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Thoreau and the Idea of John Brown: The Radicalization of Transcendental Politics

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When Henry David Thoreau defended John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859, many saw it as an outrageous statement from the author of "Civil Disobedience." Up to this point, Thoreau's only response to the injustices of the American government had been his refusal to pay taxes. He neither implemented, nor advocated violence as an instrument against an unjust government. How, then, could a transcendentalist, the champion of peaceable revolution, defend Brown, who was named "the most violent anarchist of the era," without subscribing to the latter's violent actions?¹ Since Thoreau's "A Plea for Captain John Brown," scholars have been unable to resolve this contradiction in Thoreau's political philosophy. I argue that Thoreau's four political writings—"Civil Disobedience" (1849), "Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854), "A Plea" (1859), and "The Last Days of John Brown" (1860)—should be understood as a series of stages in his political thought rather than one consistent theory. As a transcendentalist, he did not aim to establish a political ideology, and we have good reason to believe that Thoreau would never expect others to follow anything other than their own individual conscience. In "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau proclaimed that "[t]he only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right."² In this respect, we would be mistaken if we were to look for a consistent theory in Thoreau's writings, as with more systematic political philosophers.

Thoreau's defense of Brown did not constitute a contradiction with his previous writings because "A Plea" should be seen as a radicalization of his transcendental politics. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and the Harpers Ferry raid forced Thoreau to apply his abstract ideas to contemporary politics. His stance on the institution of slavery started to become radical in his 1854 essay "Slavery in Massachusetts," and ultimately Thoreau was convinced that he had found his transcendental hero in the example of Brown. After

concrete examples in “Slavery in Massachusetts” and “A Plea,” Thoreau returned to abstract ideas in “The Last Days of John Brown.” Only through reading Thoreau’s political writings as stages in his thought rather than a single political theory, and as a successive radicalization of his stance on the issue of slavery, can one understand the rationale behind “A Plea.” We can understand the reasoning in “A Plea” if we recognize that Thoreau was only concerned about the *idea* of John Brown; the person Brown’s violent actions did not stop Thoreau from defending his hero. In Thoreau’s eyes, Brown was a Christ-like figure, and such a man could not be judged by the laws of ordinary people because he was morally superior to the masses. He was “a transcendentalist above all, a man of ideas and principles.”³ Placing Brown on a “higher moral plateau,” Thoreau depicts a man who sacrificed his life in order to make others—both blacks and whites—free.⁴

These two points, Thoreau’s defense of the *idea* of Brown and his equalizing Brown with Christ, bring me to my second argument, namely, that as a transcendentalist who exhorted every individual to follow his own conscience, Thoreau would have been expected to defend *the person* Brown without any need of comparing him or his ideas with those of Christ. As a man of principles, Brown followed his own conscience, and it is not clear why Thoreau preferred to equate him with Christ instead of depicting Brown as a unique and separate man. This comparison can only be understood as a rhetorical device delivered by Thoreau to convince his mostly Christian audience in “A Plea” because the only similarity between Brown and Christ was that they both acted from their principles; and if we consider the means they used for their ends, this one shared point seems insufficient to equalize them.

Thoreau’s Position on Violence

It is crucial to recognize that, from the beginning, Thoreau did not subscribe to the non-resistance ideas of the followers of William Lloyd Garrison or any other Christian pacifist groups, such as evangelical abolitionists or Christian perfectionists who believed in moral suasion. As Lewis Hyde rightly points out, because Thoreau was aware of the difference among those who were opposing the government or its specific policies, the original title of his 1849 essay “Civil Disobedience” was “Resistance to Civil Government,” which made his position clear in the debate between “resisters” and “non-resisters.”⁵ Although many intellectuals championing civil resistance and pacifism have been inspired by Thoreau, he never necessarily advocated *civil* resistance or pacifism; his essay should rather be understood as his individual declaration

of independence from the American government, which he perceived as illegitimately coercive. Most importantly, in his writings, one cannot find an explicit rejection of violence as a political tool. On the contrary, in many parts of his essays, Thoreau recognized the possibility that violence sometimes can be justified. For example, in "Resistance to Civil Government," Thoreau acknowledged the right to revolution, emphasized the importance of "[a]ction from principle," and called upon his fellow Americans to "break the law" of "the slave's government" of the United States.⁶ Later, in "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau applied his abstract principles to the more concrete problem of slavery and harshly criticized the role of his home state in enslaving black people, using the example of fugitive slave Anthony Burns.⁷ The main reason behind his reluctance to prohibit violence was that he did not want to put limitations on the actions of individuals.

