

A Homegrown School of Thought, Socialism: Applied Transcendentalism? *John Brown, Mike Gold and the appeal to Natural Law*

Majed S. Allehaibi¹

Abstract

Socialism in America is like transcendentalism; they are all American schools of thought. They arose in the context of America. The relationship between changes in the environment, changes in the way people live and worship, and in the way they work influence the way thinkers think of or view the world. Therefore, new arguments arise to deal with the changes, and other theories adjust themselves to accommodate these changes. Some ideas feed off one another to create new themes or the recurrences of certain themes. Such a relationship of ideas exists in John Brown's transcendentalism and Mike Gold's socialism.

Keywords: *Transcendentalism, natural law, Social Gospel movement, civil right movement, social realism.*

Introduction

The transcendentalists adopted Kant's vindication of some of the great ideas of enlightenment, such as the dignity of the individual and the universal right to life and liberty. In addition, they thought we should look at the moral law within us, the natural law. Specifically, both Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were attracted to an idealist philosophy that saw the permanent truth re-siding somehow beyond the physical world. This contributed to a uniquely American way of thinking.

Thoreau, the Sage of Concord, applied Emerson's ideas through what he called "the practical business of living." In this context, Walden is his most important experiment. He had committed views as an abolitionist, as explained in his *Resistance to Civil Government*. He applied a version of applied transcendentalism, whereas Emerson put forward the most abstract concepts and philosophical principles. Walden pond, for example, shows the idea of nature to be central to Thoreau's thinking and not just the more abstract Emersonian idea of a nature within us or outside us. Specifically, in Thoreau's case, his ideas involved a very specific wild nature of plants, animals, and hu-mans as well as weather, all of which he saw as closely connected to his inner self.

Natural Law

¹ Assistant Professor of American Literature and Intellectual History, Department of English, School of Arts and Humanities, Jazan University, Saudi Arabia, Mallehaibi@jazanu.edu.sa

Transcendence refers to the appeal to a higher power, a higher and universal truth that can also be seen as “natural law” or the “higher law.” Natural law is the unwritten superior law and includes natural rights and human dignity. It also suggests the importance of a law that is higher than the law laid down by human authority. The notion of natural law refers to higher principles that are eternally true and above anything else that has ever been positive (Simon, Yves. *The Tradition of Natural Law: A Philosopher’s Reflections*).

It has been well established that Western thinking owes a great debt to the philosophies of ancient Greece, so a good starting point for an ancient illustrative example of natural law is classic Greek myth as displayed in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. As with most ancient Greek drama, the play is both a demonstration and a lesson, a dramatization of a complex philosophy that has allowed the world to literally see the enactment of a moral code and notion of higher law that has continued to resonate to the present day.

In the town of Thebes, the two sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices, have just killed each other in a single combat. With the heirs to the throne dead, their uncle Creon is made king of the city. Creon then decrees that the body of Eteocles, who is the defender of Thebes, shall be buried with full honor and ceremonies, but that the body of Polyneices must lie unburied and untouched for the dogs and wild birds to tear apart. Creon declares Polyneices to have been a traitor whose body should be left out as a kind of dishonor and to discourage other rebels from raising arms against the city.

Creon also further decrees that anyone who disobeys this edict and buries Polyneices will suffer the penalty of death. In this context, Segal noted (in “Sophocles’ Praise of Man and the Conflicts of the *Antigone*”) that this is a terrible punishment for Polyneices because as per Greek thought, when a body was left unburied, the soul of that person could not find its way and make its way into Tartarus—the underworld and the home of the dead souls—which is better than being caught in the ever-lasting in-between state. Being neither dead nor alive, remaining in the world as ghosts, and unable to find one’s way into Tartaros was considered a very terrible fate. Thus, when Creon decrees that Polyneices must not be buried, he is in effect condemning his soul to an eternity of irresolution and being unable to find its way to Tartaros. Consequently, Oedipus’ daughter, Antigone, resolves to bury her brother despite Creon’s edict. Her doing so will result in her death. For Antigone, this is an unjust law, and she buries her brother so his soul can rest in peace. For her, her obligation was to a higher law than Creon’s. The outcome is utterly predictable. Antigone is caught burying her brother’s body, brought before Creon, and condemned to being sealed in a cave and left to starve to death.

Antigone’s reason for this act of defiance was that she thought that Creon did not have the right to make the edict that he did and that his edict was unjust². She then says quite clearly that she is bound by God’s laws and not Creon’s. When Creon asks her if she knew of the edict, she says that she did. Then, when he asks her why she dared to disobey anyway, she says:

Yes, since it was not Zeus that published me that edict, and since not of that kind are the laws which Justice who dwells with the gods below established among men. Nor did I think that your decrees were of such force, that a mortal code overrides the unwritten and unfailing statutes given us by the gods. For their life is not of today or yesterday, but for all time, and no man knows when they were first put forth. Not for fear of any man’s pride was I about to owe a penalty to the gods for breaking these. Die I must, that I knew well (how could I not?). That is true even without your edicts. But if I am to die before my time, I count that a gain. When anyone lives as I do, surrounded by evils, how can he not carry off gain by dying?

² Antigone is yielding to something basic, matriarchal, and generative. She sees it as a universal principle. By virtue of this natural law’s universality, she cannot yield to this law of Creon. She is telling Creon that all must honor this deeply ingrained, instinctual, and utterly human impulse of doing the right thing even if it means breaking Creon’s law. (Rorty.Ameile. O., ed. *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*. University of California Press, 1980.)

So for me to meet this doom is a grief of no account. But if I had endured that my mother's son should in death lie an unburied corpse, that would have grieved me. Yet for this, I am not grieved. And if my present actions are foolish in your sight, it may be that it is a fool who accuses me of folly.

Thus, she says that she broke Creon's law to obey a higher law that is more ancient than that of kings. And she told Creon when he asked her, "You, tell me not at length but in a word. You knew the order not to do this thing." She responds, "I knew, of course I knew. The word was plain." Creon then said, "and still you dared to overstep these laws." Antigone replied, "for me it was not Zeus who made that order. Nor did that justice when lives with the gods below mark out such laws to hold among mankind. Nor did I think your orders were so strong that you, a mortal man, could overrun the gods. Unwritten and unailing laws. Not now, nor yesterday's. They always live, and no one knows their origin in time. She buries her brother knowing that this is a direct transgression to the law decreed by the Crown, which is the "legitimate authority." However, she appeals to a higher law, higher than that posited by Creon, when she says: "for me it was not Zeus who made that order. Nor did that justice who lives with the gods below mark out such laws to hold among mankind." Here, she is invoking a higher source that she refers to as "Zeus" and justice, and that is what justice requires she does for her brother. In fact, this also means that anyone who dies has the right to proper burial. Natural rights theorists saw that to be a very strong example of the universality of natural law and the concept of natural rights that a law that is higher and unwritten is being invoked against that which has been laid down by the authority in the community. However, Antigone did not dispute Creon's legitimate authority as he was the leader and justified in making laws and directives that make sense for the common good of the people. Nevertheless, she saw that posited law violated the higher law of justice, so her morality required her to do what she did, despite knowing that she would suffer the consequences. Overall, Antigone becomes the type of person so grounded in her moral sensibility that no power can move her away from it. Here, she is honoring the natural law, which is deeply ingrained in fundamental principles that are found within oneself and not a mere habit (Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*).

Thus, Antigone quite clearly states that she finds herself bound by higher laws and the laws of the Gods rather than that of Creon. This was seen by critics as the first drama on the topic of civil disobedience. More specifically, here, Antigone thinks that her understanding of God's laws—natural laws—supersedes human laws. This is the essence of applied transcendentalism.

