

**Jacksonian Mobs and the  
Rise of American Antislavery Poetry**

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There is an unanswered and troublesome question concerning American antislavery poetry: why did it rise to its first prominence in the United States only during the 1830s? A wide variety of British reform writers had been publishing significant amounts of antislavery poetry since at least the 1770s, and their attention to the issue of slavery increased with the development of the Romantic movement. Discussion of this relationship between slavery and the Romantic imagination has been extended recently by Moira Ferguson,<sup>2</sup> Debbie Lee,<sup>3</sup> and others,<sup>4</sup> but it is a discussion that lies beyond present purview.

On the North American continent, antislavery poems remained isolated and unusual productions in the latter eighteenth century. Benjamin Lundy's antislavery newspaper *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* (1826-1839) provided the first regular column for popular antislavery poetry, but the column's contents were limited. Only with inauguration of Garrison's *The Liberator* in 1831 and publication of Whittier's *Poems Against Slavery* in 1836, it being the first US antislavery poetry volume to receive significant national attention, did antislavery poetry begin to appear in a regular newspaper feature and in widely-sold book form.

So how did antislavery poetry begin its emergence as a noticeable body of public poetry during the decade of the 1830s? There are several identifiable reasons, and more that might be mentioned had we time today.

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<sup>2</sup> Ferguson, *Subject to Others: British Women Writers and Colonial Slavery, 1670-1834* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Lee, *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Carey, Brycchan; Markman Ellis; and Sara Salih [eds.], *Discourses of Slavery and Abolition: Britain and its Colonies, 1760-1838* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

First, it rose together with an energized antislavery movement in the United States. There were new publishing opportunities available as the Garrisonian abolitionist movement, local antislavery organizations, and antislavery religious groups consolidated themselves and were able find subscribers or financial means to print journals, annuals, tract series, and occasional productions. Contemporary readers need to be reminded of the eventual dimensions of this publishing development. Literally millions of antislavery tracts were printed and distributed. In a crude instrumental sense, the increasing organizational coherence of the antislavery movement both created a demand for political expression and provided means for its fulfillment. Antislavery societies and fairs created new means for distribution of antislavery writing, particularly for women and writers of color.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, during the 1830s, antislavery poetry increasingly appears outside reform journals; daily or weekly newspapers exhibited a new interest in printing or reprinting occasional verse on the subject of slavery.

Second, US antislavery poetry arose as an event-driven sub-genre that formulated participatory citizenship as topical verse. Early British antislavery poetry emerged from evangelical 'moral cause' verse and then Romantic political identification with oppressed subjects; beginning in the 1830s, American antislavery poetry re-tasked these British aesthetic formulae to respond to US society and its political events. Public poetry became a leading means of defining social images of slave-owners and slaves.

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent discussion of the 1830s emergence of antislavery poetry among Philadelphia women writers, see Todd S. Gernes, "Poetic Justice: Sarah Forten, Eliza Earle, and the Paradox of Intellectual Property," *The New England Quarterly* 71 (June 1998) 2: 229-265.

Such poetry had noticeable effect in discomfiting consciences, if not in obtaining political conversions. New York City diarist William Templeton Strong, who strewed contemptuous references to blacks through his writing, read Longfellow's poems on slavery in 1842, and was moved to write "It's a puzzling subject, this same Abolitionism: there is but one question involved in it: Is slavery morally right or wrong?"<sup>6</sup> Strong, then a 22 year-old law clerk, answered that question through equivocation and dismissal; his reaction no doubt paralleled that of many other Longfellow readers. What public poetry against slavery accomplished was to bring such readers to the threshold of that moral question, even if they did not resolve it.

Third, public poetry became a rhetorical outlet for passionate demonization of slave-holding society. The 1830s in the United States were a period of contradiction for antislavery politics, since on one hand there was clear demonstration of an advance towards general emancipation with the end of slavery in Great Britain's Caribbean colonies, whereas in the United States human progress seemed perversely frustrated. Antislavery 'ultras' represented a small minority discourse during the 1830s and the frustration of a minority evidenced itself frequently. This is a poetry canon whose imagery frequently describes slave-owning society and its advocates as demonic classes, slaves as their martyred prey, and the Southern states as a diorama of cruel, degraded and morally polluted scenes. The work of public poetry against slavery would eventually lay in creating what Trotsky, writing of pre-revolutionary literature, called

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<sup>6</sup> Strong, *The Diary of William Templeton Strong*, Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas [eds.] (New York: Macmillan, 1952) 1, 194-195.

its role of generating “a spirit of social hatred.”<sup>7</sup> Yet during the 1830s this was not a pre-revolutionary poetry, unless evangelical eschatology counts as revolution. The poetry typically employed a religious language of sin and coming divine retribution, a language that re-cast the experience of African peoples under slavery as a pre-apocalyptic sign of coming divine justice. Its conceptual grammar evidenced little recognition that African Americans were equals in the antislavery struggle; that using groups of people for their utility in theological systems entails subordination of their humanity and human rights; or that class contempt, rather than hatred of slavery, frequently marred these poems.

