The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America

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Prophecy as Krisis
Wendell Phillips and the Sin of Slavery

The Lord will enter into judgment with the ancients of his people, and the princes thereof; for ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What mean ye, that beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor? saith the Lord God of hosts.

—Isaiah 3:14-15

And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.

—Isaiah 28:18

Wendell Phillips’s most recent biographer, James Stewart, holds Phillips to have been “Civil War America’s greatest and most radical orator.”1 This is no small praise, given the oratorical giants who occupied America’s podiums and pulpits during Phillips’s day—men like Daniel Webster, Edward Everett, Lyman Beecher, and Henry Clay—but Stewart is far from alone in his assessment. Critical opinion from Phillips’s day to our own has almost universally afforded the “brahmin radical” a place among America’s premier speakers.2 His single run for the governorship of Massachusetts aside, Phillips eschewed the bureaucratic authority of political office and made the independent moral authority of the speaker’s rostrum the basis of his power. In his last major address, the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa address of 1881, Phillips described this prophetic stance, the voice speaking truth outside the temple walls, “with . . . no object but truth—to tear a question open and riddle it with light.”3

Phillips’s uncompromising passion ensured a controversial status, many having argued that he provided perhaps more heat than light in the public forum. The claim has been often made that Phillips was “the wrongheaded
radical of the Civil War crisis—an emotional person, lacking in responsibility, but quick to condemn those who had it, standing always for extremes that public opinion would not sustain, reckless, mischievous, and vindictive.”

4 Irving Bartlett is using the phrase of one of Phillips’s contemporaries when he characterizes Phillips’s discourse as “the eloquence of abuse.”

5 And E. L. Godkin, also contemporary with Phillips and one of the few who shared many of his radical views, nonetheless felt constrained, as editor of The Nation magazine, to criticize Phillips’s excesses.

Phillips’s alienation from his audiences is clear—the excoriation, the clamant tone, the sneering condescension are all part of his repertoire. Though his lecture “The Lost Arts” was enormously popular—given more than two thousand times over a forty-five-year period, it earned Phillips an estimated $150,000—his defense of John Brown’s effort to foment a slave rebellion in Virginia, given at a time when the specter of slave insurrections in the Caribbean loomed large in the minds of Americans, seems perversely calculated to offend and alienate. It is impossible to read the following segment of a speech Phillips gave on the events at Harper’s Ferry without feeling the distance he placed between himself and his audience. There is no third person plural here; Phillips is not a member of the same group of which they are all members, that is, he is not a citizen. Phillips is in extremis as he denounces the U. S. Constitution as a “covenant with death and agreement with hell,” a phrase often used by William Lloyd Garrison and echoing the prophet Isaiah:

Thank God, I am not a citizen. You will remember, all of you, citizens of the United States, that there was not a Virginia gun fired at John Brown. Hundreds of well-armed Maryland and Virginia troops rushed to Harper’s Ferry, and—went away! You shot him! Sixteen marines, to whom you pay eight dollars a month,—your own representatives. When the disturbed State could not stand on her own legs for trembling, you went there and strengthened the feeble knees, and held up the palsied hands. Sixteen men, with the vulture of the Union above them [sensation] your representatives! It was the covenant with death and agreement with hell, which you call the Union of thirty States, that took the old man by the throat with a pirate hand; and it will be the disgrace of our civilization if a gallows is ever erected in Virginia that bears his body.

The Union and the Constitution on which it is based are sources of legitimacy for Phillips’s audience; it is the benediction of his audience that allows the justification of slavery. Phillips decries the legitimacy of these arrangements as a falsehood. In profaning the Union and the Constitution,
and in ridiculing the feeble response at Harper’s Ferry made under their aegis, Phillips reveals the impotence of false idols. As for himself, Phillips keeps his distance above the sordidness of the affair. Only once does he suggest any kinship with his hearers when he mentions the possible “dis-grace of our civilization.”

S. N. Eisenstadt’s comments on moral fervor illuminate the impulse exemplified here. It is a radical impulse because it “is rooted in the attempt to come into contact with the very essence of being, to go to the very roots of existence, of cosmic, social, and cultural order, to what is seen as sacred and fundamental.” At the same time, there is a strongly critical element in this quest, a “predisposition to sacrilege: to the denial of the validity of the sacred, and of what is accepted in any given society as sacred.”9 Phillips’s reversal is made plausible in the convergence of the sacred and the sordid beyond the reach of man; both are untouchable. Such a reversal reveals the tenuousness of the existing order, the threat of chaos, thus providing the conditions for crisis.

The Crisis of Slavery

Dread of chaos was epidemic in early-nineteenth-century America. Expressed as a fear of intemperance, it bordered on the paranoid.10 According to Timothy Smith, “the concern for virtue that the revolutionary generation bequeathed to the new nation was no mere exercise in social control, but an effort to deal with the central problem of what we call ‘free’ societies: maximizing self-control.”11 The revival movement of the Second Great Awakening is symptomatic of the uncertainties that haunted the new nation. Perry Miller called it “the dominant theme in America from 1800 to 1860” and saw in it an attempt to achieve a national identity based on the reformation of common sins.12 Nineteenth-century Americans fueled the revival movement by relentless application of their moral yardstick to contemporaries who were invariably found deficient. Living in the shadow of those who had demonstrated the courage and discipline to lead the country to independence in a great vindication of God’s will, Americans of Phillips’s generation felt small, their horizons limited to the easily attainable rather than the possible. Moral indolence and self-gratification, the failure of virtue and moral athleticism, these conspired to consign the people to slavery. Slavery represents the apotheosis of intemperance.

For early-nineteenth-century revivalists, “slavery” was a devil term, not
merely as it applied to the institution of chattel slavery, but as any degradation of human autonomy that threatened to reduce human beings to the status of animals. As for the colonists of the late eighteenth century, “freedom” and “slavery” were radical ideas for the early nineteenth century because they were fundamental to self-definition. With regard to the Temperance movement, a product of the same climate and sharing many parallels with abolitionism, Joseph Gusfield has stated the case quite succinctly: “The concept of Temperance has rested on . . . a specific vision of man’s character in which self-mastery, industry, and moral consistency are prized virtues. Impulsive action is at the opposite pole from virtue. The good man is able, through his character, to win the victory of Will over Impulse.” 13 Slavery was both a product of the triumph of impulse over will in the enslaver and an institution that abrogated the exercise of will by those enslaved. David Brion Davis provides a useful clarification of the sinfulness of slavery when he notes that its inherent contradiction “lies not in its cruelty or economic exploitation, but in the underlying conception of a man as a conveyable possession with no more autonomy of will and consciousness than a domestic animal. This conception has always raised a host of problems and has never been held without compromise.” 14 In a word, slavery was destructive of virtue.

