From Man to Meteor: Nineteenth Century American Writers and the Figure of John Brown

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From Man to Meteor
Nineteenth Century American Writers and the Figure of John Brown

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the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

On November 2, 1859, John Brown laid siege to the Federal Arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, then Virginia, in an effort to seize weaponry which he planned to employ in a full scale slave insurrection. From the moment he entered the public eye during his brief trial and execution, John Brown and his legacy were figured and refigured by prominent writers and thinkers of the time. The result of this refiguring was an image under constant metamorphosis. As the image of John Brown cycled through the Civil War, it moved further and further from the actual man and became a metaphor for the cause he supported and finally for the conflict that arose from that cause. By exploring these writers’ works on Brown collectively rather than exclusively, a more fully developed, if at times contradictory, view of this figure can be extracted, reflecting the ever changing views of a nation engulfed by war.
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Introduction

On November 2, 1859, John Brown, already known in certain circles for his role in the sectional fighting in Kansas, performed the deed for which he was to become infamous in American history. After forming a group of a few dozen men, he laid siege to the Federal Arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, then Virginia, in effort to seize weaponry which he planned to employ in a full scale slave insurrection. Brown’s attempt to arm the slaves, of course, failed. Outnumbered by Federal Troops, Brown and his surviving men were quickly captured, tried for treason, and executed. John Brown hanged for treason on December 2, 1859.

From the moment his raid began to capture newspaper headlines across the nation, it was obvious to all that this contentious figure would not, could not, disappear from the public eye. John Brown may have failed, but his ideals were far from defeated. His powerful speech to the court had been printed and reprinted, and though his actions were thought by most deplorable, the idealism which drove those actions proved inspirational. Many were stirred when they read Brown’s defense:

Now if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by the wicked than I submit. Let it be done (Huesten 55).

Clearly aware of the effect his words and deeds would have on history, Brown consciously engaged in the definition of his identity and legacy. With these words, John Brown himself began what would become a rapid and repeated metamorphosis of his image. The image of John Brown would, in only seven brief years, be constantly figured and refigured by a number of writers and thinkers.
Brown’s willingness to lay down his life “for the furtherance of justice” and “mingle” his “blood” with that of slaves across the nation was rousing to the growing number of abolitionists in the North. They had found their martyr. But this martyr had a history. Though Brown’s idealism had left many like minded radicals in awe, it became difficult for those decidedly less fervent to stomach the violent means by which Brown enacted his abolitionist ideals. In order to be acceptable to the majority of Northerners, John Brown still needed refiguring.

And perhaps no one was better suited to accomplish this necessary redefinition than Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Already engulfed in the politics of the abolitionist movement, both men were eager to make Brown the face of the movement. Through a series of essays and lectures, they enabled Brown’s ideals to overshadow his deeds. Thoreau portrays Brown as the embodiment of his radical political resistance. He was Thoreau’s theory put into practice. Emerson went to work on Brown’s past, redefining him in the light of his own theory. Brown was depicted as the Emersonian child grown, a model for transcendentalism, and a man who listened to a higher spiritual law rather than the unjust law of the land. As these two men came to his defense, they began a process of reinventing Brown not as a man but as an image. Though the actual John Brown was destined to die, the John Brown image they had helped to create would endure through and beyond the coming conflict.

Once the John Brown image that Thoreau and Emerson had created had been freed from constraint, it began to evolve into a symbol of the cause he supported. In the summer of 1861, the Massachusetts 12th infantry began singing “John Brown’s Body lies a moldering in the grave” and John Brown underwent another symbolic transformation. He became a member of the Union Army, his “soul” “marching on” with them as they fight to end slavery in the South. When Julia
Ward Howe, a poet who happened to be all too familiar with the actual John Brown, heard the soldiers sing the praise of this new John Brown image, she was moved to write “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” in the fall of 1861.

“Battle Hymn” became perhaps the most enduring piece associated with John Brown, though it never mentions his name. Yet Howe retained Brown’s presence throughout the poem through rhyme and meter by setting her hymn to the tune of the song which bore his name. In doing so, Brown and the cause he supported become one united anthem for abolitionism, and John Brown becomes less a man and more a symbol.

In the final years of the war, the weight of the conflict became more and more unbearable as the casualties began to take their toll on the American people. It is during these final years that Brown underwent another transformation at the hands of writers. This time, he was the warning not heeded, the first of many to give their life for the cause with which he became synonymous. When Herman Melville writes Battlepieces in 1866, he began his posthumous portrait of the war with a poem that depicted Brown as an ominous sign of things to come. “The Portent” called Brown “the meteor of war,” equating his death with the now widely accepted notion that the conflict was preordained and predestined. Walt Whitman also employed this meteor symbol, but gave it a more positive connotation, and minimized Brown’s portentous potential by labeling the entire year filled with meteors and other symbolic occurrences that predict conflict. In the works of both poets, Brown’s image is almost completely separated from his physical self. The John Brown who was lauded by Thoreau and Emerson for his idealism was now replaced by the symbolic “meteor” of Whitman and Melville. John Brown’s body was now a vessel for poetic symbolism.
So over the course of only a few years, the figure of John Brown underwent a complete transformation. But why did the image of John Brown change so dramatically in these years? Because, to a certain extent, it had to change. The image of Brown as a radical abolitionist inciter of violence could not persevere once the nation itself embarked on a violent mission to overthrow the institution of slavery. When Howe transformed Brown from martyr to hero, she did so in order to grant the Union army the figurehead they so desperately needed in 1861, as they rallied behind the new cause of abolitionism. Once the nation became weary of the war and desperate to end the seemingly endless death and destruction, Brown’s role as hero seemed unnecessary. Melville and Whitman then reconstruct Brown as a symbolic force in an effort to prove that this conflict, though foreseeable and even preordained, could not have been avoided, and that Brown himself was nothing if not a force from the heavens themselves which helped to incite the forthcoming violence.

As the image of John Brown moved through the Civil War, it moved further and further from the actual man and becomes a metaphor for the cause he supported and finally for the conflict that arose from that cause. By exploring these writers’ works on Brown collectively rather than exclusively, a more fully developed, if at times contradictory, view of this figure can be extracted, a view reflecting the ever changing views of a nation engulfed by war.
In 1859 the nation was bitterly divided over the issue of slavery. The passing of the Kansas Nebraska Act, the caning of Charles Sumner, and the split of the Southern democrats from the Democratic Party all pointed to a national crisis which seemed inevitable. When John Brown entered the political arena in 1859, his actions were adamantly defended by the most radical Northern Abolitionists and deplored by the most radical Southerners in favor of Secession.

To Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, John Brown had the potential to become the martyr of the movement they so readily embraced. But Brown’s violent actions posed a threat to his status as martyr. By refiguring Brown in the image of their own ideas, Emerson and Thoreau began the process of transforming John Brown into a mythic figure of self sacrifice which they readily compared to Christ. In doing so, they effectively plant the seed that is to become the John Brown image as separate from the John Brown man, and it is this image that will be drawn and redrawn throughout the course of the war.
Chapter 1
A Seed is Planted
Thoreau and Emerson Refigure John Brown

Just weeks after Brown’s capture, a group of intellectuals from Concord, whom Brown had recently befriended, came to his defense. Among these were Henry David Thoreau, author of *Walden* and *Civil Disobedience*, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, considered to be America’s leading essayist and lecturer. As these highly influential men went to work defending Brown in the court of public opinion, the essays which followed paint a portrait of a man who is truly a hero to the transcendental movement as defined by its chief architects. For Thoreau, Brown becomes the hero of his politics – a man who is willing to put Thoreau’s philosophy of resisting unjust and immoral government into action, albeit violent action. For Emerson, Brown becomes a hero of his ideals. Emerson concentrates not Brown’s deeds but character and moral fiber as he stresses his love of nature and self-reliant rhetoric. As these two thinkers set about transforming Brown into a hero of the abolitionist movement, the essays and lectures written in his defense became an extension of each writer’s previous work. Brown becomes the hero of Thoreau’s political essays like “Slavery in Massachusetts” and “Resistance to Civil Government.” Emerson likewise portrays Brown as a child reared in the spirit of “Nature” who possesses the ethical and moral independence of “Heroism.” By the end of their campaign on his behalf, Brown has become not a religious zealot who committed an act of treason against his country, but a carefully constructed abolitionist hero molded by America’s leading intellectuals into a personification of their own ideas enacted.

But why Thoreau and Emerson came so quickly to Brown’s defense has been a critical question for both Brown scholars and literary historians. The answer perhaps lies in the fact John
Brown was no stranger to Concord, Massachusetts, nor to Emerson and Thoreau, at the time of the Harpers Ferry raid. Brown had visited Concord at least twice before the raid: once in February of 1857, when he gave an address at which both Thoreau and Emerson were present, and again in May of 1859, just months before Harpers Ferry (Allen 588; Reynolds 223). On the first of these occasions, Emerson met with him personally and, according to Emerson biographer Gay Wilson Allen, “invited him to spend the night in his home” (589). Emerson was taken with Brown, noting his visit in his journal entry from that week: “Captain John Brown gave a good account of himself in the Town Hall, last night to a meeting of the citizens” (qtd. in Porte 474). Thoreau also met and spent time with Brown on this visit, as David Reynolds, literary historian and author of a recent Brown biography, notes: “Thoreau spent an afternoon [with Brown] hearing about his martial exploits in Kansas” (222).

As Reynolds notes in his biography of Brown, there has been much critical contention over whether or not the Concord Transcendentalists had prior knowledge of the raid in Harper’s Ferry when they offered Brown their support. Though Reynolds does admit that there have been arguments over where and when Emerson and Thoreau first learned of Brown’s violent past and plans, he maintains that they “knew of it, and supported embraced him anyway” (221). Reynolds goes on to claim that Emerson and Thoreau had, even if they had no prior knowledge of Brown’s past or future violent agenda, supported the idea of violence against the slave state: “Whether or not they knew every detail of Pottawatomie is moot, since they were thoroughly familiar with – and supportive of – his overall violent strategy” (222).