Fourth, antislavery poetry during the 1830s functioned as a response to the conflict between a newly militant abolitionist movement and violent reaction from pro-slavery, anti-black, or anti-abolitionist mobs, either well-organized and spontaneous. Among the varieties of street violence during the 1830s, historian Michael Feldberg observes, “riots against abolitionists were numerically the most common form of collective violence.”<sup>8</sup> These riots notably included three days of anti-black and anti-abolitionist attacks in New York City in July 1834, leading to the burning of sixty buildings and six churches;<sup>9</sup> attacks on Prudence Crandall’s school in Canterbury, Connecticut in September of the same year; serious anti-abolitionist riots in Utica, New York, in 1835; and the burning of Pennsylvania Hall in May 1838. John Greenleaf

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<sup>7</sup> Leon Trotsky [William Keach, ed.], *Literature and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005) 188. Originally published 1925, International Publishers, New York.

<sup>8</sup> Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era: Riot and Disorder in Jacksonian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 43.

<sup>9</sup> Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987) 162-170.

Whittier stood in disguise with rescued papers beneath his coat as Pennsylvania Hall was burning and listened to shouts of “Hang Whittier!”,<sup>10</sup> likely the last known occasion an American mob cared sufficiently to come lynch a poet.

Between 1834 and 1838, some forty-six anti-abolitionist riots occurred, making this the commonest type of public mobbing during the middle of the decade.<sup>11</sup> Thirteen presses and newspaper offices were destroyed by mobs, from Kentucky to New York State.<sup>12</sup> There were few deaths, in large part because most of the anti-abolitionist riots followed a predictable course with set roles, which historian Paul Gilje describes as follows:

Rioters outside a meeting hall shouted charivari-like, screamed, and blew horns and tin trumpets. Borrowing tactics from theater disturbances, the rioters pelted rotten eggs and rocks at the abolitionists, who relished acting as martyrs, and stood bowed but unshaken under this bombardment.<sup>13</sup>

Anti-abolitionist riots were in various degrees, according to local context, manifestations of pro-slavery racism, pro-Union antagonism towards Garrisonian disunion,<sup>14</sup> class warfare, and moral outrage over unacceptable radicalism. To borrow and reverse E.P. Thompson’s concept of a ‘moral economy’ to describe eighteenth-century food riots and

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<sup>10</sup> John Pickard [ed.], *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975) 1, 278.

<sup>11</sup> David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828-1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 35.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Paul Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996) 81.

<sup>14</sup> J.T. Headley’s accounts of the anti-abolitionist riots, while antagonistic towards abolitionists, emphasize the role of nationalist sentiments. See Headley, *Pen and Pencil Sketches of the Great Riots* (New York: E.B. Treat, 1882) 79-83ff.

direct popular action in England,<sup>15</sup> these US anti-abolitionist riots instance the development of an 'anti-moral economy'. That is to say, direct popular action and violence against largely middle-class reformers employed a familiar social tool within a reactionary political economy, sometimes led by local elites and sometimes as spontaneous popular phenomenon. As historian Edward Countryman has argued in discussing the transatlantic applicability of Thompson's 'moral economy' concept, there was a new version of that interpretive concept arising in the early United States, one defined by the intersection of white supremacy with an ideology of community self-control.<sup>16</sup>

For abolitionists, the likely prospect of mobbing served as a source of internal unity within the abolitionist movement. As Whittier phrased this sentiment, "It would be pitiful policy to quarrel among ourselves, when the hoofs of the mob are on the threshold of our meetings."<sup>17</sup> When Whittier described abolitionists as "brethren of a common tongue" (line 10) in his poem "The Moral Warfare",<sup>18</sup> he implicitly defined the embattled antislavery voice as alienated from but determined to conquer popular sentiment. The 'common tongue' that Whittier emphasized as necessary for moral victory was a minority discourse claiming divine approval, a discourse whose construction relied heavily on images of sacrifice, martyrdom, and sanctification. The

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<sup>15</sup> Edward P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50 (1971).

<sup>16</sup> Countryman, "Moral Economy, Political Economy, and the American Bourgeois Revolution," 147-165, esp. 158-160, in Adrian Randall and Andrew Charlesworth [eds.], *Moral Economy and Popular Protest: Crowds, Conflict and Authority* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Whittier to Elizabeth Neall, 10 February 1839, *The Letters of John Greenleaf Whittier*, John Pickard [ed.] (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1975) 1, 323.

