“Truth Stranger and Stronger than Fiction”

Reexamining William Lloyd Garrison’s The Liberator

In the words of James Russell Lowell, poet and fellow abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison “knew how types were set,/ He had a dauntless spirit and a press.” What people have yet to appreciate fully are the larger purposes that Garrisonian abolition has served in the development of American literary culture. Propelled by his own dictum to be “as harsh as truth,” Garrison published many slave narratives, including Frederick Douglass’s famous 1845 narrative. An increase in attention to literature’s moral purpose and an emerging taste for the “real” share the same ground in The Liberator. Through a range of publishing practices—from the publication of advertisements to that of slave narratives—Garrison’s newspaper helped to crystallize the taste for the “real” and was thus formative in the development of the literary genre we call realism.

The longest running abolitionist newspaper, William Lloyd Garrison’s The Liberator (1831–65) was a product of a nineteenth-century marketplace—concerned with morality, money, and veracity. The print emissary of Garrisonian abolition, this newspaper epitomized “the vanguard of capitalist liberalism.” By virtue of their connection to the abolitionist cause, objects of everyday use—from candy to shoes—were sold in the pages of The Liberator. The affiliation between material culture and a moral agenda also carried over to the literary marketplace: a book’s relationship to abolitionist agendas was frequently used to sell it in the pages of The Liberator. The moral basis for commercial practices,
epitomized in Garrisonian abolition, became a product’s main selling point in Garrison’s paper. Thus, every section of *The Liberator* called for active moral participation in the cause of abolition through social, political, and commercial practices. The *Liberator*’s dual relationship with liberal capitalism and moral suasion makes it an ideal vehicle for the study of realism, a literary style that is closely linked with money and morality.

I. “I Will Be as Harsh as Truth”: Garrison’s Appeal to Readers

Abolitionist culture—fostered by antislavery societies and their publications—gave rise to all manner of cultural production that, in turn, yielded a new and lively marketplace for ideas, goods, and services related to the cause. William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879) and *The Liberator* are two important products of the age, created out of the historical tension that was at the center of abolition: the need to make a living in a capitalist world without violating the evangelical morality of the mid-nineteenth century.

Garrison used the cause of abolition as a unique way to make a living while furthering his moral principles. Unlike gentleman reformers such as Wendell Phillips, Garrison had grown up knowing that he would have to support himself and his family. His father, a seaman with a taste for rum, deserted the family when Garrison was just three years old. His mother, a strong-willed Baptist, struggled to keep the family together. Garrison started contributing to the household at age five by selling homemade molasses candy on the street corners of Newburyport, Massachusetts.

Garrison had shown a savvy market-conscious nature, starting from his first pseudonymous writings in the *Newburyport Herald* at the beginning of his career in 1818, and had always known that the way to succeed would be to learn to sell himself in the marketplace of ideas. According to James Brewer Stewart, one of Garrison’s biographers, Garrison was driven at an early age by the Franklinian ideal of the self-made man who measured his success in terms of his ability to create and adjust to market conditions. But Garrison’s efforts to build a career took shape in a uniquely nineteenth-century way. His personal need to make a living was intimately linked with his contemporary culture’s need to do so by morally informed means. Throughout his career, Garrison never lost sight of the necessity to balance his welfare with that of the cause, and therefore, never allowed money concerns to eclipse his moral ones. In order for Garrison to be successful, abolition must be too.

Perhaps it was the combination of Garrison’s sheer scrappiness and his moral commitment that attracted his benefactors. In order to promote the