During the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, many who opposed this movement said the laws may be unjust but they are the laws; so, go back and obey them. In this regard, the great activist of the civil rights movement Martin Luther King Jr. said that "no, the laws are un-just and therefore we must break them openly, intentionally and take the legal penalty of so doing"; this is the essence of civil disobedience. This is also what Antigone did when she broke the law, for which she had every intention of paying the penalty³ (Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait*. N.Y. Harper & Row, 1964).

Natural Law in the Early American Context

We can see the development of an appreciation of natural law in the early American context. In 1700, Massachusetts jurist Samuel Sewall produced the first anti-slavery tract published in New England, "The Selling of Joseph." In it, Sewall appeals to common sense and natural law:

³ I need to note that this is dangerous if this point of view is taken to either extreme. Following civil law blindly, as Creon would have, leads to totalitarianism. If all citizens in a society were to say, "I only obey the laws that my individual conscience tells me to obey," the result would be anarchy. The balance between the two is crucial, but difficult to find, particularly in a democratic society.

FORASMUCH as LIBERTY is in real value next unto LIFE; None ought to part with it themselves, or deprive others of it, but upon most mature consideration.

The Numerousness of Slaves at this Day in the Province, and the Uneasiness of them under their Slavery, hath put many upon thinking whether the Foundation of it be firmly and well laid; so as to sustain the Vast Weight that is built upon it. It is most certain that all men, as they are the sons of Adam, are Co-heirs, and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward Comforts of Life . . . So that Originally, and Naturally, there is no such thing as Slavery.

In the same line of thought, Sewall continued to emphasize natural rights:

The forest boys and girls in this Province, such as are of the lowest condition, whether they be English, or Indians, or Ethiopians, they have the same right to religion and life that the richest heirs have; and they who go about to deprive them of this right attempt the bombard-ing of heaven; and the shells they throw will fall down on their own heads.

The arguments from the transcendentalist school of thought in their applications is that a just human law should be rooted in a higher moral law, and it should never violate it. The American Constitution has recognized this doctrine of natural law ⁴. Additionally, the Declaration of Independence mentions “nature and nature’s God,” and then it continues to state the natural rights. The same is enumerated in the constitution, making it the embodiment of the eternal and immutable principles of natural justice. Further, the “Preamble to the Declaration of Independence” reads as “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” These rights are natural and “inalienable,” meaning that these rights cannot be taken away from us and cannot be surrendered voluntarily, which demonstrates how deeply entrenched the US constitution is in the tradition of natural law. Further, the right of “the pursuit of happiness” indicates that happiness is the natural end of human beings.

In this context, regarding natural law, Blackstone wrote in his commentaries that “this law of nature, being coeval with mankind and directed by God himself, is superior in obligation to all others . . . No human laws are of any validity, if contrary to this.” This assertion of natural law doctrine is the essence of transcendentalism. Thinking back on Kant’s phenomenal and noumenal realms, one can clearly see that human posited laws belong to the world of the phenomena, whereas the higher and eternal natural laws (that cannot be changed or taken away) belong to the world of the noumena. Thus, applied transcendentalism is basically the appeal to the higher noumenal realm (William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*).

In their application of transcendentalism, Thoreau and John Brown appealed to natural law, and they considered it to be a higher law than that of the state. Natural law signifies that there is a sense of natural rights and natural wrong, and in the case of slavery, they considered it naturally wrong. Meanwhile, when Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, his first draft did condemn slavery (clearly, Jefferson saw slavery as a violation of natural rights)⁵. However, when presented to the Second Continental Congress, they removed this passage before the declaration was adopted to avoid alienating slave owners. Consequently, in his letters, Jefferson wrote, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, and that his justice will not rest forever⁶” (John Darash *Government by Consent* 177). Moreover, Thomas Paine, the writer of *Common Sense*, ridiculed the

⁴ (Edward Corwin, *The ‘Higher Law’ Background of American Constitution Law* (1928,1929) in “Godwin on the Constitution, Vol. I: The foundation of American Constitutional and Political Thought, the Power of Congress, and the President’s Power of Removal,” ed. Richard Loss (Ithaca and London: Cornell University press, 1981) 79-139.

⁵ “Draft of the Declaration of Independence” (2014)

⁶ However, till his dying day, Jefferson never freed his slaves.

contradiction between the glorious rhetoric of the “Declaration of Independence,” which insisted that all men were created equal, and the shameful reality of slavery. The essence of Thoreau’s transcendentalism is, as stated in *Civil Disobedience*, that if the laws of the society are unjust, there is a higher law that one can be beholden to, and that this is legitimate and in fact is the right to civil resistance and disobedience in cases when the truth being consequently promulgated is more important than the laws being broken. In essence, applied transcendentalism invokes the standards of a natural law.

Ultimately, in *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, Robert D. Richardson contended that Thoreau’s politics is—as stated in his essay originally titled “Resistance to Civil Government”—about each person’s right to answer to a higher law over those of any other system in control. Moreover, Thoreau’s politics came from the life he experienced: he saw numerous injustices around himself; and in Antebellum Massachusetts,

he even witnessed the injustice of the institution of slavery⁷. Thoreau’s most famous political action resulted from the fact that he refused to pay poll tax for five years. His motive for not doing so was that he thought the money was going to be used to support the institution of slavery and the Mexican war, which he thought was fought to extend practice of slavery further to the West. He noted that we need not cooperate with the system if it is not looking after the people and is corrupt and rotten. So, he made a stand and saw a moral obligation to resist this evil system. Consequently, Thoreau defended the radical position of abolitionist John Brown based on the aforementioned premise. After Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry in 1859, Thoreau delivered a speech called “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” in which he based his argument on the natural law doctrine. He said, “I can foresee a time in which my moral ethical behavior might need to be set aside for the sake of a higher law.” The power of the state being exerting over people. Here, he spoke in profoundly personal terms. Oppression undermines the moral development of the individual. Seeing oppression, slavery, and injustice and doing nothing is immoral. As such, Thoreau believed that oppression stifles the moral development of the individual and thwarts individual liberty⁸. Overall, this is the principle of Thoreau’s civil disobedience. However, like many of the members of the Concord circles, Thoreau was indeed a supporter of Brown’s ideals but not his actions (August Derleth, *Concord Rebel*).

John Brown: A Transcendental Abolitionist

John Brown was once celebrated as an inspired individual, as a passionate Virginian Christian, and a devout abolitionist. He fought hard toward the objective of liberating the slaves. Brown’s hatred of slavery began early in his life and seemed to increase steadily until adulthood, when it transformed into its most extreme form. Historians argue that Brown’s actions and powerful response against the institution of slavery helped hasten the onset of the American Civil War, which ultimately ended slavery⁹ in the US.

Brown’s family members were also religious and committed abolitionists. They moved from Connecticut to the free state of Northern Ohio while John was still a boy. He soon engaged in a number of peaceful abolitionist activities as a younger man. Eventually, he gave land that he owned to fugitive slaves to work and live on. He and his second wife also decided to raise a Black child as one of their own.

⁷ On slavery, Emerson said “the slavery of women happened when men became slaves of kings...” However, he remained aloof in terms of talking about social causes saying, “I have other slaves to free than those negroes, to wit, imprisoned spirits, imprisoned thoughts.” Eventually, in 1850 he involved himself in opposition to slavery and joined the cause. (Emerson *Emerson’s Antislavery Writings* 1995, 10).

⁸ It was reported that Emerson told Thoreau that the state has the authority, law, and legitimacy, which should not be defied (August Derleth, *Concord Rebel*).

⁹ David S. Reynolds, Carol Berkin, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights*, 2005.

Brown declared his abolitionist views in both his actions and ideas. He contributed to the formation of an organization called The League of Gileadites (referring to the Biblical land of Gilead). This organization protected escaped slaves and, as the biblical reference would suggest, tried to offer a place where former and escaped slaves could lead a life that was free from fear of recapture. By 1849, Brown was living in a community established by abolitionists in the Adirondack Mountains in New York, which provided a place for Black people to live in relative peace.