<sup>18</sup> Whittier, *The Poetical Works* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1892) 57.

opponent in this drama, the mob, became an image of false democracy, a raging monster, and a killer of heroes.

As brief evidence for the preceding arguments, let us turn to the body of martyr poetry that appeared in *The Liberator* and other newspapers beginning early December 1836 after the murder of abolitionist newspaper publisher Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois.

### **Alton's Public Poetry**

The summary facts of Lovejoy's life and death are that he was born, raised and educated in Maine, where he graduated as his college laureate in 1826. He worked briefly as a teacher, then departed westwards in 1827 to teach in St. Louis. Lovejoy's own poetry suggests a personality on fire and a foreboding that his life would be short.<sup>19</sup> In 1832 Lovejoy returned east to the Theological Seminary of Princeton for studies; he was ordained in 1833 as a Presbyterian minister. Lovejoy was determined to convert the entire world to his faith, particularly — using his phrase — the “heathen Papists” of Europe.<sup>20</sup> Europe was spared, as he began by heading west again.

By 1835 Lovejoy was a circuit riding minister in Missouri and the editor of *The Observer*, a St. Louis reform newspaper he endowed with twin hatreds of slavery and Catholicism. When local opposition arose, Lovejoy wrote that “The fire that is now blazing and crackling through this city, was kindled on Popish altars, and has been

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<sup>19</sup> See his poem “My Mother,” 34-37 in Joseph and Owen Lovejoy, *Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy; Who was Murdered in Defence of the Liberty of the Press, at Alton, Illinois, Nov. 7, 1837* (1838).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid* 81-88.

assiduously blown by Jesuit breath."<sup>21</sup> After being burned out of his offices by a St. Louis mob, Lovejoy moved on to Alton, Illinois, where a mob greeted the now well-known crusader by torching his still-crated new press on the dock. Mobs burned Lovejoy's premises twice more in 1837 before he died on November 7 of that year, shot by a mob that had gathered to destroy one more new press.

With his determined pursuit of martyrdom, Lovejoy became the symbol of embattled abolitionism and a willingness to die in the assault upon slavery. The unsightly aspects of Lovejoy's political writings, such as animus-filled charges that "Judge Lawless is a Papist",<sup>22</sup> disappeared in his elevation as a hero who stood for free speech against pro-slavery mobs. Dozens of Lovejoy poems appeared in abolitionist, reform, religious, and temperance newspapers in the months following his death, and for years later.

In *The Liberator*, Lovejoy's heroicization began with a poem from Alonzo Lewis – 'the Lynn Bard' – a now largely unremembered poet and regional historian whose Romantic verse on Massachusetts landscapes was quite popular throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Lewis' poem "Lovejoy" characterizes him as a noble defender of human rights "which God has given" (line 4).<sup>24</sup> "'Twas joy to thee to bleed" (line 5), writes Lewis, employing a trope that was to become repetitive among later commemorative poems. Lewis' 32-line poem in rhyming quatrains, possibly the first

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid 149.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 176.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis (1794-1861) was a well-known intellectual figure, poet, historian, justice of the peace, newspaper editor, teacher, and civil engineer from Lynn, Massachusetts. His publications included *Poems* (1823), *The History of Lynn* (Boston: J.H. Eastburn, 1829), and *Love, Forest Flowers and Sea Shells* (Boston: B.B. Mussey, 1850), which went through ten editions.

<sup>24</sup> *The Liberator* 7 (December 8, 1837) 50: 200.

Lovejoy subject-poem published, has little to recommend itself as memorable. The poem voices standard themes of sacrificial patriotism, masculine affirmation of freedom, and martyrdom for the nation. It invokes Washington and Lafayette, and promises that Lovejoy's name will become "the battle word, / To lead our spirits on!" (lines 31-32).

Not all commemorative sentiments were so hackneyed: Lovejoy poetry was about to go weird and show the strange, interesting edge of abolitionist imagination. In Dover, New Hampshire, at a commemoration meeting held in the Congregationalist church on November 29, another public poem, "Dirge,"<sup>25</sup> [HANDOUT, 1<sup>st</sup> poem], raised Lovejoy as a figure whose sacrifice upheld divine law in the midst of slavery's lawlessness. The poem's imagery is startling, dark and demonic. It begins "from Freedom's western plain, / Sounds of direful tumult come" (lines 1-2) before entering into a description of slavery's supporters as fiendish demons invading the territories of freedom. "Hark! — a hundred demons' yell / rends afar the midnight air..." (lines 5-6) Moreover, Lovejoy's death is a cannibalistic feast that the blood-stained pro-slavery party is now enjoying:

LOVEJOY bleeds! — now Slavery quaffs

Deeply from the Martyr's veins!

