

FROM FOUNDING FATHER TO SACRIFICIAL SON
THE TRANSFORMATION OF JOHN BROWN

In the course of the final assault on the enginehouse of the Harper's Ferry Federal Arsenal in which John Brown had barricaded himself with the remaining members of his raiding party on the morning of October 8, 1859, Lieutenant Israel Green struck the old man with his sword before trying to run him through with a savage underthrust that raised him completely from the ground; the blade was deflected and bent double, but the assailant continued, beating his victim on the head with the hilt of his sword. John Daingerfield, one of the hostages, who was "not two feet from Brown at the time", supposed that the old man's skull was split and "did not know till some time later that Brown was not killed".(1) As chance would have it, Lieutenant Green had left his battle sword in the barracks and was armed, at the time of the attack, with only a light dress sword - a detail that no doubt saved John Brown's life and rendered possible the prison coda that was to follow, altering in the process public perception of the meaning of the raid. For it is clear that there are two separate parts to the Harper's Ferry expedition; the first comes to a close when the United States Marines storm the enginehouse on October 18, the second ends in the apotheosis of John Brown, hung from the gallows on December 2. Between these two dates he calmly received a stream of newspapermen and visitors in his cell (Oates (2) cites Coppoc's claim that no less than 800 people visited the jail in a two-day period) and kept up a voluminous correspondence with family, supporters, critics, and the simply curious. The Virginia authorities, by allowing uninterrupted access to the prisoner, and by postponing his execution so that he faced death alone, seemed perversely intent on facilitating martyrdom. His letters, writes Villard, "were a far - for them - more dangerous weapon than the Sharp's rifle they had taken from him at Harper's Ferry".(3) "No theatrical manager," remarked Thoreau, "could have arranged things so wisely to give effect to his behavior and words." (4) Later historians such as Nevins,(5) hostile to John Brown, will begrudge him his unerring instinct for finding and keeping the center of the stage, as if he should have had the common decency to keep passion out of the cold and calculating business of real politics. But as to the nature of the public conversion, there is no question. Immediately after the event the Northern press is almost unanimous in condemning the invasion as misguided if not simply crazy. On the day after Brown's capture Thoreau notes that he has "seen no hearty approbation for this man in any abolition journal".(6) On the day of the execution, however, church bells are rung throughout the North, prelude to a wave of idolatry that was to spread not only by the written word (and song) but by images as well - from nine-color chromos

of his life sold by newspapers as a promotion gimmick to Victor Hugo's imaginative sketch of the gallows scene.

The highly lyric effects achieved during the reprieve which Lieutenant Green unintentionally granted his victim inevitably color our perception of the hero, especially as the "miraculous", "meteor-like"(?) character of John Brown's intrusion into the ongoing debate about slavery tends to rob him of historical density.(8) History books reduce him to a single act that strikes out of nowhere, and the Harper's Ferry raid is treated as an overture to the Civil War rather than as a product of the 1850's. Brown did indeed consider himself as a man marked for a transcendent destiny, but his conception of his role (and the manner in which the acting out of this role was rendered possible by others) must be viewed in the light of pre-Harper's Ferry expectations as to the nature and possibilities of heroism. Leaving aside for the moment the prison sequel - during which Brown, instinctively grasping the new demands that public opinion was making on him, shifts his stance from war leader to solitary martyr - let us see what sort of figure he cut against the background of the 1850's. A number of recent historians (Michael Rogin, George Forgie and Dwight Anderson(9) among others) have argued convincingly that the period prior to the Civil War was lived in the shadow of the Founding Fathers and that however dramatic contemporary events appeared they were inevitably dwarfed by a past incarnate in the towering figures of the Revolutionary pantheon. Anderson has traced the widespread influence during this period of the cult of George Washington as codified in Parson Weems's celebrated *Life*, and in particular the forming effect the image of Washington exercised on Lincoln's career. Forgie pinpoints the 1850's as a decade in which nostalgic filio piety is intensified, stifling the nascent Young America movement epitomized by Stephen Douglas and forcing the debate to return to exegeses of the Founders' true intentions.