But other scholars, particularly those who focus on Emerson during this period, wholeheartedly disagree with Reynolds’s statements. As Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, editors of *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson with Annotations*, note in their
introduction to his journals of the period surrounding Brown’s trial and execution, when it came to the raid on Harper’s Ferry “Mr. Emerson knew nothing of it” (Journals 239). The editors go on to comment on the support of Brown not only Emerson himself, but by his friends and colleagues, stating that “When it presently appeared that it was John Brown in command” of the men at Harper’s Ferry, “his old acquaintances and friends felt sure that his purposes were humane, if militant, and believed that his fighting would only be defensive in leading away such fugitives as might flock to him” (Journals 240). Though no textual evidence, either in journals nor essays, seems to directly support this claim made by the editors, historians do agree that Emerson had less knowledge of Brown’s intentions than did Thoreau, but the true extent of what information Brown shared with either man over the course of their meetings in Concord can never be confirmed.

Despite this historical controversy, it remains clear that both Emerson and Thoreau did support Brown at the time of his trial and execution, and whether or not they ultimately gained knowledge of Brown’s violent tactics, neither ever offers a retraction of the pleas they offered on his behalf. Because of the support of Thoreau and the more influential Emerson, John Brown became a hero rather than a traitor, thus transforming him and his legacy in the minds of 19th century Americans.

Thoreau and Emerson appear to have had almost as much to gain by supporting this controversial figure as he himself had by receiving this defense. In John Brown, Thoreau and Emerson find a vessel for their own idealism, a figure capable of living their philosophies almost better than they had themselves. As Gilbert Ostrander recalls Wendell Phillips, an abolitionist and friend of both Emerson and John Brown, said, “The chief merit of Emerson’s life, was that, after talking about heroism all his life, recognized the hero when John appeared” (713).
Emerson and Thoreau’s defense of Brown may also be viewed as a defense of their own ideas put into action, despite the fact that they did not support the way in which he did so. Perhaps this accounts for their mutual focus on the man rather than the act. Brown may even have put Emersonian ideals into practice better than Thoreau himself.

In their respective rewriting of John Brown, both Emerson and Thoreau portray him as the enactment of the philosophy they pioneer in earlier writings. For Emerson, he became among the best examples of Emersonian though enacted For Thoreau, Brown became the disobedient political activist he himself sought to embody. As each of these men came to the defense of John Brown, his legacy was reformed from violent insurgent to political radical.

Henry David Thoreau had been regarded as a pioneer of Transcendentalism since the publication of Walden in 1854, but it was the issue of slavery and abolitionism that, later in the same decade, would spark a new interest in politics in the Transcendentalist movement, and would transform Thoreau from a passive non-violent protestor into an avid defender of the most violent and radical abolitionist figure to date, John Brown. In John Brown, Henry David Thoreau found a man who embodied not only transcendental thoughts, but transcendental actions, a man who personified the very ideals he sought to promote in Walden, “Resistance to Civil Government,” and “Slavery in Massachusetts.” Perhaps most importantly for Thoreau, John Brown was a man who was willing to sacrifice his own life to the cause of abolitionism. For Thoreau, John Brown was a man of myth, a man capable, through what he felt was a heroic act of self sacrifice, of exposing the government’s faults to its citizens. In his “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” published shortly before Brown’s execution, Thoreau uses rhetoric similar to his earlier essays and addresses to portray Brown as the ultimate example of political activism. In
“Plea,” Thoreau compels his readers to dismiss notions of Brown’s insanity and redefine their conception of him as an embodiment of Thoreau’s ideas of civil resistance and adherence to a higher moral law, to consider the deeper morality behind his violent actions, and to appreciate the bravery of one man rising up against an unjust government.

Yet Thoreau was not always an advocate of violent resistance to an unjust government. In fact, Thoreau was perhaps most widely known for passive resistance, an idea that would later inspire leaders like Gandhi. In 1848, Thoreau delivered a speech entitled “Resistance to Civil Government” in Concord. In this speech, later published as an essay which would become among the most popular of all Thoreau’s political writings, he advocated non-violent resistance as a means of civil protest. The only meaningful way to protest a government that is unjust, according to Thoreau, is to refuse to support it. “Let your life be a counter friction to the machine (Reform Papers 73),” he says, and his own life at that point had become just that: he wrote this essay while imprisoned in 1846 for refusal to pay his taxes. Thoreau instructs members of the abolitionist movement to do the same: “those who call themselves abolitionists should at once effectively withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the state of Massachusetts…” (74). To be jailed for such an action, according to Thoreau, is not only the most effective form of protest, but the most noble, “The true place for a just man in an unjust society,” he writes, “is in prison” (76). By allowing himself to be imprisoned for the cause, and encouraging others to do so, Thoreau was acting out the role of the martyr, of the just man imprisoned for his morals. Though Thoreau was then offering a peaceful means of protest, he would later shift his thinking to a decidedly more radical anti slavery stance as legislation is passed allowing slaves who escape to the North, to Free States like Massachusetts, to be returned to their southern servitude.
The enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1851, and the willingness of Massachusetts to abide by such a law, began a political debate that would eventually lead to a Civil War. In 1854, Thoreau delivered another speech that would become the essay “Slavery in Massachusetts”, in which he called for the government to develop a moral conscious, to transcend the laws that rule it, if in fact those laws are immoral. “The law will never make men free,” he says, “it is men who must make the law free” (Reform Papers 98). He calls for the citizens of Massachusetts to rise up against this law, encouraging them to be “men first, and Americans only at the late and convenient hour” (Reform Papers 102). Thoreau is now advocating active, not passive, resistance to government, calling on the people, not just political leaders, to obey a higher authority than the law; to obey the laws of their own humanity. Personal, not political, action against the government is now being sanctioned by the man who only a few years before advocated non-violent resistance. Thoreau is getting decidedly more radical in his rhetoric. Though it will be several years before he meets John Brown, Thoreau’s fundamental shift in thinking and writing in the years leading up to that meeting pave the way for his ultimate acceptance of Brown as a not merely an active resistor but a violent over-thrower of an unjust government.

Critic Lewis Hyde sees “Slavery in Massachusetts” as a work containing hints of Thoreau’s advocacy of violence as a means of civil resistance. He cites Thoreau’s praise of a “heroic act on the Boston Court House” (105), unexplained in the essay but no doubt familiar to readers of his own time, as evidence. The line refers to the capture of a fugitive slave named Anthony Burns in Boston earlier that year, and the unsuccessful attempts of local abolitionists to “rescue Burns and speed him off to Canada” (129). The incident ended in the death of a U.S. Marshal guarding Burns, and Thoreau’s reference to it suggests that he is moving away from the
passive resistance in *Resistance to Civil Government*, and moving towards the promotion of violence as a means of protest (Hyde 129). By supporting the acts of violence perpetrated by Burns’ supporters, Thoreau is undoubtedly growing closer to forming a rhetorical stance on the issue of slavery which will allow him to defend Brown and his raid.

David Reynolds also cites Burns and his capture as a turning point for Thoreau’s abolitionist stance, stating that Burns “revealed graphically the Transcendentalists’ turn toward violence” (Reynolds 226). Though Reynolds admits that neither Thoreau nor Emerson took part in the attempted rescue of Burns, he notes that Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who would go on to become a founding member of the Secret Six financial backers of John Brown’s raid, was also the chief organizer of the rescue (227). Higginson, an acquaintance of both Emerson and Thoreau, had begun enacting the rhetoric of the abolitionist movement violently, and Anthony Burns became the face of the increasingly violent abolitionist movement in the North until a man from Kansas named John Brown became Higginson’s new project.

In 1854, when Thoreau was writing “Slavery in Massachusetts,” most people outside of the state of Kansas had never heard of John Brown, nor would, until his infamous raid on Harper’s Ferry five years later. But much like Thoreau’s rhetoric shifts in this era from peaceful resistance to support of violence, John Brown himself had not yet achieved the immortal status as the militant abolitionist of Harper’s Ferry. A highly religious man, Brown founded the United States League of Gileadites in 1851, a militant abolitionist group who borrowed their name from the Old Testament story of Gideon, who was called upon by God to rise up against the Midians with an army of less than a hundred men (135).

According to Brown biographer David Reynolds, the League of Gileadites was composed of “forty four blacks, many of them fugitives from the Underground Railroad” whom Brown
assembled in 1851 and told to “arm themselves, learn about their weapons, and be ready to use them at all times.” Brown then advised them to prepare to capture slaveholders and slave supporters, and “swiftly kill whoever posed a threat, then retreat” (Reynolds 122).

Though the group never engaged in any violent acts, Hyde sees this group as a “foreshadowing of Harper’s Ferry” and claims that it “offers a glimpse at how Brown imagined himself” (135) as a messenger sent by God to overthrow, against all odds, the forces of evil, in this case, the institution of slavery in the South. The act of one man rising up against tyranny is, according to Hyde, an ideal shared by both Brown and Thoreau (136). Hyde cites the line in “Resistance to Civil Government” in which Thoreau states that “one honest man” was jailed in resistance to slavery that it would eventually lead to “the abolition of slavery in America” (Reform Papers 68). Brown obviously shared this sentiment, and would use his trial in 1859 as a public forum to express his political beliefs.