Wild the bloody Demon laughs,

Loud the joy infernal reigns! (lines 9-12)

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Lovejoy's murder serves both to nourish slavery and to stir the nation to rise against slavery. Although his slain body comes to rest, its murder causes "Freedom's GENIUS" to 'cry blood' at his grave (lines 28-31) and the animating spirit of his spilled blood "Wakes Jehovah's Arm of RIGHT!" (line 32) The poem suggests that an economy of transference between a martyred body, the nation, and a divine spirit that will bring salvation to all.

Equally macabre is another poem, "The Voice of Blood," which appeared in mid-December as a reprint from *The Philanthropist*, the antislavery newspaper that James G. Birney and Gamaliel Bailey had established a year previous in Cincinnati and that was also sacked repeatedly by mobs.<sup>26</sup> The poem's anonymous author conceives of Alton and the entire state of Illinois, as being visited by an amorphous spirit-voice of death that casts a darkness over the land as it passes. At Alton, site of Lovejoy's death, when the voice of blood arrives –

...the child, when he hears it, shall cry for light!

Tho' the sun is high and the day is bright;

And the mother, in frantic mood,

Shall shriek as it mutters, the cradle near,

In a whisper so loud that the dead might hear;

'I AM BLOOD! THE VOICE OF BLOOD!' (lines 11-16)

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<sup>26</sup> For a history of three anti-abolitionist riots press sacking conducted against *The Philanthropist*, in 1836 and 1841, see Grimsted 58-64. An outstanding social analysis of the anti-abolitionist riots in Cincinnati appears in Stephen Ellingson, "Understanding the Dialectic of Discourse: Public Debate and Rioting in Antebellum Cincinnati," *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (July 1995) 1: 100-144.

The voice floods the prairies with its force and fear, demanding that the state's citizens rouse themselves in the name of freedom. This is a Poe-esque vision-poem that urges citizens to awake from a nightmare of blood, or face their own death by neglecting the call of freedom.

Lovejoy poetry in *The Liberator* continued to expand on the theme of blood, with a poem by an anonymous 'B.' and entitled 'The City of Blood.'<sup>27</sup> [HANDOUT, 2<sup>nd</sup> poem] This poem assigned blood guilt and eternal disgrace to Alton and its citizens, condemning the city as a new Sodom:

Your sins will be sounded abroad,  
And be read with the history of time;—  
A city so famous for mobs,  
A people so blackened with crime. (lines 9-12)

But it is not only Alton that has covered itself with Lovejoy's blood, but the entire American nation that has bloodied itself with slavery. "Our American clothes are dyed, / Made red by the blood we have spilt," (lines 29-30) writes this poet, arguing that national guilt can only be mitigated through a conversionary embrace of Christ.

More poems appeared during the following weeks, bearing titles such as "The Alton Riot"<sup>28</sup> or "Mob Notoriety of Certain Places,"<sup>29</sup> and making public promises such as "...millions, roused, shall pledge upon thy grave / Death to oppression! Freedom to

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<sup>27</sup> B., "The City of Blood," *The Liberator* 7 (December 22, 1837) 52: 208. Similar blood guilt charges appear in "The Carrier's Address of the Ohio Repository," *The Liberator* 8 (January 26, 1838) 4: 16.

<sup>28</sup> Arion, "The Alton Riot," *The Liberator* 7 (December 22, 1837) 52: 208.

<sup>29</sup> "Mob Notoriety of Certain Places," *The Liberator* 8 (January 19, 1838) 3: 12.

the slave!"<sup>30</sup> They continued an anti-mob theme already evident in abolitionist poetry that condemned the "vile mobbish clan"<sup>31</sup> and sympathized with fellow abolitionists who, suffering from mobs "by fiery bigots led, / In many a land with patient zeal have bled!"<sup>32</sup>

Lovejoy poetry employed evangelical imagery of social conflict and calls for the state to awake to its imminent risk, such as were to become commonplace a generation later. But most crucially, the poetry raised the Alton riot as an issue of conflict between "a merciless mob" and dissident citizens demanding free expression. In elevating an individual abolitionist to martyrdom, this public poetry advocated a concept of democratic citizenship based on individual expression and resistance to mob censorship. Even while it condemned mobs, Lovejoy poetry provided a mode of heroic self-representation that appealed to white abolitionists drawn into antislavery activism despite, or sometimes because of, the social alienation, ostracism, and risks that this work entailed.

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<sup>30</sup> W.H.B., "Sonnets," *The Liberator* 7 (December 29, 1837) 53: 212.

<sup>31</sup> A.R.P., "The Cause of the Oppressed," *The Liberator* 7 (October 13, 1837) 42: 168.

<sup>32</sup> T.B., "Address to Abolitionists," *The Liberator* 6 (January 9, 1836) 2: 8.