little-known documents

Introductory Essay

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

INTRODUCTION BY BARBARA HOCHMAN

Introduction

IN 1849 HARRIET BEECHER STOWE WROTE A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO *THE INCARNATION; OR, PICTURES OF THE VIRGIN AND HER SON*,[1] a book in which her brother Charles Beecher creates a fictionalized portrait of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Stowe's essay, published two years before the first installment of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was designed to forestall criticism of Beecher's narrative by justifying his imaginative reconstruction of scriptural truth. Stowe's introduction reflects her keen grasp of the variables that shape the act of reading and provides insight into her own fictional practice. The essay also reflects her sense of the stigma attached to reading fiction in the antebellum United States.

Stowe's text anticipates one of the biggest problems she would encounter while preparing to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: how to treat serious issues of religious faith and historical fact in a narrative form that was widely presumed to encourage idleness, passivity, and romantic fantasy. In writing her introduction to Beecher's book, Stowe attempted to neutralize the widespread "prejudice against this species of composition" in order to justify that "blending together . . . of truth and fiction" which she believed many readers would associate with the "doubtful hue of romance" (iv–v).[2] Stowe argues for the value of such a blend, emphasizing the role of imagination in making elusive realities palpable: "Many, in this hard and utilitarian age, are wont to underrate the faculty of the imagination . . ." (viii); but when imagination is "chastened and guided by accurate knowledge of topographical and historic details" (v), it serves an important function. Stowe implies that imaginative literature can produce great "practical value" (viii) by representing "truth"—whether that truth is rooted in Scripture or (like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) in the social and political conditions of contemporary life.

In writing the *The Incarnation*, Beecher sought to revitalize a set of well-known images by elaborating the "Sacred Narrative" (iv) with dialogue, commentary, and descriptive detail. Stowe's introduction to the volume provides a rationale for Beecher's method by addressing a problem of reading. Her essay begins by asking how a text can create a fresh perspective on all-too-

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familiar concepts: "One of the principal difficulties realized by those who wish to [read] the Bible . . . is that want of freshness and reality which is caused by early and long-continued familiarity with its language" (iii). According to Stowe, this familiarity is a handicap for many readers, who open the Bible only to find their attention "wander[ing] in dreamy vacancy" (iv). Beecher's text was designed to transform Bible reading from a "wearisome task" (iv) into an intensely meaningful one. Stowe argues that a strategic balance of fiction and fact is amply justified when serving such an end.

Stowe's emphasis on the value of poetic license in promotion of a larger truth anticipates her own blending of fact and fiction in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *The Incarnation* employed the resources of fiction for the cause of belief, contextualizing and embroidering familiar stories in order to give them new life. Stowe was soon to make the dynamics of Bible reading a central theme in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But the question of how to tell a well-worn tale so as to make it new was still more cogent to her representation of slavery.

Uncle Tom's Cabin initially appeared in 1851 as a series of installments in the free-soil weekly the *National Era*. Writing for that context, Stowe faced a formidable challenge: how to shape an account of slave culture that would have a greater impact than the antislavery discourse typical of the abolitionist press. Stowe set out to represent slavery as a terrible sin, dangerous to both the nation and the individual (slave or free), but she was well aware that neither her facts nor her arguments would be new to readers of the *National Era*. Indeed, commentators, politicians, clergymen, poets, and other contributors filled every issue of the paper with arguments against "the peculiar institution" in general and the Fugitive Slave Act in particular.

When Haley, the slave trader in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is unmoved by "the wild look of anguish and utter despair" on the face of a slave mother whose child he has sold, Stowe's narrator adds, "You can get used to such things too my friend" (208). By proliferating images of anonymous fugitives, the *National Era* itself unwittingly contributed to the familiarization that enables one to get used to atrocities. Like Beecher, recounting the story of Mary and Jesus, Stowe believed that fictional techniques could give new urgency to images and ideas that were, in a sense, too well known.

In writing the introduction to her brother's book, Stowe explores the rhetorical challenge that Viktor Shklovsky later called defamiliarization. She thus lays the groundwork for some of the narrative strategies she herself would use in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's introductory essay to *The Incarnation* stresses the value of incident and dialogue for conveying a sense of historical truth, even when that truth must be partly "conjectural." She analyzes Beecher's judicious invention of detail, his use of "standard sources of information," and his adaptation of "historic verisimilitude" (vi). In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe too would employ a range of historical sources, creating a narrative based on an amalgam of previous texts, reported facts, and fabrications.