Davis refers to those who were victims of institutionalized slavery, those human beings who were owned by other human beings, but the connection of intemperance and autonomy reveals the owners to be no less enslaved. As Donald Scott suggests of the abolitionist view, “slavery in its essence did not differ from the broader American life, but seemed to take to its logical end point that lust for gain and the willingness to sacrifice all to selfish ends that dominated American life.” 15 Slavery stood opposed to the self-control associated with civilized men; it was directly associated with licentious behavior on the part of Southerners and indirectly with the decadence of Northerners who benefited from the labor of the bondsman. 16 For abolitionists, slavery represented the highest form of self-gratification and was symptomatic of the general decay in society necessitating the revival movement. 17

Using the language of degraded virtue, abolitionists represented slavery as a materialistic corruption, the placing of self above duty, selfishness. Personal well-being provided a kind of intoxication, an anesthetic effect against the pain of slavery. “I appeal from the American people drunk with cotton,” said Phillips. 18 The mob that killed Lovejoy was “a community, staggering like a drunken man, indifferent to their rights and confused in
their feelings. Deaf to argument, haply they might be stunned into sobriety.”19 The mayor of Boston and the mob that nearly cost Garrison his life there in 1835 “were only blind to what they did not wish to see, and knew the right and wrong of the case well enough, only, like all half-educated people, they were but poorly able to comprehend the vast importance of the wrong they were doing.”20 “What is it that thus palsies our strength and blinds our foresight? We have become so familiar with slavery that we are no longer aware of its deadening influence on the body politic.”21

Abolitionists cried out against indulgence, an indulgence that created a shield against the pain of a sinful world. As with the rhetoric of the American Revolution, the metaphors of drunkenness suggest the moral quality of those who look at questions of right and wrong through the ethical equivalent of an alcoholic cloud. The moral stupor that is insinuated suggests a state in which critical differences among principles are slurred and confused.

In the Constitution of the United States, radical abolitionists found the institutionalization of America’s failed virtue in the face of slavery. Allying themselves with the Revolutionaries, abolitionists easily carried the banner of 1776 but stopped short of assuming the burden of 1787. Phillips was one of that band of Garrisonian radicals that held the absolute idealism of the Declaration of Independence in judgment over the Constitution. In 1844, he played a role in creating the document The Constitution a Pro-Slavery Compact published by the American Anti-Slavery Society. A compilation of reprints from the Madison papers on the constitutional debates, “these pages prove the melancholy fact that willingly, with deliberate purpose, our fathers bartered honesty for gain and became partners with tyrants that they might share in the profits of their tyranny.”22 In 1847, Phillips furthered the charges in a response to Lysander Spooner’s essay “The Unconstitutionality of Slavery.”23 In the spring of 1860, Phillips’s “Plea for the Dissolution of the Union” attracted considerable attention,24 and after the secession of South Carolina from the Union, he hailed, “‘The Lord reigneth; the earth rejoice.’ ‘The covenant with death’ is annulled; ‘the agreement with hell’ is broken to pieces. The chain which has held the slave system since 1787 is parted.”25

For Garrisonians, the Constitution represented a great compromise with sin, a proslavery document, a travesty to the ideals of the Revolution as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. The Constitution was not a reflection of absolute right, but of expediency: “They [Americans] have no idea of absolute right,” said Phillips. “They were born since 1787, and
absolute right means the truth diluted by a strong decoction of the Constitution of '89. They breathe that atmosphere; they do not want to sail outside of it; they do not attempt to reason outside of it. Poisoned with printer's ink, or choked with cotton dust, they stare at absolute right as the dream of madmen." 26 As the Founding Fathers were enlisted against the leaders of the Revolution, providing fuel on both sides of the slavery debate, a fissure was revealed in the national foundation placing a terrible strain on consensus. Abolitionists effectively questioned the integrity of principles, the unimpeached status of which was necessary to sustain a justification of slavery.

In the view of radical abolitionists, the same accommodating, facilitative politics that had produced the Constitution was a chronic symptom of the failure of moral vision in America, and Phillips and his coreligionists reserved some of their bitterest invective for the process and its practitioners. "We do not play politics," declared Phillips, "Antislavery is no half jest with us; it is a terrible earnest, with life or death, worse than life or death, on the issue." 27 In a speech made in 1845, Phillips contrasted the politician with the reformer:

"The politician must conceal half his principles, to carry forward the other half—must regard, not rigid principle and strict right, but only such a degree of right as will allow him at the same time to secure numbers. His object is immediate success. When he alters his war cry, he ever looks back over his shoulder to see how many follow." The reformer, on the other hand, worships truth; "his object is duty, not success. He can wait, no matter how many desert, how few remain; he can trust always that the whole of truth, however unpopular, can never harm the whole of virtue." 28

Phillips at one point compares compromising politicians to Milton's "earth's giant sons, Now less than smallest dwarfs, in narrow room Throng numberless, like that pygmean race Beyond the Indian mount," while the "healthy party—the men who made no compromise in order to come under that arch" is compared to "The great seraphic lords and cherubim, In close recess and secret conclave." 29 Politicians thus became a symbol of moral failure as representatives of the will and leaders of the new Zion. Like Moses, they were particularly culpable.

