THE AFTERLIFE
OF JOHN BROWN

EDITED BY

ANDREW TAYLOR AND ELDRID HERRINGTON

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and

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Acknowledgments

We also wish to acknowledge here the work of two scholars, Paul Finkelman and Merrill D. Peterson, whose writing on John Brown inspired our own project. Although published too late to be considered in this book, David S. Reynolds's 2005 biography has underscored our belief that Brown remains a pivotal and highly relevant figure in the cultural consciousness of the United States.

List of Illustrations

Introduction: The Anguish None Can Draw

Eldrid Herrington

John Brown is dead. Long lives John Brown. An ordinary name and an extraordinary fate. This book examines the afterlife of John Brown, in part, by asking why the apprehension of him remains unsettled. One answer lies in an uneasy legacy of the split within contemporary opinions about the man and his action; another lies in the apparently unique action of the Harper's Ferry raids and the unsettling standards it demands. "Unique action" rests on a number of claims—of which many are contingent on race. Those who say "Long live John Brown," tend to divide along a color line. Lerone Bennett, Jr., among others, has little hesitation in rewriting John Brown's race.

What makes many baulk is that John Brown presents a daunting model of heroism, one that none of the writers in this book put into question. What is at issue, then, is what action for what crime. To John Brown, there was no question: the ownership of slaves was an issue of selves and souls, and Brown felt the issue was of such urgency that he thought he could not live inactive while slavery was alive in his nation. One death was a small price to pay for a nation and to annihilate the suffering in it, and it should also be remembered that he was willing not just to stake his life but even those of his sons. Brown undertook many conflicts; the significance of the Harper's Ferry raid was its carefully self-dramatized eye for an eye. It was the first attack on the only Federal arsenal in a Southern state and was made when sectional feeling was extremely high. John Brown hanged; his death pictured out a lynch mob's violence. His hanging pictured out exactly the failure of the United States, dead in its aspirations for human freedom, daily murdering those who, excluded by others from humanity, required rights to citizenship.

"The Portent (1859)"

"Hanging" is the first word of "The Portent (1859)," Melville's prefatory poem to *Battle-Pieces*. The poem is one of the finest written about John Brown because it captures the ways in which he was a sage of his time and strange to it; these dislocations Melville lays at the door of the South. John Brown is "weird" *not* in the sense of "odd" but in the older sense of "predictive": he presaged war; he was a seer who out-faced his nation with those eagle eyes, so famously captured in photographs. "Weird" is a weird word but is meant to show the ancientness of Brown's purpose. The single syllables "Weird John Brown" punctuate the singular predictive actions that would be reenacted in the war, reenacted in the battle-pieces of Melville's book. The trinity of blank syllables matches the bleak fact: Brown is a pendent measure of where the nation needed to be at the same time that he is a warning of pending conflict.

The first word of the poem is not "Hanged" but "Hanging": Brown is hanged, but the issue is not dead: his death was not a suspension but an inauguration of violence. Shenandoah should hang its head in shame over the hanging of John Brown. Two heads are here in the poem: Shenandoah's, hung in shame, and Brown's, hanged by the neck. He is a meteor, a planetary fragment whose gravitational trajectory meant inevitable destruction. When Melville writes "Slowly swaying/ Such the law," he declares that the nation's laws have gone against natural law: John Brown hanged by physics, not by justice; by science, not by right sentence. The only true law that was fulfilled was, gruesomely, the law of gravity: Brown hanged on his own weight. His "sacrifice" is a matter of nature and fact. By invoking science, Melville implies that Brown's death was, in fact, a sentence he passed on himself—the means of death were appropriate. The act of insurrection bloodied Brown, but in death he was untouched.

Franny Nudelman is right to observe that John Brown's body is absent in the poem, though I would add that a specific absence is invoked. The words in the poem that invoke the body are those that talk about the head: "crown," "cap," "veil," "beard." The "streaming beard" is the meteor's tail; John Brown's head is the meteor—John Brown's head when it is hanged. The invoked absence, then, is the neck. John Brown's name is placed in parentheses, as though a whispered, personal aside. But these marks are not so much about secrecy as about circumstance: the parentheses picture out the noose.

