Introduction

*Moby-Dick* (1851) begins with a provocative question and some advice on how to approach it. When Ishmael wonders, “Who aint a slave?” he asks his readers to ponder the subject “either in a physical or metaphysical point of view,” thereby announcing a dialectic that governs much of the book. The *Pequod* is an American ship-of-state run by a tyrant who masters his multiracial crew. It is also a stage for speculative rhapsodies about freedom, fate, and the tragedy of being enslaved by the quest for truth. Just as the white whale can represent chattel bondage and the boundaries of human understanding, *Moby-Dick* treats slavery as a political and a philosophical crisis as Melville, like many of his peers, struggles to reconcile the two points of view. What were the social consequences of antebellum metaphysics? By what criteria and method should slavery be judged? Could philosophy settle the slavery controversy, or was it part of the problem? Such questions loomed over United States literature between 1830 and 1860 as the slavery crisis exposed the limits of national consensus and rational authority.

Among the antebellum thinkers who strained against such limits were Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Although these authors are rightly regarded as literary figures, all brought sophisticated philosophical arguments to the slavery debate. Poe derives a theory of slavery and racism from German and British romanticism. Stowe invokes sentimental philosophy in support of abolition, while Douglass agitates for similar ends in the logic of Scottish commonsense. The slavery crisis turned Melville toward the political philosophies of Machiavelli and Hobbes, and for Emerson the conflict both vexed and inspired his particular brand of transcendentalism. What all these authors have in common is that the slavery crisis forced them to face interrelated philosophical

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problems – skepticism, representation, subject/object dualism, the foundations of moral and political law. The slavery crisis thus brought new impetus to abiding intellectual quandaries, instantiating in tragic social experience the failure of rational authority. This breakdown would culminate with the Civil War, which proved to be unavoidable. But before it came, antebellum authors tried to mediate the slavery conflict not as disengaged minds or as prophets of postmodernism so much as writers participating in a history of ideas and their use.

Reconstructing their work requires attention to an array of overlapping contexts – the slavery debate in its manifold forms, antebellum philosophy (including metaphysics, moral philosophy, and political theory), the careers, sources, and writings of authors whose thinking shaped and was shaped by events leading toward the Civil War. To study these topics is to move among disciplines and ground textual interpretation in history. It is also to synthesize what seems to be a divided critical legacy. American romanticism, particularly transcendentalism, has long been linked with philosophy, while slavery and race are clearly important to a variety of antebellum literary works. There have been, however, no extended attempts to examine the period’s literature of slavery within philosophical contexts, to see how authors adapted and applied philosophy to the most demanding civic issue of their age. Some found that their speculative projects could not escape the vortex of the slavery debate. Others discovered that their inability to settle the conflict practically forced them to engage theoretical problems at the core of their liberal beliefs. That none of them reached a peaceful solution to the slavery crisis marks the shortcomings of their era’s philosophy and the scope of their ambitions.

To say that literature uses philosophy to intervene in politics is to invite a host of definitional questions, though the general tendency of this book is to complicate, not make, such distinctions. Richard Rorty pointed out decades ago that “philosophy does not have an essence, any more than do literature or politics,” a claim borne out in the antebellum period where disciplinary formations were often inchoate, where the slavery debate cut across multiple fields, and where enlightened thinkers attempted to bring all learning into coherence.\(^2\) It is true that antebellum novels, stories, poems, orations, and autobiographies are usually too anecdotal and improvisational for the logical rigor of analytic philosophy. Literature also

differs from political discourse if only in terms of genre and rhetorical occasion. However, the writers treated here are not bound by narrow traditions, for their productions are not so much shaped by abstract disciplinary forms as they are driven by cultural forces such as the slavery conflict. Indeed, one reason why their texts are so committed to philosophical and political questions is that the antebellum era could not agree upon frameworks for the rational discussion of slavery.

