Sandra Harbert Petrlulionis, *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau’s Concord*


Reviewed by Etsuko TAKETANI, the University of Tsukuba

The first published volume to critically examine grassroots reform in Concord, Massachusetts, during the antebellum era, Sandra Harbert Petrlulionis’s *To Set This World Right* compellingly calls for a reevaluation of what is habitually oversimplified as a “context” for understanding Henry David Thoreau’s political writings. In her provocative reconsideration of Thoreau’s Concord, Petrlulionis shows how the context is not a static background against which Thoreau’s writings are set, but rather the foreground of the narrative of the evolution of Thoreau’s antislavery ideology. Piecing the story together from fragmented archives of the lives, voices, events, and influence of the townswomen and men who spearheaded local reform, Petrlulionis recovers Concord’s antislavery movement—a civic context—in which Thoreau’s abolitionism took place. As she frames it, the evolution of Thoreau’s political ideals and activism is enabled by this civic context, which is itself a narrative in its own right, in which Thoreau is an “organizing,” if not a main, character (3).

In a suggestive shift of focus, Petrlulionis positions a small coterie of committed antislavery activists at center stage—an assembly largely comprising women—whose behind-the-scenes activism influenced Thoreau and his townsmen, Ralph Waldo Emerson, to champion the cause and provoked them to action. While extensive publicity about the illustrious authors, Thoreau and Emerson, contributed to Concord’s historical fame as an antislavery town, it is, claims Petrlulionis, rather the civic effort of the little-known but dedicated individuals that made Concord an abolitionist hotbed in name and reality. This is the story that Petrlulionis attempts to tell through painstaking archival research.

Throughout *To Set This World Right*, the issue of the origin and nature of the local antislavery movement in Concord is a recurring theme. Embedded in Petrlulionis’s study are the “voices” of women and men whose activism in this historic town propelled Thoreau and Emerson to take a radical abolitionist stand. Petrlulionis deliberately chooses to make such voices heard, rather than speak for them. The story that these voices tell, she suggests, is a tale of communal effort that significantly crossed racial, class, and gender lines as it gathered momentum in Concord from 1831 to 1868. Theirs is not just a local reform narrative but is instead, Petrlulionis argues, a microcosm of the history of antebellum abolitionism in the United States and of the turbulent complexities of Northern attitudes.
toward slavery and race at the time—without an understanding of which it is impossible
to understand the evolution of Thoreau's abolitionism. Such a critical turn, Petru lionis
contends, would counter the reductive scholarly assessment of Thoreau's political writings
and activism (critics have traditionally extolled him for helping fugitive slaves even as
they have disparaged him for lingering on the sidelines until the Fugitive Slave Law came
into force) in favor of trying to rethink Thoreau through a broader and more imbricated
communal reform narrative. Simply put, then, in the words of Petru lionis, the story of
"Henry Thoreau, Abolitionist" is inseparable from that of "Concord, Antislavery Town" (4).

Petru lionis systematically works her way through a set of chronologically and
thematically organized chapters, four in total, each delineating the complex trajectory of
organized abolitionism that took root in Concord. In Chapter 1, suggestively entitled "A
Call to Consciousness, 1831–1843," Petru lionis sets out to identify, as one of the "origins"
of radical abolitionism in Concord, the political activism of Mary Merrick Brooks and 60
other women (including one black woman) in launching the Concord Female Anti-Slavery
Society in 1837—an activism that we now might think of in terms of "consciousness-raising," a
convention pivotal to second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and '70s. While
we risk historical confusion and anachronism if we transfer the terms of radical feminism
to contexts of women's radical abolitionism in the antebellum period, it is nonetheless
Brooks's and her associates' "call to consciousness"—an attempt to develop a shared
consciousness of the problem of slavery and focus the attention of a wider group on the
abolitionist cause—that eventually worked to radically change the political climate of
Concord. In Petru lionis's view, the founding of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society
should not be interpreted as simply an extension of local charity efforts in which these
women had long engaged to feed and clothe the poor—efforts that were domestic and
private in nature. Instead, it significantly enabled women's forays into the civic arena where
men (alone) were traditionally consigned, and this pioneering activism on the part of
women was to be handed down to a "second wave of female abolitionists" (6) in the late
1850s, as Petru lionis discusses in Chapter 4.

