



Editorial

CONTRARY to the ubiquitous schoolyard ditty about sticks and stones, recent events in Paris once again remind us, words (and pictures) *can* hurt; they can also empower. As public debate swirls around questions of legitimate satire versus unwarranted provocation, we are reminded of the potency of writing (and imagery) to reflect, interpret, and influence culture, whether for good or ill. *NEQ*'s March 2015 authors examine texts (persuasive, fictionalized, inquisitive, reportorial; some canonic, some ephemeral) that treat, roughly, the 1830s through the 1860s, arguably America's most intense period of cultural conflict.

Initiating her investigation of Thoreau's evident anti-Irish bias in *Walden* with a succinct (and appropriately outraged) "Henry, how *could* you?" Laura Dassow Walls goes on to show not only why he could but how he did. Armed with telling moments from his biography as well as astute literary analysis, Walls comes to a surprising understanding of Thoreau's intent, even if it fell short of its mark: "Rather than stoking the fires of nativism by pointing to Irish *difference*, as most readers assume he is doing, Thoreau is instead fuming about Irish *sameness*: he indicts John Field for caving in to the very same slave-making, state-sanctioned, consumerist economic logic that Thoreau so thoroughly detests."

In Philadelphia, a group of elite, free African American women also detested that logic. As Mary Kelley sensitively and expertly details, they, too, took to their pens to record the devastating effects of capitalism's alignment with slavery and of the "pernicious binary" of race. The women of the Female Literary Association, writing for one another and for Garrison's *Liberator*, showcased the benefits of their own social privilege: the intellectual attainments and polite accomplishments that placed them on an equal footing with their white counterparts. Still, disputing the ostensible grounds for their privilege—a "mixture with whites"—they rejected the notion that "shadings of color registered the capacity for freedom." Instead, proclaiming solidarity with their

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enslaved brothers and sisters and campaigning for social and economic justice, they turned their talents toward radical abolitionism.

In 1842, fugitive slave George Latimer arrived in Boston, and for the next fifty-four years he lived and worked in its environs as a free man. Light-skinned, Latimer was “deemed near-white in his first days of freedom,” but, as Scott Gac’s shrewd analysis of the period’s writings documents, “the renowned runagate” was viewed as “black and near enslaved in his last.” That shift in the public’s attitudes about Latimer, Gac contends, epitomizes a trend in racial representation that is “bounded by antislavery protest, debates over miscegenation, and regional clash” in the 1840s and, in the 1890s, “by regional reconciliation, antislavery remembrance, and legal segregation.”

Whereas public forces objectified the historic figure of George Latimer, John Matteson shows how Louisa May Alcott subjectified a man she tended in his final days. The young author—*cum*—Civil War nurse, whose career to that point was constrained by the demands of melodramatic magazine fiction, found her voice in his dying words. “Of all the moments that influenced her thinking about human relationships” (and her fictionalization of them), Matteson comments, “none was more important.” Yet this man’s identity has remained enigmatic. Matteson, in a nicely narrated act of literary sleuthing, solves the mystery at long last.

In another (but light-hearted) detective story, we find Paul Lewis in hot pursuit of the author of the blisteringly satiric “The Pigs—A Poem.” Given that his essay’s title announces its conclusion, the reader is free to relax and enjoy the performance for what it is: a delightful, albeit instructive, literary romp. Among its myriad targets, “The Pigs” mocks Boston’s abolitionists, but the seriousness of their enterprise is nowhere more apparent than in their support of John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry. Lifting the veil on that episode, William T. La Moy offers two documents that detail the machinations of the “Secret Six.” Finally, the issue comes full circle with another piece by Laura Walls, an essay review that exposes Thoreau’s joy in scientific (broadly read, intellectual) pursuit: the “exhilarating sense of ignorance opening to possibility.” The opening to possibility, dear reader, is what we hope this issue brings to you.

—LINDA SMITH RHOADS