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CHAPTER ONE

The Liberator

DOUGLASS HAD THE great good fortune to be “discovered” by the individual who was at the time—prior to Douglass’s meteoric rise—America’s leading crusader against slavery, the very personification of radical abolitionism.¹ William Lloyd Garrison’s own rise to fame and infamy was anything but fore-ordained. Born and raised in Newburyport, Massachusetts, he came from a poor and broken home.² After his drunkard father abandoned the family when he was a small boy, Garrison worked various odd jobs to help keep food on the table, and at times he resorted to begging neighbors for a meal. Although he received little in the way of formal education, in his early teens he began writing for, and then eventually editing, a local newspaper. Newspaper editing would prove to be one of the two great callings of Garrison’s life. He came upon the second at age twenty-five, when he joined the abolition movement. Eventually this crusade would be at the center of not just Garrison’s occupation but his entire identity. He and his wife Helen even named their children after fellow abolitionists.

Garrison’s tireless, single-minded devotion to the cause was legendary. He frequently traveled the country—or at

least the North—delivering public addresses that detailed the evils of slavery and castigated anyone or any group that accommodated the institution in any way. He worked as a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad, helping to shelter freedom seekers and spirit them to Canada. He was also a skilled organizer who devoted a great deal of time and energy to coordinating abolitionist meetings, circulating abolitionist petitions, distributing abolitionist books and pamphlets, and establishing abolitionist associations. In 1832, he was the driving force behind the creation of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, the first group in American history dedicated to immediate emancipation. The following year, he helped to form the American Anti-Slavery Society, which grew to be the largest abolitionist organization in the nation; by the end of the decade, it boasted nearly two hundred thousand members.

The chief means that Garrison used to broadcast his message, however, was *The Liberator*, the weekly newspaper that he published from his small office near Faneuil Hall in Boston. Garrison served as the paper’s editor from January 1831 to December 1865, without missing a single issue during that three-and-a-half-decade span. Neither travel nor illness nor his many other obligations could silence his pen; only the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery, managed to do that. In the inaugural editorial, Garrison appealed to the self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence, contending that the nation’s commitment to basic human equality and the protection of inalienable rights demanded “the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population.” He set the paper’s tone by promising readers that he would be “as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. . . . I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD.”³

Heard he was. At its peak *The Liberator* had only around three thousand subscribers—three-quarters of them free black people—but the paper’s reach far outstripped this modest number. In fact, it has been described as “the most influential protest paper in American history.”⁴ It helped to force abolitionism into the center of American political debate—and to polarize the nation over it. As much as Garrison’s unsparing columns buoyed and inspired the enemies of slavery, including Douglass, they were widely reviled not just in the South, where bounties were literally placed on Garrison’s head, but also throughout much of the North. Today, when we all recognize slavery for the revolting crime that it was, it is startling to look back at how much outrage Garrison and his compatriots evoked. Although the majority of Northerners disapproved of slavery and hoped that it would eventually die out, most accepted it for the time being as an unfortunate fact of life, one that had persisted for millennia. Outright abolitionists—those who advocated an immediate end to the institution—constituted a small fraction of the population, and they were widely condemned as dangerous fanatics who threatened to upend America’s peace and unity. Mobs of “respectable” citizens frequently assaulted abolitionist speakers, broke up abolitionist meetings, and burned abolitionist literature. In 1835 an angry crowd dragged Garrison through the streets of Boston by a rope.

Truth be told, Garrison’s inflexibility sometimes exasperated even other abolitionists. He was fond of quoting the biblical injunction, “Be ye . . . perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,” and he was perpetually bewildered that others were not made of as stern a stuff as he was.⁵ Garrison adopted all manner of controversial positions, and he expected his followers to concur with every one of them. Allowing even the smallest difference of opinion to go unrebuked seemed to

him to be a gross dereliction of duty. It was next to impossible to “swallow Garrison whole,” as one fellow abolitionist put it, but that was precisely what he demanded.⁶



One Garrisonian tenet that proved to be controversial even among abolitionists was that opponents of slavery were morally obliged to abstain from politics.⁷ To be sure, Garrison and his followers fulfilled their most basic civic obligations: they sat on juries, paid taxes, and generally obeyed the law, at least when the law in question had nothing to do with slavery. They even petitioned Congress from time to time. Yet they refused to vote, to hold any political office, or to support any political party, no matter how opposed to slavery. All such actions, in their view, demonstrated support for a fundamentally corrupt political order. The Garrisonian Henry C. Wright took this logic to the extreme when he declared in the pages of *The Liberator* that he would refuse to vote, even if he knew that his ballot would tip the scales of a presidential election and ultimately result in slavery’s abolition.⁸ Garrison himself pronounced voting to be “of Satanic origin, and inherently wicked and murderous,” and suggested that it “must be put in the same category with rum-drinking, profanity, lewdness, and every evil work.”⁹ (So much for him having a fun side.)