Alexis de Tocqueville was both right and wrong when he wrote in 1835, “Less attention . . . is paid to philosophy in the United States than in any other country of the civilized world.” Today, most philosophers pay little heed to antebellum America, and even some sympathetic intellectual historians find the period too derivative of the Scottish Enlightenment and too embroiled in provincial theological debates. Between Jonathan Edwards and the pragmatists, Emerson is the most likely figure of philosophical repute, and yet he remains too whimsical for more systematic thinkers. Who in the wide world of great ideas reads an antebellum book? Apologists point to constraining piety and scant institutional resources. As transatlantic observers, subsequent scholars, and antebellum writers themselves remarked, the dearth of an educated leisure class and a wealth of economic opportunity made the new nation a material culture governed by what Margaret Fuller deplored as a “love of utility.”

In this respect, however, philosophy mattered before the Civil War – even if its importance is best asserted not in the name of great ideas but under the aegis of cultural work, even if to do so is to accept what Adorno and Horkheimer (and more cheerfully, William James) call the “instrumental” ends of philosophy. Some antebellum commentators certainly objected to speculative hairsplitting, logic chopping, and skylarking. But in a country that prided itself on putting abstract ideals into practice, philosophy was vital to public life – from lyceums and moral philosophy courses, to sermons and moral philosophy pamphlets, to legal and political discussions that were closely allied with philosophy. What Emerson called

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“the philosophy of the street” was supposed to have practical value; and while philosophy was not equally available to all, neither was it restricted to privileged academics and romantics running through Concord. Though Thoreau wrote in *Walden* (1854), “[T]here never was and is not likely soon to be a nation of philosophers,” Richard Hildreth argued in a treatise on the political theory of abolitionism, “[I]n the present age, we are all growing to be philosophers.”6 From the perspective of a social history of ideas, the issue is not if philosophy mattered in antebellum United States culture but rather how it moved and was moved by the course of civic events.7

William E. Channing suggested as much when he wrote in 1835, “[S]lavery, regarded only in a philosophical light, . . . involves the gravest questions about human nature and society.”8 Whether whites could know the experience of slaves became a problem of intersubjectivity. Discussions of reform entailed debates over the will and the mystery of iniquity. Attempts to determine the rectitude of slavery could not logically prove first principles and led to struggles over contract theory, natural law, and definitions of humanity. Such conundrums were not new except that the antebellum era could not effectively defer them, especially after the Compromise of 1850 served chiefly to exacerbate tensions. The years before the Civil War witnessed the devastating irony that as the slavery conflict came to dominate intellectual life, America’s supposed empire of reason lacked philosophical clarity.

Poe, Stowe, Douglass, Melville, and Emerson had motive and opportunity to jump into the fray, though this does not explain why figures we


8 William E. Channing, “Slavery” (Boston: James Munroe, 1835), 8.
have learned to call literary theorize slavery as provocatively as they do. Perhaps, as Sacvan Bercovitch and Wai Chee Dimock suggest, literature is the “very domain of the incommensurate,” a type of writing that refuses to abide by totalized systems of thought. More specifically, romanticism, sentimentiality, and the black Atlantic play a role, for often their transatlantic transmission occurred along literary lines and their resistance to rationalism is powerfully evident in the American literature of slavery. Another reason why antebellum authors so creatively take up philosophy is that the slavery crisis eroded faith in the enlightened public sphere. The controversy was a wildly allusive, highly intertextual dialogue, but such discursive density only revealed the futility of deliberation. When Douglass marveled in 1852, “What point in the antislavery creed would you have me argue?” he played upon the widespread fear that there was little left to say. Paradoxically, such anxieties actually led to literary achievements. Obfuscation, banality, and feckless aggression do mar much of the slavery dialogue; and as in current discussions over, say, the death penalty and abortion, ideological claims were attacked and defended with almost ritualistic repetition. Nonetheless, some authors kept writing of slavery in desperate and compelling ways, striving to overcome or at least ascertain the limitations of the national debate. Their texts suggest that dramatic power rises when discursive strategies fail and that the elusive meanings of some works come not from the facile desire to obscure with willful ambiguities but rather from the frustrated drive to understand and be understood. When defending his inflammatory rhetoric, and using a figure that Moby-Dick would employ, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison described chattel bondage as (in part) a literary problem, “The whole scope of the English language is inadequate to describe the horrors and impieties of slavery . . . Canst thou draw out the leviathan, slavery, with a hook?” For some antebellum authors, the slavery crisis required, among other things, extraordinary words. That their writings speak in various registers demands no less from readers.


10 Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852), in My Bondage and My Freedom, in Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies (New York: Library of America, 1994), 432.

