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Author(s): Paul E. Teed

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THE POLITICS OF SECTIONAL MEMORY: THEODORE PARKER AND THE *MASSACHUSETTS* *QUARTERLY REVIEW*, 1847-1850

Paul E. Teed

On December 22, 1845, the Rev. Theodore Parker of West Roxbury went to Plymouth, Massachusetts, to observe Forefathers' Day, a day-long public celebration that commemorated the Pilgrims' landing in North America in 1620. Beyond the feasts and parades that were traditional on these occasions, Parker took special pains to hear orators Edward Everett and Rufus Choate expound upon the "virtues, sufferings and sacrifices" of New England's founding generation. By the time he reached his West Roxbury home that evening, though, the joy of the occasion had worn off, and sober reflections inspired his nightly journal entry. "It was joyous," he wrote, "but yet sad in recollection." Troubling his thoughts that night were recent political events surrounding the annexation of Texas and the growing power of the southern slave interest in the national government. Even more than these incidents themselves, however, Parker was disturbed by the lack of any discussion of them in the day's ceremonial pageantry. "I hate to judge men by one thing," he complained, "but in all the day there was but one allusion, I think, to slavery." Freezing the lessons of history into attractive but meaningless tableaux, the brilliant but conservative orators at Plymouth threatened to sever the moral link between New England's past glory and its present responsibilities in the nation's crisis. Such a detachment of culture from life robbed New Englanders of their most important well-

Paul Teed is an associate professor of history at Saginaw Valley State University. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Oct. 1996 meeting of the New England Historical Association. The author would like to thank R. Kent Newmyer, Harlow Sheidley, David Kiracofe, and Mary Hedberg for their valuable comments and suggestions.

springs of action, and Parker ultimately felt compelled to conclude that “the Spirit of the Pilgrims rests no longer in the sons.”²

Less than two years later, Parker joined Ralph Waldo Emerson and several other Massachusetts scholars, reformers, and politicians in founding the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, a journal devoted to “literature, politics, religion and humanity.” Though initially sharing editorial duties with Emerson and James E. Cabot, Parker took sole custody of the journal within a year and became the dominant architect of its message. During his three years as editor, Parker used the *Review* both to reinvigorate and to reinvent the politics and culture of New England as the larger nation struggled with the issues of war, expansion, and slavery. Beyond his role as editor, Parker was also the journal’s most important contributor, and he used it as a platform from which to contest the dominance of older, established Massachusetts periodicals whose political and cultural conservatism he saw as dangerous in the context of a national crisis. Without fully embracing radical abolitionist ideology, he attempted to re-establish a bridge between his understanding of New England’s place in America’s republican past, and its crucial role in transforming the American present. Reworking the old symbols of Puritanism and the Revolution, Parker also derived new sectional meaning from materials as diverse as abolitionism, Free Soil politics, and the life of John Quincy Adams. Both selective and strikingly opportunistic in his use of sectional history, Parker clung tenaciously to New England’s past while confidently rearranging it in search of present meaning. Groping toward more democratic modes of expression and appealing to broadly held sectional values, moreover, Parker also hoped to establish a New England antislavery culture that would transcend the movement’s ideological divisions.³

As an avenue for the expression of New England’s special place in American life, the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* was certainly not alone. Over the past several decades, students of New England history have amply

² “Forefathers’ Day,” *Liberator* (Boston), Jan. 2, 1846; Theodore Parker, Manuscript Journal, Theodore Parker Papers (Massachusetts Historical Association, Boston).

³ Daniel McInerney, in *The Fortunate Heirs of Freedom: Abolition and Republican Thought* (Lincoln, NE, 1994), correctly identifies Parker’s deep sensitivity to the past, but under-emphasizes the sectional lens through which he approached and applied republican traditions. Other interpretations, including Michael Fellman, “Theodore Parker and the Abolitionist Role in the 1850s,” *Journal of American History*, 61 (Dec. 1974), 666-84; and Lewis Perry, *Boats Against the Current: American Culture Between Revolution and Modernity, 1820-1860* (New York, 1993), 243-63, neglect the importance of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* in Parker’s evolving antislavery vision. For an overview of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, see Clarence Gohdes, *Periodicals of American Transcendentalism* (Durham, NC, 1931), 157-93.

documented the extraordinary sense of sectional pride and uniqueness that swept across the region during the early national and antebellum periods. By attending public festivals, creating historical societies, erecting monuments, and consecrating cemeteries, New Englanders not only reinforced a sense of corporate identity, but they also constructed a distinctive and normative image of their history and traditions. Although New England's national political influence had declined rapidly after the collapse of Federalism, the region's conservative elite fought the specter of permanent marginalization by systematically inventing and exporting New England's cultural values. The views of elite sectional promoters like Daniel Webster, Rufus Choate, and Edward Everett not only found audiences at Forefathers' Day celebrations, but were circulated in prestigious New England periodicals like the *North American Review*.⁴

Webster, Choate and other would-be arbiters of New England's regional identity, however, were ultimately forced to confront both the elusive and protean qualities of historical memory. Having celebrated the centrality of their region's past to the nation's most cherished ideals, they were unable to prevent more radically minded New Englanders from appropriating elements of their discourse. In 1859, when Wendell Phillips argued that John Brown had only gone "a stride beyond" the principles of the Puritans, he merely modified the long tradition in his region's oratory that had celebrated the Puritan commitment to absolute moral principle. Historian David Thelen's view that "the possession and interpretation of memory is rooted in the conflict and interplay among social, political, and cultural interests and values in the present" applies well to antebellum New England where the contemporary issues of slavery, abolitionism, and war

⁴ See for instance, Stephen Nissenbaum, "New England as Region and Section," in Edward L. Ayers *et al.*, eds., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore, 1996), 38-61; Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture: From Revolution Through Renaissance* (Cambridge, UK, 1986); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997); John Seelye, *Memory's Nation: The Place of Plymouth Rock* (Chapel Hill, 1998); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, MA, 1997); Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC, 1995); Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979); Blanche Linden-Ward, *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Columbus, 1989); Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York, 1978); Harlow Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism: Massachusetts Conservative Leaders and the Transformation of America, 1815-1836* (Boston, 1998); and Pershing Vartanian, "The Puritan as a Symbol in American Thought: A Study of the New England Societies" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1971).

became filters through which the meaning of sectional memory was fought over and at least partially refashioned. Although conservative memory confidently equated New England's past with order, deference, and Union, radical abolitionists and antislavery intellectuals struggled to reinterpret the central symbols of regional history in service to very different ideals.⁵

The growing periodical press in New England provided a crucially important forum in which the meaning of sectional history could be actively and continuously contested. Unlike cemeteries, monuments, and historical societies, the very periodicity of journals like the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* offered their editors an opportunity to engage readers in an evolving process of sectional re-imagination that responded to ongoing events in the larger sectional controversy. More than sermons, monographs, or pamphlet literature, moreover, literary periodicals were able to approach sectional audiences from a variety of cultural angles. Patricia Okker's work on William Gilmore Simms has already made this case for the southern periodical culture. In the pages of the *Southern Quarterly Review*, Simms combined serial fiction with articles on regional history to explain and propound South Carolina's radical sectional vision to the rest of the South. As the editor and chief contributor to the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, Parker continually re-examined New England's history, its political leaders, and its self-appointed intellectual elite. Powerfully linking the central symbols of the region's history with its present antislavery mission, Parker's periodical writings identified the antislavery movement, rather than its conservative critics, as the rightful inheritor of New England tradition.⁶

As the editor of a sectional periodical, Theodore Parker possessed real advantages as well as serious liabilities. On the one hand, his credentials as an authentic son of New England were unassailable and provided

⁵ David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History*, 75 (Mar. 1989), 1127; Wendell Phillips, "The Puritan Principle and John Brown," in *Speeches, Lectures and Letters*, 2nd Series (Boston, 1894), 307; For other works that treat historical memory in similar ways, see Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston, 1999); and Robert Cray Jr., "Major John Andre and the Three Captors: Class Dynamics and Revolutionary Memory Wars in the Early Republic, 1780-1831," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 17 (Fall 1997), 371-97.

