

A Guide to the Reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin**
by
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The story of Uncle Tom is perhaps as well known as any other single story.¹ Indeed, extraordinary numbers of people who have never read the novel still believe to understand its purpose and “message.” This is partly to be explained as the legacy of the phenomenally diverse and worldwide distribution of the novel. It is also partly to be explained by the persistence of the judgment that the novel is simplistic and uncomplicated. On that view, the act of reading the novel is rather an act of indulgence—if moral—than an act of reflection.

This judgment is not shared by the author of the novel. Stowe believed the work to be “subtle” and marked by “finer shades” of meaning. This sentiment was expressed in a letter, written from Paris in 1856, to her husband.² And there is other evidence external to the novel that she considered it complex. Indeed, at least two full works were subsequently published to explain the novel.³ But the most defensible claim for treating *Uncle Tom's Cabin* seriously must emerge from the novel itself. And a careful reading of the novel—and its various editions—reveals the care with which it was written. This essay does not broach the broad question of the novel's structure. In order to provide a view of the novel as readable, this essay begins at the surface to demonstrate the case for reading, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The plot of the novel is generally known. On its surface, an account of slavery and its abuses can well give rise to questions of mastery over oneself and others and, inferentially, questions as to appropriate regimes. But without dialectical consideration of these questions, it is certainly possible and, perhaps, likely that all such questions will assume the form of mere prejudice or convention. This novel invites the latter judgment on account of the singular paucity of genuine and extensive debate over the morality of slavery. Aside from dramatic opposition which may yield dialectical interpretations, the entire novel contains but one extensive debate on the nature of slavery. The purpose of this essay is to argue that that debate is intended to serve as a guide for the reader—the ground of interpretation for the principal and lesser oppositions of the entire novel. Slavery is but the occasion for the debate. It is not the true subject of debate. For the author is concerned to demonstrate the superiority of self-mastery to rule over others. This, alone, in her opinion, can serve as foundation to a regime of equality.

The preference of self-mastery over ruling others creates the paradox revealed in the following reflections. Ruling oneself is a greater good than ruling others. And although they who rule others may, nay, must still rule themselves, they who are ruled are

* The author wishes to acknowledge his debt to the late Martin Diamond, whose suggestion it was that a study of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* might be worthwhile. The subsequent analysis of H. B. Stowe's political philosophy—from which this essay is drawn—has far exceeded anything either of us anticipated. But that circumstance rather increases than diminishes my debt and frees Martin Diamond of any responsibility for the errors that may be present.

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prevented from ruling themselves. Thus, they are denied the greatest human good. It would be singularly unaccountable that they who are superior in goodness would gain, by their goodness, the right to impair the goodness of others. The arbitrary power of judging for others is not good for the judge. The absolute power of judging for oneself is morally necessary. That power is exercised best by those superior in goodness. But they preserve that power for themselves only as all men possess it. When that power is exercised arbitrarily by those inferior in goodness, the good of all is imperiled. Those of inferior capacity require guidance if moral equality is to be preserved.

How can men be guided by the wise if the wise possess no power to rule them? The model of Christianity provides the answer for Stowe. Those superior in goodness are mainly so because they serve the good of others. They do not usurp the right of judgment, but they supply the appropriate ends or desires and the means suited to the capacities of their fellows. They acquire a mastery over others, largely through opinion. And they do so without respect to their own conventional status. The truest form of mastery not only does not depend upon the law, but may not. Moral equality is the principle which could assure that men are not deprived of the beneficence of superior wisdom at the same time they are protected against despotism.

The strongest defense of moral equality is the demonstration of superior goodness at work under the worst conditions: despotism. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presents an ideal case: The man so far superior by nature that he will rule the opinions of others, including those called his masters, though himself enslaved. But the ideal case does not teach the indifference of goodness to conventions so much as it demonstrates the character of the goodness that were possible were impediments removed. We grasp Stowe's intent best when we become mindful of the alternatives she confronted. She wished to attack slavery and to reveal the erroneous principle of justice which was its support. She could do so by inveighing against the abridgment of the liberty of men often the equal or superior in capacity to their masters. (This alternative was reflected in the subplot of George Harris' escape from slavery.) But in that she had to attack the regime itself and thus to undermine the notion of an American common good as America then stood. Or, she could appeal to the common good of the American polity. And in that she was required to show what were the true American principles and wherein the practice of slavery departed from them. Thus, she could reveal the prospects for good—even for the lawful masters themselves—threatened by the existence of slavery.