Here, Brown served as a father figure to free Blacks and established his own family. In 1857, at a time when Brown was known as a peaceful abolitionist, he traveled up the East Coast to raise funds for what he called his “holy war.” He met Thoreau, among other transcendentalists, and had a meal with him at his family house. Brown then delivered one of his rousing abolitionist speeches to a group of citizens who had gathered at the town hall in Concord, Massachusetts. Among the many who were there was Emerson, who donated \$25 (around \$1,000 today) to Brown’s cause, and Thoreau said that he himself “submitted a trifle¹⁰.”

In the 1850s, this benevolent mood radically changed, as Brown started to consider anyone who supported the institution of slavery an absolute enemy. Brown then moved to Kansas, where he attempted to end slavery all over the United States. In October 1859, Brown and two dozen anti-slavery followers staged a raid on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, hoping to loot enough weapons to arm a slave uprising that would ignite the entire Upper South in a slave rebellion. He hoped that slaves would congregate around him and that he could march southward to create a liberation army that, through violent means, would end the institution of slavery using armed Black men and wash away the sins of America.¹¹

What Brown hoped for and anticipated was that news of the uprising would spread across and through the countryside, and slaves from the whole area would join their wing. He wanted to encourage a lot of leading abolitionists to join him, but in reality, all of them did not. Frederick Douglas, for example, an admirer and a friend of Brown, said, “It is a suicidal mission.” However, undeterred by these warnings from his friends, Brown went ahead and launched the raid. This was the culmination of Brown’s abolitionism activism, and this attack was clearly designed to incite a full-scale slave revolt.¹²

However, Brown and his raiders were surrounded and captured by Virginia militia and US Marines before they could slip out of Harper’s Ferry. At this time, ten of Brown’s raiders were killed, including two of his sons. Indeed, by this time, it was clear that Brown was willing to sacrifice almost everything in his efforts to bring about an end to slavery. The actual raid failed, but in terms of propaganda, the raid proved electrifying for abolitionists, who made Brown a hero and martyr.

When on trial in Charlestown, Brown said that the Bible had told him to do unto others as he would have them do unto him and that he was glad to die in pursuit of justice for the slaves. He also compared himself to Jesus Christ and said, “Jesus’ mission was fulfilled by his death by execution and so it will be with me,” which was a prophetic statement. In December 1859, Brown was hung on the charge of murder, insurrection, and treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia. On his execution day, he wrote, “I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood.¹³” The note was seen by many historians as a foreshadowing of the Civil War that would unfold less than two years later, during which the greatest marching song of the United States troops was “John Brown’s body.¹⁴” Moreover, many Northerners came to see Brown

¹⁰ Goodwin, James. *Thoreau and Brown: Transcendental Politics*.

¹¹ Evan Carton. *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America*, 2006

¹² Evan Carton. *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America*, 2006

¹³ Stephen B. Oates. *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown*.

¹⁴ David S. Reynolds, Carol Berkin, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War,*

as a Christian martyr himself. Theodore Parker, one of the most influential Unitarians, called him “not only a martyr but a saint,” and Emerson said, “he will make the Gallo as glorious as the cross.” Further, his death by hanging was interpreted by abolitionists as a “traumatic event which is changing the world forever.”

However, on the surface, Brown was a failure in life. He had tried to set up a number of businesses and had gone bankrupt more than once. He stole horses, lied frequently about his activities, and struck people as insane. He became one of the bloodiest of the free state warriors, participated in a number of murders in Kansas, and was a notorious criminal. However, he was a hero to the abolitionists, both black and white. Brown was a believer in immediate emancipation and said that “slavery is an abomination that must be killed now . . . if it takes a bloody conflict to end it, so be it. The fact that the United States has accepted slavery in its constitution since the beginning made all Americans complicit in this great moral sin.”¹⁵

Immediate Reactions to Brown’s Abolitionist Activism

Americans saw Brown to be either a lunatic or fanatic. However, many Northern abolitionists came to see him as almost a saint and a martyr to the cause of abolition. In 1860, Lucretia Mott said, “It is not John Brown the soldier that we praise, it is John Brown the moral hero, John Brown the noble confessor and martyr that we honor” (226)¹⁶. Thus, she held off from praising the soldier but honored Brown as a moral hero and a martyr to a higher cause. This way of thinking made Brown a transcendental hero. Further, the response to Brown’s raid was impassioned and long-lasting. William Lloyd Garrison, a peaceful abolitionist, writes of Brown’s actions in “The Tragedy at Harper’s Ferry” in *The Liberator*. He calls them “well intended but sadly misguided,” which was the general view of the American people (Stauffer and Trodd 156). Garrison went on to write that Brown’s action was “wild and futile,” and therefore did not succeed. However, defending Brown, he compared Brown to American revolutionaries and argued that the latter had also been forced to take up arms against the unjust laws of Britain, which could be compared to the violent agitation of Brown, at least in principle. Here, one can see the link to the transcendental doctrine of natural rights when Brown was forced to take up arms against the unjust laws of slavery. Brown, in his actions, was appealing to a higher law than that of the state, which then stipulated that slaves had no right to be free, especially in the South.

Later, Thoreau attended a funeral service for Brown in the Northern states among abolitionist circles and delivered the eulogy (“A Plea for Captain John Brown”), in which he claimed that Brown had “a spark of divinity in him” and that he was “a transcendentalist above all.” This was said to emphasize the idea of the noumenal realm and that its eternal truth is higher and takes precedence over posited laws. Whatever Brown's actions, Thoreau contended, his willingness to serve a higher purpose, and principle, than the law of the land links him with a set of ideas that describes transcendentalism and its application. Further, Thoreau wrote in his Plea that “[Brown] did not recognize unjust human laws, but resisted them as he was bid.” He thus resisted unjust laws in service of a higher truth.

Meanwhile, Theodore Parker wrote that “One held against his will as a slave has a natural right to kill everyone who seeks to prevent his enjoyment of liberty.” Thus, this was the view shared among abolitionists at the time: the slave had the right to kill his master and anyone who sought to prevent his liberty. Moreover, Bronson Alcott, a member of the transcendentalist circle in Concord, saw Brown as a Christ-like figure and said that he was “worthy of the cross.” This was because like Christ, Brown was willing to sacrifice his own life for a higher truth (Peterson and Merrill). He was seen to be in the same condition as Jesus. Jesus was defeated on earth and died a criminal, yet by his death, he transformed the world forever. So, after his defeat, Brown’s last cause continued to be surrounded by a

and Seeded Civil Rights, 2005.

¹⁵ Peterson, Merrill D. *John Brown: The Legend Revisited*.

¹⁶ John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd. *The Tribunal Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid*. 2012

holy aura (David S. Reynolds, Carol Berkin).

Further, the influence of John Brown can clearly be seen in the case of Charles H. Langston who was convicted of defying federal law for refusing to return a fugitive slave in 1859 before the Civil War. In his defense speech, he invoked a higher natural law¹⁷, and the transcendentalist notion of appealing to a higher truth rings out in his speech:

I will do all I can, for any man thus seized and held, though the inevitable penalty . . . hang over me. We all have a common humanity and you all would do that; your manhood would require it; and no matter what the laws might be, you would honor yourself for doing it, while your friends and your children to walk generations would honor you for doing it, and every good and honest man would say you have done right.

The reference to “common humanity” opposed the dominant idea of black people as property, and thus he felt the need to act to oppose the law that states it was illegal for them to be free. In breaking that human-posed law to obey a higher and superior moral law, he was willing to accept the associated penalty¹⁸.