There is something that cannot be witnessed in the scene, though; there is "the anguish none can draw." The suffering to come is beyond portrayal,

as is the suffering of that instant. Brown cannot be "drawn": the purposes of his gaunt, attenuated figure cannot fully be gathered or adduced.

Brown's Face

Thoreau said of Brown that "I need not describe his person to you": he was hard to forget and known to all. Much is invested in Brown's physical appearance, like his epithets; many characterizations say more about beliefs of onlooker. The "mad" photograph can show the fever of a just or unjust purpose, and, against both of those readings, indications of a mild stroke. In photographs, he seems to outstare the frame in a gaze that does not greet but goes beyond the onlooker. The sacrifice in the face is made mystical; Brown outfaced himself and became symbolic and figural. This is not what he would have wanted, if it meant abstraction instead of action. Jean Libby reminds us that Brown was aware that photographs would form part of the hagiography used in his figuration, that these were deliberate sittings to proliferate the image of a martyr. The beard was grown before, but the occasion made the beard biblical.

This is the beard in John Steuart Curry's giant painting *The Tragic Prelude* in which Brown is a giant, his arms spread like the cross, with a Beecher's Bible in one hand and a Bible in the other. Conflicting sides of the war arranged as pro-slavery and free-soilers, North and South are made the saved and the damned of Judgment Day. This is a struggle between good and evil where nothing less than the soul of the nation is on trial. Brown is a mountain of a man, a force of nature contending with fire and whirlwind.

Curry's epic scale is made human in the series of paintings by Horace Pippin and the children's book sequence by Jacob Lawrence. Brown's scaffold is not an elevated position, no more elevated than a tree from which a lynch mob hangs a man or woman. In Pippin's *John Brown Going to His Hanging*, the only forward-looking figure is a lone black woman, a Harriet Tubman figure, facing out of the canvas from the bottom right; all the rest are men, wearing hats, facing away (even John Brown). The painting makes the point that, now John Brown is dead, what will happen to those who might benefit most from his legacy? Brown acknowledged that his sacrifice was symbolic—it brought about no change unless others joined him after. Lawrence paints the 21 men as mountains or weapons and he does not try to "capture" Brown's face, giving him a figure more than a face. Brown is always hunched over, studying field plans or battle plans; he is most upright when dead. His body is long and drawn; he is tall, but not towering as in Curry's painting. It is as though Lawrence gets at the horrifying fact of hanging's lengthening a man's body.

Brown's Name

It is appropriate that Brown's name lives most in words performed by the body, in the song "John Brown's Body," later transposed to hymn and military march. He turned a millenarian (and particularly New England) tradition to militant ends. His call for war jarred the nation, out of tune, out of step, but brought into line with John Brown's body, and with "John Brown's Body." In a United States of shame, which required that it rescue itself, Brown's action is shared by soldiers, one reason why his song was taken up by them particularly. In Julia Ward Howe's rewriting of the song into hymn, John Brown's soul becomes God's truth, the truth that is marching on.

John Brown's plain name lends itself to the various epithets applied to him; the ways in which he is apprehended imply familiarity, not strangeness: Old John Brown; John Brown of Osawatomie; Captain John Brown. To call him "old John Brown" is to make him ancient and familiar, not strange. It is the nation estranged from its principles; old John Brown brought it back to its first purposes. In another sense, his name should not be given an exalted place because in his time he was one of many John Browns and John Does, hanged unjustly. His plain name stands in for many unnamed and unknown sufferers.

Democracy and Action

John Brown's action challenged not eternal questions but ones that were temporal and immediately real: bodily suffering. Also, in making Brown Christ-like, the problem is less with blasphemy than with a demotion of democracy. Brown's tone is wholly different from that of Thoreau when he says, "I speak for the slave when I say, that I prefer the philanthropy that neither shoots me nor liberates me." Brown did not speak for but spoke with; he did not act for but acted with. Why are all the raiders not Christ? Blacks had been fighting and dying for centuries; one white man stands up with them and becomes Christ-like. Someone had to give a life for so many lives given, and it just happened to be Brown; he was elected by history. Through Brown, whites showed that they were finally willing to sacrifice their bodies, even in suicidal missions. When Shaw sent his son to war, he knew the likely manner of his death.