As if to show how her choice was made, Stowe incorporates both alternatives in the almost parallel plots of the novel. We have the story of George Harris' escape and education as well as the story of Uncle Tom. Indeed, to explain the novel it will be, finally, sufficient to answer the question: Why was Uncle Tom rather than George Harris named as the "hero of our story?" George Harris certainly fits the more traditional—Patrick Henry—model of the American hero. Thus we wonder why the unusual, uncommon man should be chosen as the hero in order to assure our sympathy for the many, the lowly? Why does the democratic American polity require a human model of surpassing excellence in order to attain democratic happiness?

All these long years, but one critic has ever properly noted the tension between George Harris and Uncle Tom. But he fails to perceive the significance of that tension, although he acknowledges the complexity of the novel. Fiedler's *Love and Death in the*

American Novel relates the tension in the following terms:

Poor George—his existence is fictional only, not mythic. Unlettered Negroes to this day will speak of a pious compromiser of their own race, who urges Christian forbearance rather than militancy, as a 'Tom' or 'Uncle Tom'; it has become a standard term of contempt. But no one speaks of the advocate of force who challenges him as a 'George,' though Mrs. Stowe's protagonist of that name was a very model for the righteous use of force against force. (p. 264)

This may doubtless be explained by the fact that Americans—including “unlettered Negroes”—already have the example of Patrick Henry and other exponents of the righteous use of force against force from the American founding. (See the artfully colored portrait of George Washington which hangs from Uncle Tom's cabin wall.) But the criticism was meant to go deeper than that. Fiedler understands Uncle Tom as merely the exponent of a “primitive piety.” For that reason he cannot consider George Harris' “challenge” as a genuine alternative. It is the *only* way. And Uncle Tom's sentimental character is but the mythic creation of a guilt-ridden conscience, hungering for real expiation and not the mere contempt a George offers. The “righteous use of force against force” is unproblematic for Fiedler and is not an affirmation of the right of the stronger. Stowe's view was more sublime and less optimistic. Thus, George was for her an admirable but too limited character, with whom she identified the American founding in some respects.⁴

Stowe reveals the status of George's righteousness at the end of the novel, where she engages him in an argument in which she gets the last word. But we are running ahead of our narrative. To slow down and begin at the beginning, we can perceive what is at stake between the political and moral alternatives she offered in the first section of the novel,⁵ where the differences are initially formulated. In the final chapter of the first section and the first chapter of the second section, Stowe introduced a character who serves as the vehicle to express this difference. The character, “an honest drover,” is a slaveholder but a slaveholder who is uncharacteristically uncertain about the basis of his authority. The circumstances are, on the one hand, a Kentucky tavern which is the first stop on George Harris' route of escape from slavery and, on the other hand, a river boat upon which Uncle Tom is carried deeper into slavery.

The isolated appearance of John the Drover in these selected and separate incidents provides a bridge between the plots which goes otherwise unnoted. Besides emphasizing again how little time is required for George Harris to acquire his liberty, following his direct, step-by-step approach, the bridge serves to make clear what may have been in doubt: Uncle Tom and George Harris are reacting to the same slavery. The distinctions between the kindness and brutality of their masters in no way mitigates our understanding of their circumstances. The reader should not, therefore, depend upon meeting Simon Legree before Uncle Tom's motivation becomes questionable.

It is the dark cloud which overhangs the administration of slavery in every case that produces an ambivalence in the Kentucky drover about the basis of the institution. His doubts lead him to eliminate all appearance of coercion in his relationship with his own slaves. This requires that he be ready to give up his slaves to freedom. But he does not in fact give up his slaves. His honesty, therefore, is nothing other than his openness to a demonstration of the true demands of justice, which he is predisposed to follow. And he

recognizes that such a demonstration must turn on the account of the slave as fully a man. Thus it must reveal the nature of the duties men owe to men and the differences in men. His situation, in other words, is the ideal situation of Stowe's audience. He occupies within the novel the role of the ideal reader of the novel. And he confronts the two alternative accounts of justice.