⁶ Susan Belasco Smith and Kenneth M. Price, "Periodical Literature in Social and Historical Context," in Susan Belasco Smith and Kenneth Price, eds., *Periodical Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Boston, 1995), 3-15; and Patricia Okker, "Serial Politics in William Gilmore Simms' Woodcraft," *ibid.*, 150-62. Though dealing with national rather than sectional themes, Glen Wallach's, *Obedient Sons: The Discourse of Youth and Generations in American Culture* (Amherst, 1997), especially chap. 5, points to the role of antebellum periodicals in the ongoing debates over the meaning of history and generational identity.

authenticity and inspiration in a culture that still placed enormous emphasis on family origins. As the grandson of Captain John Parker, commander of Lexington's Minutemen on April 19, 1775, he was personally linked to one of the region's most storied events. Though he had never known his famous ancestor, Parker's boyhood in Lexington during the 1820s had been filled with mythic tales of the old captain's courage and relentless dedication to the cause of liberty. His identity as a sectional intellectual and antislavery activist, moreover, was firmly built upon this personal connection to New England's revolutionary heritage. After moving to Boston in 1846, he placed his grandfather's flintlock alongside a captured British musket on the wall of his study and vowed to resist southern "tyranny" in the name of his illustrious ancestor. "If I would not peril my property, my liberty, nay, my life, to keep my own parishioners out of slavery," he once wrote during the conflict over the Fugitive Slave Act; "I would throw away these trophies and should think I was son of a coward, and not a brave man's child."⁷

By his own admission, however, Parker was also one of the most controversial figures in New England during the 1840s. Although a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and an ordained Unitarian minister, his iconoclastic theological writings had gained him a reputation for dangerous religious radicalism. Beginning with his famous sermon on "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" in 1841, Parker had incurred the wrath of his former teachers and more conservative colleagues by questioning the authenticity of New Testament miracles and by vigorously asserting Jesus' essential humanity. His articles and books on Biblical criticism and theology had been condemned by Boston's Unitarian press, and by the mid-1840s he had been excluded from ministerial fellowship and pulpit exchanges. His growing interest in the antislavery movement after 1845 simply completed his ostracism from polite Boston society. Although his views on theology and reform were supported by the small group of transcendentalist intellectuals surrounding Ralph Waldo Emerson in Concord, Parker understood that his reputation and influence in New England had been permanently compromised by a conservative Boston establishment that wielded enormous social and cultural influence. "I am

⁷ Theodore Parker to Millard Fillmore, Nov. 21, 1850, Theodore Parker Collection (Harvard Andover Theological Library, Cambridge, MA).

the most unpopular man in Massachusetts," he once told a friend, "and am probably more hated than any man in the state."⁸

By the time he visited the Forefathers' Day festivities at Plymouth in 1845, moreover, Parker also confronted the fact that there was less and less room for his views on religion and reform in New England's literary periodicals. Transcendentalism's journal, the *Dial*, had folded over a year earlier, and the prestigious but highly conservative Massachusetts periodicals like the *North American Review* and the *Christian Examiner* refused to print anything that came from Parker's pen. Linked very closely with the conservative whiggery and Harvard Unitarianism that permeated the culture and ideology of the Massachusetts elite, these publications proscribed the radical theology and abolitionism that conservatives saw as socially disruptive and politically divisive. Two months before the organizational meeting that founded the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, Parker complained bitterly to Ralph Waldo Emerson about the stifling of progressive thought in the pages of these periodicals. "The *Examiner* is sold to Mr. Gannett and the members of the Unitarian church," he argued. "Dyspeptic [Francis] Bowen rides the lean and limping *North American* carrying its double load of bigotry and ultra-Whiggism." To Charles Sumner, he spoke of the beneficial effect of a new journal in prodding conservative New England toward reform of all kinds. "It will strike a salutary terror into all the Ultramontanists, and make them see that they do not live in the Middle Ages," he quipped.⁹

Despite the caricature and vitriol of his condemnations, Parker's sectional rhetoric and antisouthern orientation owed a great debt to these older, established Massachusetts periodicals. For decades before the founding of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, editors of Boston's leading literary journals had eloquently maintained that New England's unique Puritan origins had provided the larger nation with the "courage, self-discipline and resistance to tyranny" that so marked its place in the world. The editors of the *North American Review*, for example, had long promoted a New England-based historical literature that perceived nascent republicanism in Puritan church government and the origins of American economic prosperity in Puritan values of work and self-denial. Betraying

⁸ Theodore Parker to Robert White, Oct. 20, 1850, Parker Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society). For biographical information on Parker, see Henry Steele Commager, *Theodore Parker, Yankee Crusader* (New York, 1937); and John White Chadwick, *Theodore Parker, Preacher and Reformer* (Boston, 1900).

⁹ Theodore Parker to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mar. 14, 1847, Emerson Collection, and Parker to Charles Sumner, Apr., 1847, [n.d.], Theodore Parker Collection (Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA).

their Federalist and antisouthern orientation, moreover, such journals laid special claim to the Revolution and denied that southern traditions and leaders possessed the same "original" relationship to the American nation. As he set about the task of constructing an antislavery New England identity in the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, therefore, Parker drew upon sectional symbols and antisouthern usages that were deeply embedded in both the print and ceremonial cultures of his state and region.¹⁰

But as an antislavery intellectual, Parker also understood that these older periodicals were both politicized and highly conservative. Responding to the early national and antebellum democratic movements, New England spokesmen had used history and memory to support Whig values of ordered liberty and social organicism. For all their sectionalism, moreover, New England conservatives had also become deeply committed to the preservation and authority of national institutions. Editors like Jared Sparks and Edward Everett consistently equated respect for New England's past with loyalty to the Constitution, the Union, and to the genteel leadership class that New England offered the nation. Conservative sectionalists used history as a means by which to bind Americans, especially New Englanders, to existing political arrangements and social institutions. By the mid-1840s, the "vandal spirit" of abolitionism had emerged as the most serious threat to the conservative emphasis on order and institutional authority. Conservatives loathed the social disruption and potential conflict that accompanied antislavery agitation, and their periodical culture clearly reflected that discomfort. "We regret to see the abolitionists of the day seizing upon the cruelties and abuses of power by a few slaveholders," wrote Emory Washburn in the *North American Review*. "If . . . the Union be dissolved . . . our country will be plunged into the gulf."¹¹ Although the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* reflects Parker's overall rejection of a conservative vision of New England sectionalism, he too regarded abolitionism with some ambivalence. In a one-hundred fifty

¹⁰ On the New England periodicals and the sectional tradition, see Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism*, 97-117; Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines* (2 vols., New York, 1930), II, 219-61; Buell, *New England Literary Culture*, 193-238; Jean Matthews, "Whig History: The New England Whigs and a Usable Past," *New England Quarterly*, 51 (June 1978), 193-208; Daniel Walker Howe, *American Whigs*, 71; and Linda Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, 1970).

¹¹ Emory Washburn, *North American Review*, 41 (Jan. 1833), 193. The relationship between history and politics among Massachusetts conservatives is analyzed in Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism*, 118-147; Matthews, "Whig History," 196; Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs*, 70-73; and R. Kent Newmyer, *Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story: Statesman of the Old Republic* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 181-95.

page, anonymous "Letter on Slavery" published simultaneously with first number of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, for instance, he had attempted to develop an antislavery position that was distinct from abolitionism in its scholarly objectivity. Describing the project to abolitionist Samuel Joseph May, Parker stated clearly that he did not intend to "condemn the Church or State" as radical abolitionists did because "th[ough] bad enough, they are the best institutions we have." Modeled on the more moderate rationalism of William Ellery Channing's 1836 work *Slavery*, Parker sought to reach his audience through statistical and legal arguments that exposed slavery's degrading effect on American life and advocated an electoral solution to the problem. Aware that Parker's prodigious talents as a speaker and writer could be of great value to their movement, Garrisonian abolitionists nonetheless recognized that his views were distinct from theirs. Praising Parker's "characteristic industry, ability and discrimination," the *Liberator's* review of his "Letter on Slavery" nevertheless expressed disappointment at its implicit assumption that emancipation could be achieved within the existing Union: "We humbly conceive that [politicians] are the very last in the world at whose hands we should look for this work."¹²

As he mobilized support for the founding of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* in the spring of 1847, moreover, Parker's ambivalence about abolitionism clearly shaped his thinking about the direction of the new journal. Although personally acquainted with William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and several other Boston abolitionists, Parker's preliminary list of contributors for the review did not include them. Instead, he showed much more interest in antislavery politicians Charles Sumner, Horace Mann, and John Parker Hale who stood apart from the Garrisonians. In referring to the group that had begun the journal as a "council of conservative reformers," moreover, Parker clearly sought to distinguish his ideological persuasion from abolitionist friends who advocated disunion, nonresistance or both. "I criticize the Garrisonians on their own platforms, and I praise 'em on other platforms," he once told Wendell Phillips. "They may need to hear the criticism; others their positive merits."¹³

¹² Theodore Parker to Samuel May, July 15, 1846, Parker Collection, (Massachusetts Historical Society); Parker, "Letter to the People of the United States Touching the Matter of Slavery," in James K. Hosmer, ed., *The Slave Power* (Boston, 1916), 35; *Liberator*, Dec. 31, 1847.

