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How I Wrote John Brown, Abolitionist: A Cultural Biography

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Available online at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/john-brown/reynolds-abstract.pdf>
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Abstract

My book *John Brown, Abolitionist* is emphatically a *cultural* biography of 19th-century America's most famous antislavery warrior, just as my earlier book *Walt Whitman's America* is a cultural biography of its most celebrated poet. Cultural biography is based on the idea that human beings have a dynamic, dialogic relationship to many aspects of their historical surroundings, such as politics, society, literature, and religion.

The special province of the cultural biographer is to explore this relationship, focusing on three questions: How does my subject *reflect* his or her era? How does my subject *transcend* his or her era—that is, what makes him or her unique? What *impact* did my subject have on his or her era?

Cultural biography takes an Emersonian approach to the human subject. As Emerson writes, “the ideas of the time are in the air, and infect all who breathe it...We learn of our contemporaries what they know without effort, and almost through the pores of our skin.” The cultural biographer explores the historical “air” surrounding the subject and describes the

process by which the air seeped through the pores of his or her skin. Once the biographer accepts the cultural environment as a viable area of study, new vistas of information and insight open up. John Brown emerges in cultural biography not as an isolated, insane antislavery terrorist but as an amalgam of cultural and social currents that found explosive realization in him. Character traits usually explained psychologically have social dimensions. Cultural signifiers color the most private thoughts. Placing John Brown fully in his times freshly illuminates, among other things, the legacy of Puritanism, the significance of slave revolts and guerilla warfare, , the varieties of antislavery activism, racial attitudes, the social impact of Transcendentalism, and, more generally, the causes of the Civil War. . Literary history, too, is illuminated, since many imaginative writers—Melville, Whitman, Whittier, Victor Hugo, to name a few—wrote eloquently about Brown. Finally, new dimensions of popular culture come to light, since Brown was a cultural icon variously championed and denigrated in popular literature, music, and art.