A careful reading of "Resistance to Civil Government" reveals that Thoreau wanted to provoke individuals to follow nothing but their own consciences. An individual may decide to disobey an unjust government in various ways, such as refusing to pay taxes or starting an armed revolt to free slaves. Laraine Fergenson attempted to read Thoreau's 1849 essay as a consistent political theory, and she claimed that the "inner-spiritual" and "social reform" aspects of transcendentalism were inherent problems of this philosophy.⁸ According to this view, Thoreau's argument that individuals do not have a moral obligation to fight against all injustices because they "may still properly have other concerns to engage" them stands in opposition to his other argument that in a country where one-sixth of the population are slaves, "it is not too soon for honest men to rebel or revolutionize."⁹ I agree, however, with James Donahue that it would be a mistake to expect a political program or a consistent political view from Thoreau.¹⁰ Indeed, these two arguments constitute a contradiction for Fergenson because she expects to see a consistent theory from Thoreau, and she ignores the fact that Thoreau always focused on individuals' actions rather than their consequences. This alleged contradiction is resolved when we take into consideration the core of Thoreau's philosophy—an emphasis on the freedom of individuals to define right and wrong, along with the issues each prefers to engage with.

It seems that Fergenson was looking for one correct answer in Thoreau's writings that everybody can accept and apply to their lives. For instance, she refers to "Resistance to Civil Government" as "Thoreau's theory" or "doctrine."¹¹ But this view contradicts the main premise of Thoreau's essay, that individuals should find answers to social and political questions by looking to their own conscience instead of seeking ready answers from others. Moreover,

based on her false understanding of Thoreau, Fergenson claims that a “passionate statement of individual conviction and a reasoned argument calling for unified mass action” was another contradiction of transcendental politics.¹² First, while she views passion and reason as mutually exclusive, she fails to provide a satisfactory argument for her claim that different transcendentalist individuals had to embody passion and reason simultaneously. Second, she does not explain why she saw “Resistance to Civil Government” as “reasoned discourse.”¹³ I argue, first, that “Resistance to Civil Government” was not a political program or “reasoned discourse,” but Thoreau’s individual declaration of independence from an unjust government; and second, since, according to Thoreau, individuals are free to make their decisions, it would not constitute a contradiction if Thoreau embodied reason while Brown embodied passion.

In his 1849 essay, Thoreau proclaimed that he “cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as [*his*] government which is the slave’s government also.”¹⁴ By refusing his allegiance to the American government, he wanted to “wash his hands of” these injustices and not give his practical support to the government.¹⁵ As Fergenson herself recognized, “Resistance to Civil Government” was full of “brilliant insights” rather than “a consistent theory,” but she thought that Thoreau saw his essay as a political program.¹⁶ In addition, in the same essay, Thoreau argued that the American government had declared a war against the conscience of honest individuals. An attack on one’s conscience, in his terms, was not less important than an attack on one’s body or (physical) property. Thoreau asked: “Is there not a sort of blood when the conscience is wounded? Through this would a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death.”¹⁷ Hence, it should not be understood as a contradiction when Thoreau decided to defend Brown, a man who fought against an unjust government in order to defend his “real manhood and immortality.”¹⁸ When Thoreau applied his abstract principles to American politics in his “Slavery in Massachusetts” speech, it became clearer that he supported violence against the government where it was necessary.

