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Loci of Limitation and Liberation: Spatial Subjectivity in “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point”

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<1>In the 1840s, antebellum America was in regional conflict. Sympathizing with slaves, many northern residents assisted bondsmen in evading the capture of agents and prevented their return to lives under the yoke. From the abolitionist perspective, slave catchers violated the personal liberty of the fugitive. To the contrary, southern owners perceived interventions on behalf of the bondsman as disregarding their property rights. For instance, the state of Kentucky lost thirty thousand dollars worth of property to the North each year (Campbell 6). Disparate value systems and monetary losses strained relations between the north and south. In a 1840s speech, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives expressed the frustration of the south. Thomas F. Marshall of Kentucky argued, “When Americans spoke of dissolving the Union, they spoke of what they should not—the idea was unnameable [sic]. The Greek legislator gave it as a reason for providing no punishment for parricide, that such a crime ought never to be mentioned; but if northern gentlemen chose to use their strength for such an end as abolition, this Union must crumble, come what might” (*The Liberator* 1). As demonstrated by the later American Civil War, the dispute over the fugitive slave led to civic dissent and jeopardized the solidarity of the union.

<2>In “The Runaway Slave,” Browning capitalizes upon these preexisting geographical tensions. In the south, the fictional slave experiences the horrors of bondage. She witnesses the murder of her lover and suffers sexual violation at the hands of the master class. Subsequently, she seeks refuge at Pilgrim’s Point. This imagined locale in Massachusetts was a place of religious tolerance and a safe haven for the enslaved woman. Although Pilgrim’s Point and the American South appear to be juxtapositions in the poem, I propose that both regions deprive the bondswoman of liberation. Browning presents the enslaved woman participating in various romantic, spiritual and familial relationships, for instance, with her black lover, the pilgrim-spirits, God and the “white” baby. In these instances, except for the kinship with the biracial child, the runaway slave has no control over maintaining these partnerships. Replicating the geographical division of the United States, all of the runaway slave’s unions are torn asunder. Throughout “The Runaway Slave,” Browning uses geography to shape the narrative of the poem and to structure thematically the events of the enslaved woman’s life. Whether it is with her lover, the pilgrim-spirits or God, the woman cannot sustain voluntary alliances in the south or north. In the south, the woman is legally property. In the north, she is a fugitive vulnerable to capture. Ultimately, for the African American slave, Browning shows that no region in the United States is truly free.

<3>Let me now turn to the experiences of the runaway slave in the American South. After the arrival at Pilgrim’s Point, the enslaved woman remembers her lover. Describing his initial overtures, she utters: “But, once, I laughed in girlish glee/ For one of my colour stood in the track/ Where the drivers drove, and looked at me./ And tender and full was the look he gave-/ Could a slave look *so* at another slave?— ” (1.58-62). The runaway slave’s rhetorical question expresses an uncertainty about the possibility of romantic feeling existing between slaves. Also, as the man takes notice of the enslaved woman, the surveillance of the overseer disappears. Although the slave does not elevate to the role of authority figure, the temporary erasure of “the drivers” suggests that these looks of love momentarily liberate both individuals. In the couple’s mutual observation of each other, they prioritize personal desire. Thus the enslaved man’s attraction to the young woman implies that overseers and masters are not capable of controlling every aspect of the bondman’s life.

<4>As well as romantic connection, the enslaved man’s “tender and full” gaze also signals racial identification. The runaway slave testifies to seeing “one of my colour [who] stood in the track.” Nevertheless, in feeling, social station and racial distinction of blackness, the man and woman are

not oppositional forces. This affectionate encounter frees both from the master's agenda of constant labor and replaces it with a mutual interest that promises to develop into unconditional love. This type of collectivity had the potential to upset institutional slavery. A unified community or couple had a greater capacity to rebel. However, Browning's enslaved duo asserts a subtle form of resistance. Their uprising would not be in violence, but in the volition to choose a mate. In the context of American bondage, this opportunity is a moment of autonomy. Frequently, southern owners chose sexual partners for slaves to ensure reproduction and to maintain a supply of future workers. In addition, enslaved couples were also subject to separation on the auction block. Thus, the couple's decision to express love under the constraints of the yoke was a mode of rebellion against the inherent domination of bondage.