Garrison also insisted on strict pacifism or “nonresistance.” Engaging in any kind of violence or using any kind of force, much like participating in politics, would only sully one’s moral integrity, even if it was done in the name of fighting slavery. And how could one purge the nation of all sin without purging one’s own soul first? Given that Garrisonians were apolitical pacifists, the main weapon in their arsenal was what they called “moral suasion”—that is, the use of voice and pen

to enlighten fellow citizens and convince them of the errors of their ways. The abolition of slavery would require a thorough moral transformation of the American people, in their view, rather than mere political reform or force of arms. In practice, moral suasion meant evoking sympathy for the plight of the enslaved and, even more, relentlessly shaming and excoriating slaveholders and anyone who was willing to be associated with them in any way—whether it be conducting business with them, attending church with them, or even remaining in the same nation as them.

This last principle was one for which Garrison was especially known, and notorious: he advocated a breakup of the Union, a secession of the free North from the slaveocracy of the South. “No Union with Slaveholders” was his motto, one that he repeated time and again in columns and speeches, and that the American Anti-Slavery Society adopted as its official slogan. Garrison judged that slavery was so deeply entrenched in America’s society and government—indeed, its very spirit—that the only way to do away with slavery was to do away with the nation itself.

This was one of the points on which Garrison seemed to his critics to be at his most impractical—not just because disunion would be exceedingly difficult to achieve, but also because even if it *were* achieved, it would seem to accomplish little more than abandoning the millions of enslaved people in the South to the mercy of their putative masters. Garrison and his followers were often accused of caring more about their own moral purity than about the fate of the enslaved. Naturally, Garrison himself did not see it that way. He had already concluded that moral suasion was the only effectual means of bringing about the necessary revolution, and he could harangue Southerners just as easily from a free Northern nation—one that would serve as a moral beacon—as from within a corrupt Union.

Moreover, Garrison was confident that if the Union were to be sundered, the South would be so economically, socially, and politically isolated that its slave system would collapse from within. In an independent South, Northern military might could no longer be counted on to put down slave rebellions, inefficient slave labor could not hope to compete with free labor over the long run, and fugitives would have a much easier time gaining their freedom. Instead of making it all the way to Canada, they would only have to cross the Mason–Dixon line.

Garrison's predictions of imminent Southern collapse were surely wildly optimistic. It is just as easy to imagine an independent South, free of pressure from antislavery Northerners, entrenching slavery still more deeply, and perhaps setting its sights on expansion into Mexico, Latin America, or the Caribbean—a point that Douglass would make much later, in his post-Garrisonian phase.¹⁰ That was certainly what the South had in mind when it tried to secede in the wake of Lincoln's election. Be that as it may, Garrison regarded the prospect of disunion as an abandonment not of the enslaved but rather of the slaveholders. As he put it, "the dissolution of the Union is not to leave the slaves to their masters: it is to withdraw from those masters all the resources and instrumentalities now furnished to them by the North, without which they are powerless."¹¹ As it was, many of those "resources and instrumentalities"—including Northern aid in suppressing rebellions and returning fugitives—were guaranteed to the slaveholders by the document that Garrison regarded as the real root of the problem: the U.S. Constitution.



Garrison appealed, approvingly and often, to the Declaration of Independence and the ideals of freedom and equality that it

embodied. In almost every instance, however, he wielded it as a moral cudgel to attack the nation's founders for their hypocrisy. At the time that "they published their world-famous Declaration of Independence," he lamented, Americans "held in the galling chains of chattel servitude half a million of slaves!" The founding generation then embarked on a long struggle for independence, "mingling the clanking of fetters, and the crack of the slave whip, and the groans of their imbruted victims with their cries for liberty and their shouts of victory! It was a revolting spectacle, and a horrible paradox, admitting of no justification, or even apology."¹² Although Garrison's contemporaries, like ours, tended to venerate the nation's "fathers," he reminded them that the founders "did not blush to enslave a portion of their fellow-men, and to buy and sell them as cattle in the market, while they were fighting against the oppression of the mother country, and boasting of their regard for the rights of man. Why, then," he demanded, "concede to them virtues which they did not possess?"¹³