By the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the government malfeasance radicalized many northerners, including transcendentalists, because they, including Thoreau, felt the direct influence of slave states in their backyard. As a result, Thoreau became more outspoken against the institution of slavery. People in the free states could not claim anymore that they were innocent, and they washed their hands of the institution of slavery since now the northern states were obliged to arrest fugitive slaves to send them back to their southern

masters. This act radicalized famous transcendentalists such as Theodore Parker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Thoreau.¹⁹ For instance, while in 1849, Thoreau claimed that the government did not have a significant influence on his life, and “[i]f a man is thought-free . . . unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him,” after a few years, his views changed.²⁰ On 4 July 1854, Thoreau gave a speech entitled “Slavery in Massachusetts” at an anti-slavery rally in Framingham. Referring to the capture of fugitive slave Anthony Burns a month before, Thoreau acknowledged that although he had never respected the American government, he “had foolishly thought that [he] might manage to live here, minding [his] private affairs and forget it.”²¹ In a sense, all northerners became “the slave driver” themselves, which in “Walden,” Thoreau declared the worst thing, since he believed that it eradicated one’s morality and “a divinity in man.”²²

In his speech, Thoreau fiercely attacked the Fugitive Slave Act, declaring that “its natural habitat [was] in the dirt.”²³ He tried to convince the audience that all laws were not necessarily moral, and each individual should first of all be a moral person and then a good citizen. Again, Thoreau presented the superiority of individual conscience to political expediency and public opinion when he argued that “[t]he law will never make men free; it is men who have got to make the law free. They are the lovers of law and order who observe the law when the government breaks it. . . . [They] recognize a higher law than the Constitution, or the decision of the majority.”²⁴ He called Massachusetts a hell “covered with volcanic scoriae” before he announced that “[m]y thoughts are murder to the State, and involuntarily go plotting against her.”²⁵ Despite his radical call for action, Thoreau did not take up arms against the government. As Reynolds correctly concludes, Thoreau “had always retreated to nature for solace,” an act that he repeated after his radical speech.²⁶ Even though he believed that the power of slave states might influence him negatively, Thoreau did not seem to be convinced that *his* freedom was necessarily at stake. He thought that freedom was not given because “it had to be earned and established by the person who would be free.”²⁷ After the Fugitive Slave Act, could Thoreau wash his hands of the institution of slavery?

Thoreau still believed that he had other concerns to engage with. As Turner points out, narrowly interpreted, Thoreau’s refusal to directly participate in slavery made him an innocent man who did not support the government. Broadly interpreted, nevertheless, his acceptance of the legitimacy of the US Constitution, which did not forbid slavery, “[might have made] him indirectly complicit.”²⁸ According to Reynolds, this was the main reason for

Thoreau's fascination with Brown when they first met in March 1857.²⁹ To Thoreau, Brown was the embodiment of transcendental principles because he did not oppose slavery merely in words; Brown also enforced his views in Kansas when a foreshadowing of the American Civil War occurred in the Kansas territory between pro-slavery and anti-slavery residents in 1856.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 by opening the West to slavery. While northerners feared that this act would empower the slave states, "for many Southerners, Kansas was an all-or-nothing proposition."³⁰ Both pro-slavery and anti-slavery groups settled in Kansas in order to decide the future status of the territory. Brown was one of them, and he organized an attack in which five pro-slavery settlers were murdered in Pottawatomie Creek on 24 May 1856. Many scholars assume that Thoreau was not aware of Brown's crimes in Kansas when they met. For instance, Ostrander writes that Thoreau "had probably never heard of the Pottawatomie massacre."³¹ Moreover, Walter Harding thinks that if Thoreau had known about the massacre, "he might never have endorsed [Brown] and might [even] have been convinced of his insanity."³² However, by 1857, Brown was a well-known violent abolitionist, and it is almost impossible to believe that Thoreau had never heard of his actions. Franklin Benjamin Sanborn rightly emphasizes that "Brown's name had become such a terror, that wherever the enemy were attacked, [proslavery citizens] believed he was in command."³³ As Reynolds noted, details of the Pottawatomie Creek massacre were publicly well-known since 1856, and it seems that Thoreau embraced Brown while he was aware of his killings.³⁴