<5>Subsequently, the warmth of the enslaved couple supersedes legal authority. Continuing to chronicle the events of their relationship, the runaway slave says, "And from that hour our spirits grew/ As free as if unsold, unbought:/ Oh, strong enough, since we were two./ To conquer the world, we thought" (1.64-67). Indicative of the growth and unity of the relationship, "I" transforms to the collective "we." Instead of dwelling upon their debased humanity, through love, the duo reclaims their dignity. Essentially, the couple's bond restores their self-worth. This is a value that the lovers define for themselves. Their appreciation of each other surpasses any monetary value that slaveholders could impose upon them. Unlike the public humiliations of the auction block and flogging, intimacy temporarily shields the lovers from the diurnal realities of enslavement.

<6>Raising the stakes in the relationship, the man declares his love. This expression of affection acknowledges the feelings of the couple. Therefore, his speech act humanizes the couple and solidifies their union. Characterizing this heartfelt gesture, the woman states, "In the sunny ground between the canes./ He said 'I love you' as he passed;/ When the shingle-roof rang sharp with the rains./ I heard how he vowed it fast:" (71-74). Unable legally to marry, the enslaved man's vow is especially sacred. Amidst the coverage of the sugar "canes," he verbally commits to his lover. There was a high probability of separation under the institution of slavery and the extension of emotional attachment for other human beings made the bondman even more vulnerable. Furthermore, the rain upon the "shingle-roof" and the quick pace of the man's speech ensures that overseers are not aware of his affections. Likewise, in later verses, the woman sings his name in low tones. Simultaneously, the lovers uttering words both strengthens and jeopardizes their bond. On the one hand, using verbal expression, they share feelings with their partner and operate in mutual trust. On the other hand, were their love known to the master class, the same articulation places both slaves and their relationship in peril.

<7>From their looks and language of love, the enslaved man further consummates his dedication with craftsmanship. He uses labor to render service to a loved one. Recalling her lover's gift, the runaway slave says, "While others shook he smiled in the hut./ As he carved me a bowl of the cocoa-nut/ Though the roar of hurricanes" (1.75-77). As Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace recognizes, slaves had few possessions (Wallace 39). Here, in Browning's passage, the gift of a bowl symbolizes possessing the affections of another individual. As the couple's narrative develops, there is an increase in commitment and a decrease in the physical and psychological shackles of captivity. Unfortunately, the same hands that carved a bowl for the lover are torn away from the slave woman.

<8>Although love was momentarily able to thrive under restrictive conditions, the master class disrupts the happiness of the couple. All of the acts of kindness between the couple come under attack. Describing the hostile intervention of slaveholders, the runaway slave bemoans, "They wrung my cold hands out of his/ They dragged him—where? I crawled to touch/ His blood's mark in the dust...not much./ Ye pilgrim-souls, though plain as *this*!" (1.95-98). In a reversal of the enslaved man's initial erasure of the drivers, owners reduce the black man to a "blood's mark." This reduction of presence leads to his eventual absence from the text and in the life of the enslaved woman. Furthermore, the power-driven patriarchal figures drag away her lover. Likewise, in desperation, she crawls in the dirt in an attempt to reclaim their amorous connection. After both slaves experience elevation through love, they are literally forced to grovel in the dust and they and the reader are reminded of the physical degradation of slavery.

<9>After the initial separation of the couple, their disunion becomes permanent with his murder. This act ensures that the lovers will not reunite. Following the death of the man, the sad lover reveals her grief and owners attempt to stifle her mourning. Recounting the consecutive misdeeds of southern men and her feelings, the speaker claims: "Wrong. followed by a deeper wrong!/"

Mere grief's too good for such as I:/ So the white men brought the shame ere long/ To strangle the sob of my agony" (1.99-102). At every turn, these men attempt to extinguish feelings between the lovers. The woman's "sob" is a mark of her humanity and a reminder of the guilt of the master class. Tears and sobs also make it difficult for them to objectify the slave.

<10>In addition, the "white men" use sexual abuse to intensify the woman's powerless predicament for the "deeper wrong" to which the slave mentions is rape and the evidence of this deed is the "too white" baby who appears in stanza eighteen. We can also surmise that the slave was raped from the mention of "shame" and her inability to "weep pure tears." The shame is two-fold. First, there is the damage to her moral integrity. As property with no legal rights of her own, she is unable to reject the advances of her superiors. Historian Deborah Gray White points out that southern legislation did not recognize rape of black women as a crime (White 78). Thus the fugitive slave has no recourse and is also in an untenable situation for attaining moral integrity. Secondly, this moment also reveals the woman's distress at losing her virginity to a stranger and thus being robbed of the right to be faithful to her lover. Although the woman was an unwilling participant, sexual intercourse with "the white men" seems to her a form of inadvertent betrayal of the black lover. This does not destroy the couple's affection for each other, but establishes another disruption to the bond between the lovers. For the couple, there is no solace within the institution of bondage or the borders of the slaveholding south.