¹³ Parker, "Writers for a New Journal," Manuscript Journal Entry, 404, Parker Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society). Parker uses the phrase "council of conservative reformers" in a letter to Charles Sumner, [n.d.], 1847, Parker Collection (Houghton Library, Harvard University); and Parker to Wendell Phillips, [n.d.], *ibid.*

Parker's emphasis on the politics of sectional memory, in fact, was a serious and shrewd attempt to bridge the chasm between the complacent conservatism of older New England periodicals and the confrontational radicalism of the abolitionists. Positioning the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* between the ideological poles of the *North American* and the *Liberator*, he intended to carve out a distinctive niche in the New England periodical market and to use sectional memory and history to unite the divided progressive forces of his region. As part of a generation of New Englanders reared amidst almost constant public celebrations of sectional history, Parker understood the potential of such rhetoric to underscore the common experiences and values of his contentious contemporaries in the antislavery movement. Used selectively and periodically to interpret the unfolding events of the sectional controversy, regional memory could be a powerful antidote to ideological fragmentation. As he reminded his readers that New England's past bound them to more than simply the preservation of existing political and social institutions, he hoped to feed the intellectual needs of abolitionists, antislavery politicians, and sectional intellectuals alike. Though "the best understandings of New England," had become a "despised and sniveling opposition" to the nation's "destructive fury," the new journal could provide a "true direction to the first steps of a nation."¹⁴

The initial context for Parker's invocation of New England's sectional past emerged from his horror at the failure of Massachusetts' politicians to stand against what he believed to be an unjust, proslavery war against the Republic of Mexico. Denouncing the war from the historic platform of Faneuil Hall in early 1847, Parker had already publicly demanded that New England's people oppose the conflict in memory of their heroic, revolutionary forbears. "I call on the men of Boston, on the men of the old Bay State, to act worthy of their fathers," he told a crowd that included both supporters and hecklers. "It is time for us to tell them that not an inch of slave territory shall be ever added to this realm." Although invoking revolutionary memory in an antiwar speech presented potential rhetorical problems, Parker cleverly cast slaveholding president James Polk as a new George III whose designs on Mexican territory required the subjugation of New England dissent. Pointing to recently enlisted volunteers inside

¹⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "To the Public," *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, 1 (Dec. 1847), 4-5. Those common experiences included yearly events such as Fourth of July celebrations and Forefathers' Days, as well as special regional events such as Bunker Hill monument dedication and the Marquis de Lafayette's visit to Massachusetts in 1824. A growing number of scholars have argued for the importance of history and memory in antislavery thought and action. They include McInerney, *The Fortunate Heirs of Freedom*, esp. chap. 1; Seelye, *Memory's Nation*, and Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*.

Faneuil Hall whose threats and constant heckling made it difficult to hear the antiwar speakers, Parker reminded his audience that “our fathers hated a standing army,” and warned them that the “hireling soldiers of President Polk” were seeking to “overawe the majesty of the people.” Implying that these American troops were sectional traitors, willing agents of a scheming “foreign” despot, Parker exhorted the crowd to resist the subversion of New England’s true revolutionary legacy.¹⁵

When the first number of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* appeared ten months later, however, Parker used its pages to reflect more calmly and systematically on the reasons for New England’s failure to heed his appeal. The problem, he had come to believe, was the corruption of authentic sectional memory and identity by the region’s commercial interests. “New England could have prevented [the war],” he maintained, “but a false idea had gone abroad in New England—that southern slavery is profitable to the North.” Convinced that New England possessed the latent moral and political energy to rescue the nation from its “delirium,” he feared that the commercial ties between conservative New England textile interests and the slaveholding South had vitiated the section’s ability to speak in its truest voice. “The ‘chivalry’ [of the South] and the ‘morality’ [of New England] have one common affection,” he argued, “the love of gain.” This unholy alliance had not only prevented New England’s effective opposition to the war, but had produced an attitude of base servility toward the South that betrayed the spirit of the revolutionary generation. Quoting Shakespeare, Parker suggested that New England had long ago learned “to crook the pregnant hinges of the knee/ Where thrift may follow fawning.”¹⁶

In choosing to fawn for commercial or political gain rather than to follow New England’s historic principles, however, Massachusetts’ conservative politicians received the lion’s share of Parker’s editorial invective. Sensitive to the Puritan as well as revolutionary sources of New England’s identity, he took great pleasure in castigating Boston’s representative Robert C. Winthrop as the only member of his state’s delegation to cast a vote in favor of the Mexican war. Winthrop bore one of the most famous names from Massachusetts’ colonial past, and his Whig politics and conservative sectionalism had made him a popular promoter of New England values around the North. But his vote on the war personified

¹⁵ Theodore Parker, “The Mexican War,” in Hosmer, ed., *Slave Power*, 31, 28, 21. There is an account of the meeting in the *Liberator*, Feb. 19, 1847; and in Claude M. Fuess, *The Life of Caleb Cushing* (2 vols., New York, 1923), II, 38.

¹⁶ Parker, “The Mexican War,” *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, 1 (Dec. 1847), 53, 54. The quotation is from *Hamlet*, III, ii, 65.

Parker's fears about the death of a vital sectional tradition and signified a gross betrayal of the existing links between New England's present politics and its founding mythology. Invoking the same historical themes that conservatives like Winthrop and Webster had long used to uphold national institutions, Parker now used the heart of New England's Puritan identity to shame them. "In that puritanic blood of theirs, was there no tinge from the heart of the Pilgrim?" he wondered.¹⁷

Rhetorically conflating Plymouth Separatism with the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, Parker adhered to the long tradition of New England commemorative oration that usually cast Plymouth as "the first in a providentially appointed series of events leading to the founding of Massachusetts Bay and other New England colonies." What interested him was not history *per se*, but rather a selective use of tradition to establish authentic sectional identity and to evaluate the conduct of sectional leaders. Both dramatic and darkly comic at times, his literary polemic often played upon ironic betrayals of the past by the very people who claimed its mantle. Since the *Review's* articles were unsigned, moreover, Parker was able to experiment with aspects of style and rhetorical ethos that would have been inappropriate in published sermons. Assuming the persona of the outraged sectional patriot in his 1847 article on the Mexican War, for example, Parker castigated Webster, Winthrop and other New England Whigs for applauding a speech made by Henry Clay at the 1846 Plymouth Forefathers' Day celebrations in which the senator from Kentucky expressed a desire to capture or slay a Mexican. "Could they not, on that day, amid the feasting, the wine, the revelry, amid the politicians and the generals, amid the 'great applause,' could they not for a moment think of those outcasts of the world who came in the name of Justice to found a state?" he wondered. Memory itself, Parker implied, had been smothered in a haze of epicureanism, militarism, and destructive xenophobia.¹⁸

If Webster's and Winthrop's failure to oppose a proslavery war represented the political consequences of a vitiated sectional memory and identity, the works of historian William Hickling Prescott convinced Parker that a similar decay was occurring in New England's formal historical writing. Trained at Harvard and consistently praised in the *North American Review*, Prescott was the author of numerous works of Spanish and Latin American history that had received both popular acclaim and the approval of conservative Boston. His *History of the Conquest of Mexico* published

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁸ Buell, *New England Literary Culture*, 198; Seelye, *Memory's Nation*, 93, 458; Parker, "Mexican War," 49.

in 1843 had chronicled Cortez's sixteenth-century defeat of Montezuma in a highly romantic style that undoubtedly "fired the imagination" of American volunteers who enlisted to fight in a "Second Conquest." Prescott's history was meant as a scholarly form of entertainment rather than as wartime propaganda, but sales of the book climbed steadily during the Mexican War and it became required reading for expansion-minded politicians like Caleb Cushing who served as a colonel in Massachusetts state regiment.¹⁹