Nevertheless, there is a consensus that distinguishes between Brown’s actual methods and the motives and ideas behind his actions. Clearly, any action that results in the death of one’s children or that brings about one’s own death and therefore the end of one’s cause produces confusing responses. Thoreau wrote in his Eulogy to Brown that “no man in America has ever stood up so persistently and effectively for the dignity of human nature . . . John Brown was the most American of us all.” However, after the Civil War, Frederick Douglas, a former slave, wrote a passage showing his conflicted feelings about John Brown’s actions: “Did John Brown fail? John Brown began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free Republic. His zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine. I could live for the slave, but he could die for him.¹⁹” Thus, Brown’s transcendentalism was in going up and above the self and doing so for natural rights, a cause beyond the self; in this case, it was for justice— a social cause.

Thus, some people thought Brown’s actions were too extreme, while others thought his actions actually kick-started the events that led to the Civil War. Less than two years after his execution finally came the end of slavery in America. Thus, they believed that his actions and execution brought the ugly face of slavery to the forefront. The Union soldiers even sang an anthem about him as they were marching to their own deaths, a tune that would take on the moniker, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”:

John Brown’s body lies a-mold’ring in the grave.

His soul goes marching on.

Glory, Glory! Hallelujah!

His soul is marching on.

He captured Harper’s Ferry with his nineteen men so true.

He frightened old Virginia till she trembled through and through.

They hung him for a traitor, themselves the traitor crew.

His soul is marching on.

Glory, Glory! Hallelujah!

¹⁷ Nature refers to our human nature and internal principles that, in our common humanity and nature are part and parcel of. Natural law could also be a reference to divine laws and directives: laws that are written as per our very being that can be seen through a conscientious reflection on the same.

¹⁸ Paul Finkelman, ed., *Slavery, Race, and the American Legal System, 1700-1872* (New York: Garland,1988. Vol.4 pp 17-18.

¹⁹ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

His soul is marching on.

John Brown died that the slave might be free,

But his soul is marching on!

Glory, Glory! Hallelujah!

His soul is marching on.

The stars above in Heaven are looking kindly down

On the grave of old John Brown.

It seems clear that the US Civil War was not based on reason but on understanding and optimistic universalism about natural rights for everyone. Thus, in that regard, reason failed America. It is also clear that the support for Brown had become much more widespread by the time of the Civil War. Historian David Reynolds noted in *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded the Civil Rights* that Brown is rightly seen as a liberator who “killed slavery, sparked the civil war and seeded the civil rights.” Further, his influence continued into the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights movement.

Thoreau’s Individual Initiative

Like Emerson and Thoreau, Brown looked beyond the phenomenal world toward a higher truth, the noumenal, and the spiritual reality by means of understanding, which thus results in spiritualizing nature²⁰. Moreover, transcendence is in the appeal to a higher and spiritual truth and to the natural rights of man²¹. Like Thoreau, Brown followed an approach that can be referred to as applied transcendentalism. The posited state laws represented for them the phenomena, and thus, by means of understanding, they saw that these laws contradict a higher law and truth; so, they saw the injustice of these laws. They consequently appealed to innate natural laws and human nature. Their transcendence lies in their appeal to this higher spiritual law, which also is sanctioned by the US Constitution that “all men were created equal . . .” Therefore, slavery, even if it is legal and the law of the land, is unjust and must be abolished. Accordingly, Thoreau warned against the arbitrary unjust authority of the state. In terms of the relationship between the individual and the state, in *Civil Disobedience*, he wrote: “If the injustice is of a nature that requires you to be the agent of the injustice, then I say break the law, let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine . . .” Thus, if the law is wrong, as in the case of slavery, then he says we must refuse to obey it. In his own life, the economic system that he resisted supported and financed slavery and profited from it. Further, he directed his critiques toward those merchants of slavery who benefited from this law and consequently also attacked capitalism as an economic system that supported slavery. Overall, Thoreau’s indictment of capitalism was moral. He was attacking the lack of virtue among those who supported capitalism²².

It is clear that Thoreau and Brown acted on their principles and that their approach is applied transcendentalism because they united theory with practice. However, Thoreau was different from Brown because his revolution was an individual initiative based on nonviolence and noncooperation with the economic system that supported and benefited

²⁰ Thoreau celebrated the primitive and simple over the complex and cultural. Human culture is decadence that leads us away from simple and satisfying nature. Further, culture is artificial and deforms nature. He championed nature over culture and in *Walden*, said that one should develop intellect by observation (nature versus civilization).

²¹ In addition to occupying the natural realm, we occupy what Kant calls “the intelligible realm.” In this realm, we account for events not by physical causes but by examining reasons. We understand the course of action taken in the intelligible realm by understanding the reasons that guide the action (Guyer, ed., *Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: Critical Essays*, 1998). Thus, the bifurcation between the phenomena and noumena as well as reason and understanding is stated in *Walden* as follows: “we no longer camp as far a night but have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven” (47). This means that we have focused on the phenomena and forgotten the spiritual.

²² Meyer, Michael. *Several More Lives to Live: Thoreau’s Politics*.

from slavery²³.

The Appeal to Natural Rights: Applications

Socialism in America

Socialism in America was not Marxism²⁴, but rather it grew in the American context.

It had a moral base and was based on religious socialism that emphasized empathy, charity, altruism, and human connectedness. It understands human needs and preserves human dignity. Further, it appeals to a higher justice that transcends reasonable laissez-faire capitalism. In this context, in *Looking Backward*, Edward Bellamy explained that man is not a creature of his environment, and William Graham Sumner (an American social Darwinist) argued that man is a creator of his environment: “there [is not] any other man in the world who is to blame for the fact that I am poor?” (Sumner, *Earth Hunger and Other Essays*, 357). Bellamy agreed with this argument, but not in the crude sense that those who do not succeed have earned their station in life. Although Sumner saw the Darwinian struggle in society at the level of the individual (each person creates his own environment in the jungle), Bellamy saw survival as taking place collectively. In other words, society as a whole is the environment of which human beings collectively are the creator. Thus, for Bellamy, the key concept is cooperation and not competition. This is the means for survival.

Meanwhile, in competition, Bellamy saw division rather than solidarity. It carries the message that the rich segment of society think that they happen to be on the top because they are the fittest, and the poor are struggling at the bottom because they are unfit and deserve what they get. Therefore, Bellamy considered Sumner’s system to be inherently wrong because with this division of society comes conflict, strikes, and revolution (which are all taboo for Bellamy). On the other hand, cooperation brings the two camps together. It rules out the phenomenon of unemployment or underemployment that creates the “downtrodden” class who “live in a wretched condition...[and] their lives border on the inhuman, and [who] suffer physically and morally as a result” (qtd in Ekirch 69).

²³ Emerson was Thoreau’s mentor, and he was the prophet of transcendentalism. He believed in liberty under the law. However, he does not approve of Thoreau’s (and certainly Brown’s) radicalism. He condemned Thoreau’s actions as “mean and skulking and in a very bad taste.” Emerson said that we must not defy the law, but that maybe it should be changed, especially when it approves of slavery and the system sanctions this act. Thus, while the system may be wrong, we should not consequently jeopardize our wellbeing (Schlesinger, Arthur M., Jr. *The American as Reformer*).