In the initial chapter, Chapter XI, Stowe presents the drover's account of his own opinion. She depicts his character suitably to his role as a surrogate reader: complete republican simplicity. He is a loose-jointed, heavy-boned, tobacco-chewing Kentuckian, who wears indoors the liberty his forefathers donned out of doors as they pushed back the frontier. Seated in the tavern at which George will soon appear, he greets his fellow lodgers with a hearty "bonhommie." With them, he meets George Harris before George's arrival at the tavern. The encounter is via an advertisement for a runaway slave. Among other things, the hand bill related that the "boy, George," was "very intelligent, speaks handsomely, can read and write; will probably try to pass for a white man" and was branded with an "H" in his right hand. The handbill was read aloud by Mr. Wilson, also a traveller and George Harris' former, kindly employer in a hemp factory. After the reading, John raised himself from his post by the fire, walked up to the handbill, and let fly a charge of tobacco juice. Letting it be known that that expressed his opinion on the subject, he returned to his seat.

John was challenged to further explanation by the tavern host, and he indicated a preference that his target had been the "writer of that ar paper."

Any man that owns a boy like that, and can't find any better way of treating on him, *deserves* to lose him. Such papers as these is a shame to Kentucky; that's my mind right out, if anybody wants to know!

He next related how he handled his own gang: he offers them their liberty. "That's the way I keep mine." When they are free to run, they no longer wish to do so. This method, according to John, produces better results than anyone in the region can boast. And the method is based on treating the "boys" "like men."

Treat 'em like dogs, and you'll have dogs' works and dogs' actions. Treat 'em like men, and you'll have men's works.

John employs an interesting adaptation of Aristotle's advice as to the method of dealing with slaves. Having previously argued the injustice of slavery,⁶ Aristotle nonetheless recognizes the possibility that a decent (indeed, "ideal") republic cannot be constructed without slavery. In that pre-modern era the labor of slaves was a necessary source of the leisure required for gentlemanliness. To prove the injustice of slavery, Aristotle demonstrated that slaves should differ from free men fully as much as men differ from beasts. Then some men could by nature rule others despotically, just as any man may by nature rule dogs despotically.

Harry Jaffa has developed this argument in its comprehensive form, whereby we see that the relationships among natural beings must be derived from their respective relationships to the whole of nature. A comprehensive view of the relationships of natural beings (those with some capacity of self-movement) begins with God and descends to beasts. Because of the difference between God and man, God rules man despotically.

That is the same relationship that man has to beasts. To justify the despotic rule of man over man, differences among men of the same nature as those between God and man and man and beasts must be found.⁷ Aristotle’s proof denies the existence of such vast differences among men. His provisional acceptance of slavery, therefore, relies on a conventional understanding of slavery and seeks to accommodate it to natural principles. Aristotle achieves this by insisting that the treatment of the slave must be based on his capacity for freedom. That is, although he will be a slave, the slave’s treatment must essentially deny that his slavery is the proper form of expression of his humanity.⁸ This is also the essential form of John the Drover’s distinctions between “dogs’ works” and “men’s works.” The difference is that Aristotle suggested holding eventual freedom before the slave in order to motive the slave to acquit himself well in slavery as a means of escaping slavery. John offers his slaves present freedom as a means of motivating them to acquit themselves well in slavery, simply.

The drover found it necessary, in other words, to forego the appeal to law in dealing with his slaves. He assumed full personal responsibility for the subsistence of the relationship between himself and his slaves because, as he saw it, men cannot otherwise be held in slavery—at least, not as men. But John fully recognizes that the relationship is still slavery. Its justification is provisional in his case, resting on the likelihood that none of his men will wish to pursue “men’s actions.” The significant omission of men’s actions as what one might get when slaves are treated like men reaffirms the presumption that they who will be enslaved will not be subject to the full range of human ambitions. John can be satisfied with slavery if his slaves deserve to be ruled by him. But he cannot be sure of this unless he provides them opportunity to escape his rule. They are ruled by their own wills. He gets “men’s works” and not men’s actions, because men’s works alone are suited to their capacities. This, at least, he is entitled to assume under the precautions he has taken.