The review format afforded Parker the opportunity to comment critically and at length on the cultural assumptions of a Brahmin writer like Prescott in ways that pulpit sermons and lyceum addresses did not. His lengthy attacks on Prescott's work in the pages of the *Review* combined contemporary political issues with a demand for a New England historiography that was both useful to the present generation and representative of the region's highest qualities. "When a man of New England undertakes to write a history," he argued, "there is less excuse if his book should be wanting in philosophy and in humanity." Prescott, he maintained, lacked both "to a degree exceeding belief." Failing to provide a progressive philosophical framework in which to judge and evaluate the past, Prescott had fallen into a simple, celebratory narrative of the Spanish conquest with Cortez as the heroic conqueror of savage and backward Indians. Prescott's romantic, uncritical view of the past, he implied, had robbed his section and his nation of the ability to evaluate its present relationship with Mexico. But as the darling of Boston's conservative literary elite, Parker explained, Prescott wrote for "the class of well-bred men," whose morals simply reflected the "average judgment of a trading town."²⁰

Although Prescott's subject was Mexico rather than New England, Parker used his review to expose what he saw as the larger cultural failure of Boston's established men of letters. Appalled that Prescott's cultivated New England sensibilities were not offended by the cruel and inhuman

¹⁹ See C. Harvey Gardiner, *William Hickling Prescott: A Biography* (Austin, 1969); Robert Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York, 1985), 245-46. Although Prescott clearly disliked the Mexican War, Johannsen is incorrect in referring to Prescott as a "devout antislavery Whig" (245). See Gardiner, *Prescott*, 290; and George Ticknor, *Life of William Hickling Prescott* (New York, 1968), 464-93. Prescott's intimate connection with Brahmin Boston is amply documented in David Tyack, *George Ticknor and the Boston Brahmins* (Cambridge, MA, 1967).

²⁰ Parker, "The Character of Mr. Prescott as an Historian," *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, 2 (Mar. 1849), 247, 248.

violence meted out to the Indians by Spanish conquerors, Parker castigated the historian's attempts to excuse Spanish cruelty. "Mr. Prescott has no sympathy with the Mexicans," Parker concluded, "nay he pauses to avert the sympathy of other men, interposing his shield of ice between the victim and the compassion of mankind." While Webster and Winthrop had obliterated the memories of New England's Puritan and revolutionary past in supporting the Mexican War, Prescott's narrative had smothered the best of his section's culture in celebrating the depredations of Cortez. The results had been the same, and Parker's final judgment of Prescott was quite similar to his earlier evaluation of the politicians. "Can it be that the commercial atmosphere of Boston had stifled the nobler breath of the historian?" he asked. In a brief but gracious response to this scathing review, Prescott thanked Parker for the "frank and independent spirit" of his criticism and simply expressed his hope that "the public will not be not be converted to your philosophy."²¹

While Parker used the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* to expose links between his section's decayed connection with the past and its political and cultural failures in the Mexican crisis, his editorial mission also reflected a forward-looking program for sectional rebirth. Intimately connected to his vision of a revitalized, antislavery New England culture was a desire to strengthen the position of conscience Whigs like Charles Sumner and John Gorham Palfrey, whose vocal support for the Wilmot Proviso put them at odds with conservatives in their party and threatened their positions in Boston society. Having personally experienced the cold stares and stony silences of Massachusetts' polite society, Parker knew all too well the emotional and intellectual stamina required from those who espoused and acted upon unorthodox belief. Writing of the conscience Whigs in an 1848 article in the *Review*, Parker remarked that "the members of the family of Truth are unpopular . . . while the members of the family of Interest are all respectable, and are the best company in the world; their livery is attractive." Parker saw the "Young Whigs" as a new breed of principled New England statesmen whose rising opposition to slavery needed intellectual support and personal encouragement from friends and allies. In accusing conservatives like Webster and Winthrop of betraying the memory

²¹ Parker, "Prescott's Conquest of Mexico," *ibid.* (Sept. 1849), 465, 469; William Prescott to Theodore Parker, Mar. 3, 1859, Parker Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society).

of Pilgrim “outcasts,” he hoped to shift the mantle of sectional authenticity to a new generation of antislavery leaders.²²

This attempt to relocate legitimate sectional identity and authority, moreover, had important implications outside the traditional geographical boundaries of New England where the cultural and political supremacy of conservative sectionalism was less firmly established. Indeed, the aristocratic parochialism of the Brahmin elite had blunted their ability to reach audiences outside Massachusetts and therefore offered dissident intellectuals like Parker opportunities to shape the sectional identity of Yankee migrants. Although direct evidence of the journal’s circulation and readership is scanty, Parker’s correspondence indicates lively western interest in his journal’s antislavery cultural and political message. Booksellers and correspondents in the Western Reserve of Ohio, for instance, frequently informed him of the *Review*’s popularity in communities dominated by progressive, transplanted New Englanders. A Cleveland colporteur named R. Redington, reported that he regularly distributed copies of the journal to twenty-two subscribers, but indicated that a far greater number of families read the publication on short-term loan from either individuals or reading societies. Although Cleveland possessed a New England society that celebrated sectional themes on Forefathers’ Day with orations and parades, Parker’s journal provided Yankee migrants with quarterly opportunities to reconsider the meaning of their origins in light of contemporary events. “Most of us are from New England,” Redington wrote, “and the Western Reserve opens a field ready for the harvest.” In ways that the much more popular *Atlantic Monthly* would later perfect, Parker’s *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* appealed to Yankee westerners by supplanting the staid conservatism of the traditional New England periodicals.²³

²² Theodore Parker, “The Free Soil Party,” *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, 2 (Dec. 1848), 118; Parker, “The Mexican War,” 49. On the “conscience” Whigs, see Richard Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837-1861* (New York, 1976); Kinley J. Brauer, *Cotton versus Conscience: Massachusetts Whig Politics and Southwestern Expansion, 1843-1848* (Lexington, KY, 1967); F.O. Gattell, *John Gorham Palfrey and the Conscience of New England* (Cambridge, MA, 1963); and Martin Duberman, *Charles Francis Adams, 1807-1886* (Boston, 1961).

²³ R. Redington to Theodore Parker, July 24, 1848, and Darius Lyman Jr. to Parker, Apr. 6, 1849; both in Parker Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society). David Waldstreicher, *In The Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 245-93, explores New England fears about the cultural and political allegiance of the West during the early national period; Harlow Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism*, 97-117, analyzes the ways in which Brahmin social and political conservatism vitiated the effectiveness of their cultural program. On the role of the New England societies outside New England, see Vartanian, “The Puritan as a Symbol in

As he reached outward to the New Englanders of the West, Parker also reached inward to bolster the very politicians he hoped would carry the burden of authentic sectional culture into the national government. Sending the first number of the *Review* to John Gorham Palfrey as a gift in December 1847, he praised the “manly position you have taken in respect of the matter of slavery” since being elected to Congress in 1846 and encouraged him to defy the censure of those who lacked the moral courage to stand up for their section’s principles. Having first met Palfrey at Harvard Divinity School in the 1830s, Parker consoled this former editor of the *North American Review* that censure always fell upon those whose moral sentiments were far in advance of their times. “It is not in the power of New Englanders often to do such deeds as you have done,” he told Palfrey, and he promised to do whatever he could to “pluck a thorn out of your path.” Intellectual support from the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* was at least a partial attempt to fulfill that promise. Charles Sumner was impressed enough to send Palfrey a second copy of Parker’s article on the Mexican War, urging him to read its “stinging conclusion against the course of leading politicians.”²⁴

As Parker’s political friends attempted to regenerate the Massachusetts Whig party on the basis of antislavery principles, he sought to provide them with models of political conduct that conformed with New England’s “authentic” past. John Quincy Adams’s death in February 1848 provided a unique opportunity to illustrate the qualities of a statesman whose name was almost synonymous with New England and whose political career abounded with both antislavery and antisouthern principles. Appearing in the July 1848 number of the *Review*, Parker’s “Discourse on the Death of John Quincy Adams” was the product of extensive research conducted in part through correspondence with these same antislavery Whigs who had known Adams personally during his congressional career. Even though his discourse was presented as an “impartial” assessment of the former president’s life, Parker’s carefully crafted image of Adams actually reflects the same selective revision of sectional memory that so clearly marks his

American Thought,” 36-58. On the *Atlantic Monthly* and western audiences, see Jeffrey Groves, “‘Ticknor and Fields-ism of All Kinds’: Thomas Starr King, Literary Promotion, and Canon Formation,” *New England Quarterly*, 68 (June 1995), 206-22.

