

**Genres of Resistance, Tones of Intimacy, and Subtle Notes of Mercy**  
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Do people enjoy being shaken and upset? The question is part of the larger one: is there pleasure in pain? To which the answer is: on certain terms, yes. Nor are the terms necessarily those of masochism. Being shaken by a tragi-comedy of Ibsen or Chekhov is a pleasure, because it is a shaking into life....

The last ideal to go is hope, for none of the others can live on unsupported by it. And so in this time of *tabula rasa*, to hope or not to hope, that is the question.

Eric Bentley, The Life of the Drama (1964)

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We are setting out over difficult terrain, and the ground itself unsettles. It is daunting to consider how best to talk about the complex and conflicting legacies of human enslavement, both the rhetoric of slavery and the reality of it. The Christian apostle Paul wished us to worry about our “enslavement” to appetite more than he seemed to worry about the Roman institution of human enslavement which he seemed to accept quite readily. Most of us today are deeply worried about the “enslavement” to debt which seems to have become such a crushing and inescapable burden for individuals and states alike, as became clear in the rolling thunder of 2007 and 2008, and is clearer still in the still-rumbling global echo. In between these two kinds of symbolic enslavement--one ancient and vaguely philosophical, the other modern and hyper-capitalist--stands another, more problematic form of enslavement: the actual enslavement of human beings, justified as ownership in a way that hinges on the astonishing transmutation of a person into property.

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This strange conception culminates in what is arguably the most worrisome and unsettling form of such a conversion of the human being into thinghood: the phenomenon of New World slavery and indenture, especially the enslavement of indigenous Americans and West Africans on two continents, as well as in the plantation-rich island economies of the Caribbean Sea. The special egregiousness of this system had something to do with an emerging global marketplace. New World slave trafficking was a transAtlantic, and relatively speaking, a rather global affair.<sup>2</sup> But the special egregiousness of this system had something to do as well with a newly emerging modern interest--among philosophers, every bit as much as biologists--in the “science” of race.<sup>3</sup> These twinned ideologies--of capitalism and racism, once effectively combined and cross-pollenating--would bear especially bitter fruit in the Americas. That religion was often in collusion with these ideas and these practices ought not tempt us to forget the primacy of the “other -isms” in the New World.

Thus far I have done little more than rehearse a well-known history, and stated the main contours of the problem. But I should say a word more about what I imagine as the distinctively capitalist contribution to the problem. The first issue is also the foremost, and it is well described by Adam Smith in his famous discussion of the astonishing productivity of a modern pin factory

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<sup>2</sup> I have been especially instructed by Walter D. Mignolo, The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, & Colonization (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995) for my thinking about developments that the Spanish empire first unleashed in the New World, to be followed by others such as the French, the British and the Dutch. I will concentrate especially on the French incursion into Spanish interests on Hispaniola later in this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Here the work of Robert Bernasconi is path-breaking and essential. See, for instance: The Idea of Race, edited with Tommy Lee Lott (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2000); his edited volume, Race: Readings in Continental Philosophy (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2001); and Race and Racism in Continental Philosophy (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).

(a discussion of great interest to Hegel, as we will see later). The citizens of a single factory town may not be able to use tens of thousands of pins daily, but the world can. In short, a form of capitalism that assumes a global market is organized with ferocious industrial efficiency to maximize productivity in order to meet an increasingly global demand. First you must corner a market; then you must supply it dependably. This dependability necessarily implicates the colonies in single commodity production, and the military in securing trade routes, especially by sea. So the British East India Company works hand in glove with the British Navy, and state-sanctioned privateers wage semi-secret wars on others' trade interests in the Mediterranean and Caribbean alike. One sees the impact of such calculative market rationality in everything, from the way plantations were organized to maximize the production of sugar, cotton and the rest,<sup>4</sup> to the way slave ships were organized to maximize the cargo they could hold--and thus to further dehumanize the transatlantic "middle passage."<sup>5</sup> Now to be sure, ruthless efficiency and using every last morsel of a product are not uniquely capitalist mentalities; they are a common enough feature in most all subsistence economies. But the global marketplace in the Early Modern period was not organized around subsistence or scarcity; it was organized around luxury and abundance. That is why certain features of the capitalist mode of organizing and rationalizing these markets seems so distinctive, for better and for worse.

The first distinctive feature is what, for lack of a better term, we might call the quest for a

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<sup>4</sup>. It is worth noting that even the rum trade initially served as a way to use everything, even the waste products, from the sugar industry; rum was thus the most unpalatable of liquors throughout the early colonial period. See Wayne Curtis, And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>. This concern for the living conditions in modern industrial cities such as Manchester provided a vivid focus of concern for Karl Mark, as would working conditions in places like Chicago for the America "muckrakers" like Upton Sinclair.

moral foundation for the system of global capital. Not every economic system feels the need for such moral justification. Such moral concern can be a salutary thing; it can also, as Nietzsche warned, lead to the most destructive and self-deluding kinds of moralizing. We meet much that is good, bad and ugly in the emerging Early Modern world-system. Adam Smith clearly understood that something had happened in the world economy and he attempted to describe it accurately *before* he tried to moralize it. Yet he remained deeply interested in moral theory, and had in fact written his Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759) well before embarking upon an analysis of The Wealth of Nations (1776). Utilitarian calculus took one very far in this system, yet Smith and others felt the need to hold this mode of consequential and means-end reasoning in check with other, rather different moral resources (the one that Smith privileged was the human capacity for “sympathy”--which one might have expected to render human enslavement more problematic than it seemed to be). Another distinctive feature of capitalist reasoning--and I do not think this was made explicit enough in the early period of its theorization--was what we might call a fundamental orientation toward the future. Capitalism, in fact, hinges uniquely upon its wager on the future: the requirement to give what has been promised; the promise to pay back what one has been borrowed; the assumption of sure and steady employment; the promise of the steady flow of goods and services; the promise of ever-expanding markets. It is that optimistic orientation toward the future, especially with regard to secure trading networks and the possibility of continually expanding markets, that has been called into question throughout the global system in this new millennium.

Less interested in economics *per se*, I wish now to reflect with greater deliberation, and I hope with greater care, on why it is so difficult to find *the right tone* with which to engage in our

proposed discussion, and why it remains unclear to me *what genre* is best suited to the moral challenge of confronting the history of human enslavement and its complex post-colonial legacies. One way to state the problem is to note the fundamental ambivalence in what I have just described. Excessively calculative reason has created some of the most inhumane of all social forms, and has served to underwrite and even justify them. And yet the Early Modern cultures that evolved within this new capitalist system perceived such inhumanity as a moral concern and so worked at setting moral limits to such kinds of reasoning. The future orientation is itself one such important check. Hope, after all, is a virtue that is as fundamentally future-oriented as is the system that I have just described.