Unlike *The Incarnation*, which had little effect on the literary culture of its day, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* defined new parameters for the functions of fiction. Stowe ends her introduction to Beecher's text by elaborating one such function—the moral education of the young. Though underestimated now, Stowe writes, the "faculty of the imagination . . . does exist, burning and God-given, in many a youthful soul." Young people in particular will inevitably attempt to nourish this faculty and, "for the want of some proper aliment," will seek "strange fire from heathen altars" (viii). Stowe suggests that devout, truthful, imaginative literature, such as *The Incarnation*, will prevent "fervent" natures from having "recourse to the strains of a Byron, or the glowing pictures of a Bulwer or a Sue" (ix).[3] Two years later, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would go far beyond *The Incarnation* in captivating the imagination of readers who might have been drawn to fiction for entertainment, excitement, or escape but who would find that the underrated "species of composition" known as sentimental fiction, or romance, could also engage spiritual and social realities.[4]

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Notes

I am grateful to the American Antiquarian Society, in whose collections I discovered Stowe's text while I was an AAS–Northeast Modern Language Association fellow.

[1] Stowe's name appears on the introduction as Mrs. H. E. B. Stowe. Prodded by her sister Catharine Beecher and her husband, Calvin Stowe, Stowe subsequently dropped the initial "E" when signing her name to a piece of writing (Kirkham 51; Hedrick 138). Hedrick is one of the few Stowe scholars to mention Stowe's "Introductory Essay" (188).

[2] Although *romance* was often a negative term in nineteenth-century literary discourse, influential fiction writers from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Frank Norris use the term to signify the representation of a truth deeper than historical verisimilitude.

[3] As a girl, Stowe was enchanted by Byron's poetry (Reynolds 133–34). But Byron had become a reference point of moral outrage for Stowe and others by mid-century. Writing for the *New-York Evangelist* in 1842, Stowe attacked Byron and Edward Bulwer for their "evil influence," especially on the "minds of the young" ("Literary Epidemics"). Stowe wrote a controversial defense of Lady Byron for the *Atlantic Monthly* and *McMillan's Magazine* in 1869; she elaborated and bolstered her case in *Lady Byron Vindicated*. Ellen Moers suggests that Stowe's defense of Lady Byron dealt a "permanent blow" to Stowe's national prestige (43).

Eugène Sue's most famous novel, *Les mystères de Paris* (*The Mysteries of Paris*), was serialized in the Paris daily *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* in 1842–43. Stowe described Sue's novels in a letter to her husband (19 July 1844): "They are powerful but *stiflingly* devoid of moral principle—Their atmosphere like the air of a forcing house at 90—or so—tho full of luscious blooms & fruit make you stagger and pant for air—not the first discernment of any boundaries between right & wrong in them" (qtd. in Hedrick 165).

[4] Early reviewers fulsomely praised *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on social, religious, and moral grounds, but they also celebrated the novel as a "fascinating," "intensely exciting," "thrilling tale." A representative range of such comments appears in an advertisement that was often reprinted in Jewett's inexpensive edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "for the millions."

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Introductory Essay

ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL DIFFICULTIES REalized by those who wish to bring themselves under the influence of the Bible, in commencing its reading, is that want of freshness and reality which is caused by early and long-continued familiarity with its language.

It is true that the Christian, in happy hours and with a mind magnetized by contact with the great inspiring mind of the book, often sees passages as it were illuminated like a transparency, behind which the light necessary for its development has been suddenly kindled. A mind imbued with poetic fervor, or a scholar with leisure to search out, and knowledge to elucidate, may both find means to rise above this obstacle, and read with ever-increasing interest.

But there are many who have, unhappily, yet confessedly, neither devotional fervor, nor communion with the inspiring mind, and are,

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furthermore, neither poetical nor learned, and yet are desirous of reading the Bible that they may become spiritual; and they deeply lament when they find that its reading is to them but a wearisome task. In vain they ponder its pages; nothing is suggested; and while words known by heart from childhood pass under their eye, their mind wanders in dreamy vacancy. They start at the end of a chapter, and rise from it sighing and discouraged.

Even the true Christian, of an unimaginative temperament, suffers greatly from very much the same cause—the want of wing and fire to rise into the conceptions of the most fervent, the most ideal book that ever existed.

It has often seemed, therefore, to the writer, that no greater service could be done to a large class of the community than to reproduce the Sacred Narrative, under the aspects which it presents to an imaginative mind, with the appliances of geographical, historical, and critical knowledge.