²⁴ Theodore Parker to John Gorham Palfrey, Dec. 1, 1847, and Parker to Palfrey, Jan. 19, 1848, both in Parker Correspondence (Houghton Library, Harvard University); Charles Sumner to John Gorham Palfrey, Dec. 10, 1847, in *The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner*, ed. Beverley Wilson Palmer (2 vols., Boston, 1990), I, 204. That Palfrey found Parker’s articles useful and informative is clearly stated in John Gorham Palfrey to Theodore Parker, Jan. 15, 1848, Parker Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society).

contributions to the *Review*. Detailing aspects of Adams's life and writings that supported an antislavery conception of New England's identity, Parker hoped to use the "old man eloquent" as an emblem of the region's potential as well as a measure by which to judge its politicians in the future. As a form of "symbolic biography," his eulogy sought to transmit an understanding of Adams's life that would help commit New England to antislavery politics.²⁵

As he constructed his work on Adams, Parker was acutely aware of the ongoing, high-stakes politics surrounding the memory of the former president's life. The conservative and antislavery wings of the Massachusetts Whig party struggled mightily to harness the meaning of Adams's political career to their own values. In Congress, Boston's Robert Winthrop had already eulogized Adams without once mentioning the antislavery struggles that had so marked his postpresidential career. As speaker of the House of Representatives, moreover, Winthrop refused to recognize any member likely to mention such divisive issues. In Boston, Edward Everett's eulogy of Adams in the Massachusetts State House on April 15, 1848, was similarly devoid of controversial subjects. As conservatives prepared to unite their party behind Louisiana slaveholder Zachary Taylor, it was crucial that Adams's commitment to the Union be emphasized above his antislavery principles. Antislavery Whigs like Charles Sumner were furious about these developments and complained bitterly that even Adams's physical remains were being attended by a Congressional Committee "on which was placed the most prominent Southern and South Western slaveholding partizans of General Taylor." Sumner was convinced that this attempt to downplay Adams's antislavery views was part of a political conspiracy to rally Massachusetts behind unacceptable moral and political compromises over slavery in the territories.²⁶

Responding to the conflict over Adams' legacy in the June 1848 number of the *Review*, Parker carefully constructed an image of the former president that emphasized both the antislavery aspects of his public career and his overall fidelity to New England's "authentic mission." Adams was a "New England man," whose childhood amidst "the roar of cannon at Lexington and Bunker Hill" gave him a direct connection to the Revolution.

²⁵ Michael Gilmore, "Eulogy as Symbolic Biography: The Iconography of Revolutionary Leadership, 1776-1826," in Daniel Aaron, ed., *Studies in Biography* (Cambridge, MA, 1978), 131-57.

²⁶ On reactions to Adams's death in Congress, see William Lee Miller, *Arguing About Slavery: The Great Battle in the United States Congress* (New York, 1996), 458-62; and Charles Sumner to Nathan Appleton, Aug. 31, 1848, in Palmer, ed., *Selected Letters*, I, 246.

Unlike Daniel Webster or Robert Winthrop, Parker's Adams had never allowed New England's commercial identity to "violate the ideas of the Revolution" and had repeatedly refused to "put on the collar, lie lies . . . and consent to slavery." Instead, he had understood New England's identity and its interests in an expansive sense that linked democracy, morality, and economic progress to an unswerving commitment to individual liberty. The signal accomplishment of Adams's public life, Parker asserted, had been his ability to transcend Webster's narrow commitment to the commercial interest and to embrace the unified brand of progress that only New England could offer the nation. "Mr. Adams loved his dollar as well as most New England men," Parker acknowledged, "but he loved justice more, honor more, freedom more." Clothed in Parker's rhetoric, Adams became a symbol of the bustling democracy, productive energy, and moral order of New England's towns and cities. The great challenge for the next generation of New Englanders was to prove themselves worthy of the legacy left by this regional hero.²⁷

In the dramatic events of Adams's later life, Parker found powerful ammunition against conservative interpretations of the former president's public career. In his depiction of Adams's struggles against the congressional gag rule on antislavery petitions, for instance, Parker presented an old fashioned New England statesman—one whose principles would not bend even to southern threats against the Union. "He would not curl nor cringe, but snorted his defiance in their very face," Parker wrote. Linking Adams metaphorically to the very landscape of his native state, Parker described him as "the chafed rock of Cohasset" who stood firm "amid the yeasty waves." Describing Adams's highly visible role in the protests against the rendition of the fugitive slave George Latimer in 1842-43, moreover, Parker used his physical presence at Faneuil Hall to weave a symbolic link between New England's revolutionary leadership and the antislavery imperatives of the present. In a literary tableau that encompassed his overall vision of an antislavery New England united with its past, Parker creatively recollected the Latimer protests. "That old man sat in the chair at Faneuil Hall; above him was the image of his father; around him were Hancock and the other Adams," he remembered. "Before him were the men and women of Boston, met to consider the wrongs done to a miserable negro slave; the roof of the Cradle of Liberty spanned them all." While the omnipresent monuments and images of New England's revolutionary past were intended to consecrate the institutions of the

²⁷ Parker, "Discourse on the Death of John Quincy Adams," *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, 1 (June 1848), 340, 341, 345.

founding generation, Parker now used his periodical to equate New England's identity and traditions with a higher law. "That New England knee bent only before his God," he said of Adams.²⁸

Although Parker sought to use Adams's life as a normative political model, his opposition to the frozen iconography of conservative history and politics necessitated that his own approach to sectional memory possess a critical spirit. Corresponding with an overall decline in the pious, "customary patriotism" that had dominated the public life of the early republic, Parker's approach to sectional history saw criticism of previous generations as a prerequisite for progress. "Great men are not always wise," he reminded the readers of the *Review*. "[T]he Egyptian people scrutinized their kings after death—much more should we [scrutinize] our fellow citizens, intrusted to serve the state." After listening to Edward Everett's bland and celebratory discussion of Adams' life, Parker told a friend that even though he "felt sorry to have to mention [Adams's] faults, I should not dare to pass them over on such an occasion." As a biblical critic and radical theologian, he had always maintained that blind reverence for either individuals or texts led to the acceptance of irrational and archaic ideas that blocked the progress of thought. "Criticism," Parker once wrote of the Bible, "asks men to . . . separate mythology from history, fact from fiction." Sectional advancement, like religious progress, then, depended upon the existence of an open and critical culture in which idols of all kinds could be subjected to rigorous scrutiny. If the Gospels and life of Jesus could be analyzed in such a spirit, therefore, so could the political career of John Quincy Adams.²⁹

In practice, however, Parker's critique of Adams was mild and only served to bolster his larger sectional purpose in writing the article. His harshest judgments related to periods in the former president's life where he seemed to trade his sectional principles for political advancement or even national purpose. Parker could find no excuse, for instance, for Adams's uncritical endorsement of the Embargo Act of 1807 that had resulted in such devastating consequences for the economy of New England. What has appeared to some modern historians as an example of Adams's willingness to oppose "the narrow sectionalists of New England" was utterly inexplicable in Parker's thoroughly sectionalized interpretation of John Quincy Adams's life. Even while noting the tepidity of Adams's

²⁸ Parker, "John Quincy Adams," 367, 370-71.