Given this apparent likeness in ideals, it is little wonder that in 1859, when John Brown was arrested in Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, for attempting to seize the arsenal of weapons to arm the slaves, that Thoreau immediately entered a plea on his behalf. “A Plea for Captain John Brown” was delivered on October 30, 1859, just eight days after Brown was captured at Harper’s Ferry. Hastily compiled from his journals from recent weeks, “A Plea for Captain John Brown” is a more succinct, toned-down version of Thoreau’s musings on Brown and the events at Harper’s Ferry. In his plea, Thoreau attempts to portray Brown as a hero of transcendentalism and a martyr to the cause of the abolitionist movement. “I think we should express ourselves at once,” Thoreau says in a letter to H.C. Blake discussing “Plea,” “while Brown is still alive… The sooner the better… The people here are deeply interested in the matter” (Correspondence 563).
The speech which follows becomes perhaps the most personal and poignant made in
Brown’s defense. Critics of “Plea” attribute the success of this speech to Thoreau’s informal,
personal style which makes this speech drastically different from his other political writings
(Trodd and Stauffer 224; Albrecht 394). Thoreau uses personal pronouns like “I,” “you” and
“we,” to appeal to ethos: “It costs us nothing to be just. We can at least express our sympathy
with, and admiration of, him and his companions, and that is what I propose now to do” (Reform
Papers 135). Critics Trodd and Stauffer state that this tactic helps Thoreau to “suggest a
familiarity with Brown” that he hoped would make his audience more accepting of his stance
(Trodd and Stauffer 224). Richard Albrecht also notes Thoreau’s use of these pronouns, citing
similar intentions of the author to “bring the listener into a close relationship with the speaker”
(394). By creating such a personal relationship with his audience, Thoreau is attempting to place
them in the same rhetorical realm as him. “We,” not Thoreau, are defending Brown and his
“companions,” and the listener is immediately involved in the action of Brown’s defense simply
by hearing Thoreau’s “Plea.” Albrecht goes on to note that such appeals to his audience were not
typical of Thoreau, but were an important new development that sprang from his Brown defense.
“Thoreau has been thought of as a misanthrope,” Albrecht says, “He is reputed to have never
written for the public.” “Plea” is a departure from this attitude: “it reveals a new side to Thoreau.
However apathetic he might have been, or appeared to be, toward the mass of people who did
not agree with his views, he saw the importance of holding the attention of his audience” (402).
Taken in this context, “A Plea for Captain John Brown” becomes a pivotal work not merely for
its historical merit as a political writing, and not merely as an eloquent expression of support for
Brown, but also as an important change in the mindset of a literary figure who has become
concerned more and more with the public reception of his words.
Having established a rhetorical relationship with his listeners, Thoreau goes on to redefine Brown’s image in the mind of the public by addressing what he is not. First, Thoreau asserts that Brown is not of the same sheepish nature as his contemporaries:

A man does a brave and humane deed and at once, on all sides, we hear people and parties declaring ‘I did not do it, nor countenance him to do it’…You needn’t take so much pains to wash your skirts of him. No intelligent man will ever be convinced that he was any creature of yours (Reform Papers 136).

Thoreau claims that Brown stands morally apart from his fellow man. His actions at Harper’s Ferry, which Thoreau calls “brave and humane,” are not expected to be understood by the masses, but rather only by the few “intelligent creatures” Thoreau now addresses. Indeed, as Thoreau laments the Brown supporters whom he humorously describes as “washing” their “skirts of him,” he is referring to the many people who supported Brown and his ideology of violence before the raid, but afterwards retracted this support. David Reynolds comments on Thoreau’s relatively unique stance as Brown supporter in the days after the trial when “those truly intimate with Brown…were trying to cover up their connection with him,” yet “Thoreau was going out of his way to suggest that he was his friend and confident” (347). As Thoreau admittedly emerged as a lone voice in support of Brown, he suggested intimacy which placed him apart from his fellow New Englanders, and is suggesting that his listeners too align themselves morally with Brown.

Thoreau felt that John Brown possessed a moral sense of purpose that transcended the morality not only of his supporters or detractors, but which was superior to the morality of the government itself. In words that echo “Slavery in Massachusetts” and “Resistance to Civil Government,” Thoreau claims that Brown was acting out of a moral obligation to a higher power as he raided Harper’s Ferry:
Is it possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong? Are laws to be enforced simply because they are made? Or declared by any number of men to be good, if they are not good? Is there any necessity for a man’s being a tool to perform a deed of which his better nature disapproves? Is it the intention of lawmakers that a good man should be hung, ever? (*Reform Papers* 113).

Thoreau is now questioning the morality not of John Brown, but of the government that dared to enact laws which Thoreau, like Brown, felt to be immoral. He questions the readiness of his government to enforce laws like The Fugitive Slave Law “simply because they are made” without giving any thought to the immoral nature of the practice of slavery itself. He is positioning Brown on the side of moral righteousness in his refusal to follow that law, turning an act of violent treason into an act of Civil Disobedience. Brown is now “an individual” struggling against an unjust government who passed an unjust law, making him heroic in Thoreau’s estimation. Brown’s political beliefs which drove this violent act are now the subject of Thoreau’s Plea, and he questions the government’s right to execute a man who adheres to a moral law higher than the law of the land.

If John Brown’s actions exemplify Thoreau’s political writings, Brown’s upbringing and character, as Thoreau chooses to portray them, mirror the writer’s earlier, less controversial, work. Brown is being described here as a man who possesses the very traits that Thoreau praises in *Walden*, a life without excess. He describes Brown as:

A man of Spartan habits, and at sixty was scrupulous about his diet at your table, excusing himself by saying he must eat sparingly and fare hard, as becomes a solider, or one who was fitting himself for a difficult enterprise, a life of exposure (*Reform Papers* 115).
In his commentary on Brown’s habits, Thoreau is making a two-fold analogy. First, he praises Brown for being “Spartan” in his eating habits, rhetorically linking him with the Ancient Greek city of Sparta, a culture known for their military vigor and their strict, sparse, and laborious existence. Evoking Sparta suggests a disciplined and successful military nature. Thoreau also equates this “Spartan” nature with “a life of exposure” to the outdoors. Brown, like Thoreau in *Walden*, was living “exposed” to the elements in his militia, and had adapted closeness with the land as a consequence. Thoreau uses the very same language to describe his own purposes for living close to nature. The famous quote in which Thoreau claims to have gone into the woods to “live deliberately” goes on to describe his intended lifestyle: “I wanted to live deep and suck the marrow out of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put rout all that was not life….” (*Walden* 59). Thoreau is praising Brown with the same term he chose to praise his own experience with the nature and living simply and close to the land. Brown, like Thoreau himself in *Walden*, is “Spartan-like.” If his audience had accepted and praised Thoreau’s own endeavors at sparse living, they would recognize Brown’s virtues and equate him with this famous passage.

If Thoreau had succeeded in convincing Massachusetts that Brown possessed a high moral conviction and a virtuous “Spartan-like” lifestyle, he must convince them of the most difficult assertion of all – that, in light of these facts, John Brown’s actions were not those of a madman or a villain, but a hero. To do so, Thoreau relies on the imagery he is most famous for – imagery of the natural world. As he discusses the heroic implications of Brown’s trial and execution, Thoreau does so in terms of nature and the germination of plants:

> Such do not know that like the seed is fruit, and that, in a moral world, when a good seed is planted, good fruit is inevitable, and does not depend on our watering and cultivating; that when you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up (*Reform Papers* 119).
In Thoreau’s construction, John Brown is now a feature of the natural world. He will, like a planted seed, produce a “crop of heroes” who will continue his work. Thoreau is taking a figure associated with destruction and death and re-defining him as a source of life. By using nature to convince his audience of Brown’s heroism, Thoreau relies on his affiliation as a nature writer with a higher sense of purpose and morality.

But perhaps the most controversial comparison made by Thoreau in his speech is comparison of John Brown to Jesus Christ: “Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perhaps, John Brown was hung. These are two ends in a chain which I rejoice to know is not without its links. He is not John Brown any longer; he is an angel of light” (Reform Papers 121). Thoreau’s meaning here is poignantly clear – John Brown has been sacrificed by an immoral government for refusal to follow its laws just as Jesus Christ was executed by the Romans. Thoreau is evoking Christ as a martyr and an image of self-sacrifice, something perhaps Thoreau’s audience might accept after his lengthy support of Brown’s character and morality. But Thoreau’s rhetorical “chain” also links Brown to immortality and to divinity itself as he calls Brown “an angel of light.” Many other writers of the period will use the Christ analogy, but Thoreau alone takes it to this extreme.

Some critics offer a different interpretation of the Christ metaphor. In his essay “Thoreau’s Autumnal, Archetypal Hero: Captain John Brown,” Lauriat Lane notes Brown’s archetypal connection to Christ in that he is executed in autumn, the season that connotes age, death, and, most importantly, the season during which ancient civilizations celebrated the death of the archetypal hero (43). Lane goes on to comment that not only does Thoreau appear to be acutely aware of the seasonal significance to Brown’s execution (his journals concerning Brown are often interrupted by lengthy descriptions of the changing foliage and other natural images of death and decay), but that he was intentionally using this seasonal imagery in his journals, though not in his final speeches, to connect Brown’s martyrdom to that of Jesus Christ (Lane 44-6). “Is it too
far fetched,” Lane asks readers, “to suggest that besides writing of Brown elegiacally and tragically, Thoreau might also see Brown’s death in ritual autumnal terms, that Thoreau may, in short, see Captain John Brown as a dying god, bringing renewal to the world?” (Lane 47). The answer to Lane’s question might well be far beyond the capacity of readers to judge, but her logic remains intact. Thoreau did make these numerous Christ references when speaking or writing about Brown, and is thereby asserting that Brown, like Christ, is a mythic and symbolic figure of sacrifice.

But even as Thoreau likens Brown to Christ and his death to martyrdom, he continues to comment on Brown’s death, noting the uniqueness of Brown and his sacrifice:

It seems as if no man had ever died in America before; for in order to die you must first have lived…We’ve interpreted it [death] in a groveling and sniveling sense; we’ve forgotten wholly how to die. But we do die, nevertheless. Do your work, and finish it. If you know how to begin, you know how when to end. These men, in teaching us how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live (Reform Papers 120).

Thoreau is once again placing Brown on the pedestal of idealism, this time not according this life or deeds, but in his dignified and meaningful death. As he once again appeals to his listeners with the familiar “we,” Thoreau asserts that humanity has forgotten the notion of self-sacrifice and death with honor. To die for an ideal, for your personal beliefs, makes a man noble and his death poignant. In his final appeal, listeners may recognize the familiar echoes of the most famous lines from Walden, now evoked twice in the same speech:

I went into the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I had come to die, discover that I had not yet lived (Walden 59).
Thoreau is now likening not only Brown’s life, but his death, to his earlier writing. Brown, like Thoreau himself when he embarked on his adventure to Walden Pond, had taught the nation “how to live” in the sense that Brown, like Thoreau, had lived a life with purpose. Like Brown, Thoreau did not feel ashamed to die because his experiences had given his life meaning. Perhaps the author of Walden is taken by Brown’s triumphs not only because they were similar to his own, but that they seem to surpass his own, even by his own definitions. That Brown was willing to lay down his own life and the life of his sons in support of such ideals undoubtedly impressed Thoreau, but the manner in which he did so makes him, according to Thoreau at least, the most fitting martyr to the cause of abolitionism.