From the start, Petru lionis's narrative strategy in To Set This World Right, characterized by
gaps, loose ends, and conflicting threads, highlights that the origin and nature of Concord's
abolitionism—her subject matter—cannot be understood in isolation nor monolithically.
Opening her story with the founding of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society as
marking the "tentative" inception of radical abolitionism in Concord (8), Petru lionis
then orchestrates multiple, coordinated beginnings to bring to bear on it, such as William
Lloyd Garrison's 1831 inauguration of America's most influential antislavery periodical,
The Liberator, in Boston, and the 1834 formation of the Middlesex County Anti-Slavery
Society in Groton. She also brings together an array of historical figures—outspoken but eloquent orators and visitors—such as Angelina and Sarah Grimké, Frederick Douglass, and Wendell Phillips, who served as catalysts for radical abolitionism in the town. Thus, Petrlulonis takes care to convey the multifaceted origin of the antislavery movement in Concord, but she takes even greater pains to emphasize a schism that was inherent in it from the start. This schism, resulting primarily from the issues of women's rights and participation in the antislavery governance that was Garrison's bedrock, divided the abolitionist ranks into two camps, namely, the Garrisonian “old orgs” and the “new orgs” (26)—a rupture that did not just divide women and men, but women themselves as a collective.

Yet the divided nature of Concord’s antislavery movement is important, as it reveals the varied issues and vested interests that the reform involved. Concord’s abolitionism was not just about race, or the tiny population of free black residents in Concord (30 in number in the 1830s) and the by far larger number of enslaved black people down in the South. This theme of division remains central to Petrlulonis’s book, and emerges strongly in her second chapter, entitled “From Concern to Crusade, 1843–1849,” which describes the sundry fissures that came to the fore in the antislavery movement in Concord and within the antislavery ideology of Thoreau.

In this chapter, and throughout this study, Petrlulonis calls upon her readers to recognize how these schisms gave dynamism to the evolution of abolitionism rather than lead the movement to a deadlock. On the civic level, abolitionism—still a minority effort in the 1840s—confronted a longstanding bias ingrained in racism and sexism, or more prominently, simple indifference. But the latter was gradually won over by the influence and good offices of Brooks and her female allies, the prime source of reform power in Concord. On the political level, the Garrisonian “old orgs,” who advocated immediate emancipation and disunion (Northern secession from the slaveholding states and the federal government), met a challenge from the moderate “new orgs,” who trusted the political system to abolish slavery gradually. The former, however, held sway as they marshaled the support from disfranchised townswomen, who signed disunion petitions, significantly with their own full names rather than their married names—an indication that these women consciously began to formulate their own political identity (41).

Beyond documenting these broad communal divisions, Petrlulonis also brings Thoreau’s internal schism into focus and analyzes how Thoreau negotiated between the two (presumably opposite) platforms in his Transcendental thought, i.e., inward self-reform and collective social action. She observes that Thoreau, critical as he was of the plethora of reformers, excluded abolitionists from censure, and that the militant Wendell Phillips,
as an embodiment of a Transcendentalist (53), inspired him to accommodate political activism within his philosophy that reform should be an individual enterprise. She also discusses how the solitude and self-improvement experiment at Walden Pond did not signal his retreat from, or apathy to abolitionism, as is evidenced not only by his (legendary) nonpayment of the poll tax and resulting imprisonment, but also by his subsequent hosting, in the week following his night in jail, of the members of the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society at his cabin site for a second anniversary celebration of West Indian Emancipation—an episode brought to light by Petrusliti's archival approach (60).

Thus, Petrusluti's engagement with primary sources offers the possibility of understanding, in detail rather than in a broad sweep, the evolution of Thoreau's antislavery ideology. But her book shines brightest in her analysis of Thoreau's political writings that reflect this complex evolution. Challenging a series of assumptions and misinterpretation about Thoreau's political essay, "Resistance to Civil Government," or "Civil Disobedience," as it is more commonly known, Petrusluti makes the convincing case that the essay—while it inspired Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. in their campaigns of nonviolent social change in the twentieth century—does not rule out violence from the modes of civil protest. While readers associate "Civil Disobedience" with Thoreau's act of nonviolent resistance (i.e., refusing to pay his poll tax and going into jail), Petrusluti calls attention to how the essay is peppered with lines that can be read as promoting "anarchy," "insurrection," and "violence" (70). The pacifist reading of "Civil Disobedience," Petrusluti argues, is preserved and validated only by dislocating these pithy one-liners from the political context of 1849, in which abolitionists were increasingly desperate as another decade was ending with slavery still ineradicably etched on the national map.