<11>Browning shows that the universal pleasure of love is tainted by the peculiar institution. The runaway slave manages to find only a temporary escape in a romantic relationship. Paralleling the initial denial of mobility and self-actualization, the master class suppresses the fugitive slave's liberty by killing her lover. This system of degradation triumphs in restoring literal and metaphorical shackles upon the woman. In my forthcoming discussion of Pilgrim's Point, we will see an ideological reversal in location. This place has the illusion of a limitless environment in the wilderness, but the runaway slave still confronts boundaries.

<12>The pilgrims and their history evoked multiple connections to antislavery discourse. Originally from England, these religious dissenters traveled to Massachusetts seeking freedom to practice their faith. In the New World, they established a new beginning for themselves and future generations. Thus, over time, the pilgrims became representative of earthly liberty and eternal salvation in the north. In nineteenth-century America, the hypocrisy of slaveholding was frequently exposed by invocation of these ideals. For abolitionists in particular, the pilgrim was a symbol of the liberty they felt was a universal right. For example, Wendell Phillips related the history of these pilgrim dissenters to the trials of a runaway slave, Anthony Burns, who had asked his opinion as to whether he should return to the south. The pilgrims, along with a myriad of benevolent institutions, came to Philip's mind when he gave his pessimistic reply: "I went over in my mind the history of Massachusetts. I thought of her schools, her colleges of learning, her churches, her courts, her benevolent and philanthropic institutions, her great names, her Puritans, her Pilgrims, and I was obliged to say, 'Burns, there isn't humanity, there isn't Christianity, there isn't justice enough here to save you; you must go back'" (Bears 13). Although the pilgrim and the bondsman desired liberty, race and the law determined that the slave had no refuge in America.

<13>This is the social context to which Browning alludes when she invokes the pilgrims fathers in "The Runaway Slave." The pilgrims become the poet's imaginative point of departure and provide another source of sympathy—besides the lover—to identify with the plight of the slave woman. In Browning's versified appropriation, she envisions the pilgrims as immortal figures. They embody the ideals of liberty on earth and spiritual freedom in the supernatural realm. This position between the earth and the heavens parallels the situation of the fugitive slave. Trapped between the south and the north, the runaway slave also inhabits a middle position between ideologically opposite locales. However, in contrast to the inspiration of the pilgrims, the runaway slave's property status thwarts her aspirations for freedom. Thus the enslaved woman envisions a kinship with ethereal predecessors.

<14>At Pilgrim's Point, the slave addresses the pilgrims as kindred spirits: "O pilgrim-souls, I speak to you!/ I see you come proud and slow/ From the land of spirits pale as dew/ And round me and round me ye go" (l. 8-11). These pilgrims seemingly deracialized in their palor are beyond the callous acts of the master class. First, they lack a physical body and are therefore inaccessible to punishment meted out by the slaveholders and their "hunter sons." Second, being immortal the religious dissenters are momentarily outside of racial categorization so that the runaway slave can establish a union with them that is not predicated upon racial identification. This bond undermines the tenets of institutional slavery. Further establishing their solidarity, the

This bond undermines the tenets of institutional slavery. Further establishing their solidarity, the pilgrims hear the woman's plea. She is no longer on a solitary journey. Simultaneously, in the pilgrims, the runaway slave has new modes of communal identification and a precedent of a marginalized people removing their fetters in the north.

<15>The presence of the celestial pilgrims also provides protection. Their circle shields the woman from harm. After numerous encounters with physical and sexual abuse under the yoke, finally, the runaway slave meets an enclosure of caretakers. This formation situates the pilgrims as an audience for her narrative. Whereas speech acts such as expressing love are dangerous in the south, the runaway slave now has agency to reveal her thoughts without censure when addressing the pilgrim-souls. Unfortunately, the circle of pilgrim-spirits also foreshadows the woman's capture by the "hunter sons." Although this younger version of "white men" eventually interrupts the connection between the fugitive and the pilgrims, at this early stage, the runaway slave mingles with soul mates.