²⁹ On the decline in customary patriotism, see Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth*, 53; Parker, "John Quincy Adams," 349; and Parker, *A Discourse Pertaining to Matters of Religion* (Boston, 1907), 333.

antislavery activity while president, Parker surprisingly found the betrayal of New England's commercial interests in the embargo crisis far more distressing. "To my mind it is the worst act of his public life," he confessed. "I wish I could find some reasonable excuse for it."³⁰

Parker's criticisms of Adams ruffled the feathers of those, like Edward Everett, who hoped to depict Adams's life as an example of conservative statesmanship, but it was quite well received by the forces of political antislavery in New England and elsewhere. "My article on [Adams] has met with more favor than anything else I ever wrote," Parker told a New York correspondent. "It has been circulated very widely and I hope it will do some good work." Indeed, veteran Liberty party candidate James Birney was so pleased with it that he sent Parker a five dollar note for a year's subscription to the *Review* and proposed to write an article of his own on slavery for a subsequent issue. Birney understood that Parker's positive assessment of Adams's life reflected a profound dissatisfaction with New England's present class of leaders. "Compared with other public men now on the theater of action . . . I esteem him as highly as you do," he wrote. But he also commended Parker for refusing to write a traditional commemorative eulogy of Adams. Reminiscent of Parker's dissatisfaction with the Forefathers' Day orations in 1845, Birney expressed disgust with eloquent eulogies that had suffocated the legacy of the dead in monotonous factual detail or rhetorical excess. "After reading through the dull sophomorical effusions which Mr. Adams' death gave rise to in Congress," Birney told Parker, "[your remarks] especially commend themselves to me as the first honest attempt to benefit the living by a public, impartial account of the dead." In combining symbolic biography with post-mortem criticism, Parker's approach to the memory of John Quincy Adams verged on Birney's ideal.³¹

The striking combination of history, memory and antislavery politics that emerged in Parker's eulogy of Adams is also one of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review's* most distinctive characteristics. Unlike some antebellum intellectuals whose commitment to change necessitated full-scale revolt against the past, Parker's journal wielded a revised sectional

³⁰ Theodore Parker to Daniel White, Apr. 17, 1848, Theodore Parker Autograph File (Houghton Library, Harvard University); Parker, "John Quincy Adams," 349; Howe, *American Whigs*, 67.

³¹ Theodore Parker to friend, Oct. 2, 1848, in John Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Theodore Parker* (2 vols., New York, 1864), I, 458; James Birney to Theodore Parker, Mar. 27, 1848, and Birney to Parker, Oct. 27, 1848, both in James G. Birney Collection (William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor). Birney went on to write two articles for the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*.

memory against those who would use the past to limit change in the present. While Emerson complained about a New England culture that simply built the "sepulchers of the fathers," Parker instead chose to reinterpret the meaning of those sepulchers in solving the problems of the present generation. Since the thrust of New England's early national historical traditions had been either nostalgic or overtly celebratory, however, his somewhat more critical approach to the past grated on the ears of conservatives and verged on the abolitionist style that so deeply offended them. His pen "flourishes along too flippant a course to inspire much confidence in he who wields it," complained Boston's weekly *Christian Register*, while the Unitarian quarterly *Christian Examiner* warned its readers that Parker's articles were likely to "disturb some sensibilities and offend some convictions." Unable to denounce the *Review* simply as an organ of radical abolitionism, Massachusetts conservatives were nevertheless aware that the new journal had emerged as a platform for alternative understandings of both past and present.³²

Indeed, Brahmin criticisms of Parker's somewhat strident literary style and their obvious discomfort with his critical attitude toward the past are related aspects of a larger struggle over the public discourse of antebellum New England that is reflected in its periodical literature. As many students of New England culture have noted, the Brahmin elite were deeply committed to rules of genteel public discourse that they believed separated them from the masses and gave them a legitimate claim to cultural authority. Linked to classical and early modern republicanism, moreover, these canons of decorum implied a deep respect for the past and the role of language in preserving legitimate authority and social order. While powerfully connected to their class identity, the elite's insistence upon a "refined eloquence" that expressed the natural superiority of the speaker or writer nevertheless undermined their ability to reach audiences in the mass-democratic culture of antebellum America. For all its cultural importance, the *North American Review* reached a peak prewar circulation of only 3,200. Although scorned by Boston's refined gentlemen, both the partisan and abolitionist press in Massachusetts were much more successful in their use of a "middling rhetoric" that jettisoned the historic traditions of linguistic elegance in favor of purposely inflated speech and calculated

³² Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Essays and Lectures* (New York, 1983), 7; *Christian Register* (Boston), Mar. 11, 1848, 4; *Christian Examiner* (Boston), (Jan. 1848), 153. For interpretations of the cultural and generational tensions regarding history and progress, see Fred Somkin, *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Freedom, 1815-1860* (Ithaca, 1967), 175-206; Perry, *Boats Against the Current*, 47-78; and Wallach, *Obedient Sons*, 1-9 and *passim*.

bluntness. Radical abolitionists, whose public speech had perfected the “eloquence of abuse,” spurned traditional gentility in public discourse as a mask for moral obfuscation. Having conducted his own battles with the Brahmin religious establishment in an indecorous and acerbic fashion, Parker sympathized with the corrosive acid of the abolitionist idiom. “These men, it is said, are sometimes extravagant in their speech . . . they call slaveholders hard names, and appeal to all who have a heart.” he once wrote of the abolitionists. “The best of men have their infirmities, but if this extravagance be one of them, what shall we call the deadness of so many more amongst us?”³³

Without formally endorsing abolitionism, Parker used aspects of their “middling rhetoric” to penetrate both the mystique of established sectional leaders and their calculated use of New England’s historical traditions. His attacks on Webster, Winthrop, and even Prescott, for instance, clearly combined elite speech with a flippant sarcasm that traditional rhetoricians associated with an impaired character. Outraged by Daniel Webster’s comparison of American recruits in the Mexican War with the veterans of Bunker Hill, for example, Parker wrote, “as well might the Horse-guards at London claim glory because they had chased a crowd of women from Billingsgate, and driven them up Ludgate hill.” In his eulogy of John Quincy Adams, moreover, Parker remembered Adams’s lack of traditional eloquence and maintained that his frequent use of “terrific” sarcasm was one of his most effective weapons. In order to claim Adams’s memory for the forces of change in New England, in other words, Parker also laid claim to his modes speech. “Eloquence is no great gift,” he asserted. Adams’s “invective [was] his masterpiece of oratorical skill.” In recruiting articles from combative antislavery intellectuals like James Birney, Richard Hildreth, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Henry Bowditch, Parker further demonstrated his preference for a rhetorical style closer to that of the *Liberator* than the *North American Review*.³⁴

The underlying links between these changing modes of periodical discourse and the emergence of more critical attitudes toward New

³³ Theodore Parker, “A Sermon of Slavery,” in *The Slave Power* (Boston, n.d.), 10-11. The nineteenth-century transformations of rhetoric and public speech are analyzed in Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, 1990). The terms “refined eloquence” and “middling rhetoric” are his. The circulation of the *North American Review* can be found in Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1850-1865* (Cambridge, MA, 1938), 231-32. A classic defense of abolitionist public speech can be found in Wendell Phillips, “Philosophy of the Abolition Movement,” in *Speeches and Lectures*, I, 98-153.

³⁴ Parker, “The Mexican War,” 51; Parker, “John Quincy Adams,” 363-64.

England's past are also powerfully exposed in Parker's analysis of Richard Hildreth's historical writing. Hildreth was a former conscience Whig editor whose own views on American history had also been shaped by his commitment to antislavery politics. The son of a liberal Massachusetts clergyman and a 1826 graduate of Harvard, he had briefly practiced law in Boston before turning his full attention to Whig politics, antislavery activism, and historical scholarship. In 1849, he published the first three volumes of his *History of the United States* covering the period of settlement to the ratification of the Constitution. Combining English Utilitarian philosophy with the iconoclasm of a social activist, Hildreth's historical work consciously sought to detach New England's history from both the "gaudy tinsel" and "patriotic rouge" that had been showered upon it by historians and memorialists. Without indulging in self-conscious debunking, he consciously avoided picturesque language and set out to write a history that depicted American leaders "in their own persons, often rude, hard, narrow, superstitious and mistaken." Hildreth had once been a close protégé of conservative Bay State orators like Everett and Choate, but his conversion to conscience Whiggery had alerted him to the ways in which their use of history and memory served conservative purposes and "partial political theory." Not surprisingly, Francis Bowen of the conservative *North American* wielded his editorial pen against Hildreth's "cold-blooded" dissection of America's Puritan and revolutionary leaders and condemned the historian's failure to recognize "the worth and dignity of the motives which brought our Puritan fathers to these shores." Both the blunt style and the iconoclastic argumentation of Hildreth's work violated the most basic prescriptions of conservative culture.³⁵

Parker's attitude toward Hildreth's work was quite different, and his lengthy examination of the *History* in the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* provided one of the few positive assessments that the work received in the New England periodical press. The fact that Hildreth's history lacked the "picturesqueness of style" that made Prescott's work so popular was one of its strengths. His attempt at "scientific history" proved much more valuable in Parker's larger quest to break the conservative monopoly on the past. Against a traditional sectional memory that cast the Puritans as petrified