In addition, John added the more significant fact that he considers law incapable of making these distinctions. Hence, “more ‘n all” he provided for the freedom of his slaves in the event of his death. The force of law could not extend his *de facto* superiority to someone else, perhaps an inferior, by way of the fiction that law judges in accord with nature. To the drover, slavery is based on the right of the stronger or best, and it relies, therefore, on a natural hierarchy which requires individual and not general determination. Hence, law can only obscure the distinctions men are required to make and, as a consequence, necessarily produces injustice. It is perfectly consistent for him to shield his slaves from the law and to refuse to give them up.

But the drover’s argument is subject to a weakness and does not go without challenge. There are other slaveholders who can not justify their title by their capacity to rule other men. They face rather bleak prospects in accepting that argument: Mr. Wilson—George’s owner at a factory—fully agrees with the drover but rather because he knows and likes George Harris than because he recognizes any insufficiency in the law. As his conversation with George Harris shows later, the gentleman is utterly incapable of any abstraction in this matter. He supports John’s analysis by relating his acquaintance with George and the fact that George had invented a hemp cleaning machine on which George’s owner, Mr. Harris, held the patent. That was, of course, among the reasons that Harris took George away from the factory and attempted to “break him.” To the drover

this is a clear example of the owner failing to perceive his own good. He pushes the paradox of Harris' enjoying the profits from the patent he held, while destroying the source of those profits. John, in other words, accepts the identity of self-interest and benevolence.

It is at this point that another traveler intervenes in the discussion and challenges the drover by defending Harris' position. To the new interlocutor "bright niggers" are the special problem which disproves John's argument. Under his system of openness, owners would be left with no control over them—at least those owners inferior to their gifted chattel. Given the chance to leave, such slaves would betray their own interest to stay. And sooner than later it would become evident that the principle of slavery is not race, *per se*, but an individually determined natural hierarchy. At that point Mr. Harris and his defender would be threatened with enslavement, and the pretense of equality in the master class would be completely shattered. If, therefore, slavery is good for no man, the drover is wrong. Harris does not misperceive his own good. It is in the interest of the institution of slavery, once established, to replace the appeal to strength with appeal to law. The institution as such cannot be defended where the defense reposes entirely in the relationship between the capacities of the individual masters and the individual slaves.

The drover does not fully respond to the address of the new interlocutor, who is identified no further than as "a coarse-looking fellow from the other side of the room." In fact, he only intimates that the objection does not prove the justice of slavery so much as it suggests a fundamental injustice. The drover ascribed what the "coarse fellow" considered "sarcy and aggravatin" behavior to the fact that the slaves were men, not easily gotten "down into beasts." The exchange continued:

Bright niggers isn't no kind of 'vantage to their masters . . . What's the use o' talents and them things, if you cant get the use on 'em yourself? Why, all the use they make on 't is to get round you. I've had one or two of those fellers, and I jest sold 'em down river. I knew I'd got to lose 'em, first or last, if I didn't.' 'Better send orders up to the Lord, to make you a set, and leave out their souls entirely,' said the, drover. (p. 123)

Now both of these responses must be considered seriously. The poor, coarse, old slaveholder has a genuine problem and has struck upon a practical solution in his own case. "Talents and them things" cannot be naturally commanded by men who do not enjoy them themselves. In their case, the connection between self-interest and benevolence does not hold because they would naturally be the objects of benevolence rather than dispensers of benefactions. At the same time, the purpose of slavery where the talented may be enslaved is to serve the advantage of the master. And unless a master without talents wants to place himself under the tutelage of a slave, he must be content to obtain limited advantages from creatures in still worse condition than himself. His power must be extensive enough to permit this. But it can only be that extensive if supplemented by law, since he hasn't such powers by nature. With the aid of law the master without talents creates an artificial hierarchy which does not threaten his own freedom but still resembles the drover's natural hierarchy.