In Chapter 3, entitled "Upheaval in Our Town, 1850–1854," Petrusluti navigates us through the turbulent seas of change that flooded the U.S. political landscape subsequent to the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law that resulted from the Compromise of 1850. Petrusluti adroitly shows the full range of implications that the Compromise set in motion for the evolution of the antislavery movement. Perhaps one of the more provocative observations she makes concerns the shift in the meaning of "violence" in the political arena of the abolitionist crusade. The Fugitive Slave Law, which compelled citizens and their institutions in the North to aid in capturing escaped slaves, forced them to become "complicit" with—or alternatively to become "criminal conspirators" against—the federal government in cohort with the Slave Power (74, 72). In such a restructured binary template of "complicity or criminality," an impasse in the antislavery movement was created, and the traditional Garrisonian reform tactic of moral suasion was pressed to undergo a radical reshuffling.
In part, the argument that Petrulionis makes about this change in abolitionist tactics is straightforward, as she frames it as a shift from nonviolence to violence. The Garrisonian moral suasion, as its “futility” (100) became clear, lost ground and was supplanted by a stratagem that was (putatively) more practically effective, i.e., militancy. A new radical cadre of abolitionist activists, both black and white, pledged to combat the pro-slavery legislature and the federal government’s enforcement arm at any cost, even with violent force. Even Garrison himself was not immune to this new militancy that was to engulf the abolitionist community. At the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society’s annual Fourth of July celebration in Framingham in 1854, Garrison made a symbolic gesture of defiance by setting fire to a copy of the U.S. Constitution, to the shock of many in the audience. According to Petrulionis, a similar shift is also perceivable in Thoreau’s antislavery ideology, in which the tenet of civil noncooperation was superseded by an advocacy of overthrow of the government. This shift found an expression in “Slavery in Massachusetts,” a speech he made at the aforementioned July 4 meeting, in which he proclaimed that his “thoughts” were “murder to the State” (104). Organized militant abolitionism and Thoreau’s militant rhetoric, suggests Petrulionis, thus became commensurate, if not identical, in this critical phase of the antebellum antislavery movement.

Petrulionis concludes her study with the “climax” (6) of the radical abolitionist movement, providing a thought-provoking discussion of John Brown’s guerrilla war in Kansas and his “terrorist” raid at Harpers Ferry, the latter usually credited with igniting the Civil War. Exhaustively researched and extensively documented, Chapter 4, entitled “Call to War, 1855–1868,” breaks new ground by disclosing all kinds of behind-the-scenes support rendered by abolitionists to facilitate Brown’s plans for the insurrection. Six abolitionists—Frank Sanborn, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Gerrit Smith, Theodore Parker, George Luther Stearns, and Samuel Gridley Howe—formed a “secret Committee of Six” that financed Brown’s raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Appended to this contingent of white men, speculates Petrulionis, were a secret seventh, eighth, and ninth, that included former slaves Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman (127). Five days before the raid, the female members of the Thoreau family donated money for Brown’s discretionary use; the day after Brown was hung, Thoreau himself aided and abetted Francis Jackson Meriam, one of Brown’s raiders, to escape to Canada—an action that made Thoreau a “criminal conspirator” in the eye of the federal law (131, 142).

The biggest challenge Petrulionis faces in this final chapter is how to assess and evaluate the abolitionists’—especially Thoreau’s—complicity with the “terrorism” (118) that Brown staged to free four million enslaved people. Navigating between terrorism and freedom fighting is never an easy task in the context of antebellum America, much less so
in the context of a contemporary historical moment that is witness to the never-ending war against terrorism. Yet by portraying Thoreau's "brazen embrace" (141) of Brown's violent means in positive terms, Petrulionis, via Thoreau, asserts that terrorism can be "justified" (6) to set right a structural violence that oppresses people, such as slavery, that itself is sustained by violence and terror. Petrulionis refutes interpretations that have habitually overemphasized the pacifist Thoreau in "Civil Disobedience," downplaying the more bellicose Thoreau in "A Plea for Captain John Brown," a speech in which he apotheosizes the "pick-wielding religious terrorist ... into a new breed of transcendentalist liberator" (136). She contends that between a reformist sensibility that had produced "Civil Disobedience" and a combative tone, struck by Thoreau in "A Plea," is an unbroken continuum, and, in fact, that the latter is just the "next iteration" of the former (141). Petrulionis thus attempts to reclaim the reformist—not necessarily destructive—sensibility that can inhabit the act of violence as much as that of nonviolence.

