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The Abolitionist Imagination by Andrew Delbanco (review)

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In the final chapter, “The Image of Christ and a Disability Perspective,” Basselin departs from close-reading and uses O’Connor’s life as an artist as a vehicle for a very thoughtful theology of disability. In my mind, this chapter is most suited for scholars and teachers of disability studies that also happen to enjoy reading O’Connor. In my course on “Disability and the Popular Imagination,” my students will have to wrestle with the following excerpt: “As communion with God is dependent upon the broken body of Christ, so communion with one another is dependent upon realization of a participation in our universal human brokenness. O’Connor’s characters who most fervently deny this brokenness are the characters whose relationships are least whole and healthy” (91).

To conclude, my only slight frustration with Basselin’s book pertains to the notes. Many times I wished that the information found in the endnotes would have been included into the body of the text to give more scholarly depth to the literary analysis. This editorial decision made it clear to me that the book’s focus centers more on disability than on O’Connor scholarship. That said, Basselin’s is a book that I will use in the classroom. His insights, analysis, and prose style are useful not only for O’Connor teachers but also for O’Connor scholars, and especially those who teach Disability Studies.

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The Abolitionist Imagination. By Andrew Delbanco. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-674-6444-7. Pp. xi +205. \$24.95.

Andrew Delbanco’s brief volume *The Abolitionist Imagination* offers a civil discourse on the topic of abolitionism as applied, not only to the anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century, but also to his theory that such movements reflect a “recurrent American phenomenon” (3). Turning to literature as his example, Delbanco explores antebellum American examples from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville to illustrate that abolitionists, contrary to post-war reactions, were seen largely as a radical fringe group by many American writers who chose not to champion the cause in their writings. The discourse on this topic takes the form of commentaries written by scholars John Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Darryl Pinckney, and Wilfred M. McClay. Each critical essay offers a reaction to Delbanco’s thesis from a different perspective. Ultimately, as Daniel Carpenter notes in the foreword, “The volume becomes a reference work on American abolitionism and its meaning” (x).

Defining abolitionism as “a determined minority set out, in the face of long odds, to rid the world of what it regards as a patent and entrenched evil,” Delbanco

argues that it is “a persistent impulse in American life,” (3) and that, as a part of human nature, “we have not seen the last of it, and probably never will” (23). Noting that authors such as Hawthorne did not side with or against the abolitionist movement, he posits that antebellum American literature “came to be valued for the case it made for compromise and moderation—for the middle ground that vanished as the nation descended into fratricidal war” (39). Citing comments by scholars such as Kenneth Lynn, who in the 1960s identified slavery as the “gravest moral problem in the nation’s history,” Delbanco argues that the American literature canon eventually changed because of the successful campaign of the anti-slavery movement. The study of literature of the African American experience, he believes, grows from the need to face all aspects of this historical period and to do so by looking at the words of the participants of slavery and its aftermath. He cautions against criticizing authors like Hawthorne for their lack of engagement, however, suggesting that we consider our own level of reaction to the oppression in countries that produce many of the United States’ consumer items. “What moral stand are we taking?” he asks.

John Stauffer’s contribution, “Fighting the Devil with His Own Fire,” delves more deeply into the outlooks of Hawthorne, Henry James, and Lionel Trilling to demonstrate his disagreement with Delbanco’s assertion that the writers, like others, viewed the abolitionists as a radical element of society and avoided the issue of slavery in their works. Stating that for Hawthorne “slavery was a comparatively benign institution” (63), Stauffer offers numerous examples of the author’s unsympathetic views toward blacks and slavery. Of James, he writes: “Silence was James’ preferred mode for improving race relations.” Regarding Trilling, one of the most important cultural critics of the twentieth century, Stauffer argues “he remained largely silent about the plight of blacks in America” (65). Stauffer offers these impressions to counter Delbanco’s idea that American writers sought a centrist approach to the question of slavery. Additionally Stauffer explores successes of early abolitionists (1780s-1820s), demonstrating that many abolitionists hoped for a gradual dissolution of slavery rather than an immediate end to the institution. Arguing again that Delbanco’s portrayal of the group as radical and fringe is inaccurate, he points out that America’s founders—Jefferson, Washington, Hamilton, Madison, Franklin—“sought a gradual end to the evil without uprooting the social order or their wealth and domestic comforts” (68). Ultimately, Stauffer offers Herman Melville as the nineteenth-century American writer who foresaw the problems created by a violent disruption of slavery, provocatively stating that “if every American had been required to read *Moby Dick* when it was published in 1851, the Civil War may have been avoided” (79).