Although the evidence suggests that Thoreau knew about Brown's participation in "Bleeding Kansas," even if we accept the assumption that Thoreau did not hear of the Pottawatomie Creek massacre, that would not explain Thoreau's defense of Brown in 1859. In Thoreau's eyes, Brown was a man who truly believed that it was his duty to fight for freedom. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Brown, unlike the Thoreau of "Resistance to Civil Government," believed that he "came into this world . . . chiefly to make this a good place to live in."³⁵ Two years after his meeting with Thoreau, on 16 October of 1859, Brown masterminded a raid on a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. His plan was to steal firearms and distribute them to newly emancipated blacks. Brown and his fighters would hide in the nearby mountains, and free blacks would join them in order to fight against their former masters. If the plan succeeded, according to Brown's daughter Anne Brown, he believed that eventually, all slaveholders would "surrender to them to gain peace."³⁶

Although the plan failed to ignite a slave insurrection throughout the country, Brown became a symbol for both northerners and southerners. In the North, transcendentalists idealized Brown and declared him a hero, while in the South, he was seen as a typical anti-slavery northerner even though he was very radical compared to other abolitionists.³⁷ Most abolitionists saw slavery as an individual sin and, unlike Brown, they advocated moral suasion. Therefore, they were unwilling to endorse Brown's violent actions. Some of them, such as Adin Ballou, even fiercely attacked Brown on the grounds that violence was against the religious principles of true Christians, and without peaceful struggle, abolitionists would be on the same moral ground as slaveholders.³⁸ In such a hostile environment, only the Concord transcendentalists embraced Brown. As Reynolds highlighted, without their sanctification, Brown "might have very well remained an obscure, tangential figure—a forgettable oddball."³⁹ On 30 October of 1859, Thoreau delivered "A Plea for Captain John Brown" to a Concord audience in which he separated the idea of Brown from the person Brown's atrocities and elevated the former to the same moral ground as Jesus Christ.

John Brown: "A Man of Ideas and Principles"

How would Thoreau admire a man who had committed murders? Why did he never mention Brown's atrocities and the failure of the slave revolt plan in his speech? To answer these questions, we need to first scrutinize the image of Oliver Cromwell, the leader of the English civil wars, and then the perceived moral superiority of Brown for Thoreau. Brown was an exceptional individual who was ready to sacrifice his life for his principles and faith. Since he perfectly fit the definition of a transcendentalist hero, Thoreau did not find it problematic to ignore the person Brown himself, and he pleaded for Brown's principles. He was not concerned about Brown's life; he was giving a speech in order to "plead [Brown's] cause [and] his character,—his immortal life."⁴⁰ A Cromwellian hero did not need anybody's plea for his life.

In his books, published in 1840 and in 1845, the British author Thomas Carlyle "almost singlehandedly" transformed the reputation of Cromwell from a monster and dictator to a hero.⁴¹ The hero version of Cromwell strongly influenced both the transcendentalist and Brown himself, while in the South, Cromwell was demonized and became the symbol of New England radicalism.⁴² For example, Thoreau called Brown's soldiers in Kansas "a perfect Cromwellian troop" and compared Brown with Cromwell by saying that "[h]e died lately in the time of Cromwell, but he reappeared here."⁴³

Furthermore, next to the Bible in his bookshelf, Brown had a biography of Cromwell, written by the American author Joel Tyler Headley, in which Cromwell was depicted “as a God-directed Calvinist whose murderous tactics were justifiable.”⁴⁴ As Utzinger mentions, accepting Cromwell as a prototype of Brown also explains why Thoreau did not plead for other famous anti-slavery figures, such as Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, and Prudence Crandall. Among them, only Brown fulfilled the requirements of “Carlyle’s paradigm”; therefore, Thoreau believed that he found an American Cromwell, or in Carlyle’s words, “the original man . . . whose shaped Thought awakens the slumbering capability of all into Thought.”⁴⁵