In a book that provides so rich a narrative of the civic context in which the evolution of Thoreau's abolitionism took place, what is striking in the end is precisely the way this context-oriented methodology limits Petrulionis's otherwise nuanced analysis of Thoreau. Throughout this study, Petrulionis leaves uncontested the relationship between the context and the text, accepting the presumption of their cause and effect sequence. As she frames it, it is the material reality of events—such as "millions living in terror" (122) and the pro-slavery legislative climate of the American nation—that provoked radical abolitionists to action, leading to Brown's armed terror raid on Harpers Ferry and to Thoreau's "A Plea" deifying Brown. And if ending slavery means civil war, Thoreau, writes Petrulionis, considered it "a fair exchange" (6). In such a line of argument, a terrorist and a nation that goes to war are theoretically indistinguishable, in that both murder to achieve their goals and their violent actions could equally be justified by an end, or "fruits" (132), that lie in a future that may or may not come. A similarly reductive causal logic is deployed in the capsule précis of Thoreau that Petrulionis makes at the end of her study. She says that while Thoreau's speeches moved many to battle injustice, it is, after all, "an extremist fringe" in the community that persuaded him that the national emergency of slavery demanded unequivocal action (158), thus reducing Thoreau to a product of the civic context rather than an "organizing" character of it—the very role in which Petrulionis originally set out to cast him. To Set This World Right thus reads more as homage to this "fringe," particularly to Mary Brooks, from whose words the book takes its title (158), than as a book about Thoreau's Concord.

One might call it a flaw. But undoubtedly this problematic in Petrulionis's book stems from her refusal to indulge in nuance, a critical stance informed not just by her archival
(rather than theoretical) approach, but also by her uncompromising political commitment to eradicating social and racial injustice. In the end, then, it is this unequivocal standpoint from which she writes that makes To Set This World Right as admirably powerful and compelling as it is.

第1部 アメリカ文学とユートピア言説の構築

セント・アーマンド、「科学を静かに退場させて」は、「ユートピア主義者ソロー」がピクチャレスクとサプライズの美学と格闘しつつ、いかにして超絶的光芒の発見にいったか、「サプライズの範疇を何度も見直し、……ユートピアの概念を完全に再設定し、これまで成し遂げたことができない方法で人間化している」かを、「彼の定評ある長編四部作」を通りながら論じたもの。城戸光世、「人工のエデン、廃墟のアメリカ」は、クーパーの「火山島」、ホーソーンの幾つかの短編と「プライズアイル・ロマンス」を読み解きながら、「クーパーは拡張主義と物質主義の蔓延する当時の社会への警告として、荒地から庭園へというアメリカ的神話の崩壊を予言する寓話的なユートピア小説を書き」、ホーソーンは、「当時のユートピア共同体の裏側を描くことで、理想郷であるユートピアがその言葉の本来の意味である「どこにも存在しない場所」であることを暗示した」と論じる。「ユートピアに潜む暗い側面、またユートピアがディストピアへと転じる様を描き出す彼らの作品は、廃墟となるアメリカの姿を幻想する」と結論づける。論旨が明確な好論。三浦笙子、「『モービル・ディック』におけるアドミッド・ディクタ」は、「白鯨」が、ある意味では環境主義的パーセプションに欠けないという、ピュエルの示唆に対抗して、「『白鯨』の終末を構築する予言の構造は生命が主体であり、鯨という環境イコンを中心とした豊かな生命体の様々なモチーフがフェダーの予言を通して、言わば、エイハブの宿命的な死刑執行人になっていく」、「鯨と木材でできた棺と麻の絆は、いずれもエイハブには死の象徴であるが、エコロジーの視点からは生命のある、または生命をもたらす自然の力を表象」し、「エコディストピアの崩壊を仕組む」ものだとし、ジョゼフ・ミーカーの喜劇の定義を借