The drover's response, on the other hand, raises a doubt as to the legitimacy of an artificial hierarchy. If the hierarchy does not emerge by nature, the suggestion is that it emerges from violence to nature—the creation of soulless anthropoids. If, however,

violence to nature was the source of slavery, it is questionable whether any genuine or just advantage is served by it.⁹ What was thought to be merely the acknowledged right of the stronger looms as something perverse. In fact, if the original title were based on the appeal to strength, it would seem unlikely that law—moral opinion—would constitute a force sufficient to repress continued appeal to strength. Thus, the appeal to strength—the right of the stronger—would not be the origin of the institution or of any institution. The moral principle itself would be at the origin. And the principle originating slavery would be an impeachment of nature—a doing violence to the natural hierarchy—to which men fall prey because of their very openness to moral principle. The perversion would consist in the taking advantage of men's moral sensibility to undermine the very end of that sensibility, the realization of a natural hierarchy. The honest, open, good-natured drover, however liberal, is faced with the prospect that even his benign administration of slavery must be illegitimate. In shielding his slaves from the law, he shields them from the only principle that defends their slavery!

The conversation ends abruptly because of an interruption. John seemed prepared for the doctrine of moral equality, to which he had already given full theoretical if not practical assent. But a practical difficulty remains. Although moral equality may be granted as a consequence of human origins, it is still the case that men differ in their capacities. Further, if moral principle is at the origin of human institutions, it is necessary that men share some form of relationship. And, whatever the form, the relationship cannot avoid reflecting the differences in capacities. The doctrine of moral equality cannot be accepted until the full implications of the principle can be spelled out in practical terms.

We discovered why the strong among the slaves were not continually enslaving the weak among the masters by revealing that the right of the stronger was not, in fact, the basis of slavery. The principle of moral equality faces a similar challenge from the "bright niggers." If it means, in general, that no man rules another by nature, then it must certainly mean, in particular, that no man ever rules the very best men in fact. But it is not manifest that "bright niggers," however "sarcy and aggravatin'," are not in fact ruled by their masters.

The principle of moral equality is defensible only if the very best men cannot in fact be ruled, and the injustice is rather in the attempt than the event. They may remove themselves from proximity to their masters and avoid being ruled through inaccessibility. But that is not a sufficient test. The liberty gained already presupposes what is not proved: the utmost capacity to govern oneself. The very best men can accept that their superiority gives them no title to rule only if they can at the least assure that they are not thereby to be ruled by men worse themselves. Moral equality is compatible with moral excellence only if moral excellence is unimpeachable even in a defenseless condition. It follows that the best demonstration of the illegitimacy of slavery and the practical safety of moral equality are one and the same: that is, to show the limitation of slavery morality by showing the impossibility of enslaving, of actually ruling, the best souls. That is the same thing as to say that John the Drover need not be concerned to defend the natural hierarchy from the moment he is shown that it cannot in fact be violated. The George Harris model cannot serve this end. The fact is, if all the slaves were to follow that model, nothing would have been decided about the nature of either man or slavery. It must be

shown that human law or morality, though it may do violence to nature or mask nature, can not in fact overthrow nature. From the moment that is shown, John may give up his slaves without yielding his appreciation of the differences in men or abandoning his own interests.

But it is this moral insight he cannot find in his country—for good reasons. He understands liberty in relationship to the right of the stronger. Thus, he can provide a defense for George Harris even against the law. But the limitations inherent in that view require that he return to law or morality to seek a more comprehensive answer as to how differences in capacity can be reflected in human relationships, if mastery and submission are not the model. And when he turns to morality he finds only contradictions he is unable to resolve. So we are introduced to him a second and final time in Chapter XII, as he accompanies Uncle Tom down river.

There the question is no longer how to exempt—liberate—the brightest men from slavery, but the justice of slavery itself. Again, the drover has to consult fellow travelers. In fact, as before he but casually enters an established conversation. On this occasion, however, he has no opinion to offer; he is unsure. Consequently, he but phrases in terms of action the alternate possibilities, using the occasion to jostle the conscience of the slave-trader, Haley.

In Chapter XII we are provided further acquaintance with Uncle Tom before John the Drover makes his appearance, in contrast to the order of Chapter XI. We learn, above all, that the author also considers her hero an unusual character. Indeed, he seems so stolidly unmoved by a desire for vengeance or even an energetic demand for liberty that he almost seems a just victim of injustice. Nevertheless, the drover's discussion of the justice of slavery will not touch particularly on Uncle Tom. He is rather only an unnamed member of the slave coffle brought aboard the riverboat, *La Belle Rivière*, by Haley, the trader.