Another way to describe what I am after is to observe that no one today is offering a defense of human enslavement; that ship has literally sailed over the horizon of the morally tenable. But I am hesitant to narrate the history of abolition in the New World as a story of human progress alone. Though it is surely that in general outline, the devil is always in the details. It bears recalling that it took a century, and a Civil Rights movement, to begin to deliver on promises made to freed people in the so-called Emancipation Proclamation as well as the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The reason I began with the quote from Eric Bentley is that it resonates so profoundly with the ways in which Cornel West has grappled with this same challenge, the moral challenge of finding the right *tones and genres* with which to do the work of radically democratic and/or prophetic Christian criticism. With Bentley as his guide, West has landed on the *tragicomic* mode he finds supremely executed in Anton Chekhov's plays,<sup>6</sup> as well as in some of Stephen Sondheim's musicals.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Bentley identifies

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<sup>6</sup>. See the "Introduction" to The Cornel West Reader (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), xv-xx.

forgiveness and hopefulness as the central tones of tragicomedy, West has intensified these tonalities in a post-Civil Rights North American context. These days, West challenges us to sustain *hope*, while avoiding the false temptation of *optimism*.<sup>8</sup> This difficult distinction enables me to confront the challenge of this topic more directly: How can one write or speak in this mode? Can one speak *tragicomically* about enslavement or debt? Can one enunciate meaningful grounds for hope *without* optimism? Clearly, we will need the assistance of our finest poets and musicians in any such endeavor, which is one of the many reasons that I am delighted to have Opal Moore's participation in this discussion.

The reason for my particular ambivalence has to do with the way I set my story up: the North American slave trade was born of a powerful mixture of global capital and scientific race theory. And while the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century brand of racism may be a thing of the past,<sup>9</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century theorizations of global capitalism are not. No one today can behave as if Frederick Douglass did not write My Bondage and My Freedom (1855); many today still behave as if Karl Marx did not write the The Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, or A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859), or Capital (the first volume, A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production, appeared in 1867).

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<sup>7</sup>. This was announced in an interview with Tavis Smiley on August 28, 2001, and is enunciated in an interview with Cornel West conducted by Len Schiff and Glen Perles and published as "Occupying Chekhovian Space," in The Sondheim Review 13.1 (2006): 24-28.

<sup>8</sup>. This was a point announced most eloquently in a speech entitled "Critique in the Age of Obama" at Princeton University (28 September 2010).

<sup>9</sup>. I emphasize the qualifier, 'may', in light of David Hollinger's important cautionary reminder that "[r]acism is real, but races are not."

See David Hollinger, Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 39.

This is a perplexing situation. What if our original invitation to think enslavement and debt together results in the surprising conclusion that a form of capitalism is the more persistent problem, such that a form of debt slavery persists long after its racial and imperial justifications have been dismantled or disowned? What, in a word, if modern political economy is more powerful and influential than racial taxonomy ever was? What then to say about concepts like bondage and liberation? As Gregory Schopen has shown in his brilliant walking tour of various monastic theologies, liberation is only available, ironically enough, to those who are already deemed to be free. Saint Francis had to *have* wealth, in order to be able to give it away.

### **FINDING HISTORICAL PURCHASE**

An immediate objection can and should be made. I seem to be speaking almost as if capitalism and racism are comparable, which surely they are not, save in the sense that both functioned as grand and overarching justifications of an emerging social order. There may even have been what Goethe, well before Max Weber, called an “elective affinity” between the two. Yet capitalism may well be defensible for many long after racism has ceased to be. Recall that Mark Twain observed in his Autobiography that enslaved persons on midwestern farms were threatened with transfer to South Carolina plantations as a way to keep them in line.<sup>10</sup> The coastal plantations, much like the mines of Peru, were recognized by everyone as the very worst places in which to be enslaved. Abolition was primarily aimed at the abolition of those very institutions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>. Mark Twain, The Autobiography, edited by Charles Neider (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959), 30-33.

<sup>11</sup>. Mines and plantations both, at times, seemed literally designed to be hells on earth. Dame

The question before me involves this central *historical* quandary: if the most egregious form of New World enslavement, plantation slavery, was born of the blending of global capitalism and scientific racism, then what happens when these twinned ideologies separate and detach from one another? What comes of New World slavery when racism is nominally vanquished but capitalist forms of debt-slavery persist? What may come, I am afraid, is a new and more insistent form of imperialism, a kind of economic and territorial rapaciousness that culminated in the revelatory crashes of 2007-2008.

The pivotal moment in that story is the Civil War, at least in the United States, a war that resulted in the United States of America transforming from a grammatical plural (the United States *are*) to a singular (the United States *is*). I would like to use an unusual text as a way to organize my initial reflections on that pivotal moment in this story: that marvel of North American letters, The Education of Henry Adams.<sup>12</sup> Adams eschews the more traditional forms of autobiography in some fascinating ways, going so far as to speak of himself in the third person throughout the book. He wishes to re-conceive the work of memoir as contributing to the story of his nation, and to the perennial dilemma of any and every manner of moral education.<sup>13</sup>

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Rebecca West performed a brilliant and disturbing analysis of this phenomenon in a posthumous unfinished manuscript about Mexico, entitled Survivors in Mexico, Brevard Schweizer, ed., (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 99-111. The book was intended to round out the kind of criticism she first laid out in her masterful Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia (New York: Penguin, 1940, 1941). The question of what justifies the human capacity for suffering--both to inflict it, and to withstand it--haunts the pages of all her finest works.

<sup>12</sup>. The Education of Henry Adams, Marion Starkey, ed. (New York: TIME Inc. Book Division, 1964), in 2 volumes.

<sup>13</sup>. "A story of education," he tells us, "--seventy years of it--the practical value remains to the end in doubt, like other values about which men have disputed since the birth of Cain and Abel; but the practical value of the universe has never been stated in dollars.... This problem of

To that end, Adams rather humorously refers to himself consistently as something of a cultural dinosaur, the proud possessor of what he calls “an eighteenth-century mentality,” with which and through which he observes the tumultuous changes in later nineteenth-century North America society: militarization, industrialization, commercialization and capitalization, and eventual neo-imperialism.<sup>14</sup>

But Adams surveys these massive changes in the nation from the constitutional perspective of the Founders, some of whom were his personal ancestors. He is, to use a Nietzschean category, an “untimely man,” and this untimeliness supplies him with an important vantage-point on his times. His fledgling nation, to quote Lincoln (for whom Adams voted, twice), was “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men were created equal.” The simultaneous maturation and education of that young nation involved another tragic Nietzschean moment: “life’s school of war.” The Civil War. The biographical frame for that war was as follows.