That Brown was so willing to go to the grave for his morals is reminiscent of the early writings of another influential citizen of Concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, in the early sections of his essay “Heroism,” lauds the philosopher Sophocles and quotes a play which echoes Thoreau’s “Plea”:

\[
\text{Martius: Dost know what it is to die?} \\
\text{Sophocles: Thou does not, Martius, and therefore, not what it is to live; to die is to begin to live. It is to end an old state weary work and to commence a newer and better (Essential Writings 226).}
\]

This idea of death as an assertion of idealism is praised by both Thoreau and Emerson, and each of them in turn praises Brown for his embodiment of it. Emerson too emerges as one of Brown’s most ardent defenders in the period leading up to his execution, and will, like Thoreau, paint a portrait of Brown that is reminiscent of his earlier work.

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Long before John Brown began raiding the farms of slave holders in the territory of Kansas, Ralph Waldo Emerson was speaking and writing of the need for extensive social reform on many fronts, abolitionism being among those most crucial. As David Reynolds notes in his study *Beneath the American Renaissance*, Emerson had, throughout his career, addressed many important reform issues and been involved with many reform movements. In his discussion of each movement, Reynolds claims that Emerson “tried always to move beyond individual reforms toward a larger overarching reform that affirmed primal unities” in an increasingly divided nation (*Beneath* 94). As Emerson grew more and more disillusioned with the failure of social and political reform movements to address the larger moral issues that he thought plagued the nation, he sought in his essays to redefine these movements and redirect them through his own supporting speeches (*Beneath* 95). As Reynolds notes:

> In each of Emerson’s major essays, we discover a repeated dialectic of subversive dismissal of revered social norms followed by affirmations of self-reliance, aesthetic perception, and the symbolic imagination (*Beneath* 95).

Emerson’s lectures at Salem and Boston in the winter of 1859-60 can be viewed as examples of doing just this. These lectures exemplify Reynolds’s claim that Emerson is reinventing reform rhetoric to fit his own philosophy of self-reliance. In his defense of John Brown, Emerson reworks Brown’s image in the mind of the public from a man who has committed a violent act of treason against the government to a man whose morals and ethics resemble Emerson’s own. In the Address at Salem, Emerson describes Brown’s childhood in terms which resemble his 1841 essay “Nature.” Brown becomes a man with close ties to the natural world, and is hence philosophically and morally a kindred spirit of Emerson himself – a man whose ideals were formed by a special and continuing relationship to the wilderness, and whose life was, according to Emerson at least, one advocating self-reliance. In his “Address at Boston,” Emerson portrays Brown’s later life and death in terms similar
to his essay “Heroism” – he is a just and moral man whose ideas about truth and morality differ so vastly from those of his government that he feels ethically responsible to rise up and battle against the state. By redefining Brown in this Thoreauvian manner, Emerson is at once making him more palpable to the abolitionist movement.

In January of 1860, Emerson travels to Salem, Massachusetts, to deliver a speech for the financial benefit of John Brown’s newly widowed wife and children. In it, Emerson focuses not on Brown’s later life and deeds but on his childhood and early adulthood. As he describes Brown’s upbringing in rural Ohio, Brown is portrayed as an innocent child who develops a close relationship with the natural world:

> When he was five years old his father emigrated to Ohio, and the boy was there set to keep sheep and look after cattle and dress skins; he went bareheaded and barefooted, and clothed in buckskin. *(Miscellanies 227)*

Emerson evokes Ohio and the then near-wilderness of the rural farming communities there as he describes Brown’s early life as one of extreme poverty. That Brown is “bareheaded” and “barefooted” and “clothed in buckskin” evokes images of the frontier. Emerson is painting a picture of a child raised in pastoral setting, close to the earth, an image that recalls early Emersonian thought.

In “Nature,” Emerson frequently discusses the child, a common figure in his writings, and notes the child’s special relationship to the natural world: “To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature” Emerson says *(Essential Writings 5).* Furthermore, according to Emerson, an adult person can only view nature if he allows himself to cast off adulthood and view the world through the eyes of a child, “In the woods, a man casts off his years, like a snake his slough, and at what period so ever in his life is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth” *(Essential Writings 6).*
Emerson claims that once a man is in tune with the natural world, he remains childlike in his admiration of it, and can hence only view the wonder of the wilderness in such a childlike mindset. That Brown had, according to Emerson, fostered this appreciation in his youth for nature heightens his ability to commune with it as an adult. In Brown, Emerson had possibly found a man who signified upbringing he himself longed for as he strolled through the woods surrounding Concord. Brown was born in nature, raised starkly and simply in service to it, and could now forever hold it in this childlike esteem. In this depiction, Brown, like Emerson, is a man who draws his sense of morality from the wilderness.

As Emerson describes Brown’s later life, he stresses Brown’s continuance of this special relationship with nature. He describes Brown’s early career as a farmer:

A shepherd and herdsman, he learned the manners of animals and knew the secret signals by which animals communicate. He made his hard bed on the mountains with them; he learned to drive his flock through thickets impassable… (*Miscellanies* 228).

Though now an adult, Brown is still able to maintain a relationship with nature which seems almost supernatural. Not only is Emerson’s Brown living among the animals, making his “hard bed on the mountains with them,” but he is also able to communicate with them directly through “secret signals.” Brown here is quite literally talking to the herds he tends in their own language. He is, in Emerson’s rendition, communing with nature in the most intimate way imaginable – he is speaking to nature directly in its own language. Emerson’s Brown is not merely utilizing nature for its goods, but is in essence becoming a part of the natural world itself.
That a man could experience such an intimate connection with nature undoubtedly impressed Emerson, who himself strove for just such a connection. Emerson writes of a similar connection he felt with the natural world:

The greatest delight which the fields and the woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right (Essential Writings 6).

Emerson’s own “occult” relationship with nature shares some of the mystic qualities of Brown’s. Emerson notes that he is “not alone” in the woods but feels the companionship of the vegetation. Though no vocal communication is revealed, a “nod” is exchanged between man and nature. Emerson may not speak to the animals in the same way Brown communes with his herd, but he nonetheless feels the presence of nature and acknowledges the effect of such a presence. Yet for Emerson, this experience of communicating with the woods and the fields leads him to a higher spiritual plane;” a better emotion” results from this knowledge of the natural world, one which resembles intellectual enlightenment, as it reminds him of moments when he is “thinking justly.” Though he never attributes this type of philosophical and intellectual stimulation when referring to Brown’s similar experience, the potential for that stimulation to occur in these circumstances is still present. Perhaps Brown’s experience does not yield the intellectual or spiritual fruit of Emerson’s own, but Emerson paints Brown as a man who has a more intimate, if not more intellectual, relationship with nature than even himself.
Emerson’s address goes on to discuss the special way in which Brown used this unique ability in his profession as a shepherd and herdsman. Here, he portrays a man who is capable of managing natural resources correctly:

He had all the skill of a shepherd by choice of breed and by wise husbandry to obtain the best wool…If he kept sheep, it was with a royal mind; if he traded in wool, he was a merchant prince, not in the amount of wealth, but in the protection of interests confided to him” (*Miscellanies* 229).

Brown’s special relationship with his flocks elevates Brown to a royal status as he effectively manages the goods produced by these animals almost in the same way a king would tend his kingdom. He is “wise” in his breeding, yielding the “best wool” from keeping sheep “with a royal mind.” When he makes a profit from his herd in trade, he becomes not merely a shepherd but a “merchant prince” as he not only makes money from his animals, but protects their “interests.” If Brown the child becomes Emerson’s ideal portrait of man in perfect harmony with the natural world, Brown the adult becomes the pinnacle of the correct use of the natural world to make a living, elevating Brown to the status of royalty, if only among the animals. As he has been portrayed throughout this lecture, Brown now fully personifies Emerson’s ideal relationship between man and the natural world. Brown has become not only the innocent child clothed in animal skins, but the wise husband and royal protector of the natural.

But Emerson does not arrive at this pastoral image of Brown’s childhood immediately. In a former address at Boston, given only months before, Emerson stresses a dramatically different aspect of Brown’s childhood in order to recast him into a different Emersonian persona – the militant hero. In this address, Brown’s childhood is recalled by Emerson in completely different terms. Here, Brown is portrayed as having early ties to the military. After a brief mention of the history of the
Brown family’s military service in the past, Emerson goes on to speak of Brown’s own connection to the army through his father, “His father, largely interested as a raiser of stock, became a contractor to supply the army with beef, in the war of 1812, and our Captain John Brown, then a boy, with his father was present and witnessed the surrender of General Hull” (Miscellanies 268). The Brown family profession, cattle farming, takes on a different significance here than in 1860. This time, the goal of the family is to “supply the army” rather than to preserve the natural world. Brown as a child has also been configured differently – he is learning through his experience with the cattle not the glory of nature but the glory of war, as he “witnessed” a significant moment in military history due to his father’s work. It is also significant that he is here called “Captain John Brown,” a title emphasizing his military service which never appears in the later address in which Emerson portrays him as a child of nature. In this speech, Emerson stresses a completely different aspect of John Brown and reconfigures him into another image Emerson himself exalts in his earlier writings. In the “Address at Boston,” Brown becomes the self-reliant Emersonian hero of “Heroism.”

Emerson begins his discussion of Brown’s adult character with a somewhat grandiose statement, “For himself, he is of such transparent character that all men see him through. He is a man to make friends wherever on earth courage and integrity are esteemed, the rarest of heroes, a pure idealist, with no by-ends of his own” (Miscellanies 268). Here, Emerson is hailing not only Brown’s “courage and integrity” but stressing another trait of Brown’s – his “transparency,” or “simplicity.” By stating that “all men see him through” Emerson is appealing to the single mindedness of Brown’s ideals, which he describes as “pure” or unsullied by over contemplation. While this may seem an odd virtue for the intellectual Emerson, author of “The American Scholar,” the “pure idealism” of the military hero is praised as a type of self-reliance in his essay “Heroism”:

    Heroism feels but never reasons, and for that reason it is always right; although a different breeding, a different religion, and greater intellectual activity would have
modified or even reversed the particular action, yet for the hero that thing he does is the highest deed and is not open to the censure of philosophers or divines (Essential Writings 229).