Accepting, for immediate purposes, the legitimacy of this analysis of the period, how does John Brown fit into the temper of a time so concerned with the applicability of past models? Contemporary portraits of Brown invariably single out the anachronistic quality of his presence as a leading source of his charisma. The newspaperman James Ked-path, major architect of the John Brown legend, who had begun mythologizing Brown well before the Harper's Ferry raid, introduces him as the "old Puritan type of Christian".(10) Emerson is quick to claim him as an original settler "fifth in descent from Peter Brown who came to Plymouth on the Mayflower in 1620", (11) and Thoreau adds the Revolutionary note, comparing him to "the best of those who stood on our bridge once, on Lexington Common and on Bunker Hill".(12)

The qualifier "Old" that adheres so naturally to his name simply reinforced the patriarchal element, as did the fact that Brown was constantly surrounded - and seen as surrounded - by his sons, no fewer than three of whom were to accompany him on the Harper's Ferry raid.

If, on the other hand, Brown himself slipped so easily into this role it is because the circumstances of his life had so to speak prepared him for it. Brown's biographers have amply informed us of the multiple failures that marked his pre-Harper's Ferry career - to the extent that some of them (Boyer for instance) are tempted to see in his militant abolitionism a compensatory activity. Perhaps. But we would stress rather the fact that the setbacks which John Brown experienced in the marketplace economy forced him to return to more traditional manual occupations that served to reinforce his image as holdover from a previous age. At certain periods of his life he exhibited the booster mentality of a thoroughbred Yankee entrepreneur. Take for instance his ventures in land acquisitions. Hard up for ready cash, John Brown invested borrowed funds in the Franklin Land Company counting on the coming construction of the Ohio and Pennsylvania Canal to bring about a dramatic rise in land prices. The sequel is a classic American unsuccessful story: the canal company modified its route and the recession of 1837 created a credit pinch, with the result that by 1842 John Brown was forced to declare bankruptcy. His career as a speculator (he was even for a brief period a bank director!) was cut short. It is in great part this failure that will lead the Brown sons to stake out claims for Federal lands in Kansas, reverting to the role of frontier farmers in which they will be joined by their chastened father. Brown's subsequent foray into the wool business follows the same pattern; incensed by what he considered the unfair practices of wool purchasers he attempted to protect the farmers' interests by forming a cooperative company that would buy and hold available wool production, thus forcing the merchants to pay a reasonable price. The complexities of the market (and the erratic tariff policies of the Federal government) combined to do him in. A last-minute attempt to bypass middlemen and sell directly on the English market only compounded the financial disaster which ended in liquidation and acrimonious lawsuits. As a result John Brown retreated once again from the deceptive world of marketplace manipulation to a more traditional occupation - that of sheep and cattle breeder. However well-intentioned his try at stabilizing wool price may have been, in economic terms it represented an attempt to create a horizontal monopoly. Land speculation and monopoly building will fuel the post-Civil War economy; in these terms John Brown is a portent of the future, but a portent only since he proves spectacularly unfit for the world of the "moneylenders" and reverts to manual roles.

In yet another domain John Brown encountered defeat.

At the age of sixteen while living in the frontier town of Hudson, Ohio in the house of his father for whom he worked as foreman in the family tannery, Brown, despite his scant schooling, decided to prepare for the ministry, which meant going east to study Greek and Latin at Plainfield Academy in Massachusetts with the idea of going on subsequently to Amherst. There is no doubt as to the genuineness of his sense of vocation; there is no doubt either that in so doing he was conforming to the American pattern of social advancement. Some fifteen months later, however, he was on his way home again, ostensibly because of the inflamed condition of his eyes, in reality because he was ill-suited to the intellectual preparation that the ministry required. The humiliation must have been extreme - so extreme, as Boyer points out, that he makes no mention of the incident in his autobiography. For another, such a downfall might have resulted in a rejection of religion; in John Brown's case it only drove him to reaffirm his faith, but in a nonintellectual, resolutely naive manner. Had he acceded to the ministry Brown would doubtless have been influenced by the liberal interpretation of the Scriptures that was part of the Unitarian current so eloquently personified by Theodore Parker. As it was, he fell back on an extraordinarily literal interpretation - not only did he learn by heart entire pages of the Bible (which he quoted abundantly in his correspondence) but he read his own actions in terms of Biblical figurae. He was a Moses whose mission it was to lead God's people out of bondage in Egypt - a term which figures frequently in his correspondence as synonym for the South. (The fact that blacks also read the Bible in this spirit no doubt confirmed him in his ways). Brown habitually criticized the modern approach to the Gospel, witness his letter of 1853 to his oldest son: "I forgot to say that my younger sons (as is common in this 'progressive age') appear to be a little in advance of my older, and have thrown off the old shackles entirely; after THOROUGH AND CANDID investigation they have discovered the Bible to be ALL a fiction." (13) Whatever else he might do John Brown was not one to throw off the old shackles in order to advance into his own age. Unlike other abolitionists (overwhelmingly liberal in religious terms) for whom the emancipation of the negroes was a progressive social issue, Brown had derived his abolitionism directly from the sacred text.