Adams was born in 1838 and the stories he learned from his grandfather took him straight back to the period of colonial formation--a time, we should be quick to recall, when there were many enslaved persons in the north as well as in the south. Adams died in 1914, understanding very well that his nation had grown into a very different kind of adult. Understanding how the fledgling Federation had grown into that adult industrial juggernaut required careful attention to

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education, started in 1838, went on for three years, while the baby grew, like other babies, unconsciously, as a vegetable, the outside world working as it never had worked before, to get his new universe ready for him” (The Education of Henry Adams, I: 3).

<sup>14</sup>. The Education of Henry Adams, I: 5, and especially I: 22:

Supposing he had seen a New York stock list of 1900, and had studied the statistics of railways, telegraphs, coal, and steel--would he have quitted his eighteenth-century, his ancestral prejudices, his abstract ideas, his semi-clerical training, and the rest...?

the nation's adolescence and coming of age: through the confrontation with the *constitutional* crisis of secession, and the *moral* crisis of race-based human enslavement.

For a man of Adams's 18<sup>th</sup> century mind-set, this all began at the beginning, with George Washington. The heroic leader of a fractious and fractured revolutionary army, the first president of the new nation under its new Constitution, Washington was also a slaveholder. That realization constitutes the first chapter in the never-ending story of Henry Adams's education. While few Americans respected professional politicians in the 1850s (or the 1870s, and these parts of The Education read as if they could have been written in any election cycle<sup>15</sup>), they were unanimous in their praise of George Washington. Henry Adams, who was then living in the nation's capital that bore the first president's name, noted that people were already making pilgrimage to his home at Mount Vernon. There was a movement in the offing to build him a memorial as well, though "the effort had failed." George Washington, in other words, was well on his way to becoming the country's first secular saint. Henry Adams made his pilgrimage as dutifully as the rest, though he took away a somewhat different lesson from the journey.

[I]t was no easy trip.... To the New England mind, roads, schools, clothes and a clean face were connected as part of the law of order or divine system. Bad roads meant bad

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<sup>15</sup>. See, for example, The Education of Henry Adams, II: 28:

Even Adams admitted that Senators passed belief. The comic side of their egotism partly disguised its extravagance, but faction had gone so far under Andrew Johnson that at times the whole Senate seemed to catch hysterics of nervous bucking without apparent reason. Great leaders like Sumner and Conkling, could not be burlesqued; they were more grotesque than ridicule could make them; even Grant, who rarely sparkled in epigram, became witty on their account; but their egotism and factiousness were no laughing matter. They did permanent and terrible mischief, as Garfield and Blaine, and even McKinley and John Hay were to feel. The most troublesome task of a reform President was that of bringing the Senate back to decency.

morals. The morals of this Virginia road was clear, and the boy fully learned it. Slavery was wicked, and slavery was the cause of this road's badness which amounted to social crime--and yet, at the end of the road and product of the crime stood Mount Vernon and George Washington.

Luckily boys accept contradictions as readily as their elders do, or this boy might have become prematurely wise. He had only to repeat what he was told--that George Washington stood alone.<sup>16</sup>

Adams is playing brilliantly on the realization that, even in the revolutionary period, there was not one power-and-cultural-center in the fledgling Republic, but two, and they seemed destined to come into conflict. The Philadelphia-to-Boston corridor lay to one side, and Adams was its avatar. The corridor of northern Virginia lay on the other, and there George Washington loomed largest.

For that very reason, Henry Adams was surprised by what he saw in the virtual museum that had been made of Washington's home. In short, it looked for all the world like his own home.

[W]hen he got there, Mount Vernon was only Quincy in a Southern setting. No doubt it was much more charming, but it was the same eighteenth century, the same old furniture, the same old patriot, and the same old President.

The boy took to it distinctively.... but he never thought to ask himself or his father how to deal with the moral problem that deduced George Washington from the sum of all wickedness. In practice, such trifles as contradictions in principle are easily set aside; the faculty of ignoring them makes the practical man; but any attempt to deal with them seriously as education is fatal.<sup>17</sup>

There is a lot packed into this brief yet ominous observation. The Boston patriot, of impeccable

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<sup>16</sup>. The Education of Henry Adams, I: 50.

<sup>17</sup>. The Education of Henry Adams, I: 50-51.

revolutionary and presidential pedigree, comes south and is amazed to find what he sees seeming so familiar. There is an inkling of a sameness here; these are all men of elite privilege, after all. Yet there was a howling and unbridgeable divide, or so he had been taught to believe, between the slave-holding south and the free north. If we were to think more seriously about that contradiction, then it would be impossible either to account for George Washington, or to maintain his place in the American pantheon. Something had to give--if one cared about education and achieving wisdom, rather than cynicism and *Realpolitik*.

But not yet. Henry Adams was still a teenager when he returned from Washington, DC, and while he was convinced that American children grew up far faster than their more privileged and unserious English counterparts,<sup>18</sup> there were fault lines that he, like the adolescent nation, was content to ignore for now. That is what makes this next observation so ominous:

Life was not yet complicated. Every problem had a solution, even the negro. The boy went back to Boston more political than ever, and his politics were no longer so modern as the eighteenth century, but took a strong tone of the seventeenth. Slavery drove the whole Puritan community back on its Puritanism. The boy thought as dogmatically as though he were one of his own ancestors. The Slave power took the place of Stuart kings and Roman popes. Education could go no further in that course, and ran off into emotion...<sup>19</sup>

What Adams sensed without understanding--and what is education, in the main, but the addition of understanding to sense?--was that the abolitionist north was fueled by a kind of *religious*

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<sup>18</sup>. The Education of Henry Adams, I:

<sup>19</sup>. The Education of Henry Adams, I:51. The way this problem was set up, as the “negro problem” (rather than, say, the white slavers’ problem), made it very difficult to resolve in ways that would do justice to those enslaved persons whose freedom was centrally at issue during the War and its aftermath.

zealotry that relied less on argument than on emotion. Convinced of its own purity, determined to unmask southern depravity, northern forces were being unleashed that could only result in a moral impasse that could not be solved politically or peaceably. So Henry Adams's teenage pilgrimage to Mount Vernon actually, if unwittingly, gave him a perspective and a moral template with which to view the later course of the country, and of the War.

His perspective on that War was an unusual one, since he spent the war-years in London, serving his father who was serving as Lincoln's ambassador.<sup>20</sup> The Adams family thus had the all-important mission of keeping England out of the war, as well as discouraging it from *recognizing* the new southern Confederation of slaveholding states. I will return to this large question of recognition shortly, in a brief discussion of Hegel's moral and political philosophy, but I should underline here that the question of the recognition, or non-recognition, of states we deem problematic is yet another political dilemma that has not come to rest in our own time.