The hero, according to Emerson, relies on an intrinsic knowledge, it “feels but never reasons” rather than adhere to the conventional wisdom of “philosophers or divines” and hence becomes a form of self-reliance. Heroism depends on the reasoning of the individual, and upon the resistance of the individual to change suggested from outside forces, though they may be of greater religious virtue or even of greater intellectual merit. The ability of the hero to act before thinking is highly valued by Emerson, and he undoubtedly is attracted to Brown’s ability to do just this.

As Emerson discusses Brown, he reiterates this concept of individual will several times throughout his address, most notably, “He believes in his ideas to the extent that he existed to put them all into action; he said ‘he did not believe in moral suasion, he believed in putting the thing through. He saw how deceptive the forms are” (Miscellanies 270). Here, Emerson praises not only Brown’s ideals, but his ability to “put them into action.” Critic Harold K. Bush discusses Emerson’s use of Brown as a symbol of the individual will to action in his article “Emerson, John Brown and “Doing the Word”: The Enactment of Political Religion at Harper’s Ferry.” In John Brown, Bush claims, Ralph Waldo Emerson had found a figure capable of enacting Emerson’s own rhetoric concerning the emerging political religion of the United States – a combination of Christian virtue and individual freedom sanctified in the Declaration of Independence (202). As Bush discusses Emerson’s various representations of Brown as a spokesperson for this new political religion, citing his Puritanical background and his defense of the Declaration of Independence, he pays particular attention to Brown’s “embodiment of idealism, romantic action, and the will to power” as highlighted by Emerson (207). Bush suggests that Emerson’s interest in John Brown’s enactment of
the ideals of freedom outlined in the Declaration sprung from his own growing political involvement with abolitionism and the women’s rights movement, and Emerson’s own struggle to “join the transcendental with the practical” (211). By acting on his own ideals, and even dying for the sake of them, Brown becomes to Emerson the embodiment of idealistic action, which, for Bush, explains why Emerson becomes so fascinated with him and his deeds (Bush 212). Indeed, Emerson’s praise of Brown’s actions at Harper’s Ferry is perhaps laudable only in this light, as one of the “actions” to which Emerson refers is the murder of nearly a dozen people.

Yet seemingly overlooking the consequences of these “ideas put into action,” Emerson continues to praise Brown as heroic. The fact that popular opinion sharply disagrees with Brown is, to Emerson, all the more poignant:

Nothing can resist the sympathy which all elevated minds must feel with Brown, and through them the whole civilized world; if he must suffer, he must drag official gentlemen into an immortality most undesirable, of which they have already some disagreeable forebodings (Miscellanies 269).

Emerson is exceedingly clear here – those who agree with Brown possess “elevated minds” and are a part of the “civilized world” which will remember Brown as heroic. Those who do not are doomed to “immortality” as standing opposed to these ideals. That the majority opposes Brown and his ideals, as well as his action, is, to Emerson, another attribute of the hero, “Heroism works in contradiction to the voice of mankind and in contradiction, for a time, to the voice of the great and the good” (Essential Writings 229). It is the plight of the hero, according to Emerson, not to be understood by his own contemporaries. Even if these voices of opposition are, at the time, those of “the great and the good,” history, he assures us, will be kind to the hero. As he states in his Address, Brown may not be lauded now, but will “be a favorite with history” as the true impact of his actions
is understood by posterity (Miscellanies 269). In both his military background and his enactment of unpopular, but just, idealism, Brown has become the quintessential hero of Emerson’s essay.

And, like the hero of “Heroism,” Brown must inevitably face death. As Emerson says of the hero, “But whoso is heroic will always find crisis to try his edge. Human virtue demands her champions and martyrs, and the trial of persecution always proceeds” (Essential Writings 234). “Virtue,” according to Emerson, often requires the sacrifice of those who ardently defend it. Heroes may be forced to suffer for the ideals they protect. Here, Emerson does not mention a military death, but specifically mentions martyrdom, trials and persecution as the means by which a hero must meet his death and earn his immortality. Though this passage was written in 1841, more than a decade before Brown’s own trial and execution, Emerson could not have hoped for a better embodiment of this sentiment than Brown’s own self proclaimed martyrdom in 1859.

From his childhood, apparently spent both in the pasture and in the presence of the military, to his many adult professions and finally, in his death for his idealism, John Brown becomes for Ralph Waldo Emerson, a living embodiment of Emersonian principals like those outlined in his major essays. That Emerson, following the lead of his favorite student, came so quickly to Brown’s defense is, in light of such similarities, understandable. Also understandable is Emerson’s struggle to make Brown and his legacy fit so tightly with his own philosophy. In John Brown, Emerson had found a man with whom he could not only identify, but a historical figure whom he could help mold into an image of his own philosophy enacted. This figure that Emerson helped to create will be molded and remolded throughout the war as other writers add their voices to the ever changing image of John Brown.

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While critics of Henry David Thoreau readily address his support of John Brown, Emerson’s own involvement in Brown’s defense tends to be ignored by all but a few Emersonians. Some historians, like Gilbert Ostrander of *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, attribute these intellectuals defense of Brown to misinformation given to the men about Brown and his affairs in Kansas, stating that “It was on the basis of these accounts that Emerson and Thoreau marked him as a hero in righteous cause” (Ostrander 713). Ostrander goes on to question the historical effect of these men’s efforts, “Emerson, at the time, was sure that history would echo his exalted opinion of Brown. It has not done so” (714). Perhaps this fact offers some explanation as to the lack of critical work done on Emerson and Brown.

If history has, as Ostrander claimed, revised its opinion of John Brown, it remains clear that Emerson and Thoreau did not. Thoreau died in 1862, only 2 ½ years after his defense of Brown, and never had the opportunity to recant any statement made on Brown’s behalf, though it is unlikely that Thoreau would have ever done so. Emerson, on the other hand, lived decades longer than Thoreau, through the entire Civil War, before dying in 1882. Not only does Emerson not recant his defense of Brown, but continues, throughout his later career, to praise him. In his eulogy for Abraham Lincoln, given at Concord in 1865, Emerson comments on Lincoln’s great oration skills, comparing him to Brown, “His brief speech at Gettysburg, will not easily be surpassed by words on any recorded occasion. This, and one other American speech, that of John Brown to the court that tried him, and a part of Kossuth’s speech at Birmingham, can only be compared with each other, and with no fourth” (*Essential Writings* 831). Not only is Emerson still ardent in his support of Brown, he elevates him to the same historical status as the martyred President who had been another hero to the abolitionist movement.
This comparison, perhaps shocking in modern times, was accurate in the sense that few figures of the 19th century have been more mythologized than Abraham Lincoln and John Brown. In Lincoln’s case, this mythic identity was constructed by many voices and still endures today. In the case of John Brown, this mythic identity began its formation only weeks before his death when Thoreau and Emerson take up his cause and continued to evolve and change throughout the years leading up to and through the Civil War. When war finally does break out, John Brown will undergo another symbolic redefinition, this time not by the writers and thinkers of New England, but by the troops themselves.
By 1861, the abolitionist movement had become the adopted cause of the newly formed Union Army. As troops gathered around Washington D.C. in the anticipation of the Battle of Bull Run, they needed a cause to rally behind, and a hero to rally them. John Brown would become that hero, and the liberation of the Southern slave would become that cause. As the nation itself resorts to violence in the name of abolitionism, John Brown cannot realistically remain a radical voice of dissent, no matter how eloquently Thoreau and Emerson had written him into this role. He was now the hero of the Union Army, and needed to be portrayed as such.

When Julia Ward Howe, a poet who happened to be the wife of Samuel Gridley Howe, one of the alleged Secret Six financial backers of John Brown, heard his name sung by the Union Army as she visited D.C. with her husband in 1861, she began to write a hymn that would become among the most familiar depictions of John Brown to date. Though his actual name never appears in the poem, Howe’s “Battle Hymn,” set to the tune of “John Brown’s Body,” transforms his image from the Emersonian hero into the hero of the cause for which he gave his life.
JOHN BROWN SONG.

John Brown’s body lies a mouldering in the grave,
John Brown’s body lies a mouldering in the grave,
John Brown’s body lies a mouldering in the grave,
His soul’s marching on!

Chorus:
Glory Hallelujah! Glory Hallelujah! Glory Hallelujah!
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THE

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BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;
They have built Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel;
"As ye dealt with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on."

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sowing the hearts of men before His judgment-seat;
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my gown!
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.
BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC.

BY MRS. JULIA WARD HOWE.

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Published by the Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments
Chapter 2
But Who is Marching On?

Julia Ward Howe is best known as the author of “Battle Hymn” despite the fact that she authored several other collections of poetry throughout her early life and went on to become a key figure in the Women’s Movement. Her husband, Samuel Gridley Howe, was a prominent abolitionist with famous friends including Charles Sumner. Howe was a woman at the center of the 19th century political landscape who wrote a patriotic poem during a time when patriotism was paramount as a nation was divided against itself. Her life was interesting and politically charged, and has been the subject of many biographies.

In no small part due to these factors, her writing has typically been read biographically, and the most often discussed aspect of her poem becomes the story of its composition. Her daughter Florence Howe Hall began this process in 1916 with her *The Story of the Battle Hymn of the Republic*, a critique that recent critic Gary Williams calls “valuable for the anecdotes of jolly family life and the occasional glimpse into a relationship or event that might otherwise have slipped out of memory, these filiopietistic works afford even less in the way of acknowledgement of martial discord or detailed scrutiny of the poetry” (4). Deborah Clifford’s 1978 biography *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* does more in the way of biographical truth telling and preservation of history, but critiques Howe’s writing very little other than to mention its biographical roots. Williams’s own *Hungry Heart: The Literary Emergence of Julia Ward Howe* goes a long way in rectifying this tendency toward biography, but concentrates not on Howe’s most famous work but on her earlier poetry like *Passion Flowers*. Though his study of these works is complete and compelling, he neglects “Battle Hymn” almost entirely, save for a
brief few pages at the end. The result of this critical gap is that while Howe’s earlier works have been rescued by critics, “Battle Hymn of the Republic” remains engulfed in the story of its composition and its creator, with only a few critical exceptions. Considering the historical impact and continued popularity of “Battle Hymn” and its crucial role in the refiguring of John Brown, this seems a great shame.