Nevertheless, Brown was not only an American Cromwell. He was an American patriot who stood against his own country, a transcendental hero with uncompromisable ideals, and finally, an angel. Thoreau was indignant because the newspapers failed to understand Brown. The media depicted Brown and his followers as insane and heretic, and as traitors. Thoreau tried to convince his audience that the editors of those newspapers “do not know the man,” and that they had all missed the main point about Brown, namely, his principles.⁴⁶ Brown was “a man of faith and of religious principle” who sacrificed his life for the oppressed without waiting to be “personally interfered with” by the unjust American government.⁴⁷ He did not have peers, and he was superior to all Americans because, as Thoreau had complained in “Resistance to Civil Government,” thousands of people were against slavery “in opinion,” but instead of acting, they just “sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say they know not what to do.”⁴⁸ Brown knew what to do, and he lived in accordance with his principles.

Defending Brown’s radical abolitionist and integrationist ideas were not an easy task in front of an unfriendly or, at best, a skeptical audience. In a place where most people did not endorse Brown’s actions, it was even more difficult to argue that Brown was “the most American of all of us.”⁴⁹ Thoreau, therefore, used some tactics to avoid alienating his audience. First, although he had only met with Brown once in 1857, he attempted to convince the listeners that he personally knew Brown very well and that he was qualified to speak about Brown. In the beginning of his speech, Thoreau used informal language by frequently using personal pronouns, such as “I heard him say that,” when he referred to their private conversations.⁵⁰ Second, after 19 October, when the news about Harpers Ferry reached Concord, Thoreau had already defended Brown in his *Journal*, and “A Plea” was mostly a collection of his *Journal* articles. However, Thoreau deleted some sentences for his speech because he did not want to be dismissed by the audience. For

instance, the following sentence, which appeared in his Journal, was one of them: "If Christ should appear on earth he would on all hands be denounced as a mistaken, misguided man insane and crazed."⁵¹

But Thoreau did not refrain from portraying Brown as Christ's equal. Brown was not only superior to other humans; he was also "superior to nature."⁵² Such a man could only be characterized as Christ. Initially, Thoreau called Brown "the savior of four millions of men," after blaming the audience of pretending "to care for Christ" while they dismissed Brown. Thoreau then went further, establishing a direct link between Brown and Christ: "Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light"; moreover, after quoting Brown, Thoreau added that "[y]ou don't know your testament when you see it."⁵³ Now, Brown was not only Christ, but his words were a new revelation for Christians. This equating of Brown with Christ can, I think, be only understood as a rhetorical tool to convince the audience because, otherwise, depicting Brown as a unique man who acts from and dies for his principles would be a more suitable defense of Brown in terms of an ideal transcendentalist individual.

In "Resistance to Civil Government," Thoreau asked: "Why does [the state] always crucify Christ, and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?"⁵⁴ Later, in "A Plea," he added Christ-like Brown to this category by criticizing the unjust government's inadequate response to him. He called the American government a tyranny that held "fettered four millions of slaves."⁵⁵ This slave government forced all citizens to choose between the enslavement of their bodies and the enslavement of their consciences. The greatness of Brown, then, was that "he had the courage to face his country herself, when she was in the wrong"; he did not fear the government, which menaced its citizens by warning them to "cease agitation on this subject [slavery], or I will make a slave of you, too, or else hang you."⁵⁶ James Goodwin rightly argued that the best proof of Brown's transcendental individualism, according to Thoreau, was the execution of Brown by the government.⁵⁷

The American government was so unjust that an honest man had a right to interfere with its affairs. During his interrogation, Brown told a government official that "I believe it would be perfectly right to interfere with you, *so far as* to free those you wickedly and willfully hold in bondage."⁵⁸ In "A Plea," Thoreau acknowledged that he agreed with Brown on this issue.⁵⁹ It is the right of a liberator to rescue the enslaved people, and at that crucial

moment, the slaveholders should decide whether they will resist the liberator. If they choose to be an obstacle between the liberator and the slaves, the violence of the liberator becomes “only consequential and not itself integral to the act of liberation.”⁶⁰ Thoreau, therefore, could easily justify Brown’s atrocities since Brown was forced by the slave masters to commit those crimes. In other words, the slaveholders were guilty of this bloodshed.