<16>The fugitive attests to their kinship with tales of persecution. Apostrophizing this community, the speaker says, "O pilgrims, I have gasped and run/ All night long from the whips of one/ Who in your names works sin and woe!" (1.12-14). Her efforts to escape the whip are equivalent to the travails of her pilgrim predecessors. They suffered persecution in England and attempted to sustain their belief system. The slave thus appears as a modern version of a pilgrim seeking spiritual and political deliverance in unfamiliar territory.

<17>Subsequently, this elevated stature allows the woman to report the misdeeds of the master class. "Who in your names works sin and woe!" declares their untoward behavior. These men use their association with the pilgrims to justify heinous treatment of the slave. Although slaveholders and religious dissenters share a common race and national heritage, the fugitive demonstrates their divergence based upon morality. Reading these lines, Angela Leighton contends, "The ideal of liberty has thus given way to tyranny, not fortuitously in the course of time, but by direct lineage: 'in your names'" (Leighton 99). The runaway slave's rendition of events attempts to disrupt the "direct lineage" between the master and the pilgrim. Thus, she distinguishes the slave as the true descendant of this religious community. Ultimately, the fugitive repositions herself—literally and figuratively—to be closer to the values and venues of freedom than her oppressors.

<18>In regard to increasing her physical proximity to liberation the runaway slave emulates the arrival of the pilgrims. Evoking similar actions at Pilgrim's Point, the bondswoman declares, "I stand on the mark beside the shore/ Of the first white pilgrim's bended knee/ Where exile changed to ancestor,/ And God was thanked for liberty" (1.1-4). At this geographical marker, the pilgrims attain a place in American history and the rights of citizenship. Instead of residing at the margins of European society, at the regional mark in the New World, they become central to establishing the ideals of a country. Arrival at this locale makes the pilgrim's dream of freedom come to fruition.

<19>Subsequently, assuming the identical pose of bending her "knee down on this mark," the runaway slave attempts also to garner citizenship and liberty. The fugitive slave desires the identical privileges of the religious dissenters at Pilgrim's Point. Thus articulating similarity of sentiment and posture, the runaway slave says, "I have run through the night, my skin is as dark./ I bend my knee down on this mark:/ I look on the sky and the sea" (1.5-7). The pose of submission—like that of the pilgrims—shows the woman's gratitude to the religious dissenters for providing a model of emancipation. After a treacherous journey from the south to the north, she is grateful to arrive at a locale historically associated with freedom. Once again, the slave demonstrates solidarity with her pilgrim predecessors. Bending their "knee down on this mark," both parties envision Pilgrim's Point as a place of salvation. Their mutual spiritual and physical survival depends upon reaching this refuge. However, in the circumstance of the runaway slave, the "hunter sons" rob her of liberty and historic immortality. Inevitably, the benefits of the locale evade the fugitive slave. Although the runaway slave's mobility momentarily positions her in a landscape of liberation, the pilgrims and Pilgrim's Point are unable to protect the woman from the grasp of white authority.

<20>After narrating her story and assuming the ideological and literal position of the pilgrims, the runaway slave's bliss comes to a sudden halt. Encountering the youthful patriarchal figures, the speaker says "Ha!—in their stead, their hunter sons! Ha, ha! they are on me—they hunt in a

the speaker says, "Ha!— In their stead, their hunter sons:/ Ha, ha! they are on me— they hunt in a ring!" (l.204-205). The "hunter sons" claim their inheritance as oppressors of the woman. From the perspective of these youthful men, the fugitive is a means of production and monetary possession. Their perception of the runaway slave literally and figuratively disconnects her from the pilgrims and the human family. Overall, their sinister presence overcomes the spiritual protection of the religious dissenters. Their ominous ring creates a barrier between the runaway slave and an unshackled existence.

<21>Whereas intimacy defines the union of the lovers, the common ideal of liberty defines the bond between the pilgrims and the runaway slave. In the presence of the religious dissenters, she could believe that freedom was within her grasp. Nevertheless, like the bond with the romantic couple, slaveholders disrupt the precious ties between these fellow freedom seekers. After the dissolution of two unions, the runaway slave seeks out the assistance of a higher power.

<22>In Britain and America, references to biblical allusions and God were consistent tropes in the slavery debate. These religious motifs were partially due to owners justifying bondage with passages from the *Bible*. For instance, many nineteenth-century Southern Christians believed that the Curse of Ham condemned the descendants of Africa to enslavement. In Genesis, Ham—son of Noah—sees his father naked. After awaking from a drunken state, Noah curses Ham's progeny (Canaan) to be "a servant of servants." This was one of many tales that owners used to rationalize their social position and mistreatment of Africans. However, to counter these assertions, abolitionists also evoked religiosity. In newspapers such as *The Liberator*, they railed against slaveholders as agents of the devil (Campbell 6). This faith-based condemnation demonized the master class. Analogously to the efforts of owners to debase the humanity of slaves, activists attempted to dehumanize southern slaveholders.