Perhaps the best explanation for this fact is the compelling nature of the story itself. As Howe herself admits in *Reminiscences*, “It would be impossible for me to say how many times I have been called upon to rehearse the circumstances under which I wrote ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic.’ I have also had the occasion more than once to state the simple story in writing. As this oft told tale has no unimportant part in the story of my life, I will include it briefly in these records” (273). It is, by Howe’s own admission, a story worth repeating.

The inspiration for the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” was partially due to circumstance. Samuel Gridley Howe, Julia’s husband, had been active in politics for years, befriending many key figures and involving himself extensively in the abolitionist cause. In 1861 he became a member of the sanitary commission and headed to Washington DC to inspect the living conditions of the troops. Howe, of course, accompanied her husband. As Clifford recounts in her biography of Howe, “On November 18th the Howes were invited to attend a grand review and drove out accompanied by the Andrews and James Freeman Clarke.” The Howes were keeping quite important company: John Andrew was the Governor of Massachusetts and John Freeman Clarke was a prominent preacher of the Transcendentalist movement. Clifford continues:

While they were engaged in watching the maneuvers the Confederate forces suddenly attacked and the sightseers were forced to turn back to Washington. The drive home was long and tedious as carriages and troops filled the road. To help pass the time, the Howes and their companions began singing famous army songs,
including ‘John Brown’s body lies a moldering in the grave’. The soldiers particularly liked this one and joined their voices to the chorus, at which point Clarke turned to Julia and suggested that she write ‘some good words for that stirring tune’” (Clifford 143).

Howe herself describes this scene in her *Reminiscences*, and describes how she was awakened late that night by what she called an “attack of versification” and wrote the poem in its entirety in the darkness, fearing that light would “wake the baby” who slept near her as she wrote (*Reminiscences* 275).

Such a clear source for an artist’s inspiration is indeed compelling, and Howe’s midnight composition has become famous, leading critic Louise Tharp to refer to “Battle Hymn” as “the song that wrote itself” in her article for *American Heritage* (1). “Battle Hymn” has long been read in solely this light, and Howe’s verse has been interpreted by many critics merely as a reflection of this encounter. Edward Snyder’s “The Biblical Background of the Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which appeared in *New England Quarterly* in 1952, does a thorough job referencing Bible quotes which he claims inspired Howe, but uses them to explain how “we account for the stroke of genius by which Ms. Howe suddenly, in a few minutes at the first grey of dawn, dashed off this masterpiece” (231). Indeed, though Snyder’s biblical references may be quite useful as potential source material, the fact that he is plagued by the question “where did she get the phrase ‘the grapes of wrath,’ subsequently popularized by Steinbeck?” (234) leads the reader to believe that he is searching for an explanation for the poetry rather than conducting actual research into its composition.

But, as Gary Williams reminds us, perhaps these readings of Howe’s process stress the wrong aspect of this story. Noting that Howe’s recollection that she had learned to write poetry
in the dark so as not to wake the baby was a habit she had developed much earlier, Williams states that Howe “linked the composition of this work to practices learned during the years when the need to write had to accommodated around the edges of maternal responsibilities.” She wrote this way, in other words, because she had to. “Like her earlier work, this piece took shape under conditions that underline the particular challenges faced by women writers” (209).

Though the inspiration Howe felt to write this song so quickly can yield interesting cultural commentary like that of Williams, it is not the only biography which informs a reading of “Battle Hymn.” Howe actually met the source of her inspiration years before when John Brown paid a visit to her home to meet with her husband. Samuel Gridley Howe was a member of the so called Secret Six financial backers of John Brown and the Harper’s Ferry Raid, and his role in these events has been chronicled extensively by Reynolds, Warren, and other Brown biographers. Most notably, Samuel Gridley Howe was remembered as being among the most nervous of all the Secret Six members when Brown was captured, as Reynolds recounts:

Howe, for whom the Virginia idea had always been an adventurous escapade rather than a deep commitment, shook with fear when his name began to be associated with Brown. He went to Stearns’s Medford mansion and paced about nervously, confessing that he was on the verge of going insane (343)

Reynolds goes on to note that Samuel Gridley Howe then publicly denied any involvement with Secret Six, and then fled to Canada for fear of punishment (344). His wife is equally guarded in her memoir about any knowledge of the Harper’s Ferry Raid, “Of the details I know nothing, and have never learned more. None of us could exactly approve an act so revolutionary in its character, yet the great hearted attempt enlisted our sympathies very strongly” (Reminiscences 256). Though she admits to no prior knowledge of the raid, she expresses her disapproval by
referring to the act as “revolutionary” and admits to stirring the “sympathies very strongly” of her family.

That Brown had Howe’s approval at one time is certain, for as she recalls Brown visiting her home, she describes him flatteringly, “He looked like the Puritan of Puritans” she remarks, “forceful, concentrated, and self contained. We had only a brief interview, of which I only remember my great gratification at meeting one of whom I had heard so good an account” (Reminiscences 254). Brown had met the future author of “Battle Hymn,” and had, at least according to her account penned after Harper’s Ferry, been “gratified” to do so.

As Howe writes so fondly of her encounter with Brown, it is little wonder that, only a few years later in 1861 when she and her husband sing war songs to the soldiers, that “John Brown’s Body” be among those selected for performance. John Brown’s physical presence had clearly been an important subject in the Howes’ life in previous years, and the fact that Howe had chosen this particular song to rewrite becomes more interesting when viewed in light of her and her husband’s involvement with the controversy surrounding him. Regardless of the interesting circumstances of its composition, Julia Ward Howe chose to set her “Battle Hymn” to the tune of the widely popular war song “John Brown’s Body,” a song which she apparently knew well enough to sing on that well recorded day. The poem which she produced during that late night session strongly resembles the original song, despite the fact that she chose to leave John Brown out of “John Brown’s Body.”

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Notwithstanding the story of the poem’s conception, I wholeheartedly reject the notion that “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” wrote itself. No matter how versed its author was in the Bible or Brown, “Battle Hymn” was conceived as a rewriting of a widely popular Civil War
song, and is perhaps best understood in that context. As Julia Ward Howe sat up late that night, she transformed “John Brown’s Body” from song to verse, keeping only the refrain, which does not appear in the first published version of her work, and replaces images of Brown himself with those of a vengeful Old Testament God who like Brown, is fighting for the cause of the Union troops. Though John Brown does not appear in the poem in name or in image, Howe retains his presence by mimicking the rhyme and rhythm of the song, as well as making its refrain her ending line for each stanza. Though Brown himself is absent, he haunts the poem through these subtle techniques.

But before a close reading comparing the poem to its source can begin, the version of the popular song Howe heard that day must be determined, taking into consideration that the impromptu, oral nature of this song makes this task difficult. Most Brown scholars attribute the origin of the “John Brown Song” to the Twelfth Division of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, commanded by Colonel Fletcher Webster (Reynolds 466; Stutler; 255), the earliest printed copy of the lyrics are owned by the Library of Congress and are dated July 1861. According to Reynolds, these lyrics were inspired by a man in this division coincidently named John Brown, and was developed as a off color joke about how he looked “pretty lively for a marching corpse” (Reynolds 466). Though this story is often repeated as the only source for this song, historian Boyd B. Stutler, prominent Brown researcher and owner of an extensive collection of archival material related to Brown, (now housed in the West Virginia Archives), investigates the origin of the song in his article “John Brown’s Body,” published in Civil War History. Though Stutler acknowledges that this song is extemporary in nature, and hence all of the versions of it cannot be known, he outlines the publication history in great detail. Stutler names James E. Greenleaf, an organist, and CS Hall, both of Charlestown and one (Greenleaf) a
member of the original chorus attributed with inventing the song, as the ones who first “put the song into shape for formal presentation” by limiting it to five verses taken from “dozens submitted for print” (Stutler 257). This version was printed and distributed throughout New England in the armies’ wake beginning in July of 1861 and continuing throughout the war, and though Stutler notes other copies of the lyrics were published, each of these copyrights is for an “identical song” (Stutler 257). One of these copies is held by the Library of Congress, and, according to Stutler, is one of only three surviving copies.

When Howe’s biography is coupled with this publication history, it becomes reasonable to assume that she, arriving in Washington in November of 1861, would have come knowing the words to this, the only published version, of “The John Brown Song,” or, considering the oral nature of folk music, would have learned a version of this song by this point. This is reaffirmed by Frank Sanborn, a biographer of both Thoreau and Emerson and a contemporary of Julia Ward Howe, in a letter he writes her daughter, included in The Story of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Sanborn states in the letter that he himself “bought a handbill which contained rude words of the John Brown Song” that same year outside Boston, Massachusetts, notes the same commander and infantry, and he states that it was this version which undoubtedly inspired “Battle Hymn” (Hall 59). Though the exact words sung by Julia Ward Howe and her companions are not recorded, it is reasonable to infer that this version is the one she committed to memory and used to draft “Battle Hymn” late that night.

When “Battle Hymn of the Republic” first appeared in The Atlantic Monthly, it did not bear Howe’s name, nor did it include the famous refrain “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!” Though the poem was not attributed to Howe in this first printed version, it would not, during this period, have been difficult for interested parties to discern the poem’s author. Later editions of the poem,
such as the one included here from the Library of Congress, do include the author’s name, as well as the refrain. For the purposes of this study, I will utilize both versions of “Battle Hymn.” Since the five stanzas are, in both versions of the song, identical, I refer to the earlier version printed in *Atlantic* in my discussion until I deal with the refrain, when I utilize the later, undated version containing it.