A central aspect of Adams's education in London was an education in political gamemanship, a kind of gaming he found morally reprehensible. He was shocked not just by the level of political intrigue, but by the frankness with which high-ranking British administrators lied to his face. For the still Puritan-ly inclined Adams, the fundamental issue at stake in the War was simple: it was the moral problem of human enslavement and the bankruptcy, literal as well as figural, of a system built on enslaved backs. For the British the issue was not so simple, since slavery was also about plantations, and coastal plantations in the United States were all about cotton. There was also more than a whiff of imperial residue in British foreign policy regarding its upstart American colony: while they had abolished slavery in Britain, they seemed only too

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<sup>20</sup>. The Education of Henry Adams, I: 120-246.

happy to turn a blind eye to it in those semi-barbarized colonies across the Atlantic. Adams came to despise Gladstone, that stalwart of British liberalism and noble causes. “As morals,” he observed, “one could detect no shade of difference between Gladstone and Napoleon except to the advantage of Napoleon.”<sup>21</sup> Gladstone was secretly plotting *against* northern interests throughout the Civil War, Adams discovered later, fully expecting the Confederacy to win its independence and actually endeavoring to supplement its ironclad navy in semi-secret. It was everything the Adams delegation could do to keep Gladstone from saying so publicly. This was all an education, of sorts.

Henry Adams returned to his native land in 1868, and quickly came to see the War and its aftermath with other eyes. Not necessarily jaundiced eyes, his eyes were far less moralizing than the ones that had gazed upon the roads near Mount Vernon little more than a decade before. Grant may have been a brilliant general, but he proved an inept and corrupt president. Lincoln, sanctified in death much as Washington had been,<sup>22</sup> nonetheless had suspended *habeas corpus*, imposed an unpopular draft you could buy your way out of, created the largest mechanized army the world had ever seen--and a crushing naval blockade for good measure, which was a continual sticking point for the British--and had demonstrated his willingness, over and again, not just to use this army, but to abuse with it, violating the traditional rules of warfare along the way. The casualties that were tolerated, by *both* sides, take the breath even now. Sherman’s march through Georgia was a staggering violation of the just war tradition; so, for that matter, was the demand

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<sup>21</sup>. The Education of Henry Adams, I: 172: See also Chapter 10 (I: 159-183) on “Political Morality.”

<sup>22</sup>. For a brilliant case study in comparative apotheosis, see Gary Laderman, The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

for unconditional surrender.

And now that new nation, unevenly *unum* in its *pluribus*, had an army it needed to use. So the army, like the nation, turned west. And by way of seizing Indian lands, building railroads to get there, creating a coal industry, a steel industry, then later an oil and automobile industry, the United States of America became a very rich place. Liberty had been trumped by commerce. People immigrated to get rich, not to be free. The courts began to protect business as much as, if not more than, the people. The US Supreme Court turned to the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and began to toy with the thought-experiment that turned a corporation into a person in the eyes of the law, even if they did not imagine such a corporate person engaging in “free speech” yet. No one was more surprised by all of this than the boy who had been educated in an eighteenth century frame of mind.

These are some of the reasons for the importance of Adams’s retrospective memoir for my purposes. While Henry Adams entered upon the war a moral Purist, he grew suspicious of such religious simplification, a simplification that refused to see its own complicity in propping up the system it allegedly opposed. Christianity had colluded with the slaveholding south. British liberals had colluded in much the same way. The north was slaveholding as well as the south; neither zone was entirely “free.” Never cynical, Adams was educated out of his ability to see the history of his country as a morality play. Or as one with a clear moral. His moral education was leading hm, to use one more Nietzschean turn of phrase, to a perspective “beyond good and evil.”

And that, it seems to me, is as much a matter of genre and of tone as it is of politics and moral philosophy. Hence his decision write memoir, in the third person and in somber retrospect.

## FINDING PHILOSOPHICAL GROUND

I would like to turn very briefly now to a philosophical aside, more specifically to the philosophy of Hegel, which was all the rage in Europe when Henry Adams was a child.<sup>23</sup> One of the most famous of all the moments in Hegel's 1807 opus, The Phenomenology of Spirit,<sup>24</sup> is the remarkable ten-page discussion of "mastery" (*Herrschaft*) and "slavery" (or "servitude," *Knechtschaft*). Marx has often been described as having made an entire career out of providing exegesis of those ten densely packed pages.

The main outline of the story Hegel tells is clear enough. Two consciousnesses that have become *self-conscious* (that is, aware of themselves as free-standing, free-thinking, independent selves--no mean achievement, in Hegel's judgment) come into first contact with one another. Hegel plays brilliantly on dualisms, dichotomies and dancing turns of phrase throughout these pages, to emphasize the bipolarity--and the personal nature--of this encounter. When two self-consciousnesses first meet, they do not embrace, or kiss, or fall in love. Rather, Hegel suggests, *they enslave*. The two are locked in a life-and-death struggle for recognition, a fight to the death. It is, Hegel insists, a fight fundamentally for recognition (the very political experience the Confederate states were denied throughout the War). A self-consciousness does not fully secure its sense of self until an independent self-consciousness recognizes it as such. I need you to

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<sup>23</sup>. "To the end of his life he labored over lessons then taught [by his diplomatic experience in London]," Adams notes. "*Never was demonstration more tangled. Hegel's metaphysical doctrine of the identity of opposites was simpler and easier to understand.*" (The Education of Henry Adams I: 164, italics mine).

<sup>24</sup>. Two English versions may be found in G. W. F. Hegel: The Phenomenology of Mind, J. B. Baillie trans. (New York: Humanities Press, Inc., 1910), 229-240, and Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, A. V. Miller trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111-119.

recognize me in my singularity. I need to become more than an *object* before you; I need you to see me as a *subject* in my own right, a subject such as you are yourself. That is very difficult recognition to win and maintain.

What happens, Hegel suggests, is complicated. Neither being may back down, and the fight to the death results in just that, the stalemate of mutual death. Oedipus's sons kill one another before the walls of Thebes. This is what Hegel rather grimly conceives of as an "indeterminate [*unbestimmt*] negation," since it is ethically indeterminate. Both men are dead; there is nothing more for them to do or, in Henry Adams's terms, nothing more for them to learn. But often it is the case that one being in the encounter "wants it more," which is to say, is willing to risk more, maybe to risk everything, maybe even life itself. In that case, a hierarchy is established, with one being submitting to the authority and/or control of another. And thus are born both the master and the slave.

This may sound like an assessment concluding that the slave has enslaved him- or herself. But it is not that; Hegel goes in a very different direction and notices something rather interesting. He notices that the master has made himself *dependent upon* the slave--precisely, for continued recognition, What is a master without a slave to recognize his or her mastery, after all? What is an empire without its colonies to define it as imperial in the first place? By contrast, the slave is under no illusion about ever receiving due recognition from the master. He or she has to look elsewhere for some sense of self, and Hegel locates it in a peculiar place. He says that the enslaved person, unlike the master, enjoys his or her labor. This is not the romantic ideal of "working for a living," of course; it has everything to do with having a world, a *material* world, ready-to-hand.