The discussion is in fact initiated when one of the little angels aboard ship reports the appearance of the gang to his mother. Her gentlewomanly oaths and cries of shame are the occasion, once again, for a fellow-traveler to defend the institution. Unlike the "coarse fellow" from the tavern, who defended slavery by the interest of the master, however, the defense drawn from this "genteel woman" rests on the benefit of slavery to the "negroes," in particular. In this discussion a subtle change occurs. The attack on slavery still comes from a southerner. But the initial defense of slavery is placed in the mouth of a northern woman. Stowe does not explicitly avow this, but she has the genteel northerner say, "I've been South, and I must say I think the negroes are better off than they would be to be free." This unacknowledged first occurrence of what will become a major theme of the novel, culminating in a Vermonter's slaying Uncle Tom, underscores the importance of the opinion here expressed. Rather than proceeding from a view to the good of the master, it is predicted on a radical distinction between blacks and whites. Stowe believed that liberating the country from the evil of slavery as distinct from slavery itself depended more upon refuting this positive good opinion than upon demonstrating the injustice of the right of the stronger.

The discussion aboard *La Belle Rivière* turned upon the question whether the slaves were as fully human as the master class. The southern lady who attacked slavery

attacked most bitterly its “outrages on the feelings and affections” of the slaves. She cited specifically the separation of families. The northern lady accepted the general truth of this statement as it relates to human affairs, but eventually maintained that “we can’t reason from our feelings to this class of persons.” After a warm response from the antislavery gladiator, the genteel woman rested herself in a repetition of her initial reflection. She had begun with a preface that there was much to be said on either side of the question. But her entire case amounted to the two-fold assertion that negroes were sub-humans who were improved by the moral guidance of their masters. In this she implicitly accepts the argument that among the fully human, each must be supposed competent to judge of his own good. And Stowe implicitly argues that this is the state of northern opinion on the matter.

As a consequence, there falls upon northern opinion and the entire positive good school the necessity to demonstrate the generic deficiencies of negroes. The northern lady shrinks from this task, but just as she sinks into silence an unidentified parson speaks up.

It’s undoubtedly the intention of providence that the African race should be servants,—kept in a low condition . . . “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be,” the scripture says. (p. 141)

Earlier in the novel Stowe attributes this position to some of the southern clergy; in particular. Thus we may assume this parson is a southern parson, and his appearance—out of nowhere—demonstrates the support and origin of that northern opinion which impedes the struggle against slavery.

But there is a slight difference in application. For the genteel woman, the slaves were subhumans who were being improved. But in the parson’s use of holy text, they are fully human beings who are being punished. We must emphasize the passage, “kept in a low condition,” which interdicts attempts at improvement. In this we find a moral or biblical basis for the artificial hierarchy—the necessity of breaking “bright niggers.” Thus, what the northern lady sees as the work of nature is in fact the work of men—if under divine guidance. The origin of the northern prejudice—the view of negroes as subhumans—is the rigorous application of an artificial hierarchy designed to keep the slaves in a low condition.

It is at this point, on his own ground, that we re-encounter John the Drover.

‘I say, stranger, is that ar what that text means?’ said a tall man standing by.

John confesses that he has not heretofore viewed the matter in that light. We saw why in Chapter XI. But we remember that John was open to moral guidance on the subject. So the parson responds, again, “undoubtedly.” For reasons “inscrutable” the divinity decreed the doom of bondage for the African, the son of Canaan, “and we must not set up our opinion against that.”

Now this seems comprehensive enough, although its reliance on “inscrutable reasons” ought leave some room, for doubt in John’s mind. Nonetheless, he tries out the practical application, perhaps sarcastically, perhaps not.

‘Well, then, we’ll all go ahead and buy up niggers.... if that’s the way of Providence.—won’t we, Squire?’ said he, turning to Haley, who had been standing ... intently listening to the conversation. ‘Yes, ... we must all be resigned to the de-

crees of Providence. Niggers must be sold, and trucked round, and kept under; it's what they's made for. 'Pears like this yer view's quite refreshing, an't it stranger?' said he to Haley. (p. 142)

Because John ends his statements in questions, needling the slave-trader, Haley, we are entitled to assume that he finds this view rather singular than refreshing. But Haley, at least, responds seriously. He never really thought about the matter, but would not have gone so far himself. He was just a man in business who, if it turned out to be wrong, "calculated to 'pent on it in time.'" Now John enjoys himself, congratulating Haley on having been saved the trouble of reflection and repentance. All of which blessing comes from knowing the scripture, like the good parson.

