stephen and Abby Foster must have relished, expressing as it did their enduring commitment in exactly the same terms as they had themselves.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 303-4.

⁸⁷ William Lloyd Garrison to Abby Foster, November 12, 1877, Foster Papers, AAS.

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