Moving away from the literary focus of the argument, in her essay “Did the Abolitionists Cause the Civil War?” Manisha Sinha declares that Delbanco’s views represent a revisionist history of abolitionism. She challenges Delbanco “through the lens of history” (88) rather than literature. Among other complaints, Sinha

reacts to Delbanco's belief that abolition was a reflection of evangelical Christianity. She counters that the movement shared "greater affinity with radical movements for social change like women's rights, communitarian, and utopian socialist movements than with Bible societies." Conventional and revisionist historical accounts incorrectly overemphasize this link to "narrow religious concerns" (105) she argues, concluding her historical defense of the abolitionists' merits by noting: "Viewed from a world historical perspective, the legacy of the abolition movement has hardly been one of intolerance and war" (108).

In his essay "The Invisibility of Black Abolitionists" novelist and scholar Darryl Pinckney draws on his own experience with the civil rights movement, offering a more contemporary perception of abolitionists. Recalling that as he grew up in the 1960s "abolitionists were generally thought of as white," (111) he points out that "a white abolitionist in the nineteenth century faced dismissal from his or her post, expulsion from school, loss of bank credit, and social ostracism, but the black abolitionist had no status to lose" (114). Pinckney examines seminal texts to show that, contrary to this belief, blacks played a large role in the abolitionist movement. Citing works such as Benjamin Quarles' *Frederick Douglass* (1946) and *Black Abolitionists* (1969), he explores the impact that these works had on black studies programs and movements in the 1960s and '70s. Following further discussion of texts such as Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore* (1962) and Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965), his observations conclude with musings about black writers and intellectuals, positing that the challenge they face is "to abandon the watchtowers, to give up the habit of policing the territory of African American literature and American literature, to let the new thinking in" (132). Similar to Delbanco, who believes the impulse that inspired abolitionists is inherently American, Pinckney suggests that "the abolitionists, black and white, will continue to speak down through the ages, in some place like China, which badly needs another revolution and the example of the abolitionists" (133).

Wilfred M. McClay's offering, "Abolition as Master Concept," is the most supportive of Delbanco's views. Identifying abolition as a "master concept," he, like Delbanco, sees it as a "particular expression of this more general and permanent cultural dynamic at work in American society" (139); a dynamic similar to Delbanco's "persistent impulse in American life." McClay wonders, however, just what this tells us about American culture. Does it suggest that we constantly change as we pull ourselves out of moral complacency, or is it "something perfervid and dangerous" (139) that focuses too narrowly and obsessively on its goal? Drawing on literary examples, McClay suggests that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* exists, not as an abolitionist novel, but as a work that was written because of the abolitionist movement, which "transformed [its] culture by tapping into its foundational religious and political convictions and relentlessly forcing an honest recognition of the culture's existing moral contradictions" (142). McClay defends Delbanco's assertion that contemporary literary artists, including Hawthorne,

chose not to embrace the abolitionist cause because they, unlike the abolitionists, could foresee the high cost of such reform: a catastrophic Civil War. Once again citing Delbanco, he points out that the one thing that all abolitionists had in common was evangelical Protestant religious fervor—something that the artists did not espouse. He declares quite simply: “No religion, no abolitionism” (146). McClay’s succinct discussion of several of Hawthorne’s short works supports his (and Delbanco’s) supposition that the writers did react to ideas of abolitionism, although not specifically.

Delbanco follows these critiques of his work with a brief response; however, I think readers of *Christianity and Literature* will find Delbanco’s original essay along with McClay’s the most valuable in this brief volume. These two, arriving from similar directions, explain most specifically the relationship between imagination and abolitionism. Stauffer’s criticism of Delbanco’s essay offers a thoughtful and useful commentary that presents another side of the argument, and it should definitely be read alongside the other essays. Sinha’s and Pinckney’s contributions are more tangential to Delbanco’s thesis, and, while they provide an added dimension to the volume, their approaches explore less specifically the topic of the abolitionist imagination. Ultimately, this brief collection of connected essays provides a thorough argument from different perspectives of the motivations of abolitionists and how they affected contemporary thinking as well as that of the twenty-first century.

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I Told My Soul to Sing: Finding God with Emily Dickinson. By Kristin LeMay. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013. ISBN 978-1-61261-163-1. Pp. 291. \$17.99.

Emily Dickinson is a writer who prompts personal responses from her readers, even from scholars. Susan Howe’s widely read *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) blends scholarly inquiry with a dash of first-person pronouns, and *Wider Than the Sky: Essays and Meditations on the Healing Power of Emily Dickinson* (2007), edited by Cindy Mackenzie and Barbara Dana, overtly calls for personal responses to Dickinson’s work. More recently, Susan VanZanten published *Mending a Tattered Faith: Devotions with Dickinson* (2011), which provides close readings of twenty-nine poems for the purpose of devotional exercise.

Kristin LeMay’s *I Told My Soul to Sing: Finding God with Emily Dickinson* takes its place among these projects, with an emphasis on the ways in which Dickinson’s poetry has impacted the author’s own spiritual journey. LeMay calls Dickinson “Saint Emily, patron of all who wrestle with God” and explains, “For over ten