²⁴ Marxism. Karl Marx, as both an atheist and a materialist, denies the existence of anything noumenal. All there is for him is the phenomena, the physical matter. He denies the existence of anything beyond the phenomenon. Marx’s system, in a Kantian sense, operates only in the world of the phenomenon. For Marx, the base or system of society is the economic means and modes of production, upon that rest the political, social, and intellectual superstructure. Society works because all of society is created by economic forces, the base or structure of society, what he calls the economic means and modes of production (i.e. economic structure, feudal, capitalistic, or otherwise). For Marx, those economic forces determine everything else. Philosophy, religion, and aesthetics: all are determined by economic and socioeconomic forces. For Marx, meaning starts with the physical, with the base, and moves upwards toward philosophy and aesthetics. In contrast, in American socialism, meaning starts from the top, with the higher law of justice and human natural rights, and moves downwards to aesthetics, politics, and philosophy. For Marx, thoughts flow upward from the base; ideology, art, and consciousness are all determined by economic forces and can never be independent of them. Marx claims the economic reality people live in creates ideas and a system of beliefs. The American idea contends that human ideas create historical forces, but Marx sees the historical forces as the origin of human ideas. So, for Marx, art has no separate existence, no inherent meaning that can transcend the economic milieu. Accordingly, in the Marxist system, art loses its transcendent status because if it is unable to break free from sociopolitical forces, then it cannot hope to express truth. For Marx, art is also a product of a certain economic structure, means, and modes of economic production. The perspective on art considered in American socialism is that art is transcendent. It is eternal and touches on absolute truth. Art in the Marxist system cannot be so. For Marx, art is just like a machine in that it is a mere creation. It is in this sense a cultural product; it is no longer transcendent (something that encapsulates ideas). In the Marxist system, art is no longer timeless. It is no longer for all time. It is only for its age; it is only a product of its author’s socioeconomic milieu.

Additionally, it prevents the phenomenon of the “forgotten man” by equalizing the actual conditions of all men and also rules out the selfish individualism promulgated by Sumner’s idea that the only duty of “every man and woman [is] to take care of his or herself” (Sumner *Earth-Hunger and Other Essays* 351). Further, it does not use the wage concept as a failed system of measurement associated with competition. Finally, it guarantees a comfortable living.

To clarify the difference between the two aforementioned systems, Bellamy offered a metaphor: In nineteenth-century society, one holds the umbrella “over himself and his wife...giving his neighbors the drippings.” In Boston, in the year 2000, instead of putting up “three hundred thousand umbrellas [during the rain] over as many heads . . . [we] put up one umbrella over all the heads.” This conveys his utopian vision, which he considers to be possible growth.

Overall, Bellamy’s vision shows a level of maturity that goes beyond the conflicts of strikes and revolution as well as the struggles of competition. It also offers a sense of generosity derived from religion. His response to the argument that Jesus’ observation that “the poor ye have always with you” was as follows:

Somewhere else, I believe Christ tells his disciples that two duties sum up all the law and the prophets: one being to love God wholly, the other to love one’s neighbor as one’s self. Now, how long do you think, if everybody loved his neighbor as himself, there would be left any who were poorer than his neighbor? . . . if there is any such thing as blasphemy, it surely consists in quoting the great apostle of human brotherhood against the abolition of poverty (Bellamy Talks on Nationalism 65-66).

Thus, socialism in America is organic and in an organic community. It is derived and supported by a higher law, which was religious teachings in this case. The social gospel movement, for example, was a response against social Darwinism, a cutthroat capitalist competition in which the strong always prevail. The social gospel movement took the position that its job was to defend the weak. They said that we have to do what Jesus did, and he was most attentive to the ones who are weakest and neediest and most suffering in the world.

Josiah Strong said that it is true that there is a Darwinian competitive world, but that does not mean that we have to stand helpless before it. There are all kinds of ways in which we can guide evolution through benign paths. Further, he noted that in nature itself, there are plenty of examples of cooperation: the bees cooperate with each other, and the cattle too live happily together. Thus, we have to be more like the bees and cattle, and together we will bring our society forward (Sydney Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, Vol. II.).

Walter Rauschenbusch was one of the central characters of the movement. He wrote a book titled *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, in which he made the point that we should stop thinking about salvation as something for the individual. It is not just a matter concerning the individual souls that have to be saved one by one but a collective matter involving the interest of society as a whole. Overall, salvation is something to be achieved by social means; hence, American socialism is organic socialism (Carter, *The Spiritual Crisis of the Gilded Age*).

Eugene Debs, the man who ran for president on the socialist ticket in 1921 (and got almost a million votes), wrote a biography of Jesus as a socialist and a working man in *Jesus, the Supreme Leader* in 1914.²⁵ To sum up, unlike in Europe, in which socialism had a very strongly anticlerical, anti-religious flavor, in America, socialism had a much more Christian quality; thus, it was religious socialism. Specifically, socialism in America was interested in redefining the idea of salvation as being one that occurs collectively. It emphasized the collective over the individual, and its ideal was the transformation of society from competing individuals into a cooperative spiritual society (J.P. Diggins, *The Rise and Fall*

²⁵ Clearly, all these people read the Bible selectively for evidence that substantiated their views.

of the American Left).

Meanwhile, Orestes Brownson (a socialist and a member of the transcendentalist circle of Concord) noted that wage slavery is comparable to chattel slavery and appealed to a higher law for justice. To illustrate, Brownson wrote an article in 1840 titled “The Laboring Classes,” in which he expressed deep empathy for the working poor. In this article, he systematically criticized capitalism as a system of oppression of the laboring classes: “Our business is to emancipate the proletariat, as the past emancipated the slaves.” Specifically, this emancipation was the system that could be used to establish “equality between man and man, which God has established between the rights of one and those of another.” Without economic equality, Brownson contended, there could be no political or social equality. According to him, the class division was simple: the haves and the have-nots, the nonworking managerial/owner class, and the proletariats. Consequently, he wrote the following: “all over the world, this fact stares us in the face. . . the working man is poor and depressed, while a large portion of the nonworking men, in the sense that we now use the term, are wealthy.” He referred to the managerial class as capitalists who exploit workers by not paying them the full value of their labor. Specifically, Brownson found that owners live parasitically on the misery of the workers and siphon the value the workers create:

The man who employs them, and for whom they are toiling as so many slaves, is one of our city nabobs, reveling in luxury; or he is a member of our legislature, enacting laws to put money in his own pocket; or he is a member of Congress, contending for a high Tariff to tax the poor for the benefit of the rich . . . Man who employs them to make shirts, trousers, etc. [and] grows rich on their labors. He is one of our respectable citizens, perhaps is praised in the newspapers for his liberal donations to some charitable institution. He passes among us as a pattern of morality, and is honored as a worthy CHRISTIAN.

So, as detailed above, society honors and rewards the managerial classes, while the proletariats “live in wretched conditions” and “their lives border on the inhuman, and they suffer physically and morally as a result.” With their wages, Brownson noted, workers cannot live comfortably and “if any, by their wages acquire a competence.” Additionally, he went on to note the following: “Factory laborers work without becoming one whit better off than when they commenced labor. They are emptied. At best they break even.” In this context, he noted that they are trapped in a sort of wage slavery and compared it to chattel slavery. In other words, when a worker is a slave to his wages, he has to continue to work because that is how he can make the bare minimum to survive. In fact, Brownson took it even further and said that chattel slaves were even in a better position than wage slaves: “In regard to labor two systems obtain; [one] that of slave labor, the other [that] of free labor.

Of the two, the first is, in our judgment, except so far as feelings are concerned, decidedly the least oppressive.” This is, Brownson contended, because slaves are well taken care of, provided for, get medical attention, are well fed, and get raiment. He further explained that because slaves are property, they are taken care of and protected. Slave owners protected their property. On the other hand, capitalists do not have to protect their property. In this context, Brownson noted that wage slaves assume the cost of their upkeep and do not receive enough funds to manage it. If something happens to them at work, such as an injury or loss of body part, they are not given the needed medical assistance. They are simply out of work as they are used up, and someone else is hired to take their position. Although free, they are denied economic freedom and security. However, chattel slaves did have economic security. However, both forms of slavery lead to moral deprivation, according to Brownson, and, the only way out is to over-throw the institution of oppression²⁶.