“A Plea” aimed to convince northerners that they did not deserve to be represented by Brown because they—people without principles—were not innocent of the institution of slavery. Brown was inspired by God; as he said to the Virginian Senator James Mason after Harpers Ferry, “[n]o man sent me here; it was my own prompting and that of my Maker.”⁶¹ Such a divinely inspired man did not need anything from the masses; it was the people who were in need of Brown:

I wish I could say that Brown was the representative of the North. He was a superior man. . . . When a man stands up serenely against the condemnation and vengeance of mankind, rising above them literally by a whole body,—even though he were of late the vilest murderer, who has settled that matter with himself,—the spectacle is a sublime one. . . . [W]e become criminal in comparison. Do yourselves the honor to recognize him. He needs none of your respect.⁶²

Although Brown was alive on 30 October, Thoreau always talked about him in the past tense. According to Thoreau, an individual without any meaning in his life could neither live nor die. Brown not only showed Americans how to live a life with strong principles; he also taught them how to die, because this old man was one of the few people who had “died since the world began.” Thoreau asked his audience: “Do you think that you are going to die, sir? No! there is no hope of you. You haven’t got your lesson yet.”⁶³ As Edward Mooney pointed out, for Thoreau, Brown was the embodiment of excellence. He was not an example but an exemplar “without whom we would be ignorant” of how to live a meaningful life.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Thoreau personally did not follow this excellent man in everything. He claimed that “it is [not] quite sane” for an ordinary individual to devote his life to one issue, “unless he is continuously inspired, and I have not done so.”⁶⁵ Brown was one of those few who was divinely inspired; thus, it was not a duty for everybody to follow him. The most appropriate thing for ordinary people was to acknowledge the moral superiority of Brown.

In “The Last Days of John Brown,” an abstract eulogy for Brown, Thoreau compared Brown’s life to a meteor and said that he “know[s] of nothing

so miraculous in [American] history.”⁶⁶ Here, Thoreau pleaded for Brown in the abstract language of “Resistance to Civil Government.” He knew that even though most Americans were uneasy about Harpers Ferry, in the future, the idea of John Brown would transcend all these conflicts. He claimed that most people only pretended that they were Christians and free humans. Indeed, it was Brown, at least for Thoreau, who was a true Christian and a free man. Brown was not only the liberator of the slaves; “[h]e has liberated many thousands of slaves, both in North and South.”⁶⁷ He liberated the enslaved consciences of bodily free white northerners. As “the embodiment of principle,” Brown enforced the Golden Rule—arguably a more abstract name for “higher law.”⁶⁸ While Brown had already been executed, he did not die, Thoreau declared. He taught Americans how to die, but he was still alive. As Donahue rightly pointed out, for Thoreau, Brown, like Christ, was transcended “from one mode of existence to another.”⁶⁹

In this short eulogy, Thoreau reaffirmed Brown’s moral superiority. At the end of his speech, Thoreau described the martyrdom of Brown in even more abstract terms:

Of all the men who were said to be my contemporaries, it seemed to me that John Brown was the only one who had not died. . . . I meet him at every turn. He is more alive than he ever was. He has earned immortality. He is not confined to North Elba nor to Kansas. He is no longer working in secret. He works in public, and in the clearest light that shines on this land.⁷⁰

As it is clear from this eulogy, Thoreau never discussed the violence and failure of Brown, because they were inappropriate details for him. He even attacked the newspapers for their criticism of Brown’s tactics on the grounds that they all missed the main point in their needless discussions of unimportant details. The primary concern of Thoreau was neither an old man named John Brown, nor his tactics, but his cause. *John Brown* ceased to be a personal name; now it became the symbol of a meaningful life.