³⁵ Richard Hildreth, *History of the United States* (6 vols., New York, 1849-51), I, vii; *ibid.*, IV, vii; Francis Bowen, "Hildreth's History," *North American Review*, 73 (1851), 445, 411. On Hildreth, see Donald E. Emerson, *Richard Hildreth* (Baltimore, 1947); Emerson, "Hildreth, Draper, and 'Scientific History,'" in Eric Goldman, ed., *History and Urbanization: Essays in American History in Honor of W. Stull Holt* (Baltimore, 1941), 139-70; George H. Callcott, *History in the United States, 1800-1860* (Baltimore, 1970), 190-91; and Buell, *New England Literary Culture*, 230-32.

monuments of traditional virtue, Parker now praised an historical vision that consciously refused to compromise with the shibboleths of New England filiopietism. "Mr. Hildreth is not ambitious in his attempt to defend the fathers of New England," Parker argued. "He is not misled by any reverence for the Puritans." Unlike Prescott whose literary "shield of ice" had attempted to obscure the reality of brutal conquest and intolerance, Hildreth had made no attempt to disguise the errors of New England's founding generation. In Hildreth's caustic and vivid account of Puritan repression, destruction of Indians, and participation in the slave trade, Parker found historical evidence for the ongoing need for change. As long as New Englanders uncritically venerated the past, they would be unable to trust themselves to face the present crisis with confidence. Now no longer the subject of simple, "unqualified praise," the "bigoted character" of the Puritans could be finally acknowledged by a new generation of New Englanders committed to progress. Written "in the spirit of a democrat," Hildreth's image of deeply flawed Puritans would allow young New England intellectuals and politicians to face the future without fear of betraying the past.³⁶

While Parker delighted in letting the air out of pompous conservative rhetoric, his larger loyalty to the same New England sectional tradition nevertheless imposed serious limits on his critical vision. Despite the power of Hildreth's critique of the Puritans, Parker's review still insisted that America's highest ideals had emerged from the New England's unique colonial past. Whatever the specific mistakes of the region's founders, Parker maintained that their overall subordination of economic interest to religious and moral principle elevated them far above their southern counterparts and preserved them from the "blight of slavery." "New England was founded for the sake of an idea," he reminded his readers, "Virginia . . . by men who reasonably thought to make their fortune . . . they founded different institutions, which produce the contradictory results we now see." Parker had never intended his revision of sectional memory as either a rejection or a systematic examination of New England's past. Instead, he had intended it as a means of encouraging new sectional leaders to act confidently against slavery. The result was an unwieldy interpretation of New England history that celebrated the region's values while vigorously emphasizing its imperfections. Straining mightily to combine these elements, Parker's review of Hildreth concluded ambiguously by asserting that "along with the bigotry of the Puritans, there was a hardy vigor, a

³⁶ Theodore Parker, "Hildreth's History of the United States," *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, 3 (June 1850), 424, 397, 423.

capacity for doing and enduring, a manly reliance on God and their own arm."³⁷

Even more startling evidence of Parker's inability to fully transcend conservative visions of regional history was the total absence of any discussion of New England's own experience with slavery. While Parker dealt at length with Puritan "cruelty" toward the Indians, the lack of legal protection for indentured servants, and New England's role in the slave trade, his review accepted Hildreth's association of slavery itself with the South alone. Following not only Hildreth, but nearly every historian of New England since the 1790s, Parker simply assumed that slavery had played little or no role in colonial New England society and that his region's political institutions were "remarkable" for ways in which they reflected "the progress of liberty." As Joanne Pope Melish has recently argued, "virtual amnesia" about the important role that slavery played in the colonial New England economy had been a central part of the process through which the early national elite shaped a useful but racially exclusive image of a uniquely libertarian New England past. "A historically free, white New England ever more favorably contrasted with a Jacobin, Africanized South," she writes, "was the linchpin of a burgeoning antebellum New England nationalism." For Parker, as for a previous generation of New England sectionalists, confronting the reality of New England slavery meant sacrificing a deeply compelling vision of sectional origins that located the experience of bondage exclusively below the Mason-Dixon line.³⁸

The interpretive difficulties that confronted Parker's quest for a usable sectional memory simply multiplied as he attempted to apply it to the shifting antebellum political scene. In 1848, the dramatic revolt of Bay State conscience Whigs and the formation of the Free Soil party initially convinced Parker that Puritan self-reliance and the New England revolutionary spirit were replacing the false sectional patriotism of conservative leaders. "Massachusetts has shown herself worthy of her best days," he wrote of the Free Soil vote in 1848. "Mr. Webster's thunder [fell] harmless and without lightning, from his hands." The very politicians that Parker sought to nurture in the pages of the *Review* were using a similar understanding of sectional history in explaining the growth of support for

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 396, 407.

³⁸ Parker, "Hildreth's History," 407-17; and Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and 'Race' in New England* (Ithaca, 1998), 210-37. The implications of this historical effacement for Parker's later Anglo-Saxon racial nationalism are explored in Paul E. Teed, "Racial Nationalism and Its Challengers: Theodore Parker, John Rock and the Antislavery Movement," *Civil War History*, 41 (June 1995), 142-60.

the antislavery political movement. "The spirit of Freedom is spreading in Massachusetts now as in the days of the earlier Revolution," Charles Sumner wrote in language that delighted Parker. "Even in Boston, the stronghold of the commercial spirit, we find most unexpected sympathy."³⁹

New England's electoral weakness, its internal divisions, and the realities of political compromise, however, made such an interpretation difficult to sustain. Parker was bitterly disappointed, for instance, when the Free Soil convention chose Martin Van Buren rather than New Hampshire's John Parker Hale as its presidential candidate in 1848. Hale had become a hero to antislavery forces in New England when, as a Democratic congressman, he had defied his party and voted against the annexation of Texas. To Parker, Hale's willingness to support principle at the expense of political expediency placed him alongside Palfrey and Sumner as an ideal New England leader and legitimate heir to John Quincy Adams. "You have raised my opinion of the human race," Parker told Hale in the most dramatic language he could muster. "To stand alone in such a case is to stand nobly." That such noble New England ore could be shunned by the new antislavery party in favor of a calculating New Yorker like Van Buren undermined Parker's attempt to connect free soilism with his revised sectional memory. Grieved at the news of the party's choice, Parker instead sarcastically linked the "fox" to the memory of an earlier tempter of New England virtue. "Naughty men say Van is the son of Aaron Burr," Parker told abolitionist Samuel May. "There is a certain spiritual similarity between the two."⁴⁰

Whatever problems Van Buren's nomination posed for Parker's attempt to link the Free Soilers to New England's past, the ideological conflict among the region's reformers over its platform and historical claims was equally serious. Believing that the new party represented an even more egregious dilution of moral principle than the old Liberty party, Garrisonian abolitionists denounced its failure to call for immediate emancipation. While Sumner and other Free Soilers had laid claim to New England's revolutionary memory in building their movement, abolitionists explicitly

³⁹ Parker, "Hildreth's History," 421; Parker, "The Free Soil Party," 120; Charles Sumner to Salmon P. Chase, July 7, 1848, in Palmer, ed., *Selected Letters*, I, 237.