The anachronistic figure that Brown cut, however, far from alienating militant abolitionists, proved to be a decisive factor in the spell that he cast over them. Nevins and Woodward, both relying heavily on James Malin's anti-Brown work, John Brown and the Legend of '56, mistakenly treat the enthusiasm of Brown's Northern supporters as a nineteenth-century form of 'radical chic', a desperate middle-class search for the exotic. (14) In a recent study Jeffery Rossbach (15) argues that the 'objective' intention of Brown's supporters was - through the catalytic effect of the violence that they knew he was prepared to unleash - to eradicate

slave docility and propel black men into the nineteenth century as full-fledged participants in the emerging industrial economy. Although his approach is at times tendentious Rossbach brings us much closer to the true nature of the relationship that bound Brown to the Secret Six, the band of intellectual reformers who financed his arms buying. To begin with, Brown appeared not as exotic but as a familiar figure cut from the same (social) cloth as they were. They, like John Brown, were descended from old New England families, and, with the sole exception of Gerrit Smith who had inherited a fortune in landholdings, they were born of families whose fortunes were in decline (George Stearns is the only one to make good as a businessman). John Brown represents for them a reminder of their origins - brought humanly closer by his evident insolvency. At the same time, Brown presented additional guarantees of reliability for these hesitant conspirators. He was a family man (abolitionism is closely linked to defense of the family as reading H.B. Stowe reminds us); moreover he retained (perhaps the only holdover from his illfated encounter with the business world), an accountant's turn of phrase that calmed whatever doubts may have assailed Sanborn, the chief bookkeeper of the group's funding enterprise. John Brown offered them a unique opportunity to reenter the world of the Fathers, to reestablish contact with the primal sources of national energy (it is in this sense that Brown is literally radical). James Redpath will supply the additional link when, in his portrait of John Brown, he evokes the latter's Indian prowess, a sure sign that a genuine American hero is in the making.

Undoubtedly as well - in the eyes of the Secret Six - John Brown, tough and unyielding, stood for the Act as against the Word - or rather words. Their support for him assuaged their misgivings as to the real hold that their ideas had on national consciousness and behavior. Brown's curt dismissal of politicians, his condemnation of all forms of compromise, his belief in the virtues of insurrection recalled an earlier age when - instead of talking (16) their ideas and engaging in Garrisonian shilly-shallying about moral 'suasion' (as the contemporary term would have it) - men had acted on their beliefs. And this nostalgia was accompanied by a solid dose of the intellectual's anti-intellectualism, which is but another expression of their uncertainty as to their status in society. John Brown, as he appeared in front of his Concord audience, holding up for all to see the chain with which the Missouri ruffians had bound and dragged his son, reassured them that they were indeed in touch with the cruel realities of the world.

An integral part of Brown's public image was his reputation as a Kansas fighter. It was as Captain John Brown, the hero of the Battle of Black Jack, that he toured the East in 1857 and 1858 in quest of support for his Great Plan. Kansas, in the second half of the decade, was the

theater not only of clashes between proslavery border ruffians and Free Soil immigrants; it was as well the seat of conflict between two conceptions of the anti-slavery cause. To Eli Thayer, the wealthy Worcester manufacturer and founder of the New England Emigrant Aid Society, antislavery was business antislavery; he had no quarrel with the slaveholders who remained south of the border. To Thomas Wentworth Higginson, later to figure as Brown's most loyal supporter among the Secret Six, it was a political and moral crusade, the last chance for the nation to make good on its initial promise of equality for all. To Higginson, who tried to raise an army for Kansas, and who held the rank of brigadier general in James Lane's troop, "a single day in Kansas makes the American Revolution more intelligible than all that Sparks and Hildreth can do". (17) This militant minister makes it a point when preaching in Lawrence (Kansas) on a September Sunday of 1856 to choose as text for his sermon the very Biblical verses the Reverend John Martin had preached on his return from the Battle of Bunker Hill. When in January of 1857 Higginson finally met John Brown face to face it produced a shock of recognition.