In the field of American intellectual history, the antebellum literature of slavery forms an uneasy transition between David Brion Davis’s *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution: 1770–1823* and Louis Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club*, which traces pragmatism to the Civil War.\(^{12}\) Poe, Stowe, Douglass, Melville, and Emerson show how slavery factored in the turbulent shift from the American Enlightenment’s rational confidence to the more self-conscious, skeptical modernity that the pragmatists helped to shape. In political theory and political philosophy, Paul Gilroy, Charles Mills, and Ivan Hannaford examine slavery, enlightenment, and race, depicting racism and chattel bondage as fundamental ideologies of modern Western thought.\(^ {13}\) A purpose here is to argue that antebellum writers actively and often insightfully interrogate the relationship of slavery and philosophy, even if their thinking does not always accord with current sensibilities. A less explicitly political perspective comes from the philosopher Stanley Cavell, who has shown that the best antebellum metaphysics appear in literary forms. Along with Cornel West, Cavell reveals the philosophical acuity of American transcendentalism by placing it between European romanticism and subsequent anti-foundational thought.\(^ {14}\) What follows shares an appreciation for the proleptic power of antebellum literature while including a broader selection of writers and more attention to social milieus.

Yet for all the welcome work in adjacent scholarly fields, the primary locus of reference for this book is the study of antebellum literature. Literary critics committed to philosophy seldom examine the slavery crisis, while those investigating chattel bondage and race tend more toward political contexts. As a result, the field has suffered from a problem of “double consciousness” – not exactly W. E. B. Du Bois’s Hegelian concept of “two warring ideals” but rather Emerson’s struggle with the

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disjunction between “Materialist” and “Idealist” ways of being in the world. Emerson’s loose usage of these terms is, to quote Lawrence Buell, “cavalier”; and his notion of double consciousness is capacious enough to encompass a number of dualisms. Most immediately, he points to a tension between Lockean empiricism and Kantian idealism, between a passive perception of the physical world and an active, constructivist view. Emerson also sets at odds the inductive methods of natural science and the a priori methods of metaphysics. But keeping in mind Bruce Kuklick’s point that nineteenth-century American philosophy is dominated by “idealism” (insofar as it tends to hold that “existence is essentially mental”), Emerson’s double consciousness additionally indicates a more general distinction between the material practices of politics and the abstract theories of philosophical idealism, between what Ishmael roughly calls the “physical” and “metaphysical.” In Emerson’s words, these two outlooks “diverge at every moment, and stand in wild contrast,” even as they offer in a diction that is simultaneously national and transcendental the promise of a coming and yet unrealized “fuller union.” Whether or not such a synthesis is possible is a main concern for Emerson and his contemporaries; and just as they struggled with double consciousness, generations of critics have been split not only over questions of canon but on methodological lines.

In 1867, Emerson remembered antebellum life and letters as a field of “divides,” “dissociation,” “severance,” and “detachment.” In the early twentieth century, George Santayana, Van Wyck Brooks, and D. H. Lawrence agreed, finding in American literature and culture an irreconcilable “double allegiance” to theoretical speculation and practical power.
F. O. Matthiessen’s definitive *American Renaissance* (1941) moved toward a fuller union by claiming a synthesis of romanticism and “the possibilities of democracy.” Yet in doing so Matthiessen built what Jay Grossman calls a literary–historical “fortress” that so narrowly conceives of political questions as to neglect such issues as slavery and race. Cold War scholars continued to emphasize the metaphysical strain of Matthiessen’s canon, setting the ecstatic transcendentalism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman against the speculative caveats of Hawthorne, Melville, and, less frequently, Dickinson and Poe. The possibilities of democracy did not go unnoticed, but most critics downplayed sociological factors, defining the genius of the American Renaissance over and against material discourses. Despite the rise of American studies and critics like C. L. R. James, writings about slavery, even from major figures, were considered minor works, while the shadow of blackness that cast itself over more canonical texts seemed less about chattel bondage and race and more about the psychology and theology of sin.