There are many intellectuals who saw the economy as the core of social reality and spoke out against the injustice of the status quo where workers (the have-nots) are being exploited

²⁶ Gregory Butler, *In Search of the American Spirit: The Political Thought of Orestes Brownson*.

by those who own the means of productions (the haves). In this context, Debs said²⁷:

We are engaged today in a class war; and why? For the simple reason that in the evolution of the capitalist system in which we live, society has been mainly divided into two economic classes—a small class of capitalists who own the tools with which work is done and wealth is produced, and a great mass of workers who are compelled to use those tools²⁸. (427)

Thus, Debs reiterated Brownson's idea that workers do not get the value of what they produce: "A fair day's pay for a fair day's work. What is that? A fair day's pay for a fair day's work is all the working man produces. I want all I produce by my labor. It's mine. None of it belongs to the capitalist. None of it belongs to the owner" (428). Moreover, under the capitalist system, workers are nothing but tools to create wealth for others, and they receive enough compensation for their work to keep them working. Wages are used to maintain their standard of living and for them to reproduce to create more workers. Further Debs went on to say the following:

The employer has the economic power to appropriate to himself, as a capitalist, what produced by the social labour of the working class. This accounts for the fact that the capitalist becomes fabulously rich; lives in a palace where there is music, and singing, and dancing; and where there is luxury in all climes, while the working men who do the work and produce the wealth endure the probation and make the sacrifices of health, limb, and life, remain in a wretched state of poverty and dependence (429).

Thus, self-sacrifice is for the workers, and the capitalist asks the workers to do so for the sake of progress, while they live in luxury. Consequently, Debs saw capitalism as hypocritical, as it denied liberty and equality for all with capitalists controlling the destiny of the workers.

Accordingly, Debs observed that the workers live in a state of false consciousness, as they do not know that they are being exploited. They do not understand that the system is oppressing them and keeping them down. They are unaware because they think that they are getting their fair due. Finally, they accept the prevailing public opinion, which is a "reflection of the interests of the capitalist class," as Debs noted. He then emphasized that the working class does not realize that their wretchedness and inequality are not natural and that it is the result of their exploited conditions. Debs, therefore, thought that the workers have to be educated about their conditions to awaken them and take them out of their complacency to true realization. To that effect, Debs wrote as follows:

It is sometimes necessary that we offend you and even shock you, that you may understand we are your friends and not your enemies . . . whatever might be said of the ignorant, barbarous past, there is no excuses for poverty today . . . you can change this condition—not tomorrow; not next week, not next year, but in the meantime, the next thing to changing it is making up your mind that it shall be changed. It is, indeed, the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed who saw these ideas to be liberating, in which in a sense they escape the terror of their lives by embracing this socialist idea of yet to come a time of peace and of plenty (440).

As previously noted, the phenomenal world is what is, and the noumenal world is what ought to be. In this context, the appeal of the socialist is to the higher law as well as natural human rights and human justice, equality, and dignity, which is against the positive state law that supports the exploitative laissez-faire capitalist system and capitalists who profit from the system.

²⁷ Several leading socialists, including, Eugene Debs, founded the Socialist Party of America in 1901. They adopted a very loose definition of socialism and rejected the Marxist idea of class struggle. By 1912, the largest selling weekly socialist newspaper in the United States was "Appeal to Reason." In the previous pages, I stressed that communism in America was not Marxism but was home grown out of the unique circumstances in the American context, much like transcendentalism and pragmatism*[Endnote].

²⁸ Eugene Victor Debs, Bruce Rogers, Stephen Marion Reynolds. *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches*, 1908

The Civil Rights Movement and the Appeal to Justice

The idea of transcendentalism in its natural law form continued in the twentieth century. It did so under the banner of moralism, the sense of a common cause of justice as well as an open hand of trust extended to find a moral equivalent to war and a way to freedom that does not involve violence. In *Stride toward Freedom*, Martin Luther King Jr. also emphasized the eternal higher and noumenal truth. He noted that people can be set free not by laws or statutes but rather by the truth. In saying “the truth shall set you free,” he highlighted that the way of truth is unity and inclusiveness. Specifically, this quote means that you will be free from the sins of separateness and segregation and that the truth of human unity will ultimately prevail and save us, black and white, from the illusion of separateness and the untruth of racial segregation. It will also liberate us from the sense of separateness to see the truth of the unity of the community and in diversity. In King’s view, sin is separation, and this means beings separated from one another. The truth is that we are part of a common unity. Thus, King championed not liberty under law but civil disobedience and nonviolent protest against unjust law²⁹.

King also adopted the religious teachings of breaking laws and going to prison for it. And in doing so, he broke unjust positive laws when it contradicted the higher, eternal laws. In agreement with Thoreau’s and certainly John Brown’s worldview, King wrote the following in the section, “Letters from a Birmingham Jail” in the aforementioned book—

One may well ask: ‘How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?’ The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that “an unjust law is no law at all”. Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a manmade code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an “I it” relationship for an “I thou” relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful.

He thus appealed to the constitution that states that all men are created equal. It is clear here that the notion of applied transcendentalism, which is an appeal to a higher truth, was prevalent throughout the 20th century. It is also evident in the case of the prominent leader of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s as shown above.

Further, in his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King Jr. relied heavily on the natural law tradition to make his case against racial prejudice. Specifically, his statement that “a just law is a manmade code that squares with the moral law or the law of God” and that “an unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law” resonates with transcendentalist notion of higher justice, that the unjust law is a human law that contradicts the eternal and higher law of God.

Moreover, Martin Luther King Jr. also cited Thoreau’s influence on his own particular brand of civil rights movement in the 1960s. Here, King argued that although one considers

²⁹ Robert P. George. *Natural Law Theory*

himself a law-abiding person, there are moments that could arise in a lifetime when it is going to be more important to break a law to establish wider and more valuable principles than it was to continue to exist within the confines of civil society, that the unjust law is a human law that contradicts the eternal and higher law. And so, in a sense, King said that they, black people in America, have fundamental humanity that must be respected³⁰.

Overall, Martin Luther King Jr. resurrected natural law doctrine and applied it ingeniously to race relations in the United States. Further, this doctrine was also used by the founding fathers in the constitution of the United States when they said that “all men are created equal . . .” King used these ideas to argue against racism, as Antigone did when she approached the Greek tyrant Creon and said that she is obeying a natural, eternal and higher law than that of Creon. Thus, it can be concluded that there is a moral, higher law that, if obeyed, uplifts and gives us sustenance in a time of terror and turmoil. It is also the law that had to be applied against slavery and the practice of segregation. This is the essence of applied transcendentalism.

Echoes of Transcendentalism in Art in the early 20th Century Leftist Worldview

In the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Martin Luther King Jr. founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the sole purpose of which was to combat the continuation of Jim Crow laws and segregation, thus seeking greater inclusion of blacks in American life. Therefore, King appealed to higher principles. Toward the end of his life, he also started a theory of socialism. In this context, in *Why America Needs Socialism*, G.S. Griffin noted that King started to realize that the problem with American society was not racism. Specifically, he saw that racism was just a symptom of poverty and economic inequality.

Michael Gold, a leftist intellectual and editor of the *New Masses*³¹, also before King viewed separation and segregation are sins, and his call was for unity, inclusivity, and collectiveness. For Gold, as there is racial segregation, there is economic segregation, and as there was slavery, there is wage slavery. His position was the belief in literature as a transforming force of social reality and that it can change the course of history. However, the question is, can literature actually transform social reality and change the course of history? The answer is an emphatic yes. For example, in 1862, when Harriet Beecher Stow visited the White House, President Abraham Lincoln said to her, “So this is the little lady who [wrote the book that] made this big war” (49)³². The book he referred to was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was a bestseller novel in the 19th century and probably the first American book to sell over a million copies. This book put a human face on the institution of slavery and made people around the world recognize the horrors of slavery. In total, 300,000 copies were sold in the one year after it was published in 1852. This is one of the instances where it can be said that art and life are inseparable. Thus, publishing books changes history and not just literary history, as this book helped to trigger the Civil War and, in a sense, brought a kind of process of thinking about the impossibility of the conditions in the United States—slavery in this case—to a culmination.