The present work is the commencement of a series which contemplates such a presentation of the narrative of the Evangelists.

There may be some who at first would feel a prejudice against this species of composition, as so blending together the outlines of truth and fiction as to spread a doubtful hue of romance over the whole. They wish to know that what they are reading is true. They dislike to have their sympathies enlisted and their feelings carried away by what, after all, may never have happened.

To such we would suggest the idea, that no human being ever reads any narrative without some image and conception of what they read; and that the blank, cold, vague, misty images of an uninstructed mind are no *more* like the truth, than the conceptions of a vivid imagination chastened and guided by accurate knowledge of topographical and historic details respecting these distant scenes and events.

For example, no one ever hears of the Virgin Mary without forming some kind of an image or conception of her, it may be, borrowed from some antiquated engraving or old church painting, the fruit of monkish revery or of artistic inspiration; or it may be that there is only a kind of formless mist connected with the sound of that name. But neither the formless mist nor the antique effigy are a whit nearer to the reality than the conception of one who, knowing the strong national peculiarities of her race, and gathering all the intimations of Scripture touching her descent, character, and external position, should embody to himself, as nearly as possible, the *probable* truth of the case. A reasonable probability, though not like certainty, is still worthy of a good degree of attention and confidence.

So, though incidents may be inserted into the narrative which, though probable by historic verisimilitude, are still confessedly conjectural, yet these are more like truth than a blank, void of any incident whatever; because *some* incident confessedly did occur over and above what is scripturally recorded, and there is, therefore, a large and legitimate field for combined imagination and critical ingenuity to fill up chasms in the most skillful and probable manner.

Thus much, however, being premised, it is due to truth to say, that the writer has endeavored to render the narrative precise and authentic, so far as attention to standard sources of information could avail.

As far as descriptions of scenery, localities, architecture, opinions, manners and customs, &c., are concerned, the writer has preferred, for the sake of accuracy, to risk the imputation of plagiarism, by weaving in expressions of standard authors or of eye-witnesses in ways incapable of being conveniently indicated by quotation mark or reference. For example, the journey from Nazareth to Hebron is almost step by step the track of Professor Robinson reversed, as given in his Researches. In the descriptions of travelers, whenever there was a picture word or graphic epithet, the writer has unceremoniously seized hold of them, being more anxious to produce a truthful impression than to claim the merit of originality. Nor should

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we censure this while we praise the painter who seeks to transfer to his canvass the coloring of a Titian or Rubens, or the sculptor who seeks to inspire his marbles with the indescribable graces of the chisel of Praxiteles; we rather should applaud the design of throwing the coloring of imagination around the authentic details of a tome of travels or a dry encyclopedia.

In all cases where the Divine Subject of the narrative has been introduced as speaking, the language has been simply and only that of the Bible, without paraphrase, diminution, or addition; for the author could not hope to achieve what even Milton failed to accomplish, viz., to represent worthily, unassisted by the direct inspiration of the Holy Ghost, the words of one wholly divine. For the same reason, no description of the personal appearance of the Savior has been attempted, as it was believed to be a subject where all words, as well as all artistic representation, whether by pencil or chisel, must forever fall short of the expectations and desires of the soul that appreciates his glory. That revelation must be left to the disclosures of a coming day.

In the style of writing here adopted, there are, confessedly, great difficulties, more particularly when applied to sacred subjects of so high a grade. To meet every one's ideal, to shock no one's tastes, to impinge on no one's doctrinal views, and to make, in so extensive a subject, no mistakes in points of research, is perhaps a height of success not to be dreamed of. It is only to be hoped that the work, with all the drawbacks necessarily incidental, may offer to many minds a decided advance upon their former conceptions of sacred subjects, and furnish a suggestive stimulus to further mental activity in the same direction.

Many, in this hard and utilitarian age, are wont to underrate the faculty of the imagination, and all that ministers and belongs thereto, as of no practical value. But, for all that, it is none the less a fact, that such a faculty does exist, burning and God-given, in many a youthful soul, and, for the want of some proper aliment, seeks the strange fire from heathen altars, and culls poisonous fruits and flowers from hot-beds of the god of this world. Even for this fallen and too often erring child of heaven there is, however, bread enough and to spare in a Father's house.

If, then, these pages should suggest to some fervent spirit that it may not be necessary to have recourse to the strains of a Byron, or the glowing pictures of a Bulwer or a Sue, for themes of boundless scope and unutterable brilliancy, then one result, at least, of no inconsiderable moment, will have been realized.

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