'Ye could just have said, "Cussed be—what's his name—and 't would all have come right.'" And . . . the honest drover . . . sat down and began smoking, with a curious smile on his long, dry face.

Only at this point does Stowe explain that the troublesome stranger is John the Drover, connecting this conversation with the previous discussion. John still doubts. This new view is insufficient to alter his relationship with the human beings he holds as slaves. Still, he has not found and cannot offer the moral guidance to assure himself that even his minimalist approach is just.

Again, from nowhere a parson speaks. He utters but one statement. Opposing the New Testament to the first parson, he quotes, "'All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.' I suppose . . . *that* is scripture, as much as 'Cursed by Canaan.'" Matters are at a standstill, which fact John promptly notices. The discussion is temporarily interrupted by the boat's coming into a landing. But on the way to the guards John ascertains what we were not yet told of slavery, when a fellow passenger nods yes to his question, "Both them 'ar chaps parsons?" The contradiction between the two serves to indicate why John cannot find comprehensive moral guidance. Something needs to be added to take him beyond the minimalist position he occupies—something in the way of doing unto others what one would want done to himself that yet takes account of differing capacities. Until that is provided, the drover's opinion comes closest to recognizing the necessity of moral equality. Christianity simply understood is a provisional account of man's duty to man.

During the break in the discussion a practical example of the effect of slavery is given. A distraught slave-wife rushes on board to cry farewell to her slave-husband, one of those chained in the coffle. The author describes the event in her own words, and reduces it, in general application, to what *she* considers the essence of slavery, "the weak broken and torn for the profit and convenience of the strong." That is, they are not improved—ruled for their good—nor kept in a low condition by divine injunction. But the "strong" who profit from it are nonetheless made strong by the protections afforded them through opinions such as these. In that sense the weak are not necessarily the naturally weak but rather those kept weak by reason of exclusion from social and political intercourse.

The philosopher, Francis Lieber from South Carolina, mildly criticizes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because "*the minister* does not appear once." His review, written in 1853 and in an unfinished manuscript which was never published as far as we know,¹⁰ was

generally favorable and certainly kindly but noted an absence of practical guidance on the question. This last criticism is sufficiently answered by the concluding sentence of his own review: "Could I mount the scaffold for the abolition of slavery, I would do it tomorrow." But beyond that, and more importantly, is the connection between the two criticisms.

Lieber apparently meant the minister in his accustomed role—actually ministering to consciences and preaching sermons. But it is safe to say he overlooked the passages we have just cited, for they explain, in their contradictions, the "absence of the minister." The appeal to the church, simply, is an appeal to the very source of many of the opinions subtending slavery and, in any event, to the contradictions which resulted in the paralysis of opinion that left the drover in doubt how far he need go. The practical guidance in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* results from its demonstration both of the opinions required to end slavery and the means necessary to the establishment of those opinions. The minister does appear—but in order that we discover the need to go beyond the church. The minister here serves an earthly purpose greater than himself.

The discussion resumes with the antislavery parson vehemently attacking Haley as the cause of all the bitterness seen in that tearful separation of husband and wife. He assured the trader that he would be called to divine judgment on account of this sin. Haley turned from him in silence, but could not escape the omnipresent drover.

'I say now,' said the drover, touching his elbow, 'there's differences in parsons, an't there? 'Cussed be Canaan' don't seem to go down with this un, does it? ... And that 'ar an't the worst on 't ... mabbee it won't go down with the Lord, neither, when ye come to settle with Him, one o' these days, as *all on us must*, I reckon.'

We add, by way of voiding suspense that Haley managed to escape to a neutral corner and there reflected on the increasing "danger" of his enterprise, resolving to end it apparently soon.