Many of the writers in this volume remind us of the signal difference between John Brown's raid and the violence it inaugurated. Brown acted with whites and blacks; the Civil War was fought by whites until blacks were permitted to join the armies as privates. Blacks, in large part, were

denied a part in war but were equal partners in Brown's raid. It was not the slaves that Brown was "redeeming" but the nation; he enlisted black men to the fight. It was the nation that was shamed, not slaves. Black men helped him, they were not rescued by him—they were a band of 21 in open conflict, not a "Secret Six."

"Terrorism" and Madness

Santa Fe Trail, a movie starring one of America's recent presidents, fed the myth of Brown as a fanatic and wide-eyed madman. John Brown was found crazed by those who found this sangfroid frightening and a test of their sacrificial limits. He was also found crazed by those who found that there were no reasons for turning from reason to violence. Brown's reputation as a madman diverts from the fact of the insanity of the United States of his time. To help slaves who were sold on the auction block, abolitionists committed their bodies to the lecturing stage. John Brown's eloquence was on the hanging scaffold.

Those who invoke madness and "terrorism" must address the question of comparable cause. Louis DeCaro, Jr. rightly reverses this wrong done to John Brown; Brown was fighting against "proslavery terrorists." Stauffer and Trodd remind us of the unjust comparisons to Timothy McVeigh; making such a comparison attempts to erase the crime of slavery. Brown made a strike against slavery, what he called the "unjustifiable War of one portion of its citizens upon another." Slavery was terror inflicted daily and for generations on innocent men and women. It was a crime against the Constitution and made the United States, in the bald hypocrisy of its position, "A land of freedom, boastfully so-called, with human slavery enthroned at the heart of it, and at last dictating terms of unconditional surrender to every other organ of its life, what was it but a thing of falsehood and horrible self-contradiction?" (James 1911, 42). To call Brown a terrorist is still to believe that the antebellum United States was the United States as it should be.

Brown is also seen as a madman because of his "failure" but this "failure" was a measure of the failure of the United States. Governor Wise's logic was that if he did not hang Brown, others would lynch him. Hanging Brown was a striking challenge to the futility of Wise's action, purportedly meant to quell rather than instigate violence. Many wanted Brown's death to bring on violence. Brown showed in the moment of his death that the United States as it existed at that moment would die—its corrupt body politic had never really lived. Brown's death in effect fractured the state: Harper's Ferry was in Virginia when Brown died, but would become "free"

West Virginia during and after the war; Virginia was the one state split on the Eastern seaboard to have remained halved. It was to be seen as a phenomenal triumph of a body over the body politic, but as Franny Nudelman eloquently describes the hypocrisy of war, violence was the basis for collectivity where collectivity could have put violence to rest.

History was compactly staged on that scaffold in that many who captured Brown would stake their claim for slavery: Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart; John Wilkes Booth, who thought Brown a fanatic, went to Harper's Ferry to see him hanged. It was another staged scene of the "drama" and tragedy of the United States, a moment, as Arthur Miller would say of the moral vertigo he experienced when writing *The Crucible*, "when an individual conscience was all that could keep a world from falling." John Brown's hanging was not John Brown's tragedy, but the tragedy of a nation.

It took a man who straddled the divide to unite the nation: Lincoln was a conciliator as well as an emancipator in the sense that he wanted to resolve the question of union before that of slavery. Judgment of Lincoln cannot be the same as that of Brown because Lincoln did not court his assassination; because of Booth, who felt that Lincoln was, like Brown, a traitor, Lincoln did not live to see poisonous half-measures enforced by subsequent governments.

Brown and Labor

The labor question made John Brown accessible, in particular, to Europeans who might have had a more distant sympathy regarding slavery. But also in an America where blacks were economically shackled from Reconstruction on, John Brown's attempts at wage equality resonated. Julie Husband shows that Du Bois knew that "race consciousness [was] the foundation for class-consciousness" in the United States and held the first meeting of the Niagara Movement at Harper's Ferry in 1906. Studying and writing his 1909 biography about Brown taught Du Bois about action; he was moved from academia to activism through his biographical work. Bruce Ronda shows how Muriel Rukeyser takes the deprivations of the Depression and layers them with the kinds of labor questions Brown's life asks.