I saw in Kansas the history of the past [...]
 And if I wanted a genuine warrior of the Revolution
 where could I find him better than in the old
 Vermonter, Captain John Brown, the defender of
 Osawatimie... Old Captain Brown, the Ethen Allen,
 the Israel Putnam of today? (18)

+ + + +

An autobiography is the record of the manner in which an individual recombines the events of his life in terms of the response he intends to elicit; the autobiography of an historical figure can reveal the attempt to situate and define a public image. In the case of John Brown, unfortunately, the autobiographical record is slim. The account of his Kansas adventures, which he began in the third person, is cut short after only a few pages; we are left with the celebrated autobiographical letter addressed to George Stearn's son Henry but in fact intended for George Stearns himself. Dated July 1857, this letter - which recounts Brown's early life up to the time of his marriage - is designed to build confidence in the writer as a man who can be trusted in a matter as perilous as a direct attack on Southern slavery. The most dramatic moment is the account of young John's encounter with a black boy. While staying "with a gentlemanly landlord once a United States Marshall", (19) he meets a slave "near his own age very active, intelligent and good feeling" to whom he is under obligation "for numerous little acts of kindness". But whereas John is complimented on his smart behavior and quick speech, the black boy, his equal in every respect, is "hardly clothed", "poorly fed", and "beaten before his eyes with Iron Shovels or any other thing that came to hand". There

is no way of knowing whether or not this incident actually took place; true or not, the scene is given as the origin of his abolitionist sentiments, "a circumstance that in the end led him [i.e. John Brown, the text is in the third person] to declare and swear: Eternal War with Slavery". Childhood experience here provides the terrain for fundamental political decisions which are thus assimilated to reactions in a domestic (patriarchal) setting. In his autobiographical letter John Brown adheres to the pattern set down by Parson Weem's Life of George Washington (also written for young readers but aimed through them at their elders) whereby the stories of childhood (apocryphal or not) are seen as sure signs of future greatness.

The autobiography presents as well another curious aspect. While on one hand the author insists on his early ambition "to excel in doing anything he undertook to perform" and on the fact that he habitually expected to succeed in what he undertook, the account itself chronicles a series of losses which cast him in the role of victim. When he was six an Indian gave him a "Yellow Marble" which he lost "beyond recovery"; subsequently his pet squirrel wandered away or was killed leaving him "in mourning" for over a year; finally a ewe lamb, "perhaps" a gift from his father, sickened and died. These incidents - which John Brown sees fit to recall along with the loss of his mother at the age of eight, a loss that was "complete and permanent" in that he never "adopted in feeling" his stepmother - constitute what he refers to as "the school of adversity". Losses are interpreted as elements in a didactic process. Moreover the passage which describes the loss of the marble and the squirrel is followed immediately by the admission that, on occasion, he told lies; reversing the order of reading would suggest that the double loss is chastisement for uttering falsehoods. Could this not be further interpreted as an oblique reference to the punishment administered (in the form of financial ruin) when he abandons the Biblically sanctified profession of sheep and cattle breeder and ventures out into the false world of the moneylender? That such issues are not far from his mind is suggested by the fact that, in the course of a paragraph which discusses the right of minors to own animals, he adds that "older people have sometimes found difficulty with titles" (a reference to the dispute with Chamberlain over ownership of the Westland farm?). Be this as it may, in the context of the autobiography the misfortunes that he endures are treated as part of a plan, of a "much needed course of discipline" by which the "Heavenly Father sees it best to take all the little things out of his hands which he has ever placed in them". The only adversity recorded which is not considered as part of the Almighty's plan is that meted out to the black boy; only in so far as John Brown takes up the cause of the black boy (a boy of his own age and - according to the description given - of like abilities) is revolt legitimized. Here we can refer to another text written by Brown himself, this