The final symbol of the moral decay in America as the abolitionists viewed it was the dereliction of the church on the issue of slavery. The reluctant church was perhaps the institution most defamed by the abolitionists after slavery itself. Dissatisfaction with the institution of the church inspired
“come-outers” to cast aside its corrupted authority and inspired Stephen S. Foster to make his reputation by interrupting church services to speak on behalf of the antislavery cause.\textsuperscript{30} In antebellum America, the Bible was used as much by false priests to legitimate slavery as it was to condemn it,\textsuperscript{31} and though Phillips never went so far as to accept what he felt were the heresies of Garrison and some of Garrison’s followers, he did decisively set himself apart from the church and the attitude of the church with regard to slavery.\textsuperscript{32}

According to Phillips,

the abolitionists early saw, that, for a moral question like theirs, only two paths lay open: to work through the Church, that failing, to join battle with it. Some tried long, like Luther, to be Protestants, and yet not come out of Catholicism; but their eyes were soon opened. Since then we have been convinced that to come out from the Church, to hold her up as the bulwark of slavery, and to make her shortcomings the main burden of our appeals to the religious sentiment of the community was our first duty and best policy.\textsuperscript{33}

He noted that the church’s reaction to \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} was “either silent or hostile, and in the columns of the theological papers the work is subjected to criticism, to reproach, and its author to severe rebuke.”\textsuperscript{34} “Save us from a Church not broad enough to cover woman and the slave, all the room being kept for the grogshop and the theatre—provided the one will keep sober enough to make the responses, and the other will lend its embroidered rags for this new baby house.”\textsuperscript{35} Phillips found the church’s appeal to the separation of church and state as a reason for not becoming involved in the controversy disingenuous: “The office of the pulpit is to teach men their duty. Wherever men’s thoughts influence their laws, it is the duty of the pulpit to preach politics.”\textsuperscript{36} The position of the church was all the more disingenuous because of its failure to maintain it consistently:

Free men are kidnapped in our streets, to be plunged into that hell of slavery; and now and then one, as if by miracle, after long years, returns to make men aghast with his tale. The press says, “It is all right”; and the pulpit cries, “Amen.” They print the Bible in every tongue in which man utters his prayers; and get the money to do so by agreeing never to give the book, in the language our mothers taught us, to any Negro, free or bond, south of Mason and Dixon’s line. The press says, “It is all right”; and the pulpit cries, “Amen.”\textsuperscript{37}

Again and again, Phillips pointed to the dereliction of instruction, the failure of political and moral leaders to provide clear direction, to make significant distinctions between good and evil.
The mentality of compromise that Phillips excoriated in both politics and the church was intended by its proponents as the vehicle for continued unity. It was a beguiling notion in its passivity—"live and let live." It was not a strenuous doctrine. It reflected the realities of the world in all its imperfections. But compromise also has a sharply dyslogistic element: it does not always preserve the interests of opposing elements in mutual deference and respect, but sometimes surrenders one to the other. Compromise can be "a shameful or disreputable concession," particularly when it is the self that is compromised. Here the lack of strenuousness belies the benign face of compromise. In an age where the self is asserted only through the exercise of virtue, the life of ease involves the horrible anxiety of the loss of self, a condition of slavery. Compromise, in this less charitable view, is not a stalemate between the white king and the black king, but a reduction of all players to a homogeneous gray mass. In such a state, no significant distinctions can be made, there is no line of demarcation, no foundation for judgment, only amorphous formlessness, chaos.

The Call to Judgment

In such a situation, it is the prophet's office to cry, "Hear, you deaf; and look, you blind, that you may see!"\(^{38}\) "To waken the nation to its real state, and chain it to the consideration of this one duty, is half the work," said Phillips.\(^{39}\) According to Hofstadter:

Phillips's career illustrates the principle that the agitator is likely to be a crisis thinker. . . . In periods of relative social peace the agitator labors under intellectual as well as practical restraints, for he thinks in terms of the  ultimate potentialities of social conflicts rather than the immediate compromises by which they are softened. His moral judgments are made from the standpoint of absolute values, with which the mass of men cannot comfortably live. But when a social crisis or revolutionary period at last matures, the sharp distinctions that govern the mind of the agitator become at one with the realities.\(^{40}\)

Referring to America as a modern-day Sodom,\(^{41}\) a device often employed by the Old Testament prophets to suggest the urgency of the moment, Phillips attempted to create the necessary atmosphere of crisis. "While drunk with the temptations of the present hour," he proclaimed, "men are willing to bow to any Moloch."\(^{42}\)
Murray Edelman has suggested that "crisis" is perhaps the most powerful political term available for encouraging unity and common sacrifice. Phillips's purposes could not be better represented as he sought to create a new community through the renewal of virtue. The tradition of the jeremiad in America attests to a long practical understanding of the principle. Sacvan Bercovitch writes, "From the start the Puritan Jeremiahs had drawn their inspiration from insecurity; by the 1670s, crisis had become their source of strength. They fastened upon it, gloried in it, even invented it if necessary. They took courage from backsliding, converted threat into vindication, made affliction their seal of progress. Crisis became both form and substance of their appeals." Bercovitch traces the use of the jeremiad through the nineteenth century and finds the idea of crisis to be a stable theme.

The revival culture of ante-bellum America was predicated on crisis. In the personal terms of revivalism, abolitionism was, for many, the resolution of a carefully nurtured personal crisis of vocation. Donald M. Scott has argued that a large number of abolitionists had been dutifully prepared by their parents for the experience of rebirth and conversion, as a result of which God's plan for their lives would be revealed. Bearing the marks of a strong Puritan heritage, the life dedicated to God's purpose was strenuous and exacting. According to Scott, "rebirth led not to disregard of the world but to implacable hostility to the world as it was sinfully constituted. As Christians born to righteousness they were as obliged to combat the sinful world as they were to rid themselves of all remnants of sin."

Phillips was very much a product of this revival culture. Raised in a very pious, Calvinistic household, his mother's earliest gift to him was a Bible. In 1826, after hearing Lyman Beecher preach on the theme "You Belong to God," he reported a conversion experience, though he did not discover the nature of his mission for another decade. When he did find his way into the abolitionist movement, he described the event in revelatory terms: "I had read Greek and Roman and English history; I had by heart the classic eulogies of brave old men and martyrs; I dreamed, in my folly, that I heard the same tone in my youth from the cuckoo lips of Edward Everett—these women taught me my mistake. . . . These women opened my eyes." The women Phillips refers to are the women who had invited Garrison to speak to them on the day Phillips saw him dragged in a noose through the streets of Boston. By remaining steadfast and refusing to surrender their meeting, these women presented Phillips with a vision of courage and virtue. Phillips stresses the extraordinary nature of the experience by con-
trasting it with his formal education, and he refers to it as an “anointing.” It is certainly not implausible to see in Phillips’s radical career an attempt to provide meaning to his life in a world where the clerical and political options of his forefathers had been made increasingly irrelevant. A modern cynic might be tempted to find in Phillips’s abolitionist activities a synecdochal rejection of a repressive Calvinist upbringing, but Max Stackhouse reminds us that the slavery question, calling into question as it did the absolute doctrine of the natural right to property, also raised criticisms of “decadent Calvinist theories, which saw personal wealth as a sign of special divine favor.” Stackhouse quotes James Dombrowski to the effect that a “this-worldly” Calvinism, as opposed to the “otherworldliness” of Lutheranism and the “next-worldliness” of Catholicism, manifested itself in those places where Calvinism was most deeply entrenched. This “Puritan evangelical” Calvinism emphasized participation in the world with a view to transforming it. Just as Emerson, during this era, faced the crisis of relevancy and found a meaningful vocation as a “scholar,” Phillips was able to find a divinely sanctioned vocation in abolitionism. According to Ronald Walters, “to be an abolitionist was to declare allegiance to the principles of brotherhood and equality of opportunity, to suffer for those ideals, and to band together with like-minded individuals.” Their agitation “often came at a crucial moment in their lives and helped them find direction, meaning, and companionship.”