Civil Rights and Violence

Blacks had been standing up, rising up, and dying for centuries. The question, in a way, was about white insurrection. It was not hanging that

troubled John Brown, but what he and his nation had to live with. His daunting demand for an answering commitment and debates concerning the place of violence were most acutely witnessed in the civil rights movement. John Brown laid down his life for his country and for the rights of a race. But the place of words and nonviolent resistance should not be forgotten. Frederick Douglass knew how tough Brown's demand was; he did not join Brown because he knew his words had force where his body might not. John Brown's is one kind, one measure of action, not one-of-a-kind. Other kinds of action are also honorable. In listening to the faltering parts of Thoreau's "Plea," we should remember Gandhi, who read "Resistance to Civil Government" when in jail in South Africa and recognized the action he was at that moment advocating—*satyagraha*—soul force. It was that same force that Martin Luther King, Jr. invoked in his "I have a dream" speech in Washington, DC: "Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force." Many might place John Brown on the side of, say, the Black Panthers. But is this parallel apt? John Brown demonstrated passive resistance on the scaffold. He acted with blacks.

Chapters

Louis DeCaro, Jr. shows that who tells history is a matter of inheritance, of money and of opinion and family tradition. Oswald Garrison Villard shared blood with his grandfather William Lloyd Garrison, hence his ambivalence toward John Brown in his biography of the man. He had money to pay research assistants whereas Du Bois wrote without ancillary funds. Villard wrote a harsh, unsigned review of Du Bois's *John Brown* in his own paper; Du Bois defended himself in private letters. DeCaro, Jr. is the writer who most pulls *The Afterlife of John Brown* short: it too minimizes the African American memory of John Brown and brings terrorism to the fore.

Franny Nudelman uncovers absent bodies in her chapter: there is no mention of slavery in the song "John Brown's Body;" Wendell Phillips says that Brown acted on behalf of slaves whereas Brown confounded racial identity; John Brown's blood reminds us of "the staggering material differences between the enslaved and the unenslaved." On the scaffold, Brown "represented both a suffering slave population and a guilty white nation," sacrifice and penance together. Nudelman's word "represented" is accurate because Brown's suffering was not comparable with that of slaves: he hanged in an instant. Robert Penn Warren feels that the United States has no "felt" history until the Civil War. His quotation marks sit uneasily around the word because of the suffering American bodies inflicted on

themselves. The absences Nudelman identifies are the pattern of the enactment of the Constitution. "Slavery" was mentioned only on its abolition; it was meant to correct the tacit understanding that "all other persons" designated blacks, Indians, and anyone who was not white.

Joe Lockard examines sentimental poetry about Brown's death published in Garrison's *Liberator*. Even these poems of apocalyptic phraseology or pat acceptance pave the way for "John Brown's Body" reincarnated as a hymn. The hideous paradox of the United States is laid bare in these poems, which turn over words such as "traitor" and make them "glorious." Andrew Taylor shows that these paradoxes linger in speeches of the time too: the teleological vista Thoreau invokes in his "Plea" demotes the radicalism of John Brown's act. As with the absences that Nudelman notes, Thoreau glosses over blood. But Thoreau is intelligent about the "risk of isolating Brown in his own transcendence;" Taylor's essay constitutes a response to John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd's observation that "Brown made the transcendentalists' abstractions concrete and in return they made him a transcendentalist abstraction."

Kristen Proehl returns again to the place of natural fact in Brown's life and in his portrayal by others: "Brown transformed the natural world into a tool that could be used to dismantle the institution of slavery." Thomas Higginson in particular is interested in Brown's knowledge of the mountains, as a key to his character and as a matter of military tactics. John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd show the persistence of Brown seen as a force of nature: as a prairie fire and tornado in John Steuart Curry's murals for the Kansas State House. They also bring him back to earth in their argument that his "character and actions made possible and necessary *by* his time and his country." They show that Brown's extremity was forced by his reluctance of his times to have done with its greatest crime.