<23>In verse, Browning explores the converse of the antislavery rhetoric. Thus, if the slaveholder was the agent of the devil, the slave was the ally of God. This logic envisions the bondsman as the spiritual superior of the master. Furthermore, physical suffering also associated slaves with piety. For example, enduring the agonies of flogging, whipping and branding, slaves were perceived as Christ-like. Like the Son of God, the slave was a child of the Supreme Being and subject to grave punishment. On this pious terrain, Browning's "The Runaway Slave" attempts to speak to the preeminent master. This communication is beyond the political institutions of the United States and is not subject to the laws that bolstered institutional slavery. Unlike her previous unions, the runaway slave's divine alliance presents a partner with more power than the slaveholder. Whereas the union with the lover and pilgrim-spirits offers a semblance of freedom, the bond with God has the potential to provide lasting liberation. The runaway slave hopes her imagination and dialogue with the Almighty will procure an existence—on earth and in the afterlife—without shackles.

<24>Before arriving at Pilgrim's Point, the runaway slave called upon the Supreme Being. Remembering her approach to the Lord with her lover, the slave recollects, "We were two to love, and two to pray:/ Yes, two, O God, who cried on Thee./ Though nothing didst Thou say!" (l.86-88). In her former locale, the mediations of two individuals could not inspire the presence of God. The short-circuiting of this spiritual connection is two-fold. The barriers existing between the lovers and God consist of bondage prevailing in the south and the couple's unwed status. First, with God's lack of a response to the lovers, Browning suggests that the higher power could not reside in the same region as slavery. This claim undermines faith-based justifications for bondage and implies that the Supreme Being disapproves of the system. Second, the unmarried couple is unable to sanction their relationship with religious doctrine. African American slaves were unable to marry legally. Thus, their relationship was prohibited from obtaining civic or religious approbation. Although the romantic relationship has the power to socially elevate the man and woman, it is unable to foster spiritual interaction. Therefore, fleeing the south, the fugitive hopes to attain a closer relationship with God.

<25>Nevertheless, in the north, there is also an initial distance between the runaway slave and the Redeemer. She believes that God's universal plan intentionally places black people under the subjection of fellow human beings. Pondering the Lord's creation of the bondsman, the fugitive slave contemplates:

I am black, I am black,
And yet God made me, they say:
But if He did so, smiling back

He must have cast His work away
Under the feet of His white creatures,
With a look of scorn, that the dusky features
Might be trodden again to clay.

(1.22-28)

The runaway slave links blackness to her community's subservient role in society. Her declaration of color consciousness equates blackness to bondage. However, the reference to "they say" also reveals a scant knowledge about religion. The phrase infers that the woman receives information about the creator from other individuals. Thus, probably unable to read, she makes assumptions about God's role in the social and moral condemnation of African American slaves.

<26>Imagining the creation of the slave, she envisions the Lord positioning the bondsman beneath "His white creatures." Literally and figuratively, black people are secondary and in a position to be "trodden" to clay. Reminiscent of the physical brutality against her lover in the south, the runaway slave imagines God lowering the community to the ground. Complicating this dynamic of racialized subjectivity, Angela Leighton submits, "This patrilineal succession is a white succession, and is one that links all white fathers both divine and human" (Leighton 42). The black woman and her community are not part of this "succession." The fugitive slave's placement at the bottom of the hierarchy forces her to use the northern environment to comprehend her presence in the universe and the United States.

<27>Thus, the natural world initiates a union between the slave and God. In the wilderness of Pilgrim's Point, the runaway slave identifies similarities between the sylvan setting and her physical features. Describing God's handiwork in the forest, the fugitive slave observes:

And yet He has made dark things
To be glad and merry as light:
There's a little dark bird sits and sings,
There's a dark stream ripples out of sight,
And the dark frogs chant in the safe morass,
And the sweetest stars are made to pass
O'er the face of the darkest night.