In a Kantian sense, art and literature portray the noumenal sides of life. In literature, sentimentalism is the point as emotions come first and reason always follows. Here, it should be noted that emotions are what guide and should guide our conduct, so there is no apology on the part of sentimentalism for touching our heart, which is the purpose of art that also includes: emotion, intuition, and a visceral sense of moral closeness and connectedness between us and our fellow humans.³³

³⁰ Martin Luther King Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in *Why We can’t Wait*. New York. Harper and Row, 1964, pp 76, 82.

³¹ A 1930s American leftist literary magazine.

³² Barbara A. White. *Visits With Lincoln Abolitionists Meet The President at the White House*, 2011

³³ Tompkins. *Sensational Designs The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (1986).

Therefore, art, which most fully expresses and encapsulates truth, is transcendent. It is eternal and timeless and lies outside any given historical period. Within such art, meaning is ever imminent in that meaning exists in the work of art, and yet its final point of reference lies above the physical constraints of time and space. In other words, the final function of art and of all language itself is to point back to meaning. Thus, art is a means to a higher end to finally direct us back to meaning. In the Kantian sense, art points to a higher kind of reality (just not the scientific and pragmatic meaning of reality). Specifically, transcendent art points back to some higher meaning that we want to get a hold of. Therefore, this kind of art expresses itself through binaries—a set of two related terms in which the first term, which is perceived to be closer to the origin (the noumena), is privileged over the second. However, the second term is always seen as a falling away from the first. An example of this is the platonic “world of being” versus the “world of becoming,” which refer to the eternal and unchanging versus the world of constant change. As such, according to Plato, the idea or form is given precedence over the image, imitation, or mimesis as well as the body and soul. In other words, that which is closer to perfection and to the eternal and which is unchanging is privileged over that which alters or decays. Here, it is clear that transcendent literature is that which appeals to the higher truth, which looks up to those eternal, unchanging, and universal truths and tries to implement them in the world of the phenomena.³⁴

In conclusion, Gold believed in change through literature. Literature in the 1930s was to teach, educate, and awaken the masses to their human rights, dignity, and natural rights as well as the fact that they should demand their rights. Thus, literature does matter as it develops empathy and accesses a repository for cultural and social history. Through its very fictionality, it provides a kind of truth that William Faulkner calls “the truth of the human heart, the old universal truth . . . love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.”³⁵ Additionally, literature can change the individual and their character as well as it can change the larger collective. The classic example of literature having a real-world impact is (as discussed above) Harriet Beecher Stowe’s abolitionist novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. It places slavery within the tradition of the sentimental novel, eliciting tears from readers as it creates a deep identification with characters who are caught up in the system of slavery as slaves, free blacks, or Southern whites with abolitionist opinions. At the time, this novel was so popular, and second only to the Bible. It is certainly a strong piece of evidence in support of the argument that literature does matter and can change the course of history.

Moreover, Gold noted that in the 20th century, we had a different form of slavery, which was economic slavery, and his appeal was to the collective self; it is the higher truth for him. For Gold, the unity of the people, not just the notion of the individual, is the notion that the collective can be a person. Gold in a sense is transcendence, he understood life in terms of moral duty, not in terms of desires. the sense of duty and purpose that goes beyond mere self-interest - some kind of purpose. Further, Gold aligned his motive with that of Thoreau’s and Brown’s, which is the eternal principle of justice. Here, it should be noted that in all their writings (and certainly actions), they had the ability to deliberate at the level of principle; that deliberative function is essential to the moral virtue which motivated their actions.

Mike Gold and John Brown

³⁴ That is not to say which is right and which is wrong, but this is a different way of looking at art, of looking at ourselves, and of looking at the nature of reality.

³⁵ William Faulkner’s Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature

Michael Gold, a 20th century writer and intellectual, was a major figure of 1930s leftist literature. Through the *New Masses* (a Leftist literary magazine), he became the voice of the leftist literary movement. He had an audience of mostly young writers, upon whom he had the kind of effect that could only come from a man who was absolutely authentic and impeccably sincere.

Gold was influenced by John Brown's humane principles and his life's project and thus wrote a book entitled *Life of John Brown: Centennial of His Execution*.³⁶ Here, he narrated what has been summarized above of the life of John Brown in detail. Gold spoke with evident admiration about the righteousness of Brown's cause and then aligned his cause to that of John Brown—namely the liberation of the human spirit and dignity of man. He began the book with the evocation that “John Brown's life is a grand, simple epic that should inspire one to heroism” (3). He also compares Brown to the figure of Jesus and Socrates, he then went on to say: “there are men who have proved their superiority in the pettiness of life, and who seem almost divine. John Brown is one of them . . . [he] was the greatest man the common people of America have yet produced” (3). For Gold, Brown was the ultimate transcendent figure who devoted his life to a higher as well as “great and pure cause” (3). He saw him as a transformative figure just like Jesus and Socrates. In addition, Gold claimed Brown's story to be the archetypal story for those who are seeking justice and to get rid of oppression: “It is the story of thousands of men living in America now. . . . John brown is still in prison in America; yes, and he has been hung and shot down a hundred times since his first death. For his soul is marching on; it is the soul of liberty and Justice, which cannot die, or be suppressed” (4).

In the preface, Gold stated that the transcendent cause that moved Brown to action against chattel slavery is the same higher cause that is moving him to action against wage slavery. He then went on to claim that Brown was a socialist:

John Brown saw much farther than his own times. He knew that there were many other things wrong with the social system in America besides slavery. There are plain indications here . . . that Brown was one of those early American radicals, such as Horace Greeley, Albert Brisbane, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others, who felt that the abolition of slavery was only the first step toward a free America. Wendell Phillips, for instance, one of this abolitionist band, became after the civil war one of the leading champions of the rights of workingmen in their battle against bad working conditions (37).

Next, Gold mentioned the fact that John Brown was executed for the crime of attacking slavery: “Slavery has become respectable, while freedom is considered the mad dream of a fanatic . . . to attack slavery was to attack the constitution, the church, the government, and the institution of private property” (5,8). He then noted that it is only the savior figure who resists injustice (in both forms chattel and economic) because he “feels the suffering and injustice of another as his own” (9). To that effect, Gold wrote, “To attack respectability has always been the crime of the saviors, and respectability is the cross on which they are forever hung” (8). Thus, he saw Brown's actions as right because they were against unjust laws. In other words, he opposed the laws of the land and appealed to a higher law of ultimate justice. Here, one can see that Gold appealed to the same higher law and opposed the laws that only helped exploit the masses, who are the wage slaves. Gold wrote the following on what Brown was asked when he was on trial:

“Gold found resonance in Brown's cause to free the slaves in his own cause of fighting for the rights of the oppressed and downtrodden in the 1930s. Gold wrote to show clearly the previously mentioned case of Antigone, who broke the posited law of Creon and followed the higher and eternal law, as also resonating with Brown's cause:

“Had I taken up Arms in behalf of the rich, the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends, or any of their class, every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than of punishment.

³⁶ Gold, Mike. *Life of John Brown: Centennial of his Execution*. Roving Eye Press. New York. 1960.

But this court acknowledges the validity of the law of God. I see a book kissed here which is the Bible, and which teaches me that all things that I would have men do unto me, so must I do unto them. I endeavored to act up to that instruction. I fought for the poor; and I say it was right, for they are as good as any of you; God is no respecter of persons . . . I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong, but right.” Until Brown utters the statement that clearly indicates the transcendence of his cause: “Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children, and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done.” (Gold, *Life of John Brown*, 56).

In this context, Gold then added that Brown was convinced that his death was necessary for the cause. Like Socrates, he also forbade his friends from trying to rescue him and said: “I am worth now infinitely more to die, than to live” (57). Gold took Brown’s last call for action—“I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood” (57)—to heart and being inspired by it, tried to inspire the masses to take action to change the status quo.