In a brilliant and bracing revisiting of Hegel's famous dialectic, Susan Buck-Morss poses a fascinating question.<sup>25</sup> Why does Hegel's analysis break off there? Why does he stop short of what would seem to be the logical next step in the dialectic: namely, a slave *rebellion* against the master, culminating in what Hegel claimed interested him most of all--freedom and liberation.<sup>26</sup> So why is there no slave revolt in Hegel's account? Why do we move instead to descriptions of what he calls "Stoicism" and "Skepticism" and the "Unhappy Consciousness"?

The question is made more urgent since Buck-Morss demonstrates conclusively that Hegel had a voracious interest in the slave revolt in Haiti and the creation of the first freedmen's nation, with a bold constitutional principle penned by Toussaint L'Ouverture himself, that (in the words of C. L. R. James<sup>27</sup>) "slavery was forever abolished." That was in 1801. But then the French under Napoleon rescinded the Revolution's abolition of human enslavement in 1803, just ten years after its initial Revolutionary decree, and sent a naval fleet with 25,000 troops to the island to quash these overly rebellious rebels.<sup>28</sup> The German language journal, *Minerva*, reported

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<sup>25</sup>. See Susan Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti and Universal History (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

<sup>26</sup>. As he notes in his Lectures on the Philosophy of History: "*the final cause of the World at large, we allege to be the consciousness of its own freedom on the part of Spirit, and ipso facto, the reality of that freedom*" [Lectures on the Philosophy of History, J. Sibree trans. (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), 19].

<sup>27</sup>. C.L. R. James, The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution (New York: Dial Press, 1938), 263.

<sup>28</sup>. I am especially indebted to Patrick Leigh-Fermor, The Travellers's Tree: A Journey Through the Caribbean Islands (London: John Murray, 1950), 229-307, for my initial impressions of the complicated flow of the Haitian Revolution, and the ways in which such guerilla campaigns for independence necessarily proceed.

For a more critical view of Fermor, what she deems the falsifying equation of the Caribbean and the Aegean, and the broader "role that travel writing played in the construction of the Caribbean as the New Aegean," see Emily Greenwood, Afro-Greeks: Dialogues Between

on the Haitians' successes against the French from the fall of 1804 to the end of 1805. Hegel read that journal religiously.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time--and this is the very heart of Buck-Morss's new reading of the dialectic<sup>30</sup>--he engaged in a systematic reading of Adam Smith's The Wealth of Nations in late 1803, gradually coming to see that "[t]he slave is the one commodity like no other, as freedom of property and freedom of person are here in direct contradiction."<sup>31</sup> Hegel became acquainted with the attempt to theorize global capitalism in 1803, and noticed the central contradiction lying at its heart. Then philosophy met history (or vice versa<sup>32</sup>) in Haiti in 1804-1805. The Phenomenology was published in 1807. So why is none of this made explicit there?

One possible answer is that Hegel was suspicious of the Haitian case, as he was dubious about Africans' capabilities for self-government in general. Robert Bernasconi has made this case most eloquently, placing Hegel, in his words, "at the Court of the Ashanti."<sup>33</sup>

Buck-Morss has a somewhat more sympathetic view of Hegel, who was then desperately looking for a job in the German speaking academic world, and who therefore could not speak too openly in support of anti-imperial independence movements and the chaos they had so clearly unleashed. So he praised Haiti quietly, if praise it was, mostly between the lines of the

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Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 20-38.

<sup>29</sup>. Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti and Universal History, 40-45.

<sup>30</sup>. Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti and Universal History, 52-53n90 and 58-59.

<sup>31</sup>. Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti and Universal History, 53n90.

<sup>32</sup>. Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti and Universal History, 59-60.

<sup>33</sup>. Robert Bernasconi, "Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti," in Stuart Barnett, ed., Hegel After Derrida (New York: Routledge, 2000), 41-63.

Phenomenology.<sup>34</sup>

But there is more to the story, I think. There is also the matter of Hegel's deep *ambivalence* about the French Revolution, his concerns over the way in which a genuinely progressive project of self-liberation turned so quickly into the Terror. Hegel had a more chastened view of self-congratulatory Enlightenment, self-righteous revolution, and self-proclaimed projects of liberation, ever after. So the tone with which he wishes to leave us in this strange genre of Phenomenology (and still later, "World History"), is moral ambivalence, a kind of hope without optimism... very much like Henry Adams, in the equally oddball genre of third-person memoir, and also reminiscent of Cornel West, and the rich variety of media he uses to speak tragically about the careening course of human justice.

### **FINDING A MERCY IN INTIMACY**

I noted that Hegel speaks throughout those pivotal pages of the Phenomenology in the dual voice. He imagines the encounter as taking place between two individuals, not between groups of people--such as the oppressed and their oppressors, or massed armies in the field. Hegel knows, as Homer did, that there is an often terrifying intimacy in hand-to-hand combat. It is the very *intimacy*, the deeply *personal* nature of those pages, and their at times lyrical descriptions, that accounts for their staying power, their broad appeal and long influence. It is here, in this dialectic, that Hegel's philosophy becomes not only a more intimate philosophy, but one that

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<sup>34</sup>. She does not let Hegel off the hook in this way, however, since when his position in Berlin was secure and he was in a position to speak more clearly about the political implications of his own position, he retreated from them. As she puts it, "What *is* clear is that in an effort to become more erudite in African studies during the 1820s, Hegel was in fact becoming dumber" (Buck-Morss, Hegel, Haiti and Universal History, 73).

actually hinges on the paradoxical and sometimes contradictory nature of human desire.

There are economic and political consequences to this. And all of this may be inflected in an especially revealing way by contemporary feminism.

I would like to turn then, albeit briefly, to the question of how the personal relates to the political *on the plantation*, and how such a perspective may impact upon the difficult topics of slavery and debt, of bondage and liberation. One observation that Henry Adams makes rather late in The Education provides me with an important new point-of-entry:

The study of history is useful to the historian by teaching him his ignorance of women: and the mass of this ignorance crushes one who is familiar enough with what are called historical sources to realize how few women have ever been known. *The woman who is known only through a man is known wrong....* The American woman of the nineteenth century will live only as the man saw her; probably she will be less known than the woman of the eighteenth; none of the female descendants of Abigail Adams can ever be nearly so familiar as her letters have made her; and all this is pure loss to history, for the American woman of the nineteenth century was much better company than the American man; she was probably much better company than her grandmothers.<sup>35</sup>

Adams deals with this historian's conundrum in an interesting and unusual way. He simply refuses to speak for women at all, and thereby omits the discussion of fully twenty years of his own life (1871-1892), during which time he met and was later married to Marian Adams, who took her own life thirteen years into the marriage. If he cannot know women intimately, then Adams will not dare to speak for them at all. He does know his grandmother in some ways, but only because he has her letters to consult. Here is another interesting literary genre that bears further critical reflection, as some wonderful recent works of history endeavor to show.