⁴⁰ Theodore Parker to John Parker Hale, Feb. 22, 1848, and Parker to Samuel May, Aug. 11, 1848, Parker Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society). Parker periodically (and unsuccessfully) solicited articles from Hale and sent him a copy of "John Quincy Adams." Hale, like Birney, Giddings, Palfrey, and Sumner, was also a source of information for Parker's articles on political and legal subjects. See for instance, Theodore Parker to John Hale, June 5, 1848, *ibid.* On the career of John Hale, see Richard H. Sewell, *John P. Hale and the Politics of Abolition* (Cambridge, MA, 1965); and Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 127-30, 152-69.

denied the legitimacy of such a connection. "The Free Soil Party . . . is not in its nature and avowed purposes a Revolutionary party," argued the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. "As long as it intends to be true to the political compromises of the Constitution, it is a *Pro-Slavery* party." Parker's editorial emphasis on sectional memory had been intended in part as a bridge between New England's divided antislavery forces, but he discovered that New England's past was still very much contested ground.⁴¹

Unwilling simply to concede the field to the abolitionists, Parker once again turned to the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* and to the integration of tradition and progress that he had attempted to forge in its pages. His article on the "Free Soil Party" in 1848 faced the difficult challenge of defending the party's "revolutionary" significance against doubtful radical critics while at the same time building a case for its fidelity to New England's sectional traditions. Not surprisingly, the result was a rather strained combination of generalities and contradictions. On the one hand, he declared that the new party was part of an unstoppable "revolution in ideas" that linked the principles of 1776 to an inevitable future "revolution in deeds." In their opposition to the "Dynasty of slaveholders" who manipulated the federal government in order to extend slavery, New England's Free Soil politicians like Hale, Palfrey, and Sumner were true heirs of the revolutionary generation's "determination to govern themselves." At the same time, however, he was forced to concede that the party was not hostile to "the American state, and therefore makes no revolution there." In making the case that free soilism was basically consistent with the Constitution, moreover, Parker seemed to yield to the abolitionists' most basic point.⁴²

The article was more successful, however, in recasting recent sectional memory to echo the more distant past. In a striking commemorative review of New England's antislavery history since 1831, Parker depicted the abolitionists and Free Soilers as interdependent forces for sectional progress. The Free Soil movement, he now contended, had benefited from seventeen years of heroic and successful New England antislavery activism. As he described Garrison's early days in Boston, Parker reminded his readers that abolitionists had long endured "the scorn, the loathing, the contempt of mankind" for the sake of "the most abused and despised class of men." Like the Plymouth Pilgrims whose "small beginnings" had been "mocked" by their own contemporaries, these latter day seekers had also

⁴¹ *Seventeenth Annual Report, Presented to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society* (Boston, 1849), 28-29; *Liberator*, May 26, 1848.

⁴² Parker, "Free Soil Party," 106, 107, 119.

“forgotten self interest in search of a great truth.” Just as the revolutionaries of 1776 had vindicated the sacrifice of their Pilgrim fathers, so New England’s support for the Free Soil party in the 1848 election represented at least partial vindication of the abolitionists’ extraordinary sacrifices. “When intelligent men mock at small beginnings, it is surprising that they cannot remember that the greatest institutions have had their times which tried men’s souls,” he mused. Though neither Garrisonian abolitionists nor Free Soilers would have acknowledged or approved of this connection, Parker labored mightily to elevate memory above ideology in uniting the progressive forces of his region.⁴³

Parker’s revised New England sectionalism had begun in part as a means by which to oppose slavery without endorsing radical abolitionism, but its ultimate formulation described antislavery radicals as New England’s conscience and as part of the vital, living bridge between his section’s historic struggles and its present “revolution in ideas.” In so doing, his periodical emerged as a dissenting voice in a conservative culture that had consciously constructed New England’s memory so as to bind the present generation to existing institutions. Sometimes inconsistent, and always selective, Parker’s periodical rhetoric nevertheless recast that legacy as a wellspring for transforming those institutions. The result was an antislavery vision in which the past and present merged in a progressive alliance that promised the inevitable “triumph of the genius of freedom.”⁴⁴

In October 1850, Parker informed a correspondent in New York that there would be no further numbers of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*. “[It] came to an end directly through the failure of the publishers,” he wrote. “Though they always found the *Review* profitable to them.” After three extremely laborious years as the journal’s editor, leading contributor, and financial supporter, Parker was frustrated at the failure of the project while at the same time relieved to be free of its incessant demands on his time. Escalating conflict in Boston over the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and Parker’s role as one of the city’s most militant opponents of the law had already come to dominate his attention. A central figure in the organization of Boston’s Vigilance Committee, he had emerged as a valuable link between the city’s black community, its abolitionists, and its political antislavery forces. Moving comfortably between activists of widely differing ideological persuasions, he now consciously sought to build a resistance movement upon the provocative sectional images that had

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 114-15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

emerged in pages of his periodical. "Plymouth, the altar stone of New England," and "Bunker Hill, the spot so early reddened with the blood of our fathers," had now become monuments to the future as much as to the past.⁴⁵

The rapid movement of Parker's rhetoric from the pages of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* to the streets of Boston provides the key to both the failure of the journal and its larger significance. While at times using the democratic idioms of the partisan and abolitionist press, the *Review's* format clearly resembled elite publications too closely to reach a truly popular audience. Indeed, the *Review's* obvious debt to conservative understandings of regional history and its rather slavish imitation of older periodical forms indicate how difficult it was for mid-nineteenth century New England intellectuals to find a fully democratic voice. In their struggles to detach themselves from the "haughty elitism" of the Brahmin elite, young New England intellectuals contended with a print culture that still militated against cultural rebellion. Parker's palpable relief at the death of the journal and his far more complete and successful application of its message in mobilizing popular resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act suggests that the traditional quarterly review was an imperfect forum for democratic intellectuals disenchanted with their conservative "intellectual inheritance."⁴⁶

At the same time, the *Review* had served its purpose. Parker was now highly skilled at the art of creating memory and reinventing tradition, and he had come to see the possible uses of a reconstructed past in popular forums. The posters, broadsides and antislavery sermons he wrote during the 1850s made direct appeals to an imagined New England that he had helped create in the pages of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*. "MEN OF BOSTON! SONS OF OTIS AND HANCOCK AND THE BRACE OF ADAMSES! See to it that no Massachusetts Citizen is dragged into Slavery, without TRIAL BY JURY! '76!," he exclaimed in 1854. The

⁴⁵ Theodore Parker to Robert White, Oct. 20, 1850, Parker Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society); Theodore Parker, "Reply to Webster," in Hosmer, ed., *Slave Power*, 246-47.

⁴⁶ Peter S. Field, "The Birth of Secular High Culture: The *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review* and Its Critics," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 17 (Winter 1997), 608-09; Fields, *The Crisis of the Standing Order: Clerical Intellectuals and Cultural Authority in Massachusetts, 1780-1833* (Amherst, 1998). The possible connection between the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review* and the more popular *Atlantic Monthly* is examined in Gohdes, *Periodicals*, 192-93. On Parker's use of memory during the anti-Fugitive Slave Act agitation, see Albert J. Von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson's Boston* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 111.

violent attempt to rescue Anthony Burns from the Boston Court House that year was in part sparked by a speech in which Parker tauntingly addressed an excited crowd in Faneuil Hall as “fellow subjects of Virginia!” Although the dream of a unified antislavery culture had not yet materialized in Massachusetts, there were powerful signs that a reworked sectional memory offered important points of connection between the region’s opponents of slavery. In an 1852 speech to a Faneuil Hall audience that included both many abolitionists and antislavery politicians who had contributed to the *Review*, Wendell Phillips used Parker’s idioms to praise Free Soilers Charles Allen and Horace Mann for their opposition to the rendition of Thomas Sims. “[N]o matter how far they may be from the level which we call antislavery,” Phillips believed that their actions conformed with the authentic traditions of their region. Despite their faults, he went on, “they have turned their faces toward Massachusetts, and would ultimately “vindicate the old fame of the State.”⁴⁷

For Parker, the Fugitive Slave Act crises offered unique opportunities to measure his region’s allegiance to the historic identity he had constructed. Applauding the city’s mass resistance to the rendition of Anthony Burns, for example, he could not help but conclude that Boston was still the “dear old Mother” of Hancock and Adams. At the same time, however, he also understood that New England and the North were in the process of creating a new history that would itself be worthy of memory and celebration. In the dramatic rescues of fugitive slaves, Parker saw a new sectional tradition in the making. “There are certain outward acts which represent a great principle of eternal right,” he told abolitionist Samuel May on the second anniversary of Jerry McHenry’s rescue in Syracuse, New York. “It is well to pause on each anniversary thereof, and use the historical occasion to deepen in our minds respect for justice, and the disposition to be faithful thereto, even in the midst of crisis.” In the pages of the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, Theodore Parker had paused amidst crisis to re-examine and reinvent New England’s memory.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ “Broadside No. II,” reprinted in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Parker*, II, 133; Wendell Phillips, “Surrender of Sims,” in *Speeches and Lectures*, I, 70; Parker’s speech before the Boston Court House attack is reprinted in Theodore Parker, *The Trial of Theodore Parker* (Cambridge, MA, 1855), 199-206.

⁴⁸ Parker, “The New Crime Against Humanity,” in Hosmer, ed., *Slave Power*, 309; Theodore Parker to Samuel May, [n.d.] [n.p.], in Weiss, *Life and Correspondence of Parker*, II, 117.