Then the Culture Wars came, bringing with them a kind of wild contrast. Famously, the American Renaissance became a flashpoint in the 1980s and beyond as feminist, multicultural, and New Americanist critics, often bolstered by theories of historical materialism, objected to the field’s exclusive canon and purportedly disengaged scholarship. To dwell on philosophy seemed to miss more pressing political points as Stowe, Douglass, Fuller, Harriet Jacobs, and others formed a new canon, while slavery and race came to the fore in a host of scholarly books. Older methodologies endured in the age of political criticism, but one reason and measure for the success of cultural studies in antebellum literature is that it discovered and continues to discover exciting synergies between the old canon and the new.

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At the start of the twenty-first century, it is clear that a range of antebellum writers treat political topics, including slavery. It turns out that much conversation is possible – that, for instance, Hawthorne and Thoreau talk about slavery with Fuller and Stowe; that Emerson, Douglass, Dickinson, and Jacobs converge on issues of freedom and self; that Poe, Melville, Whitman, and Martin Delany explore the dynamics of democracy and race. With race and slavery seeming to enter into every sphere of antebellum life, with diverse authors engaging in dramas of resistance and mutual influence, and with the sense that race, class, gender, and citizenship all variously inflect each other, sociological models that once seemed reductive have become more nuanced and expansive without ceding their original conceptual terms. The Culture Wars are not over in the study of antebellum literature but a kind of détente has been reached. During the middle third of the nineteenth century, a generous grouping of texts interact in a decidedly material idiom – one occasionally still lamented as the politicization of literature, one that continues in accusations of American Renaissance “ monoculturalism,” and one often celebrated in the name of diversity and cultural work.23

That said, some slow growing signs suggest that criticism committed to idealism is rising, and not simply in the manner of a scholarly pendulum tracking a well-worn arc. Just as the American Renaissance proved amenable to political interpretation, more recently canonized traditions appear increasingly open to philosophical inquiry. Such inquiry need not entail deconstruction, neo-Marxism, or psycholinguistics, which have for decades been projected back on nineteenth-century texts. The more historically minded can turn to ideas available at the time to invoke, for instance, Hobbes before Foucault, and Schelling instead of Lacan, and to view language not through Derrida but through someone like Thomas Reid. In this way, the literature of slavery can be read within philosophical history not to attenuate theory or cultural studies but rather to advance them through an effort of synthesis that does not exclude philosophy from the domain of politics and culture.

Already such work is underway within subfields that are often treated as discrete. Len Gougeon and Albert von Frank have shown how slavery was a fundamental concern of transcendentalism. Other scholars demonstrate how sentimental literature before the Civil War broadly calls on eighteenth-century moral philosophy when advocating social reforms.

Gilroy, Helen Thomas, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. show how black Atlantic writers test the limits of enlightenment when resisting slavery and racism, while Dimock, Brook Thomas, and Eric Sundquist explore the relation of antebellum literature and law. Perhaps closest to the work at hand is Gregg Crane’s recent (and excellent) book that reads nineteenth-century American literature in terms of race and higher law. Sharing Crane’s sense that the slavery crisis demanded new and often proto-pragmatist ways of establishing moral and rational consensus, this book explores how romantic, sentimental, and black Atlantic literatures all work with varying degrees of doubt within and against philosophical traditions.

In the crucible of the slavery crisis some standard distinctions do not easily hold, though the blurring of such boundaries need not be an act of deconstruction nor (as Russ Castronovo warns) a “liberal methodology” erasing all differences. Rather, by focusing on the slavery debate as a widely experienced cultural problem, antebellum authors of various affiliations mix and match on both materialist and idealist ground as canonical diversity comes to entail a synthesis of methodologies. The problem of double consciousness thus leads toward what Emerson called “Idealism as it appears in 1842,” a formulation that embeds philosophical abstractions in specific historical conditions and suggests that the practical work of politics cannot be divorced from theoretical frameworks. In the middle third of the nineteenth century, an inclusive gathering of seriously considered, richly written texts desperately tries to realize ideals in the material world. The literature of slavery is a site for this prospective fuller union, even if disparate methods and canons cannot be smoothly or symmetrically integrated.


This excerpt provides insights into the various factors involved in the interactive process, highlighting the callee's crucial role in the accomplishment of collaborative identification. From the Cambridge English Corpus. It would seem from this excerpt that bells performed not only a practical, but also a devotional function. From the Cambridge English Corpus. Translations of excerpt.