We begin to notice an intriguing constellation of concerns here: the question of the

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<sup>35</sup>. The Education of Henry Adams, II: 133, italics mine.

relative inaccessibility of human emotions, the question of tone, the search for a genre in which to render such a tone, the frank admission of perplexity and conundrum. Some of the most interesting work that has been done recently on the phenomenon of plantation slavery in the New World seems to me to involve the difficult exploration of the uncanny *intimacy* of the plantation as a domestic space. Relatively small numbers of primarily white landowners lived together with often quite large numbers of enslaved persons of color, in what constituted some very complex and very heterodox households.<sup>36</sup>

The *intimacy* of such domestic spaces has come in for some very interesting analysis in recent years, as has the history of the human emotions more generally. In one especially salient example, the letters of Anna Matilda Page King (1798-1859) were edited by Melanie Pavich-Lindsay and published in 2000<sup>37</sup>; they offer a surprising glimpse into a large cotton plantation on the coast of Georgia at Saint Simon's Island; Anna King died in 1859. Deemed one of the most eligible women in her elite circle, Anna married Thomas Butler King (1797-1864) relatively late; King's family was titled but essentially broke. Thomas King himself had great political ambition, so as soon as the couple married and his financial affairs were secured, he ran for a seat in the US Congress. He spent most of their married life in Washington, DC (and later on, much farther away, for extended periods in California and in Central America), coming home for brief

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<sup>36</sup>. That gender, and sexuality, and social stereotypes loom large in the analysis of such settings is unsurprising. Catherine Clinton's *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1982) drew out some of these connections already in 1982. A new book edited by Bernadette Brooten, and entitled *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming its Religious and Sexual Legacies* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), announces many exciting new trajectories for scholarly research and public policy, alike.

<sup>37</sup>. Melanie Pavich-Lindsay, *Anna: The Letters of a St. Simons Island Plantation Mistress, 1817-1859* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

conjugal visits that left Anna alone--alone in the surreal way of the plantation system--to raise nine children (five sons and four daughters) and to run what was essentially a large corporation involving more than fifty bonded souls.

The letters describe Anna's intimate and unhappy personal life in vivid detail, since she sublimated so much of her frustrated energy at an absentee husband into her correspondence--to him, to friends, and later to her own children. One of the most striking things about Anna's letters is the prevalence of *the language of care*, the way she cares for enslaved persons with whom she lives and works. When they sicken, she nurses them personally, regularly conducting all-night vigils on their behalf. And when they die, she worries that she grieves too much and for too long.<sup>38</sup>

After having what amounted to a nervous breakdown, Anna King was sent north to recuperate for a season, and the letters written from Pennsylvania and Connecticut (in 1852-1853) are striking for nothing so much as the sudden appearance of a nasty vocabulary she never used at home.<sup>39</sup> Reacting to what she deemed the radical break with social protocol in being challenged about slavery over supper, Anna King begins to speak, and then to write, like a racist. As soon as she returns to Georgia, this ceases and she returns to her cares, as well as her admittedly narcissistic caring about caring too much. She did not live to see the abandonment of the plantation, called "Retreat," its occupation by Union soldiers and freed blacks, nor the death of one son at Fredericksburg (two other sons died in 1833 and 1859), the burning of neighboring

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<sup>38</sup>. It is one especially noteworthy aspect of the book that Pavich provides us with a remarkable Appendix ("The Bondpeople of Retreat," *Anna*, 419-438) in which she has given a great many of these enslaved persons back their names, and at least the vague outlines of a life.

<sup>39</sup>. See Pavich-Lindsay, *Anna*, 191ff.

townships such as Darien by troops under Colonel Thomas Shaw, and the devastation of the entire region by troops under the command of General Tecumseh Sherman near the war's end.

Melanie Pavich returned to this difficult topic, from the other side as it were, in a doctoral dissertation recently completed at the University of Georgia. In it, she worked on the journals of Martha Schofield (1839-1916, making her a *precise* contemporary of Henry Adams), an abolitionist and a Quaker from Pennsylvania who spent fully fifty years after the Civil War in Georgia and South Carolina, working for the Freedman's Bureau in creating new venues for the education freed southern blacks. The school she created in Aiken, SC, still stands. Together with her advisor, Ronald Butchart,<sup>40</sup> Pavich manages to tell a riveting tale about one woman's intellectual and spiritual journey toward a very different kind of abolition, and a different kind of faith. Contemptuous of white southerners after witnessing the carnage of the war, and taking more than a little satisfaction at their desperate and humiliated state after the war, Martha Schofield nevertheless opted to stay in South Carolina at great personal risk.

Most Freedmen Bureau operatives did not stay, and religion almost surely played a role here. Those who were drawn to the work in order to secure another "star in their own crown" did not last long; the narcissism of the initial motivation made it harder to stay when times got tough. By and large, Quakers who were innocent of that kind of starry rhetoric, who came south for reasons having less to do with personal salvation and more to do with social justice, tended to last longer. Martha's journals reveal a strange and sometimes jarring cacophony of both rationales, as well as a revealing glimpse into the intimacies of a personal life that are as

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<sup>40</sup>. His new book, [Schooling the Freed People: Teaching, Learning, and the Struggle for Black Freedom, 1861-1876](#) (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), tells this story with elegance and sensitivity.

challenging and surprising in their way as those that Anna King's letters reveal. Martha Schofield was clearly a person of substance, charm, and great personal appeal. Many men came into her orbit, and some never left it; a precious few stayed very close to her most private thoughts. Most of these men were married. The results were an enormously complicated, difficult and painful personal life--for a woman who spent most of her adult life living alone.

Two women on opposite sides of the defining conflict of their generation. One senses that they would have liked one another, in any times other than their own. Certainly they would have understood each other. Both women were fiercely intelligent, strong-willed and strong-minded, religiously heterodox. They did not suffer fools, and perhaps in part for this reason, they spent a great deal of time alone. They lived as much in personal print--in letters and in journals--as they did in the world. They longed for love, and to the degree that neither felt she had found it, they lived in intimacies dominated by distance. Even God, for both women, was conceived as a distant and enervating absentee, whose consummations of faith were endlessly deferred.