Abolitionism is almost universally described by modern writers as a “moral crusade,” “a sacred vocation,” or a “religious movement,” and Phillips, armed with confidence in his righteousness and his vision of absolute truth, reflected the religious nature of the cause in his discourse. He described abolitionism as “an insurrection to restore absolute right,” described John Brown as “the brave, frank, and sublime truster in God’s right and absolute justice,” and denied concern with the temporal and ephemeral: “You see I am talking of that absolute essence of things which lives in the sight of the Eternal and the Infinite; not as men judge it in the rotten morals of the nineteenth century, among a herd of States that calls itself an empire, because it raises cotton and sells slaves.” Phillips truly prophesied or “spoke for another” when he said of John Brown, “God makes him the text, and all he asks of our comparatively cowardly lips is to preach the sermon, and say to the American people that, whether that old man succeeded in a worldly sense or not, he stood a representative of law, of government, of right, of justice, of religion, and they were a mob of murderers who gathered about him, and sought to wreak vengeance by
taking his life.” The rhetorical attitude suggested here is succinctly characterized by Bartlett: “No matter how bitter, how merciless, how seemingly vindictive his assaults on individuals, Phillips always felt justified in what he was doing. He did not think of himself as an ordinary lecturer or orator, but as a kind of minister to the public, preaching the gospel of reform.”

The assertion of God’s presence in history, however harsh, carries the reassurance of order, a single motive power, a single guiding passion behind an otherwise inexplicable universe. The exegesis of sacred history is a critical prophetic device for revealing at critical moments God’s will. The prophetic woe finds in catastrophe an adumbration of God’s judgment. Abolitionist discourse of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is rife with such revelations. David Brion Davis finds the theme to be central in the emergence of immediatism over gradualism in antislavery thought and provides a number of examples. Notable among them is Granville Sharp’s interpretation of hurricanes in the West Indies as “supernatural agencies to blast the enemies of law and righteousness,” and American Thomas Branagan’s plea to “bring a speedy end to slavery and avert the divine judgment of an apocalyptic racial war.”

The language of Sharp and Branagan, with its synthesis of logos and pathos expressed as righteousness and the conviction of divine order behind it, was shared by Phillips and his fellow Garrisonians. In the “Address of the Executive Committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society to the Friends of Freedom and Emancipation in the U. States,” signed by William Lloyd Garrison as President and Wendell Phillips and Maria Weston Chapman as Secretaries, it was declared,

After the independence of this country had been achieved, the voice of God exhorted the people, saying, “Execute true judgment, and show mercy and compassion, every man to his brother: and oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart. But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear; yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone.” “Shall I not visit for these things? saith the Lord. Shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?”

Borrowing language directly from the Old Testament, Garrison, Phillips, and Chapman left no doubt as to the ultimate realization of God’s will: order would be restored through the elimination of sin. Perhaps not all would be saved, but the power of an omnipotent God would not be thwarted by the puny obstinace of avaricious men. There is a promise
here that chaos will succumb to justice; the wicked will be punished and the good rewarded; the moral qualities of the world will be clarified.

Frightful as the prospect of natural disasters and wars might have been, the most compelling evidence of Jehovah's wrath against His people was the threat of the "slave power conspiracy." Conceived as a plot by the slaveholding states to establish political hegemony over the free states, the idea of the slave power conspiracy implicated the North for its passive complicity in slavery far more than it implicated the South for the sin of slaveholding. There was, after all, something virtuous in the Southerner's aggressive defense of slavery, however misguided. It was for this reason that Phillips had a grudging admiration for the unregenerate John C. Calhoun and nothing but contempt for the great compromiser Henry Clay. The end of Northern fecklessness would be its own slavery, the "slave power conspiracy" being conceived as God's vehicle for the enslavement of all those who had forsaken virtue and the covenant. In a letter to Phillips from William Lloyd Garrison, "Sunday Morning, April 21 [1861]," Garrison ventured to suggest some "portions of Scripture" that he felt might be useful for an address Phillips was to make that day at the Music Hall. From chapters 50 and 51 of Jeremiah, Garrison made the following application: "Israel and Judah typify the North; and a recognition of their guilt, also, is made, with discrimination and hope:—'For Israel hath not been forsaken, nor Judah of his God; though their land was filled with sin against the Holy One of Israel'—i.e., the sin of complicity."63

For those with an acute moral vision, the design of the slave power conspiracy was evident in many of the events preceding the Civil War. It is in the nature of conspiracies to attempt to escape notice, to disguise pattern as random activity. Actions presented to the public as the independent pursuit of economic interests—the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Fugitive Slave Law, the Compromise of 1850—were viewed by abolitionists as components of a concerted moral assault.64 The abolitionists were burdened with the task of revealing the true nature of events to the degenerate who saw them only through the promiscuous language of politics. In reference to the annexation of Texas, Phillips said,

How vigilantly, how patiently, did we watch the Texas plot from its commencement! The politic South felt that its first move had been too bold, and thenceforward worked underground. For many a year, men laughed at us for entertaining any apprehensions. It was impossible to rouse the North to its Peril. David Lee Child was thought crazy, because he would not believe
there was no danger. His elaborate *Letters on Texan Annexation* are the ablest
and most valuable contribution that has been made toward a history of the
whole plot. 65

The conspiracy theme, as evidenced in the rhetoric of the American
Revolution, is a vehicle for signification. God, or some other absolute value
standing in His place, is implied in the notion that there are ideals to which
the conspiracy can be opposed. Conflict achieves cosmic dimensions; quo-
tidian appearances prove to be an inadequate account of events; the contest
has profound implications. Indeed, it is precisely under the shroud of
pedestrianism that conspiracies seek to escape notice, to avoid a true assess-
ment of their consequences. As isolated and random occurrences, events
beg to be dismissed without cross-examination. Against the tendency to
reduce events to insignificance, the prophetic voice demands a thoroughgo-
ing exegesis of sacred history. In doing so, it reveals the patterns and
provides a rationale for the putatively innocuous and serendipitous.