Turning to other countries, Janine Hartman explores a European pantheon of resistance—labor activists and anarchists—through a pairing of Victor Hugo and Joseph Déjacque. She shows that ways in which Europeans approached the name of John Brown was often through an equation of slavery with "wage slavery"; in their view, Brown could be viewed as working against an aristocracy in order to form a true republic. Julie Husband shows that this labor question was, in the United States, still a race question. Du Bois's biography of John Brown is cognate with his preoccupation with labor rights for blacks. Du Bois thinks beyond the Harper's Ferry raid in his research into Brown's attempts at a wool collective: "Brown and Smith were convinced that freed slaves would need to own their own capital as well." In such research, Du Bois shows that John Brown had his eye not just on the imminent conflict but also on the

necessity for black economic freedom after the conflict. Du Bois also enacts the necessity of overturning pejorative words: he talks about Brown's "Lost Cause" as freedom for blacks. Du Bois was writing against contemporaries such as Thomas Dixon, Jr. who hated Brown to the degree that he loved the Klan. It is as though Du Bois read Melville as well; Husband notes that "veil" is a significant term for Du Bois, who was "shut out from their [white] world by a vast veil," and who deplores the veil of John Brown's fate. The veil is what Christ had to rend in the temple, in an act of destruction and violence in the middle of a holy place; Du Bois unites with Brown in Christ-like fighting.

Bruce Ronda reads Muriel Rukeyser's poetry in the context of the economic problems of her time, a Depression that also produced a number of works about John Brown (Michael Gold and Michael Blankfort's play *Battle Hymn* was sponsored by the Works Project Administration as were Arthur Covey's paintings, *Episodes in the Life of John Brown*, in the Torrington, Connecticut post office, among others). Rukeyser registers the agony of the man through her intelligent line-breaks and allusion to Melville: "Deep in the prophet's eyes, a wish to be again / Threatened alive, in agonies of decision / Part of our nation of our fanatic sun." John Brown does not wish to be—to exist—again; he wishes to exist in resistance, to exist *in conscience*. These are "agonies of decision" that cause him pain, not "agonies of death."

Tyler Hoffman brings to light a number of children's stories about John Brown. It is personal history as well as history that matter here—Brown brought his family to his cause and he is reported to have kissed a black child on the way to his death. In Gwen Everett's children's story it is Annie who tells the tale; in Russell Banks's *Cloudsplitter* it is Owen Brown. Kimberly Rae Connor shows how Banks's fictional reworking of Brown's story is attentive to racial paradoxes, to the uneasy pairing of abolition and minstrelsy, and the "guilty pleasure" of "racial transgression when it is cast as righteousness." In his "slave narrative" in whiteface, the triumph over privations is not triumphant. Banks brings "neither editorial clarity nor factual verification" to the tale but presents the paradox of extreme selfhood and the giving up of self.

John Brown is considered a marginal figure in part because of the daring of his actions; this is a measure of others' courage, not his own. Is the same said of civil war soldiers? Writers must struggle still to return him to heroism. Some of the legacy of John Brown is the halfway concession but there is nothing halfway about John Brown; it is interesting that such an unequivocal action has such a variety of responses. In this book there are no detractors from "black" assessments of John Brown but many responses to whites' half-measures.

John Brown is still hanging; judgment about him is not fixed. There are many reasons to dig Brown's body up again because we live in only a generation after the ebbing of the questions fought out and avoided during the Civil War. Many answers to why Brown's afterlife is fraught have little to do with Brown: there is much past assessment to correct; his action asks a lot in answer; for many it is difficult facing up to what the United States was; many live passively with the lingering consequences of Reconstruction. However, much of Brown's afterlife shows continued celebration, in biographies, paintings, novels, plays, songs, poetry, speeches, and films. The fact that many of these need to be retold as our understanding deepens and our acceptance advances means that John Brown needs to live on.

In a sense, Robert Penn Warren was right: only in the Civil War did the United States come into being, to "feel" its history. The United States was not true to principles until slavery was abolished; it was in suspension until the question was settled by the president, by the war's end, and in the Constitution. The inequalities John Brown worked against were not settled in state law for another three generations, and they are not settled yet in our society. Righting those wrongs now seems a long way off from the gaunt shadow of John Brown.