Toni Morrison's latest novel, A Mercy, captures the same sad intimacy of these complicated colonial spaces, as well as this perennial human hunger for love. The setting of the novel is colonial; it is 1690 and the Americas are already dizzying in their religious complexity, unsettling in the vulnerabilities they expose, and shocking in the cruelties they enable and unmask... not least when religion is at issue. Everyone, regardless of skin color, is vulnerable to the loss of freedom, and the abuses that such unregulated and often invisible bondage invite. Poor families regularly hand their children over, voluntarily place them in indenture, put them to sea, marry them away. Women especially are subject to the continual threats of violence and violation, all of them continually seen as property and a material (childbearing) resource.

We spend most of our time in this novel near the homestead of Jacob Vaark, and his wife Rebekka, who have been farming in Virginia for some time. His early trip to Roman Catholic<sup>41</sup> Maryland sets the story in motion, as we come to understand only later. Vaark began supplementing his income as a trader (“goods and gold,”<sup>42</sup> and, one suspects, a fairly casual entry into the rum trade later on<sup>43</sup>), and over the years he acquired several enslaved persons, though he was opposed (however loosely and in theory) to the institution. They were all women, and they were all named at the outset by others who held title to them: Florens, Lina and Sorrow. The novel begins with the strange story of how Florens came to live on the Vaark homestead, after Jacob’s fateful trip to Maryland. Later, when Jacob Vaark succumbs to the pox and dies, the vulnerability of this household of independent women is made evident to all, and the book ends with some rather anxious and somber speculation about their future.

The novel catches us by surprise, however, when we discover that the central character of the book is not someone we were inclined to notice at the outset: not the late Jacob Vaark, nor the wife who barely manages to survive him. In other words, *not the masters*. Rather, this novel culminates in a new understanding of one of the enslaved women in the Vaark household, the attractive young woman with a tragicomic taste for fine shoes, the young girl named Florens.

Her story, as it turns out, is the really big story here--one part Hegel, and one part Haiti--

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<sup>41</sup>. It bears noting that Morrison is much taken with the idea that Catholics, especially the Jesuits, were far more inclined than Puritans, by and large, to admit that enslaved Africans had souls, and therefore considered their conversion to be a matter of the first spiritual importance, and the question of their subsequent treatment a matter of foremost ethical concern.

See *A Mercy*, 191, 194-195.

<sup>42</sup>. Morrison, *A Mercy*, 28.

<sup>43</sup>. Morrison, *A Mercy*, 34-37, 176.

one more example of the centrality and the difficulty of securing *recognition*. Florens was always strong, perhaps stronger than even *she* knew. When she met the freed blacksmith who came to do some work on the new Vaark homestead--then returned several times more to attend to various tasks, ranging from new construction to nursing members of the Vaark household through long illness--“Florens was struck down with another sickness much longer lasting and far more lethal.”<sup>44</sup> She fell in love with the blacksmith and gave herself to him with wild abandon. Through a complicated plot twist, she eventually returned to him. Her mission was initially to go to his home and to send him back to examine Rebekka Vaark, who fell ill immediately after her husband died. Florens was clearly meant to return to the Vaark’s when the blacksmith’s ministrations were at an end, but she had just as clearly decided to stay there with him, somehow. She gave herself, in other words, as only a *strong and free* person can.

Her lover badly misunderstands the nature of her gift, mistakes her strength as a form of weakness, and so he turns her away in the cruelest terms, claiming that he can only love a free person, not a slavish person such as she has become. Whether his snap judgment against her is due to his own gender and color prejudices, or is the result of a vast and tragic misunderstanding about an injury his own child suffered under her care, remains uncertain. Later Florens will recall the lesson as follows:

I am remembering what you tell me from long ago when Sir is not dead. You say you see slaves freer than free men. One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion. That it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild...<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>. Morrison, *A Mercy*, 150.

<sup>45</sup>. Morrison, *A Mercy*, 187.

This is Hegel's dialectic, crueler this time, and imagined in nearly crushing, personal terms. But Florens's observation tells us something important about the two that we had not seen; namely, they were genuinely and intimately involved with one another. They talked, and spoke of very serious matters. We had seen more of the frankly animalistic desire they had for one another, through the eyes of Sorrow,<sup>46</sup> but not this intelligent care and thoughtful concern. In all of this, Morrison is fleshing out for us something that Buck-Morss misses in Hegel.

In Florens's lyrical retrospective phrasing, the lesson goes something like this:

Still, there is another thing. A lion who thinks his mane is all. A she-lion who does not. I learn this from Daughter Jane [a young white girl who saved Florens at great risk to herself]. Her bloody legs do not stop her. She risks. She risks all to save the slave you throw out.<sup>47</sup>

He is a lion, to be sure, but so is she. Suddenly the she-lion sees him as all mane, and roaring, and no substance. When the blacksmith first called her slavish and literally threw her away, Florens instinctively rebelled. She picked up a hammer, intending to kill him. He disarmed her and threw her away, again. She refused to give ground, grabbed a set of tongs lying close at hand, and wounds him, seriously this time. She sees the blood and seizes her opportunity to escape from the house she had hoped just days earlier to make her home. Morrison's description

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<sup>46</sup>. Morrison, A Mercy, 150-151. It is important that Florens is identified already as a she-lion, which will help to explain her subsequent reactions to him: "unlike female farm animals, she was not standing quietly under the weight and thrust of the male.... This here female stretched, kicked her heels and whipped her head left, right, to, fro. It was a dancing."

<sup>47</sup>. Morrison, A Mercy, 187-188.

of their fight makes the Hegelian dimension of what is essentially a struggle for recognition unmistakable:

[M]y way is clear after losing you who I am thinking always as my life and my security from harm, for any who look closely at me only to throw me away. For all those who believe they have a claim and rule over me. I am nothing to you. You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eye? Are you afraid? You should be. The hammer strikes air many times before it gets to you where it dies in weakness. You wrestle it from me and toss it away. Our clashing is long. I bare my teeth to bite you, to tear you open. Malaik [his son] is screaming. You pull my arms behind me. I twist away and escape you. The tongs are there, close by. Close by. I am swinging and swinging hard. Seeing you stagger and bleed I run. Then walk. Then float. An ice floe cut away from the riverbank in deep winter. I have no shoes. I have no kicking heart no home no tomorrow. I walk the day. I walk the night. The feathers close. For now.<sup>48</sup>

In a word, Florens rebels and she escapes. And when she returns to the Vaark homestead, having nowhere else to go, everyone instantly marks the change in her: “from ‘have me always’ to ‘don’t touch me ever’.”<sup>49</sup>

Then the novel ends, much as it began--with Florens, who is literate--writing some of this difficult story down. She is writing an explanation of herself to a blacksmith who will not be able to read her words. It is not clear he would have understood it, even if he could. Most of what she writes is equally shattering, either way. But the final words of the novel are reserved, not for Florens, but for her absent mother. She serves as a profound novelistic counterpoint to the mother in the earlier novel, Beloved, this mother who does *not* kill her child, but rather hands her over in order to give her a chance to live more freely and less at risk of sexual violation. It was

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<sup>48</sup>. Toni Morrison, A Mercy, 184-185.