Conclusion

Thoreau’s philosophy primarily focused on individuals rather than actions *per se* and their possible consequences. In this respect, Thoreau was not a consequentialist; for him, the most important thing was to follow one’s own conscience. When the conscience of an individual violates the law of the state, then Thoreau said “break the law!”⁷¹ If we interpret Thoreau’s defense of Brown through this individualistic or transcendentalist lens, we can see that,

indeed, there was no contradiction between Thoreau's previous political writings, on one hand, and his two speeches on Brown, on the other. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that Thoreau never prohibited violence in his writings. On the contrary, "Resistance to Civil Government," his declaration of independence from unjust government, separated him from non-resistance groups. Later, in "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau applied his abstract principles to concrete political examples such as the Fugitive Slave Act and the rising slave power in the Union. As a response to the government malfeasance, it is plausible to say that Thoreau became more radical. However, it was not a departure from his previous political thoughts.

To Thoreau, endorsing Brown's cause and his tactics were two separate steps. And compared to the former, the latter was so minuscule that it did not even deserve Thoreau's attention. The cause of Brown, liberating both blacks and whites from the enslavement of their bodies and consciences, was the most important thing, and Americans, Thoreau argued, missed this point. He believed that such a man who had continuous inspiration from the divine could not be judged according to ordinary rules. Brown was a superior man because he was following a *higher law*. First, due to his moral cause, all of his atrocities were justifiable. Second, the slaveholders were guilty of these crimes because they chose to stand between the liberator and slaves. Then, for Thoreau, Brown was not even responsible for those killings; hence, it was absolutely meaningless to focus on them. By repeatedly emphasizing to his audience that Brown was not an ordinary man, and that he was at the same moral plateau with Christ, Thoreau tried to separate the idea of Brown from Brown's body. He only pleaded for the cause of Brown.

It would be misleading to expect a political doctrine or a consistent political philosophy from Thoreau as a transcendentalist individual. Thoreau's political essays should be read as a series of stages in his thought. At the same time, the historical context should also be taken into consideration. Reading "Resistance to Civil Government" and "A Plea" as two unrelated essays would be a mistake. Instead, developmental reading of Thoreau allows us to understand the rationale behind "A Plea" and "The Last Days of John Brown." Finally, refusing to look for a political program in Thoreau's writings enables us to see that indeed there was no contradiction among his writings but only a radicalization of his transcendental politics.

NOTES

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3. Thoreau, *Essays* 194.
4. J. J. Donahue, "Hardly the Voice of the Same Man": 'Civil Disobedience' and Thoreau's Response to John Brown," *Midwest Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2007, pp. 247–65; p. 257.
5. Lewis Hyde, "Henry Thoreau, John Brown, and the Problem of Prophetic Action," *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2002, p. 128; see also Fanny Garrison Villard et al., *William Lloyd Garrison on Non-Resistance: Together with a Personal Sketch* (Nation Press, 1924); Bryce Taylor, *Unbounded Christianity: Defining Religion for Oneself in Nineteenth-Century New England through Adin Ballou*, 2016, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, PhD dissertation, pp. 99–102.
6. Thoreau, *Essays* 149, 154–55.
7. Thoreau, *Essays* 186.
8. Laraine Fergenson. "Thoreau, Daniel Berrigan, and the Problem of Transcendental Politics," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 65, no. 1, 1982, pp. 103–22; p. 104.
9. Thoreau, *Essays* 149, 153.
10. Donahue, *Hardly the Voice* 252–53.
11. Fergenson, *Thoreau* 116–17.
12. Fergenson, *Thoreau* 105.
13. Fergenson, *Thoreau* 105.
14. Thoreau, *Essays* 149.
15. Thoreau, *Essays* 153.
16. Fergenson, *Thoreau* 115.
17. Thoreau, *Essays* 158.
18. Thoreau, *Essays* 158.
19. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist* 226–29.
20. Thoreau, *Essays* 168.
21. Thoreau, *Essays* 186.
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23. Thoreau, *Essays* 177.
24. Thoreau, *Essays* 179, 184.
25. Thoreau, *Essays* 187–88.
26. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist*, 228.
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