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The Word and the Life: John Brown as Reader

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Abstract

This paper is a small first pass at one dimension of a large new project, whose working title is “American Charismatics: The Intellectual Vocations and Civic Legacies of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Joseph Smith, and John Brown.” That project posits and explores the common origins of the divergent charismatic vocations that these three men pioneered—the vocations of literary intellectual, religious evangelical, and radical political activist; or poet, prophet, and revolutionary—in the social, spiritual, and epistemological dislocations of the Second Great Awakening and the democratic relocations of sacred scripture and scriptural authority that were forged in this crucible. My heuristic proposition that, different as the fields they fashioned and followers they attracted may be, Emerson, Smith, and Brown each (given some adjustment of family class positions, psychologies, and migration patterns) might have become either of the others suggests one way in which I think John Brown presents, as the title of this morning’s panel has it, “A Problem in Biography.”

The facet of this problem that I will examine here is Brown's authorization, his access to agency and a sense of self, by a founding commitment to and perpetual practice of reading. This commitment, which also characterizes my other two figures, puts common understandings of both reading and personal identity under pressure, as, for example, when Emerson charges the American scholar to discover or recover himself through the tuition or "influence" of nature and action, as well as books, but also warns that, absent the effluence of the scholar's intuition, none of these texts will be well-read. My approach to John Brown as reader also draws on Stanley Cavell's essay, "The Philosopher in American Life," in which he attributes Emerson's and Thoreau's non-recognition by professional philosophers to their substitution for conventional analytical argumentation "a mode of thinking, a mode of conceptual accuracy, as thorough as anything imagined within established philosophy, but invisible to that philosophy because based on an idea of rigor foreign to its establishment." Cavell names that "foreign rigor" reading and defines it as "the task of endless responsibility for one's own discourse"—a responsibility exercised through obedient responsiveness to a discourse that one has not authored.

John Brown located himself in the world, conceived his relations to others, and assessed and revised his course textually. Reading was the characteristic mode in which he both wrote and acted. (It is not coincidental, perhaps, that the family code for Brown's Kansas and Harpers Ferry fighters was "scholars.") Though Brown's "controlling narrative," as Lou DeCaro observes, was "that of Providence and the discipline of God," that narrative had to be produced and reproduced out of the materials and in response to the circumstances at hand—a "task of endless responsibility." I will consider John Brown's practice and person as reader in several of his writings and speeches, in his notorious statement that it was better that "a whole generation of men, women and children should pass away by a violent death" than that the Golden Rule or the Declaration of Independence be violated, and in the particular resonance for him of Richard Baxter's *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, which Brown once remarked that he thought no one could read without becoming a Christian. John Brown as reader may assume the shape neither of the imperial and/or disorganized selves of earlier biographical accounts nor of the performative or self-fashioned role-player of some more recent ones, but rather of

the investigative self described by Emerson in *Nature*, who rigorously seeks “to learn of his relation to the world . . . by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility.”