In Garrison's view, the Constitution represented an utter betrayal of the Declaration's ideals.¹⁴ When the framers of that charter made their "infamous bargain" with slavery, he insisted, they effectively "trampled beneath their feet their own solemn and heaven-attested Declaration, that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." As he—and most Americans—read it, the Constitution contained a host of safeguards and even rewards for slaveholding interests, including a guarantee that fugitives would be returned to those who held them in bondage, an augmentation of slaveholders' voting power in the House of Representatives and the electoral college (amounting to three-fifths of the population that they enslaved), a promise that the federal government would help to quash insurrections, and, at least for a time, an assurance that the international slave

trade could continue. For all of these reasons, Garrison predicted, the Constitution “will be held in everlasting infamy by the friends of justice and humanity throughout the world. It was a compact formed at the sacrifice of the bodies and souls of millions of our race, for the sake of achieving a political object—an unblushing and monstrous coalition to do evil that good might come.”¹⁵

Garrison’s most famous characterization of the Constitution—one that he deployed time and again in editorials, speeches, and letters—was that it was a “covenant with death” and an “agreement with hell.” These sobriquets come from the prophet Isaiah (28:18), and they had been used by the abolitionist James W. C. Pennington to describe the Constitution’s fugitive slave clause.¹⁶ (Incidentally, Pennington had, like Douglass, escaped from a life of bondage on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, and he was the minister who presided over Douglass’s marriage to Anna Murray in New York in 1838.) Garrison broadened the indictment to encompass the Constitution as a whole, which he believed presented an insurmountable obstacle to the revolution that he sought. Indeed, his belief in abstention from politics and the desirability of disunion were both motivated in large part by his view of the Constitution as thoroughly and irredeemably proslavery. What would be the point of voting for this or that candidate, or supporting this or that party, when the nation’s basic charter guaranteed that slavery could never be abolished? Why should lovers of freedom remain part of a union whose originating contract required them to support a system of brutal oppression?

Garrison staged one of his most sensational assaults on the Constitution on Independence Day in 1854, in what his biographer describes as “the pinnacle of his career in agitation.”¹⁷ The setting was a sweltering outdoor rally of around six hundred abolitionists in Framingham, Massachusetts, some

twenty miles west of Boston. A number of renowned figures, including Lucy Stone, Henry David Thoreau, and Sojourner Truth, addressed the crowd from a dais that was adorned with an upside-down American flag bordered with black crepe. The bulk of Garrison's speech was a familiar recitation of the manifold evils of slavery and slaveholders, but his words were overshadowed by his actions. At the close of his remarks, Garrison held up a copy of the Constitution—which he described as “the source and parent of the other atrocities” that he had recounted—struck a match, and set it alight. As the bulk of the crowd roared its approval amid a scattering of hisses and boos, he ground the ashes under his heel, exclaiming, “So perish all compromises with tyranny!”¹⁸ Just in case anyone might have assumed that Garrison was caught up in the moment and that he would come to regret this highly charged symbolic act, nearly a decade later he assured the readers of *The Liberator* that “no act of ours do we regard with more conscientious approval or higher satisfaction, none do we submit more confidently to the tribunal of heaven and the moral verdict of mankind.”¹⁹



Thanks in part to Garrison's intransigence on all matters of doctrine and strategy, a sort of schism emerged within the abolition movement in 1840, just before Garrison and Douglass met for the first time. Even as a small and beleaguered minority, the advocates of immediate emancipation could not manage to maintain a united front. Their disagreements centered particularly on Garrison's advocacy of disunion, his insistence on abstention from politics, and his welcoming of women as key players in the movement. The members of the American Anti-Slavery Society who diverged from Garrison on these

scores split off to create a new American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, based in New York City, and many of the same individuals helped to form the Liberty Party, the first national political party dedicated to the eradication of slavery. These political abolitionists, as they came to be known—as opposed to apolitical or antipolitical abolitionists of the Garrisonian stripe—hoped to use the levers of government to bring about an end to slavery, and naturally they sought to make what use they could of the Constitution.