<sup>49</sup>. Morrison, A Mercy, 179.

this mother who made the split decision that landed her young daughter, Florens, on the Vaark homestead to begin with. She noticed that Jacob Vaark smiled at her daughter's comical taste for unwieldy, "way-too-big woman's shoes."<sup>50</sup> He recognized her, in short, as a human being with unique qualities and a personality to match. And so, in the accident of an instant, the mother took a calculated risk and placed her child in his care, the care of a man who took the time to see her. We are meant to notice that it was thus Florens's own childlike character-quirk that actually saved her.

It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand and know what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing.

Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tue mae.<sup>51</sup>

So we are invited to wait, not on a miracle, but on a mercy, the singularly human kind of grace through which we gift one another. Slave or free, Morrison speaks of and points toward an intimacy in which to give is not to lose, and to receive is not to possess. Not dominion, not domination, it is the freedom to love, which is also necessarily the freedom to lose, the very essence of the difficult freedom of a free gift. This is a gift of self that stands outside the system of market exchanges, a gift that stands on the far side of education, of Hegel's dialectic, of categories like mastery and slavery, a gift that is envisioned as a gift of intimate human attachment, and passionate human care. Only such a love, not a god, can save us.

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<sup>50</sup>. Morrison, A Mercy, 30-31.

<sup>51</sup>. Morrison, A Mercy, 195-196.

We may not be optimistic about the future of such a love in this world, but we can and must have hope. That is precisely the tone,<sup>52</sup> and imagistic novel is the genre, that Morrison has chosen to awaken our own moral imaginations. On that very slender thread of very tentative hope, one that remains mindful of the tragedy of pain and suffering and loss, I will close.

## **A CONCLUDING WORD IMAGE**

Let me conclude, then, by returning to the larger and less intimate issues with which I began: the matter of some persistent Early Modern -isms, and the damage to which they may give rise. We began with a glimpse of the new world created by a powerful combination of global capitalism and the new science of race. I noted the especially disturbing qualities of the plantation and mining systems created by that combination. I then suggested that racism has ironically been easier to combat than has a rampant and rapacious profit motive that enabled social forms almost as oppressive to take the place of the plantation. Jim Crow gave the lie to the simple story of moral progress allegedly enacted in the U. S. Civil War. That is one reason for not narrating the nineteenth century as the story of human progress alone.

In point of fact, what we see happen with most of the thinkers I have surveyed--from Adam Smith, to G. W. F. Hegel, to Henry Adams, to a variety of supremely creative antebellum historians, to Toni Morrison--is that they resist an overly moralizing narrative of the sort that turned the Civil War and abolition into a morality play, a story of simple progress with a happy moral outcome. Their moral tone is far more ambivalent than that, since the real legacy of such

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<sup>52</sup>. Morrison seems to me to end on a note of mercy that is echoed by the marvelous quote from Anton Chekhov with which Cornel West *begins* his 1999 The Cornel West Reader:  
write about this young man squeezing drop by drop the slave out of himself and waking one fine morning feeling that real human blood, not a slave's, is flowing in his veins.

an experience was the realization of the need for continual vigilance, nothing more nor less.

When we turn to the contemporary economic situation and a variety of state attempts to intervene in it, we meet an even more pronounced ambivalence. Many have become suspicious of big stories and big solutions, *state-sponsored* solutions, and for some very good reasons. We might easily conclude that we are now getting the politics that we deserve, the kind that comes after such grandiosity. But the turn away from state solutions or state solidarities need not result in the wringing of hands, the gnashing of teeth, or the adoption of a posture of despair.<sup>53</sup> The absence of optimism or moral confidence can be a call to hopeful and critical engagement, not despair. As Jeffrey Stout reminds us in his new book--with its marvelous title, Blessed Are the Organized<sup>54</sup>--a suspicion of centralized state power and centralized solutions need not result in cynicism at all. It may simply be the prompt that returns us to the more local democratic practices of grass roots organizing, forming coalitions around matters of common concern by learning to listen to one another, most especially when we appear to disagree. It is Hegel's dialectic without the enslavement, democratically resistant to all such forms of unearned social hierarchy. Abolition began as one such grass roots phenomenon; so did the Civil Rights movement. Imagining the next such movement, as something other than a Tea Party, is one of the primary moral challenges before us in this time, Stout believes.

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<sup>53</sup>. I was critical of this "tragic posture" in Tragic Posture and Tragic Vision: Against the Modern Failure of Nerve (New York: Continuum, 1994), 11-25.

<sup>54</sup>. Jeffrey Stout, Blessed Are the Organized (Princeton University Press, 2010).

It is important to recall that he had earlier argued that hope was in fact a virtue essential to comprehending the conception of democracy as a tradition with its own distinctive standards, social practices, and even virtues. See his Democracy and Tradition (The Princeton University Press, 2004), 8-9, 19-60, for an eloquent rehearsal of the democratic virtues of *piety* (oriented toward the past), *love or generosity* (later invoked as charity, this virtue is primarily but not exclusively oriented toward the present), and *hope* (oriented toward the future).

The necessity of hope, even and especially when we are not feeling optimistic, has to do with the fact that we will be the ones who will craft, and secure, whatever kind of future will come in our sacred wake. Here is how Opal Moore captures that spirit of deep ambivalence in tone, that confusion about our local and less proximate histories, as well as a vision of ourselves as links in a chain that remains mindful of what she calls the “fragility of heroes.” It comes in a poem (one of my favorites) written in poetic response to the laying in state of the body of Ms. Rosa Parks. Opal Moore will discuss the poem further, and far better, herself, but the poem itself provides a me with a meditation uniquely fitting to the conclusion of my remarks.

### **October 24, 2005**

(Rosa Parks’ remains lay in honor in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol... a first for a woman)

a coffin too has a quiet dignity  
seems solid upon its bier

the weather is good. the people will not suffer  
to wait, to witness a symbol

of resistance  
weary monument to love

rehearse the myth:  
how we got our silver rights

on account of a black woman’s feet hurt,  
just a woman a woman just colored worked

lent dignity to us, to buses  
to the boys in *Barber Shop*

didn’t send no flowers from wages earned hard  
to help bury our beating heart.

Cowboy of the Greatest Posse in the West  
bends his head to pray. he’ll do his best:

god is good. yes he is. and you were  
good too. now gone. yes, good and gone. praise god.

his sec'y of state frowns--it's a long walk  
back to the limo  
past Birmingham through Montgomery,  
her pampered feet won't save us.

a seamstress rests her feet in death:  
a nation genuflects--marvels--mocks--

the line is long of witnesses,  
this fragility of heroes.

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