John Brown's body revives whenever the United States shames itself, when the body politic bears wounds, when it imprisons citizens without trial or prosecutes an unjust war in an unjust manner. In this, the "drama" of the United States is the drama of humanity bent on violence yet attempting to better itself. John Brown's action does not provide an unthinking template and answer to the questions, When is the right moment and what is the right manner of violence? John Brown is dead—we must live up to him before we die.

Black People's Ally, White People's Bogeyman: A John Brown Story

Louis A. DeCaro, Jr.

"John Brown is one of the most vexing figures in American history," writes historian William McFeely. Interestingly, he makes this declaration in the first line of an introduction written especially for the reissue of Benjamin Quarles's classic study of African Americans and John Brown, *Allies for Freedom* (1974). But if Brown seemed austere, reticent, and even humorless to many of his black associates, probably none of them would have shared McFeely's opinion. The divided opinion regarding Brown has often been a matter of black and white. Malcolm X recognized this in 1964 when he concluded that white society had unfairly portrayed Brown as a "nut."[1] As seen in this essay, from the time of his death in 1859 until the present, John Brown has often been rejected by many white Americans because he does not conform to the accepted paradigm of national virtue: he was *too close* to blacks, and all too eager to win for them by force what many of their forefathers had withheld from them by force.

John Brown was born on May 9, 1800, the son of devout evangelical Calvinists of Connecticut background. Brown's father and mother were strongly antislavery from the late eighteenth century and carried these sentiments with them, along with other Puritan families, to the Western Reserve of northeastern Ohio in the early 1800s. The Brown family was notable for their strong abolition views, and John followed his father in working on the local underground railroad and in supporting political figures who opposed slavery. John Brown's business endeavors of over three decades were mediocre at best, though his attempts at success were

thwarted as much by current economic trends and crises as by his own misjudgments and errors. Yet Brown's consistent plan from young adulthood was to use business success to advance the cause of abolition, and his business and family concerns were often interwoven with efforts on behalf of the troubled African American community.

Brown came to national prominence as a fighter in the 1850s, when the newly opened Kansas territory was torn by civil strife between proslavery and free state settlers. Constant, violent intrusion and interference by Southern forces in the political processes of the new territory in 1855–1856 finally brought a violent response from the free state side, including the militant Browns. In later years it was fully revealed that Brown, several of his sons, and some other free state men had led a night raid on proslavery neighbors, leaving five mutilated bodies along the Pottawatomie Creek. Brown and others contended that the killings were essential given the collaboration of proslavery neighbors with Southern terrorists camped in the area. Their apprehensions were well founded. While all free state settlers were generally endangered by proslavery terrorism, outright abolitionists such as the Browns were particularly marked for attack. John Brown and his associates gathered sufficient evidence to conclude that free state people in their area—especially his outspoken sons—were in danger of imminent assault. Their bloody strike was preemptive, not vengeful, particularly since there was no territorial or federal constabulary to provide them protection from proslavery terrorism. This violent response was extremely distasteful to conservative free state settlers, who were either too fearful or naive in the hope that the proslavery government in Washington, DC would intervene to bring justice. Since Brown's leadership in the Pottawatomie killings was largely unknown back East, his well-earned reputation as a guerilla was not tainted in the Northern press. This proved expedient to his later efforts to raise funds—ultimately for his own independent strike against slavery at Harper's Ferry, a small town in Virginia that stood at the doorstep of the South and hosted the only government armory in the slave states.

Brown's plan was to use the vast Allegheny mountain system that stretched downward into the South as a means to move his men and black recruits into the heartland of slavery. As he later insisted, his intention was never to ignite an insurrection but to lead away increasing numbers of the enslaved—with minimal violence—until his liberation movement had become so widespread as to collapse the economy of the South. But John Brown's mountain campaign never begun. Despite a favorable response to the raid from the local enslaved community, his own apprehensions and errors stranded him and his men in Harper's Ferry beyond the hour of escape.[2]