As Julia Ward Howe began writing “Battle Hymn,” the first, and most famous, lines from “John Brown’s Body” establish the rhythm and meter of her poem. Since song lyrics are metronomic, and must follow the regular beat of the metronome, the songs beat is very regular ¾ tempo and would be sung iambically, with an emphasis on the first words:

\[
\text{ˉ     ˉ             ˘ ˉ      ˘       ˉ       ˘   ˘      ˘    ˉ     ˘}
\]

*John Brown’s body lies a moldering in the grave*

But when the first line is scanned without the metronomic beat provided by the music, the lines read not as iambic but as trochaic.

\[
\text{ˉ     ˉ                 ˉ       ˘   ˉ      ˘    ˉ     ˘    ˉ     ˘}
\]

*John Brown’s body lies a moldering in the grave*

This meter has an ominous air appropriate to its subject, as the trochee is often used as the meter for verse containing dark and shadowy imagery, like Poe’s “The Raven” or the three witches spell in *Macbeth* (*Western Wind* 235-6). As this meter is the opposite of the iamb, the pattern that most closely resembles speech, these lines would, had they been read and not sung, sound more like a chant than a march.

But when transcribed to music, the highly regular meter of this song enabled it to become so popular with the marching soldiers, and the emphasis at the beginning of each line captured the power of the songs first image – John Brown’s body. The fact that he is a “body” and is “moldering” or turning to dust, in his grave, denotes that not only is John Brown dead, but has
been for sometime, which is true at the time of the songs composition. John Brown is not depicted as the living abolitionist leader or the eloquent speaker in the courtroom, but rather as a long dead memory evoked by the soldiers as they march in rhythm. This fact is amplified as it is repeated, and the image restates itself as the first line repeats twice. Yet even though “John Brown’s body” may be dead, his “soul” is “marching” along with the soldiers, evoking a sense of commradory felt with the soul of Brown. His soul is marching with them.

Howe keeps the steady rhythm of the song by employing an equally steady meter in her “Battle Hymn:”

\[
\text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \\
\text{Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.}
\]

\[
\text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \\
\text{He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.}
\]

\[
\text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \\
\text{He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword.}
\]

\[
\text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \quad \text{-} \\
\text{His truth is marching on!} \quad \text{(Howe 1862)}
\]

These first lines, along with the rest of the verses, were identical in both the 1862 printing and the subsequent undated printing. Howe mimics the metronome by using iambic heptameter, a scheme using seven iambic feet per 14 syllable line. She likewise mimics the emphasis on the first metric foot by beginning each line with a trochee “−−”, which, paired with the iambic meter, adds a skipping beat to the song rather than the monotonous march of “John Brown’s Body.”. Heptameter is, according to *Western Wind*, a poetry text, a form also known as a “fourteener” which is popular in song lyrics and hymns, and is often found in the form of a ballad stanza, which breaks the line into two three and four feet lines. *Wind* cites “Amazing Grace” by John
Newton, as example (*Western* 228). Taking this into consideration, it is possible that Howe is employing this typical meter in order to assure that the poem can in fact be sung.

But according to the *Bedford Glossary of Literary Terms*, a ballad stanza typically rhymes *abab*, unlike “Battle Hymn” which perfectly rhymes Lord, stored, and sword and reads *aaab*. Though Howe keeps the traditional meter of the ballad stanza, she does not break the lines, but allows them to remain ‘fourteeners’ to match the rhythm of “John Brown’s Body,” and likewise deviates from the traditional rhyme scheme to preserve the feeling of repetition found in the original song. The last line scans and rhymes exactly to the original source, with “soul” being replaced by “truth,” as the word now belongs not to Brown, but the Lord.

The image of John Brown has been notably dropped from the stanza in both versions of the poem, and will remain absent, though the imagery will remain similar. In lieu of “John Brown’s Body,” Howe begins her poem with an image of prophecy “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of Lord.” As “Lord” is capitalized, it refers to God, and the eyes that view it belong to the speaker of the poem, who witnesses God returning to earth. Jeffery Polizzotto, in his article “Julia Ward Howe, John Brown’s Body and the Coming of the Lord,” notes the use of the first person pronoun in “Battle Hymn,” and discusses the implications of a woman author having such a prophetic vision. “This powerful text,” Polizzotto says, “is also about the transfiguration of Julia Ward Howe, the author, from a writer and obscure supporter of reform causes into one of the world’s leading advocates of women’s rights” (185). Polizzotto contends that it is not God who replaces John Brown in Howe’s version, but the first person “I” of Howe herself. Assuming that the speaker of the poem is indeed the poem’s author, which itself is a somewhat dangerous statement for an explicator, Polizzotto reads this first line as “Julia Ward Howe, the woman hitherto relegated to the sidelines in her husband’s and national civic life, has been vouchsafed
the vision and the purpose denied to her husband, John Brown, and men” (187). Though this reading relies perhaps too heavily on the biography of the author herself, the fact that the speaker is granted a vision and a purpose that the original subject of the song, John Brown, is unable to achieve, remains poignant. Howe’s speaker recounts a prophetic experience that Brown himself predicted – that the Lord is coming back to earth to help free the slaves.

But the Lord, in the speaker’s rendition, is neither peaceful nor forgiving. Rather, he is violent and vindictive as he “tramples” the “vintage” filled with the grapes of “wrath.” He bears a military weapon, a “sword” that is “terrible,” which he wields as a “fateful lightning,” connoting not only the vengeance of God as a force of nature who strikes with the force of “lightning,” but also the preordination of those who must bear his wrath, as this lightning is “fateful.” Like Brown’s soul, the Lord’s “truth,” or at least the “truth” of his vengeance, remains with the soldiers, “marching on” with them into battle.

John Brown takes a likewise active role in the Union army in the second and third verses of “John Brown’s Body”:

He has gone to be a soldier in the army of our Lord,
He has gone to be a soldier in the army of our Lord,
He has gone to be a soldier in the army of our Lord,
His soul is marching on!
John Brown’s knapsack is strapped upon his back,
John Brown’s knapsack is strapped upon his back,
John Brown’s knapsack is strapped upon his back,
His soul is marching on!

John Brown is no longer merely a “body moldering” but is now presumably alive and enlisted in the Union army, “He has gone to be a soldier.” These lines evoke the memory of the other John
Brown who was a member of the Massachusetts 12th and fuse that image with the image of the historical John Brown. The third verse reiterates this image of Brown among the men by adding a physical description, “John Brown’s knapsack is strapped upon his back.” This is apparently not a figurative ‘rising,’ as John Brown has not only enlisted but received his supplies with which to fight in the war, the knapsack being one of these staples.

Such a resurrection potentially endows Brown with a religious connotation that is now becoming bound to his image. This connotation is only amplified by the repetition of the word “Lord” in the stanza. The fact that the army is not only sanctioned, but owned, by the “Lord” furthers this Brown/resurrection/God connection, which, like the image of his body in the first stanza, is only magnified by the repetition of the line. The soul of John Brown is joined by his actual body, and his actual physical presence is suggested by his spiritual presence among the troops.

Howe’s second stanza parallels the song, if not in subject, than certainly in imagery:

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a thousand circling camps;
They have builded Him an alter in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps.
His day is marching on! (Howe 1862).

The second stanza begins with the same initial image in its first stressed foot. “I have seen” once again connotes the speaker’s own vision of “Him,” or the Lord, huddled among the “camps” and the “watchfires” of the Union army. But it is interesting to note that while the vision is still the speaker’s, it is now viewed by her self, “I have seen,” not through her “eyes” as before. This establishes a potential difference between the two types of sight in the poem. The first is a physical sight, hence the mention of the organ, the latter a more abstract vision.
A biographical reading of these lines by Gary Williams in *Hungry Heart* offers Howe’s presence at the front lines as a possible source for these images (Williams 211), but more important to these lines is perhaps not who does the seeing but what is being seen. Just as John Brown has joined the army, both physically and spiritually in “Body,” so has God has joined the ranks of the troops in “Battle Hymn.” Since this is admittedly not merely the soul of a dead abolitionist, but the presence of the Almighty, the soldiers have taken to “building an altar,” presumably at which to worship. Even though Brown is not present, the connection between God and the soldier is stronger here than in the original version, perhaps due in part to Brown’s absence.

The regular rhyme continues in this stanza, marry these lines together into one image – God among the troops. But the speaker has another vision in this stanza; she can actually discern, or “read” the “righteous sentence” of the Lord as she observes the soldiers. Words like “read” and “sentence” immediately evokes books, and by extension it can be assumed that it is the Bible being read by firelight. Yet another equally fitting connotation of “sentence” is judgment, as in the sentencing of the accused, a meaning highlighted by the use of the word “righteous.” God is perhaps here not only to inspire, but to judge.

Both connotations suggested in the previous stanza emerge in next lines:

I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel:
As ye deal with my contemnors, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the Hero born of women, crush the serpent with his heel.
Since God is marching on! (Howe 1862).

The speaker is now “reading” what is clearly the “gospel,” which is “written” on “steel,” a metal typically used for the construction of weaponry, not transcription, adding another military
element to this vision. Yet what is read is a type of “sentencing” – God is judging the armies “contemnors,” or adversaries, with the grace that they have judged. Though this line does not directly refer to Brown, one must wonder with what “grace” the God of Howe’s poem might judge his executioners.

The next lines of the stanza grow a bit murky in reference to God. “The hero born of women” presumably refers to the same vengeful God that seeks to “deal with his contemnors” in the previous lines, yet God was not “born” of anyone – Christ is “born of women,” yet his name is not used. Also, the “gospels” most often refer to the New Testament, which was written as a testimony of Christ, not God. This discrepancy can be reconciled by reading these lines as God’s direct voice, calling forth his son to seek vengeance in his wake, giving the command “Let the hero…” but again, Christ is associated with peace and mercy, not vengeance.

Though Christ is never mentioned in “John Brown’s Body,” the next stanza evokes imagery commonly associated with him:

His pet lambs will meet him on the way -
His pet lambs will meet him on the way -
His pet lambs will meet him on the way -
They go marching on!

The pronoun “His” is referring to Brown in these lines, and the capitalization is due to its beginning the line, but the images of the “lamb” is one frequently associated with Christ’s resurrection, as well as the direct association with Christ himself as the “Lamb of God.” Brown’s “pet lambs” or followers, follow him in the same way followers of the church follow God. Brown has become not merely a member, but an organizer and leader, of the Union army. His “lambs” will “meet him on his way,” and rally behind him as he fights the Confederate army. John
Brown’s soul, previously singular, becomes the plural “They” who “go marching on” as he garners support of the Union Army.