(1.29-35)

Although, previously, she blamed God for the condemnation of blackness, the runaway slave now bears witness to the positive aspects of his dark creations. The "dark bird," "dark stream," and "dark frog" all contribute to making the scene benign. Whereas the complexion of the runaway slave dooms her to bondage, this dim embodiment of the wild is devoid of moral taint.

<28>Furthermore, amidst tentative liberation at Pilgrim's Point, the runaway slave personifies the bird, frog and the night. These entities sing, chant, and have human attributes. Through Mother

Nature, the bondswoman asserts her humanity and vicariously unites with God. On the other hand, the aforementioned elements of nature participate in human-like activities. The woman aligns with other living beings and rejects property status. On the other hand, the dark entities are also a part of God's benevolent offerings. Revealing her affinity to the Lord's dark creations, the runaway slave affirms her blackness as benevolent and shifts from a creature of "dusky features" to a creation full of goodness.

<29>After striving to achieve individual harmony with the creator, the runaway slave recognizes the expansive protection of the Almighty. This patriarchal duty is distinctly different from southern slaveholders and the "hunter sons." Instead of being a force separating the woman from relationships, God's inclusive shield makes her equal to all human beings. Sharing her newfound understanding of the heavenly father, the fugitive points out:

Indeed we live beneath the sky,
That great smooth Hand of God stretched out
On all His children fatherly,
To save them from the dread and doubt
Which would be if, from this low place,
All opened straight up to His face
Into the grand eternity.

God's power is all-encompassing and able to erase the racial distinction between "all His children." She now credits him with placing slaves on the same plateau with the white community. Assessing the role of the Lord as patriarchal figure in the poem, Sarah Brophy contends, "The presentation of the Pilgrim Fathers and God as stable authorities also suggests that 'The Runaway Slave' engenders a conservative politics" (Brophy 278). On the contrary, in the context of the tradition of British women's antislavery verse, the runaway slave's engagement with God speaks to a liberal political posture. Although this is a gesture of moral conservatism, it does not exclude the progressive stance of a slave establishing equality to fellow human beings through the dominion of the Supreme Being. Furthermore, she asserts that the master class is disregarding the desires of the divinity. Thus, by perpetrating atrocities such as physical and sexual abuse, they are unable to open "straight up to His face." Echoing their disconnection to the pilgrim-spirits, slaveholders' heinous behavior creates a moral divide between themselves and the savior.

<30>Further distinguishing the master class from God, the runaway slave illuminates the misguided nature of man. Comparing humans to the capacity of the higher power, the fugitive declares, "Our wounds are different. Your white men/ Are, after all, not gods indeed./ Nor able to make Christs again/ Do good with bleeding. We who bleed/ (Stand off!) we help not in our loss!" (1.239-243). The woman insists that divine ordinance supersedes the power of these men. Although they dominate fellow human beings, the fugitive slave unveils their secular and spiritual shortcomings. Also, the runaway slave makes a distinction between the sufferings of the slave and Christ. Unlike the Son of God, the bondsman's pains do not redeem the sins of man. Instead, their bleeding stresses the wrongdoing of southern oppressors and the "hunter sons."

<31>Imagination and faith facilitate the bond between the slave and God. In her mind's eye, she speculates about the promise of his relationship with mankind and reconsiders her position in the world. Bondsmen—like poets—have an internal vision and soul. The fugitive slave's consideration of God provides the impetus for a relationship with the heavenly entity and shows her interiority. Unfortunately, the spiritual union dissolves with the killing of the "white" baby.

Slaveholders sexually violating the fugitive slave force her to choose between submitting her child to captivity or accepting moral condemnation.

<32>Chronicling the runaway slave's unions and traumatic separations with her lover, pilgrim-spirits and God, Browning suggests that southern patriarchal figures are to blame for discord in the United States. Nevertheless, the poem also implies that the north is also accountable for bondage in the country. Before the American Civil War, Browning expressed hope for the redeeming qualities of the north. In an 1861 letter to Mrs. David Ogilvy, the poet provides a critique of the internal strife: "The dry bones shake throughout the world--& even in America, see how things are. My only fear is that the north will compromise—which will be fatal to the moral life of the nation, only threatened so far in her natural life. When the burden of slavery is thrown off, she will arise up & go forward" (Browning 169). Likewise, in "The Runaway Slave" the north must avoid facilitating confinement. Essentially, in the south and north, Browning attempts to replace bondage with the bonds of productive relationships. These ties provide intermittent liberation that momentarily undermines oppression. Thus, the poet and the runaway slave condemn America for its failure to secure everlasting freedom for African American slaves.

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