Treatment of the slave power conspiracy theme by Phillips and his fellow
Garrisonians reveals an obsessive concern with enslavement as a result of
moral sloth. Radical abolitionism was often less concerned with working
toward freedom of chattel slaves than it was with the integrity of Northern
free states. In a letter to Phillips, Garrison, quoting Jeremiah, wrote, “Flee
out of the midst of Babylon, deliver every man his soul, be not cut off in
her iniquity.” 66 Phillips himself bespoke a certain selfish complacency when
he argued, “If we never free a slave, at least we have freed ourselves in our
efforts to emancipate our brother men.” 67 It would be unfair to say that
Phillips was not concerned with the plight of the chattel slave. He was
concerned, as, for example, remarks made in 1846 attest: “We must speak
strongly because the crisis demands plain talking. Remember this is no evil
which lynx-eyed ingenuity has discovered. We are not going about with a
lamp at mid-day, in order to ferret out some little local evil. Every sixth
man is a slave. The national banner clings to the flagstaff, heavy with
blood.” 68 At the same time, it appears that his legal background, his interest
in the issues of the American Revolution, and the nature of his conversion
to the antislavery movement inclined Phillips to a great concern with the
infringement of the slave power conspiracy on the rights of free Norther-
ners. 69 In his first speech as an abolitionist, “The Right of Petition,” Phillips
protested against the antibolutionist gag-rule in the Congress and lamented
the death of a right “we had thought as firmly fixed in the soil of America
as the Saxon race which brought it here. It was the breath of life during
our colonial history, and is recognized on every page of our history since as the bulwark of civil liberty.” He went on to link the defense of civil liberty and abolitionism: “Upon the friends of abolition, of free discussion, of equal rights, throughout the land, insult had been heaped on insult, and outrage added to outrage, till we thought that malice had done its worst. All the outworks that guard the citadel of liberty had been in turn overthrown. The dearest rights of freemen had been, one by one, torn from us.”

Phillips’s famous speech “In Defense of Lovejoy” was a defense of freedom of expression; its only concern with slavery was the fact that Lovejoy had been the owner of an abolitionist press.

For self-professed revolutionaries who disdained expediency, it is more than mere coincidence that their proselytizing was restricted to the North; it is more than mere coincidence that primary among their tactics was withdrawal from contaminated institutions—the refusal to vote, the come-outerist movement in the churches; and it is more than mere coincidence that the motto of the American Anti-Slavery Society was “No Union with Slaveholders.” Possibly the influence of New England Calvinism with its doctrine of predestination inhibited Garrisonian abolitionism from ever realizing a posture of conversion, but it seems apparent that radical abolitionism, for whatever reasons, is more adequately characterized as a movement of separation. Given the absolutist philosophy behind it, it seems inevitable that it should be so. Radical abolitionism found a certain power in the ambiguity between fitting its situation as corrective and fitting within what the situation permitted and would receive.

In the 1844 “Address of the Executive Committee,” Phillips, Garrison, and Maria Chapman declared that they wished to separate from slaveholders not in anger, not in malice, not for a selfish purpose, not to do them an injury, not to cease warning, exhorting, reproofing them for their crimes, not to leave the perishing bondman to his fate—O no! But to clear our skirts of innocent blood—to give the oppressor no countenance—to signify our abhorrence of injustice and cruelty—to testify against an ungodly compact—to cease striking hands with thieves and consenting with adulterers.

In this excerpt, the end of judgment is clear. Although concern is summarily expressed for the “perishing bondman,” judgment entails separation, decision, definition. In wishing to keep their skirts clean, to avoid the touch of “thieves,” the abolitionists express less concern for the welfare of the slave than for their own moral purity.

But it would be unfair to be overly cynical regarding the intentions of
the Garrisonians. Consistent with Phillips's emphasis on the language of instruction, it cannot be doubted that the signers sincerely expected their action to serve as a model for emulation. By setting themselves apart in opposition to those who act contrary to God's will, the abolitionists sought to demonstrate the proper exercise of virtue and encourage the emulation of others, as well as to affirm their moral status.

Abolitionists saw the Civil War as the culmination of crisis. The people had for years absorbed themselves in captious debates, feigning ignorance of God's will, exhibiting a moral timorousness. Finally, there was no recourse but for God to execute His judgment and to restore order: "It is in vain now, with these scenes about us, in this crisis, to endeavor to create public opinion; too late now to educate twenty millions of people," lamented Phillips. "Our object now is to concentrate and to manifest, to make evident and to make intense, the matured purpose of the nation. We are to show the world, if it be indeed so, that democratic institutions are strong enough for such an hour as this. Very terrible as is the conspiracy, momentous as is the peril, Democracy welcomes the struggle." The crisis for Phillips is instructive; properly attended to, it provides the resolution of chaos and indecision; it is a judgment from which must be discerned "the matured purpose of the nation." Awful as the war was, it at least had meaning. It resolved all doubt concerning the moral quality of slavery.

Judgment provides the resolution of the *agon* in the sacred drama. The antagonist is either absorbed or vanquished. Either way, the new display of unanimity is equally impressive. Justice is both ruthless and benevolent. The radical polarization of the world eliminates confusion. In a world where political and religious leaders fail to offer clear direction, where the compromise of purity is innocuously presented as a process that leaves the greater part of principle intact, prophetic rhetoric posits a clear dramatic opposition of protagonist and antagonist. It clarifies moral identities and structures desires for denouement.