To conclude, both Mike Gold and John Brown are seen as noble heroes of a higher cause, as they both chose social activism to abolish an unjust law. This higher cause endows a sense of how the transcendentalist way of thinking could enter into the socialism that developed in the American context. Further, Gold and Brown’s transcendentalism originates in their appeal to a higher truth and in their willingness to devote their lives to resisting unjust laws.

Transcendental Resonance in the 1930s

In the 1930s, during the Great Depression³⁷, Gold followed the cause of John Brown but used a different weapon, following the principle that the pen is mightier than the sword. He led a group of young writers, and asked many to move left into a form of literature that is not for the elite but for the masses and a form of writing that is now known as literary realism. This was art not for art’s sake but as a weapon and an educational tool to awaken the masses and shake them out of their complicity, the art that speaks directly to the proletariat³⁸ and “encourage[s] anything that would have a moral tendency” (Gold *Life of John Brown* 15). Using Brown’s actions as comparable to the American revolutionaries against England and the comparison to Jesus (a figure who transformed the world as

³⁷ This is the era in which the industrial economy of capitalism really matured. It was transformed from the age of familial entrepreneurship where most industrial manufacturing and commercial enterprises were often family-run or partnerships between a limited number of people. The 20th century gave rise to corporate systems of organization structure, which were far more centralized and with much greater economic power. WWI was in fact one of the most bloody crevasses in human history—a devastating struggle that dragged on for four long years—and the eventual peace resolved none of the fundamental issues that caused it despite the patriotic commitments rallied by the state propaganda. The result of this was the ever-growing disillusionment with parliamentary democracy, which pursues a senseless struggle that resulted in mass debt for no legitimate purpose. This certainly attributed to the rise of authoritarian, totalitarian regimes in the aftermath of the war, such as those in the very heart of Europe: Spain and Italy became fascist, Russia was seized by the revolutionary Bolsheviks, and Germany succumbed to the domination of Adolf Hitler’s national socialist party. During their respective times in power, Stalin and Hitler perpetrated mass murder on an unimaginable scale. At this time, the Great Depression had begun and later ended with WW2, which in some ways was a resumption of the WWI, which culminated in the Red Scare in the United States (Eric Hobsbawm. *The Age of Extremes: 1914-1991*).

³⁸ Gold believed that literature can educate the working class, as he wrote in his *Life of John Brown*: “Working-class Americans, and they are the majority of the nation, did not go to the high schools and universities. Neither did John Brown. But they can read history, as he did . . . and they can study and make themselves proficient in some field, as he made a surveyor of himself by home study . . . Great men do not need to own a college diploma; they teach themselves, they are taught by life” (13).

Brown's actions ultimately changed American history), Gold compared workers of his time to slaves. As Brown ended slavery in America, Gold saw that the ultimate goal of literature in the 1930s was to educate the masses to awaken them to their plight and the injustice that they unwillingly endure. In this manner, according to Gold, slavery still exist in America but was just metamorphosed into another form. As Eugene Debs did before him, Gold saw that as wage slavery. Therefore, his objective was to unify the masses.

Moreover, the dignity and the good of the collective, not the individual, is the ultimate goal of socialism. Thus, it is clear in Gold's work that his call for spiritual unity transcended race and class. He understood that the way out of this dehumanization was not through greater polarization but through the transcendence of it. With this realization, the shift became from exclusivity to inclusivity of all races, classes, and genders as well as religious beliefs.

Conclusion

The 1930s leftist movement promoted an intellectual transition toward widespread confidence in the possibility of social reform. Gold, among others, viewed himself as one of the writers who wanted to change the world and the status quo by using social criticism and public commentary to alter public opinion. This was the activist theme of 1930s writers and intellectuals. They wrote plays, poems, journalism, novels, and history books in many different literary genres. Their writings were related to the world in which they actually lived (social realism), all of which could be used to influence public opinion to reform and restructure society. Therefore, Gold embodied the notion of the intellectual as a social critic because he believed that writings could reshape social and cultural reality, promote the education of the masses as well as help create a new cultural sensibility and the image of the social hero; it could actually change the world.

As it has become clear by now that American socialism in the 1930s recognized the primacy of the collective, that it recognized merit and was aware that the merits of others do in fact come before one's self-interest. As such, it has become clear that in the 1930s socialist literature, the collective "we" (not the individual) is transcendental. Proletarian literature also championed the truly free individual, who acts without the cravings of possessiveness and finds inner peace by being freed from the delusion of the capitalist worldview. Just as for Emerson, understanding is the faculty enabling a person to reach a higher level of consciousness, the proletariat hero realizes that his or her individual being is at one with the collective. This is undertaken through awakening, self-knowledge, and empathy. In addition, he/she understand that his or her self is at one with all selves. And in this awareness of unity with all, comes spiritual liberation. Thus, the freest person is the person who sees all human beings in himself and himself in all human beings, free from the sense of alienation from others, from divisiveness, as well as from fear and anxiety (the psychological burden, which is bred from alienation and divisiveness). In other words, the collective self-connotes the transcendentalist theme that when we understand harmony and unity with others and when we are in tune with ultimate reality, comes a dispelling of fear. This is the result of greater vision and the light of a kind of enlightenment that can show us the ultimate reality, which is the noumenal realm of the world of being in the platonic sense. Hence, in a spiritual moral sense, liberation means, the control over oneself, one's soul and that comes through self-knowledge and from knowledge of the unity of beings around us. That is to say, we are all part of life on this planet and that we are all a part of one another. Thus, non-conformity, as put forward by Emerson, is unity in diversity that frees us from the illusions that divide us.

However, nonconformity does not imply going against the grain but rather a call to being free. Moreover, freedom is the foundational impulse of Americanism. However, Plato defined freedom not as a license but as acting with responsibility, self-control, and

enlightenment and in a way that is consistent with duty and not contrary to it³⁹. A similar struggle for inner freedom comes out of the quest for self-discovery, a quest which is initially inspired by the common fear of personal inadequacy caused by racism. This is because the effects of injustice and humiliation have no boundaries.

As such, leftist storytelling follows a transcendental paradigm in a sense, which is an archetypal quest in its essence: the quintessential journey of the hero that may begin in fear and insecurity but can end in the discovery of truth—the sort of truth that can set them free. The idea presented in a larger sense is the idea of a journey or a pilgrimage to truth. For example, this story is clearly seen in *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Native Son*, and *Jews Without Money*, among many others.

Moreover, for the 1930s socialist writers, there was no art for art's sake, by which I mean that art has self-subsistence and an end in itself with no other purpose. For them, the purpose of art was to unify the masses and create a collective whole as well as to educate and enlighten. The proletariat writer's transcendence is in their purpose of using art to create a collective personhood, an organic whole in which the whole not only contains each part but each part contains the whole. Based on this idea, the collectivist theory is generated, which is the idea that society as a whole and not the individual is the unit of moral value. Consequently, they sought to transform the status quo in terms of the ethics of what ought to be and not what is.

In addition, the proletariat writer demonstrated the Kantian morality of not working toward getting “what I want” but rather “what I ought to do.” In this context, Kant viewed morality as based on the a priori principle (in advance of experiences or prior to all experiences) and higher laws that are not posited laws. Thus, the question of morality for the leftist writers' project, one might argue, was Kantian. In this context, “What I ought to do?” is morality based on duty. It includes doing what one ought to even if it goes against one's inclinations. It is about following the moral law simply because it is moral. In the case of these writers, they did what they ought to for the good of the people.

Accordingly, a new moral code is created at the level of the individual. Here, morality is not about happiness but about duty. Ethics and morality are simply about what ought to be done, doing one's duty whether one likes it or not, whether it makes one happy or not, and whether the consequences are good or not. In other words, you simply do what you ought to do. Ultimately, transcendence refers to following this moral law.

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