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, many political abolitionists argued that the Constitution could be used for antislavery purposes—to enable Congress to keep slavery out of the Western territories, for instance—and a few went so far as to suggest that it was an inherently abolitionist document, one that demanded the overthrow of slavery even in the South. We will meet several of these figures, and recount some of their arguments, in chapter 4. For now, we can take note of Garrison's response to them, which was to insist that an antislavery reading of the Constitution was clearly and obviously antithetical to the founders' intentions. "It is absurd, it is false, it is an insult to the common sense of mankind," he wrote, "to pretend that the Constitution was intended to embrace the entire population of the country under its sheltering wings." Like Chief Justice Taney in *Dred Scott*, Garrison was adamant that "nothing is more certain" than that the Constitution's preamble "never included, in the minds of those who framed it, those who were then pining in bondage."²⁰

The framers' true intentions were, Garrison claimed, evident from the practice of the time, and indeed all subsequent times. After all, the founders did not set about eliminating slavery after drafting and ratifying the Constitution. On the contrary, the institution persisted and indeed expanded over the subsequent six decades, and everyone involved—legislators,

presidents, judges, and everyday citizens alike—assumed that this was perfectly consistent with the nation’s founding charter. One might “as rationally attempt to convince the American people that they inhabit the moon,” Garrison exclaimed, “as that they have not intelligently, deliberately, and purposely entered into a covenant, by which three millions of slaves are now held securely in bondage!” Hence, he derided the “verbal casuistry” and “legal quibbling” that political abolitionists undertook in a vain attempt to prove that the Constitution was somehow hostile to slavery: “Let there be no dodging, no shuffling, no evasion. Let us confess the sin of our fathers, and our own sin as a people, in conspiring for the degradation and enslavement of the colored race among us.”²¹



The case against the antislavery interpretation of the Constitution was prosecuted with even greater vigor and acumen by Garrison’s most capable partner, Wendell Phillips.²² In stark contrast to Garrison, Phillips was a child of immense wealth and privilege who could trace his ancestry back to the founding families of Massachusetts. He attended Boston Latin School, Harvard, and then Harvard Law, where he studied constitutional law under Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story—the nation’s most eminent jurist save Chief Justice John Marshall himself. Phillips joined the abolition movement in 1835, after witnessing firsthand the Boston mob’s attempt to lynch Garrison. Soon thereafter he closed his law office—practicing law required taking an oath to support the Constitution, which was deemed inconsistent with Garrisonian principles—and joined Garrison in his many and varied efforts to combat slavery, marching in lockstep with him all the way through the Civil War.

Phillips drew on his extensive legal training to mount a spirited attack on the idea that the Constitution could serve abolitionist ends, most prominently in a work titled *The Constitution a Pro-Slavery Compact*, which was published in 1844 under the auspices of the American Anti-Slavery Society.²³ The bulk of the work consisted of extracts from a variety of sources, including James Madison's notes from the Philadelphia Convention, which had been published just a few years earlier, the records from some of the state ratifying conventions, and the debates in the First Congress. Phillips marshaled this evidence to demonstrate that the Constitution's framers, ratifiers, and earliest officeholders all understood it to support slavery. The founders, he asserted, forged a damning compromise that granted "to the slaveholder distinct privileges and protection for his slave property, in return for certain commercial concessions on his part toward the North," and "the nation at large were fully aware of the bargain at the time, and entered into it willingly and with open eyes." The "melancholy fact" was that "our fathers bartered honesty for gain, and became partners with tyrants, that they might share in the profits of their tyranny."²⁴

Phillips found preposterous all efforts to prove that this bargain did not take place, or that the Constitution could be read in any other way. "If the unanimous, concurrent, unbroken practice of every department of the government, judicial, legislative, and executive, and the acquiescence of the whole people for fifty years do not prove which is the true construction" of the Constitution, he demanded, "then how and where can such a question ever be settled?" The simple fact was that "the Constitution of the United States has been, and still is, a pro-slavery instrument, and that anyone who swears to support it, swears to do pro-slavery acts, and violates his duty both as a man and an abolitionist."²⁵

In a way, the Garrisonians' insistence on the proslavery nature of the Constitution played right into the hands of slaveholders who sought to claim the moral authority of the founders, and the legal protections of the Constitution, on behalf of their system of chattel bondage. In fact, John Archibald Campbell, an Alabama lawyer who would go on to become a justice on the Supreme Court, told John C. Calhoun that Phillips's *The Constitution a Pro-Slavery Compact* was "quite an able pamphlet," one that proslavery Southerners "might circulate to great advantage excluding a few paragraphs."²⁶ Phillips, however, was undeterred. In another work, written a few years later, he ridiculed the efforts of those who sought to force an abolitionist reading on the Constitution: "Alas, the ostrich does not get rid of her enemy by hiding her head in the sand. Slavery is not abolished, although we have persuaded ourselves that it has no right to exist. . . . National evils are only cured by holding men's eyes open, and forcing them to gaze on the hideous reality."²⁷

Garrison and Phillips were, of course, far from the only abolitionists to read the Constitution as resolutely proslavery. Throughout the 1840s, one of their many followers in this regard was a remarkable young runaway whom they encountered at a convention on the island of Nantucket.

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