In order to achieve certainty in the face of chaos, Phillips indulged in a reactionary move characteristic of the prophet. In the values of the American Revolution, Phillips found a redoubtable consensus and a model of virtue. Phillips canonized the Founding Fathers, and much of their philosophy was continuous with his religion. In college, he displayed an affinity for the works of Locke, among others, and was particularly interested in the history of the American Revolution. His speeches contain references to John Milton and Algernon Sidney. He echoes the revolutionary motto that "resistance to tyrants is obedience to God," and he often spoke of
“natural law” and “inalienable rights.” Two of his biographers attest to
the fact that the spirit of the Revolution was still very much in evidence in
the Boston of Phillips’s boyhood, and James Stewart makes the influence
of Whig republicanism on Phillips’s career a central theme in his biography.
The many tributes paid to Otis, Hancock, the Adamses, and Jefferson in
his speeches bear out these estimations and leave no doubt as to the lasting
imprint of this tradition on Phillips.

In his “Defense of Lovejoy,” one of his first speeches on behalf of
abolition, a speech that gained him instant notoriety if not fame, Phillips
pointed to the portraits of the Founding Fathers hanging there in Boston’s
Faneuil Hall and proclaimed: “Sir, when I heard the gentleman lay down
principles which place the murderers of Alton side by side with Otis and
Hancock, with Quincy and Adams, I thought those pictured lips would
have broken into voice to rebuke the recreant American, the slanderer of
the dead.” In his speech “The Argument for Disunion,” he reminded his
listeners, “We stand today just as Hancock and Adams and Jefferson stood
when stamp act and tea tax, Patrick Henry’s eloquence and the massacre of
March 5th, Otis’s blood and Bunker Hill, had borne them to July, 1776.”
Not only in God, but in the overpowering virtue of the leaders of Revolu-
tionary America, Phillips found a guide to action and a ground for judg-
ment.

There were natural continuities between the philosophy of the American
Revolution and the philosophy of Phillips’s day, continuities that the lan-
guage of evangelicalism should not be allowed to obscure. Phillips referred
to “a thread which bridges over that dark and troubled wave, and connects
us by a living nerve with the freemen of the Revolution.” The writings
of the Scottish Common Sense philosophers were prominent in American
colleges and universities of the early nineteenth century, and there was, if
anything, an even greater reliance on “intuition” as a source of infallible
knowledge than in the Revolutionary period. The Second Great Awaken-
ing in America was a time of immense faith in the power of the heart to
discern truth. Phillips displayed this common faith when, for example, he
affirmed his commitment that the “Higher Law” stood opposed to slavery.
“So speaks the heart,” he said.

Addressing the heart, Phillips spoke the language of the passions. It is
the prophet’s task to create an emotional response to sin, a reaction to the
pathos of God. Phillips exhibited a powerful consciousness of his rhetorical
choices. Apparently making the heart metaphor literal, he declared, “There
is something in the blood which, men tell us, brings out virtues and defects,
even when they have lain dormant for a generation.” Abolitionism was “blood whose warm currents of eloquent aid” had sprung to life after the dormancy of a generation “to rouse the world by the vigor and pathos of its appeals.”

Phillips demonstrated both vigor and pathos: “If we now repudiate and denounce some of our institutions, it is because we have faithfully tried them, and found them deaf to the claims of justice and humanity.” “Prove to me now that harsh rebuke, indignant denunciation, scathing sarcasm, and pitiless ridicule are wholly and always unjustifiable; else we dare not, in so desperate a case, throw away any weapon which ever broke up the crust of an ignorant prejudice, roused a slumbering conscience, shamed a proud sinner, or changed, in any way, the conduct of a human being.”

Abraham Heschel asks, “What is the torment that prompts the prophet to hurl bitter words at the people? Is it a feeling of alarm, the threat of disaster? What is the direct inner impact the prophet seeks to make upon his people? Does he aim to strike terror in the heart, to alarm?” And he answers, “The prophet’s purpose is to move people to repent, to convert the inner man, to revive devotion, love, to reconcile Israel with God.”

Phillips made clear the exhortative nature of his enterprise when he said,

It seems to us that in such a land there must be, on this question of slavery, sluggards to be awakened, as well as doubters to be convinced. Many more, we verily believe, of the first than of the last. There are far more hearts to be quickened than confused intellects to be cleared up—more dumb dogs to be made to speak than doubting consciences to be enlightened. [Loud cheers] We have use, then, sometimes, for something beside argument.

Writing of the Old Testament prophets, Heschel concurs: “Their primary aim is to move the soul, to engage the attention by bold and striking images, and therefore it is to the imagination and the passions that the prophets speak, rather than aiming at the cold approbation of the mind.”

Edwin Black, not coincidentally, finds William Lloyd Garrison to be an example of this mode of speaking, which Black terms “exhortative discourse” as opposed to “argumentative discourse.” Exhortative discourse, according to Black, “is that in which the evocation of an emotional response in the audience induces belief in the situation to which the emotion is appropriate. In this genre, a strong emotional experience does not follow the acceptance of a belief, or even accompany it; it precedes it. Emotion can be said to produce the belief instead of the reverse.” Black’s analysis of exhortative discourse tends to corroborate much of what I have claimed.
about Phillips and to illuminate the dynamics of Phillips's speaking. He notes that the power of exhortation to promote intense conviction makes it an "alien tongue" and goes on to describe the judgment in the exhortative genre and its imminence.

Phillips's transformation of the world, then, lies in the revival of emotional orientation. Radically dividing the world into good and evil and providing an example of the proper emotional response to each, he attempted to bring order out of chaos. In the dull, homogeneous, ambiguous world of compromise, exhortation served to restore simplicity and order through the introduction of highly charged and distinctive emotional states. In Phillips's own words, "God has given us no weapon but the truth, faithfully uttered, and addressed, with the old prophets' directness, to the conscience of the individual sinner." In accordance with the epistemology of the time, Phillips provided an unfettered, uncomplicated proclamation of absolute truth in terms designed to demand an emotional conviction on the part of the audience; he aimed to make his listeners feel the truth.

It may first appear that such a passionate discourse is at odds with the ideal of temperance that the discourse was supposed to elicit and enforce. James Stewart, in an illuminating analysis of Phillips's rhetoric, finds this contradiction between the ideal of control and the passionate, evangelical vehicle for achieving it central to antebellum America. According to Stewart, "the major source of Phillips's rhetorical mastery" lay in his unerringly balanced synthesis of these seemingly conflicting impulses by making order the prerequisite of freedom, he spoke to some of the deepest feelings of his age.