But we are here concerned only with John, who finally stopped asking questions and turned a bit serious himself. The differences in ministers, he reasoned, provides no measure of safety with respect to God, nor, we might say, with respect to justice. Thus, his concluding statement is as much a reflection upon his own circumstances, as he duly notes, as upon Haley's. And the problem is that he is left to himself to reconcile the demands of justice, since the authoritative interpreters of the just—those officially designated as such—fail to recommend a course either consistent or sufficiently comprehensive when all are considered together.

The reader of the novel occupies the same position, save that he has the further advantage of being able to read beyond these isolated passages. John the Drover appears nowhere else in the novel. And, considering his good intentions, we may freely imagine that he has now joined us in reading the rest of the novel and continuing these reflections. And what we seek, above all else, is to discern what it is that John owes his slaves beyond liberty, the attainment of which nonetheless requires their freedom. We wish to discern how John can provide for their good without ruling them, since in his case the slaves are inferior in capacity to himself. We wish to discern, therefore, why the indefeasible liberty of all relies more surely upon the right of the weaker than upon the right of the

stronger—why, that is, George Harris is an inappropriate hero for the defense of moral equality and the demonstration of man's duty to man.

What we require is a single account of the three dilemmas presented through John the Drover's appearance in the drama. The first, we recall, was to know that human morality could not overthrow nature, though it might mask it. This would permit John to accept a principle that would defend the freeing of his slaves without risking either his own enslavement or, more importantly, the occasion to pursue what is good. Secondly, we required to know if the slave class were as fully human as the master class. John is predisposed to this view, but is uncertain as to either its practical consequences or the results if, acting upon this view entirely, it is subsequently shown to be in error. Thus, the third and most significant dilemma must be resolved as a condition of resolving the first two. If it is true that the artificial hierarchy masks a true natural hierarchy but can not override it, the strong kept artificially weak must, even in their weakness, be capable of demonstrating their human superiority to the naturally weak. They must be more than "bright niggers." Clearly shorn of all conventional supports and wholly without occasion to rule other men by established authority, they must nonetheless manifest their "talents" and one talent above all others, the capacity to judge what is good for men.¹¹ John demands what it is very difficult to provide: the human model of surpassing excellence drawn from among the misery of the slaves. This is a thing difficult to provide, but the author will make the attempt. And, as if to create the suspense she had already removed in the avowal that Uncle Tom was her hero, she continues the parallel plots with the teasing question, who will our model be? To answer that question one need begin at the beginning of the novel. But the foregoing discussion, serving as a guide to the reader, would render that a new beginning.

NOTES

¹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ed. by John A. Woods (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). Any further citations of the novel will be to page numbers, parenthetically inserted in the text of this essay.

² Charles E. Stowe, *The Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: 1890).

³ The one, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), presented a factual defense of the story's imitation. The other and more important, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (1854), actually expounds the principles of the novel though in itself it is but a travel memoir.

⁴ Note the character of his "Declaration of Independence," which affirmed his liberty but neglected its basis in moral equality as such. Chapter 17, "The Freeman's Defence."

⁵ In these terms, Chapters I-XI constitute the first section of the novel, and Chapters XII-XXI constitute the second section. By page numbers rather than chapters a different center is found and yet new questions introduced.

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254a15 - 1255a1; tr. by Sir Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁷ Initially, in *Crisis of The House Divided* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1959), but subsequently elaborated in several essays, “The Reply to Bradford,” “A Bicentennial Cerebration,” “What is Equality,” and “Equality as a Conservative Principle.”

⁸ *Politics*, 1325a24; 1327b; 1328b24-1329a25; and 1330a20.

⁹ Aristotle, *Physics*, Book V, Ch. 6.

¹⁰ Francis Lieber, “Review of Uncle Tom's Cabin,” Ms. found in Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

¹¹ Stowe proceeds as though the entire novel were, in effect, a refutation of Hegel's view of the African, in *The Philosophy of History*. But, in order to rescue the African, it proves equally necessary to demonstrate the subordinate importance of consciousness as such—subjective knowledge of the present state of moral development—in the consideration of human moral possibilities. Thus, Stowe appeals to that substratum—once called nature—which both determines and is available as a guide to human action. The reason in history, in this view, will extend only so far as particular appeals to reason may carry it—as opposed to a general development of the *logos*.