Certainly, Phillips stood as an example of the paradox of freedom through submission—like the prophet, the radical abolitionist was only genuinely free when completely given over to the divine will—but we should be wary of perceiving irreconcilable oppositions where none exist. In their critical assessment of classical systems of thought, eighteenth-century philosophy and rhetoric understood the passions as integral to human nature and not necessarily alien to humanity's higher nature. As David Hume claimed, "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." But Hume also argued, "It is impossible . . . that this passion can be opposed by or be contradictory to truth and reason; since this contradiction consists in the disagreement of ideas, considered as copies, with those objects which they represent." George Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric, a text Phillips studied at Harvard, extended Hume's thinking on the relation-
ship between feeling and persuasion by making “vivacity” the foundation of belief. Phillips’s exhortative discourse is completely consistent with Campbell’s Humean emphasis, and Phillips’s teacher of rhetoric at Harvard, Edward T. Channing, appears to have reinforced such ideas.99 It was Channing’s belief “that it takes nothing from the merit of modern political orators to concede, that our most impassioned popular eloquence is marked throughout with the intention of leading considerate men to responsible action.”100 Passion, far from being irresponsible in the view of nineteenth-century rhetoric, sought to make people responsive to the good. It was a manifestation of God’s judgment and a vehicle for awakening something fundamental to the self, for only through the proper exercise of the passions was one virtuous and thus truly human.101 As Mynheer Peeperkorn counseled Hans Castorp in another anodyne environment,

Feeling, you understand, is the masculine force that rouses life. Life slumbers. It needs to be roused, to be awakened to a drunken marriage with divine feeling. For feeling, young man, is godlike. Man is godlike, in that he feels. He is the feeling of God. God created him in order to feel through him. Man is nothing but the organ through which God consummates his marriage with roused and intoxicated life. If man fails in feeling, it is blasphemy; it is the surrender of His masculinity, a cosmic catastrophe, an irreconcilable horror.102

Perhaps flinching at the metaphors of intoxication, nineteenth-century Americans would have understood perfectly Peeperkorn’s meaning.

The ethos presented through passion is ambiguous. It may represent the most indulgent form of personal expression reflected in such characterizations as “He just let go” or “She really let loose.” Certainly, the appeal of such a licentious mode of speaking in an otherwise constrained and repressive society should not be underestimated, and it also makes understandable the acrimonious reactions to abolitionist rhetoric as a further sign of the fear of intemperance. At its extreme, passionate discourse may bring the speaker attention in the form of recriminations or retaliation, hence the connection between passionate expression and, for example, the passion of Christ. Hazel Catherine Wolf reflected this point of view when she argued that the abolitionists used their histrionic martyrdoms as a kind of exhibitionism, neurotic displays of self.103 Wolf’s suggestion that martyrdom was the primary motivation for the abolitionists has sustained serious criticism, but even most scholars sympathetic to the abolitionists have agreed that it is a significant idea in abolitionist thought.
Alternately, passion may be seen as an overpowering urge external to the person, in the case of the prophet, Yahweh’s will. The prophet is reduced to the status of vehicle; the self is not expressed but surrendered. Passion accurately reflects this sublimation, for we associate passion with the loss of self—“I was out of my mind,” “She forgot herself,” “I was beside myself,” “I don’t know what came over me.” The passionate state of mind is essentially sacrificial; the prophet is compelled to suffer the divine suffering. This is the view held by Aileen Kraditor who suggests that “the evidence shows willingness to suffer for the cause as a probably necessary price to be paid, rather than a desire to suffer.”

The difference between Wolf and Kraditor is the difference between seeing in martyrdom a perverse form of self-celebration and seeing in it a form of ethical proof. From Kraditor’s standpoint, martyrdom is the logical culmination of a commitment to unpopular truths. Wolf, on the other hand, would have us see not the ultimate sacrifice of self to principle, but the ultimate self-serving. By either interpretation there is a marked failure to accommodate the audience, but the prophetic motive is servitude.

Phillips clearly presented his exertions and suffering as an inescapable duty. From the examples already provided, the ubiquity of the language of duty in his discourse is evident. It was a burden of which he was always cognizant, as the frequent references attest. The performance of a sacred duty in an atmosphere of adversity is the formula by which martyrs are created, and Phillips had a keen understanding of the appeal of martyrdom. In a speech commemorating the occasion of the Boston mob that nearly took the life of Garrison, he praised the women of the antislavery society who stood firm in their adherence to principle regardless of the threats of the mayor:

They taught me that down in those hearts which loved a principle for itself, asked no man’s leave to think or speak, true to their convictions, no matter at what hazard, flowed the real blood of ’76, of 1640, of the hemlock-drinker of Athens, and of the martyr-saints of Jerusalem. I thank them for it! My eyes were sealed, so that, although I knew the Adamses and Otises of 1776, and the Mary Dyers and Ann Hutchinsons of older times, I could not recognize the Adamses and Otises, the Dyers and Hutchinsons, whom I met in the streets of ’35.

He also cast Elijah Lovejoy and John Brown as martyrs “who teach us how to live and how to die.”

Phillips demonstrates his appreciation of the didactic function of martyr-
dom in his repetitions of the verb "teach." Martyrdom was understood as a corrective to the failure of instruction by political and religious leaders whom Phillips so bitterly indicted. That he had learned his lessons from these noble martyrs is evidenced in his own willingness to join them: "We are perfectly willing—I am, for one—to be the dead lumber that shall make a path for thee men into the light and love of the people. We hope for nothing better. Use us freely, in any way, for the slave. When the temple is finished, the tools will not complain that they are thrown aside, let who will lead up the nation to 'put on the topstone with shoutings.' "  

And it is clear that Phillips believed he had laid himself on God's altar when he describes the abuses he has suffered in his pursuit of the cause, and nowhere clearer than when he explicitly links himself to the Old Testament prophet Nathan:

Sir, when a nation sets itself to do evil, and all its leading forces, wealth, party, and piety, join in the career, it is impossible but that those who offer a constant opposition should be hated and maligned, no matter how wise, cautious, and well planned their course may be. We are peculiar sufferers in this way. The community has come to hate its reproving Nathan so bitterly, that even those whom the relenting part of it is beginning to regard as standard-bearers of the antislavery host think it unwise to avow any connection or sympathy with him.  

In martyrdom lies the perfect realization of duty, the radical sacrifice of the self. In a discourse opposed to slavery, martyrdom is also the most complete freedom and the most profound exercise of virtue. Most important, in all this we find a model for emulation. The martyred prophet presents himself as a synecdochal realization of God's will.

Divine Judgment in a Postsacral World

The language of duty is a language of relationship. It is both an assertion of the motive of the prophet and a continuing testimony to the existence of divine forces that have commanded the prophet's servitude. In the latter aspect, the community to which the prophet speaks must have a belief in the possibility of the sacred, or the prophet's claim is dismissed as madness. Furthermore, this belief must be in direct proportion to the claims the prophet makes against it. In Phillips's case, in the criticisms of his intensity by both his contemporaries and later historians, there is the persistent
suspicion of something excessive in the passion. Phillips himself understood this, as his acknowledgments of the charges of madness and fanaticism attest. For all its promise of resolution in judgment, Phillips's rhetoric produces a lingering agitation.

The world presented in Phillips's discourse is a simple world, a world of uncomplicated Manichaean dichotomies, a world of "us" and "them," the pure and the sordid. It is also an unreal world. Phillips speaks in terms of the ideal. His reliance on hyperbole and antithesis reflects the magnitude of worldly events and the relationship of competing forces as seen from a sacred perspective. His untempered, unqualified judgments are heroic leaps onto the cosmic plane. For all but a small band of radicals, however, the vision was not compelling. The Civil War was not fought to restore the kingdom of God, but for reasons that were patently political and economic. Although the early nineteenth century was ostensibly a time of religious revival, the existence of the revivals themselves reveals an underlying doubt. The overwrought style of revivalism indicates a kind of spiritual desperation. It is possible that the increasingly fragile religious conceptions of the day could not support the stringent demands Phillips placed on their credence.

But to say of Phillips that the vision was ultimately not persuasive, like saying that the Second Great Awakening did not bring about the kingdom of God, fails to confront the phenomenon itself. Phillips did draw large crowds, and he did command, if not discipleship, at least a certain fascinated popularity. If Phillips's claims were grandiose and extravagant, there is some sense in which the performance of them was not. What we need to discover is some link between the prophetic impulse and the literary and dramatic conventions of Phillips's time. The genre of melodrama is the obvious place to look.

Melodrama is a product of the notably secular French Revolution, whence it was exported to England and America. Peter Brooks finds in melodrama "a degenerate form of the tragic—a form of the tragic, we might say, for a world in which there is no longer a tenable idea of the sacred." It shares with prophetic judgment a basic impulse "to locate and to articulate the moral occult." As a poetic form, the melodrama is reassuring; in the end justice is done. Melodrama testifies to the presence of meaning in the world; it addresses the void. Brooks finds its genesis "in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political
concern.”\textsuperscript{116} Far from being frivolous, the stark diametric oppositions in melodrama suggest its kinship to primitive mythologies. The integrity of the dramatic form in both depends on a resolution that attests to the continuing viability of justice. In the dramatic conflict lies the promise of a new order out of the midst of chaos. As Brooks has written, “If the world at the start of a melodrama seems charged with moral ambiguities . . . these ambiguities are not inherent to ethics. They are rather appearances to be penetrated, mysteries to be cleared up, so that the world may bathe in the stark moral lighting of manichaeism.”\textsuperscript{117}

Considered as melodrama, Phillips’s discourse enjoys the advantage of immediate comprehensibility and total involvement of the audience, its passionate side, hissing and cheering the appropriate parties, as well as its rational and contemplative side. By engaging the feelings of the audience, melodrama forces them out of their torpor, forces them to confront the dramatic conflict and to align themselves. Melodrama provides the therapeutic function of catharsis, according to Brooks, less through the tragic mode whereby pity and fear are purged than through the “total articulation and vigorous acting out of the emotions.”\textsuperscript{118}

Brooks’s notion of melodramatic catharsis might be abbreviated with the term “exhaustion.” The early nineteenth century was saturated with the melodramatic imagination. Popular dramas included such titles as “Boston in Ashes, or Homeless Tonight” and “The Rat Catcher’s Daughter.” Temperance songs like “Father’s a Drunkard and Mother is Dead” were unashamedly extravagant. Nor is Uncle Tom’s Cabin, with beatific Little Eva, long-suffering Uncle Tom, and the heartless Simon Legree, a work generally noted for its subtle shadings. To the extent that Phillips spoke in the language of exaggeration bordering on hysteria, he was speaking in the language of his day, a moralistic din that must have reached a deafening level. Rather than arousing their audiences, nineteenth-century radicals may only have left them numb.

Beginning with the analog of prophecy and ending in melodrama may seem a rather precipitous descent. The two generic attributions may further seem to imply quite different valuations of Phillips’s discourse. In the comparison of prophecy to melodrama, it may seem that the prophetic is cheapened and degraded, but melodrama is not so easily dismissed. Confronting the melodramatic in Balzac’s Illusions perdues, Henry James found himself torn between seeing it as either “a magnificent lurid document or the baseless fabric of a vision.”\textsuperscript{119} Peter Brooks finds James’s indecision “close to the center of the problem of melodrama.”\textsuperscript{120}
parallels our question on the nature of martyrdom, and it points to the problem of *ethos*. It is the problem of prophetic *ethos* that must next be attended to, leaving Phillips with the self-assessment of a melodramatic reformer hero created by one of Phillips's contemporaries, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Quitting his "cosey pair of bachelor-rooms—with a good fire burning in the grate, and a closet right at hand, where there was still a bottle or two in the champagne-basket and a residuum of claret in a box," Miles Coverdale left the pollution of the city to journey in a snowstorm to Blithedale where he and his compatriots were to form a community based on virtue and self-reliance that would set an example for the world. On this occasion, Hawthorne allows his protagonist to observe,

The greatest obstacle to being heroic, is the doubt whether one may not be going to prove one's self a fool; the truest heroism is, to resist the doubt—and the profoundest wisdom, to know when it ought to be resisted, and when to be obeyed. Yet, after all, let us acknowledge it wiser, if not more sagacious, to follow out one's day-dream to its natural consummation, although, if the vision have been worth the having, it is certain never to be consummated otherwise than by a failure. And what of that! Its airiest fragments, impalpable as they may be will possess a value that lurks not in the most ponderous realities of any practicable scheme. They are not the rubbish of the mind. Whatever else I may repent of, therefore, let it be reckoned neither among my sins nor follies, that I once had faith and force enough to form generous hopes of the world's destiny—yes!—and to do what in me lay for their accomplishment. 121