That Brown is likened to Christ by both the soldiers and by Howe herself seems reminiscent of the earlier writings and lectures of Thoreau, who was among the first to refer to Brown as Christ-like. Thoreau based this comparison on Brown’s own sacrifice and used this phrase to emphasize Brown’s role as martyr. Howe, following the lead of the soldiers themselves in “John Brown’s Body,” used this now familiar comparison to stress the sacrifice not of Brown, but of the Union Army. The image of Brown continues to evoke sacrifice, but the act of sacrificing one’s life to overthrow slavery now falls to the soldiers, and the Christ comparison here reiterates the change in Brown’s own image.

Howe’s “Battle Hymn” again substitutes God for Brown in its imagery, as it is he who now not only resides among the soldiers but is now actively leading the army:

> He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
> He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment seat;
> Oh! Be swift my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant, my feet!
> Our God is marching on! (Howe 1862)

God has “sounded the trumpet” and hence rallied the troops in their eternal mission “that will never call retreat.” The image of God leading the Union army is undoubtedly motivating for those under his command, but no less motivating is the fear of judgment that is retained in this verse. Along with leading his troops, he is still “sifting out the hearts of men” by placing them in judgment “before” him. The speaker, also, is roused to the cause, exclaiming in first person her desire to answer this call “Be swift my soul to answer him! Be jubilant my feet!.” As the speaker enters the chorus of those following God into battle, “God” is now possessed not only by her, but
by everyone – it has become “our” God and everyone may share in the vision only the speaker enjoyed at the poem’s beginning.

The final stanza is a dramatic departure from those that came before it. Time and place are radically altered here, and we are no longer on the battle field:

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on. (Howe 1862)

Williams notes that the biblical imagery of this stanza is somewhat off, “lilies are associated with Christ’s resurrection,” he notes, “not his birth” (Williams 212). This imagery has confused critics of the poem who attribute its conception only to Howe’s reading of the Bible. Snyder admits that these lines “take the general idea and images” from the Bible, but “has transferred them so that now the glory in Christ’s bosom transfigure not Christ but ‘you and me’” (Snyder 238). That the people receive the power of Christ to fight their cause is stated plainly in the last line, cementing this divine relationship between God, the soldiers, and Christ. Just as Christ “died to make men holy,” so must the members of the Union army “die to make men free,” sacrificing themselves for the greater good of humanity.

The last verse of “The John Brown Song” has no such humanitarian imagery. Rather, it ends in the ultimate portrait of vengeance:

They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree!
They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree!
They will hang Jeff Davis to a tree
As they march along!
Brown and his followers go decidedly further in their vengeance. They will “hang” the President of the Confederate States of America, “to a tree.” Not only is this punishment decidedly cruel, it becomes less unusual in the context of Brown, whose fate was also hanging. Furthermore, the fact that this man is to be hanged “to a tree” is reminiscent of lynching, a fate suffered by many former slaves in the South governed by Jefferson Davis during this period. Even if these lines seem particularly brutal, from the perspective of those singing them, this is a punishment that fits the crime of the Confederacy. Other than the concept of vengeance exacted by God, these lines have no clear parallel in Howe’s hymn, nor perhaps should they.

Though not present in the first published version of “Battle Hymn,” the phrase “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!” appears in the subsequent versions exactly as it appears in the original song. This three fold praise of the power of God’s glory is perhaps what links the two works’ inexorably in the popular mindset. In each, the chorus serves the same function: John Brown is praised as the protector of abolitionism and the inspiration for the Union army in much the same way as Howe’s God is praised for his protection of the troops and his vengeful judgment of their enemies. Though the subjects are different, the sentiment driving these lines remains the same.

And indeed John Brown is not present in Howe’s “Battle Hymn” in any literal form – it is God, not Brown, that leads these troops into battle as they chant the “Hymn.” In spite of this, Howe did admit to setting her hymn to the tune of the popular song, and retains not only its rhyme and rhythm, but several key images from the source, though she changes the subject of those images from Brown to God. David Reynolds comments on the effect of this symbolic shift in his study of Brown, noting that “Julia Ward Howe took the further step of fusing the meaning of John Brown with the religious spirit behind the Civil War” (Reynolds 469). Indeed, though
they never appear together in verse, the subjects of these two works do share the same goal – to divinely inspire the Union army to battle against the South, and by extension, slavery.

As the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” continues to be read in terms of the author’s biography, and the question about who or what inspired the writer to craft her hymn continues, perhaps a better question becomes why Howe chose to remove John Brown, a man she knew personally as well as politically, from the song bearing his name. The personal problems she and her husband faced in the aftermath of the Brown raid and the exposure of the Secret Six may have persuaded her to omit his image from the poem altogether rather than to have the Howe name once again appear in print next to Brown’s. Yet though she removes the body of John Brown from the song itself, she retains his spirit, and that forever marries her “Battle Hymn” to the memory of John Brown. Like Emerson and Thoreau only years before, Howe had reconfigured the image of John Brown to suit the needs of the nation at this particular moment in the war. He had become a hero not just in the Emersonian sense, but a hero to the entire Union Army and its followers, like the Howes
By 1865, the country had grown tired of paying the price of war. By the time Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant meet at the Appomattox Courthouse on April 12th, 1865, and the Civil War officially ends, both sides have suffered numerous casualties. Lincoln had accepted the rebellious Southern States back into the Union, and the Reconstruction was set to begin. John Brown, and the war he had helped to begin, was finally fading into memory.

When Herman Melville and Walt Whitman draft their war poetry during these final years of the conflict, John Brown undergoes yet another symbolic transformation. The same man who had been lauded as the hero of the Union Army by the soldiers and poets of 1861 is stripped of this title in 1865, when a war hero is no longer needed, or perhaps even wanted. Brown is now portrayed as a force beyond human boundaries. He is “the meteor of war,” that flashed briefly across the sky years before as a warning of the devastation to come. In each of these poems, John Brown’s death occurs in the past tense – Whitman recalls the spectacle after the fact, and Melville’s poem begins with John Brown’s body hanging lifelessly on the gallows. In both poems, neither the life, nor deeds, nor ideals of the man are mentioned. All that remains of the John Brown of Emerson and Thoreau is a literal body. Unlike Julia Ward Howe, these writers do not marry the concept of Brown to the concept of abolitionism or the overthrow of slavery, but instead redefine him again, this time as a portentous meteor which sailed over their heads years ago that could, as they suggest, have been read as a sign of the violence to come.
Herman Melville and Walt Whitman have been compared by critics of the American Renaissance biographically, due to their close geographic proximity and thematically, due to the fact that each sets a collection of poetry against the backdrop of the final years of the Civil War. Yet critics agree that they are at ideological odds. As Robert Spiller notes in his historical critique of the two authors, “Melville’s voice is the voice of irony and despair” while Whitman’s is “crying out for confidence in life, in the future, and in the common goodness of humanity” (67). Their respective Civil War poetry, *Battlepieces* and *DrumTaps*, have been read as companion pieces representative of their drastically different poetic voices. Each collection features a poem about John Brown in which the poet uses a meteor as a symbol. Because of their use of similar imagery, Melville’s “The Portent” and Whitman’s “Year of the Meteors” seem ripe for comparison, yet while “The Portent” remains one of Melville’s most critiqued poems, “Year of the Meteors” is scarcely mentioned by Whitman scholars. This section compares the two poems through a careful reading of the meteor image, asserting that their treatments of John Brown are exemplary of their radically different poetic voices and personal ideologies. Furthermore, the use of the meteor image is employed by each poet, but to different ends. The meteor in Melville’s “The Portent” moves Brown further into the realm of the symbolic by replacing his actual body with a celestial body, reinforcing his pivotal role in the political climate that led to war. Whitman, in contrast, employs the very same image to first grant Brown this same symbolic weight, then strip him of it through a series of other images he deems portentous.
These poets’ conflicting use of the same symbolism demonstrates that during the final years of the Civil War, John Brown’s legacy was still undecided.

That Melville and Whitman are so similar biographically has led critic Robert Spiller to compare these writers as the different Romantic voices of the 19th century. Whitman and Melville “were born within two years of each other after living lives which virtually spanned the century” Spiller says “At no time were they further than a few hundred miles of each other except for brief journeys, and both looked to New York City and its environs as home” (68). Spiller goes on to note that these parallels did not mean the writers directly influenced each other, “there is no record of their ever having known each other or made significant comments on each others writings.” This isolation from each other only adds to the power of their individual voices and reaffirms their differing Romantic visions of America, according to Spiller. They are “two rebel giants each created and inhabited for his span of years the sovereign kingdom of his own imagination” (67). For Herman Melville, this “sovereign kingdom” was the open sea, the setting for both the real and fictional adventures of his youth. Melville remained a Romantic voyager, fleeing from “hardships more imaginary than real” until the later 1850’s when he settled down permanently in New York City (69). Whitman practiced no such escapism, but rather worked in New York City publishing houses most of his early life before publishing Leaves of Grass. While both writers can easily be defined as Romantic, Melville tended to romanticize the distant while Whitman found what Spiller calls the “inherently poetic” in daily 19th century life (Spiller 78). It is perhaps for this reason that when confronted with a national crisis like the Civil War that Melville reacted with grandiose symbolism, rendering a picture of a scene he never saw, while Whitman provided the poetic zeal of a first person participant.
Whitman’s *Drumtaps* and Melville’s *Battlepieces* have been compared by critics as featuring these differing Romantic voices. In his article for *American Quarterly* “Drumtaps and Battlepieces: The Blossom of War” John McWilliams notes that these collections of Civil War poems differ dramatically despite their similar content. McWilliams rightly observes that both authors “see the emergence of a stronger nation, purified through disaster, made wise through suffering.” He also notes that while Whitman “shaped the chaos of war into a triumph of the national spirit,” Melville “discovered through examining the history of the Civil War that he could neither sustain or fully believe his own assertion that the nation had been reborn” (McWilliams 181). McWilliams attributes this ideological difference to the role each poet plays in the war he describes. Melville is a “detached observer” of the war, and hence his poetry concerning it relies on historical fact and chronologically ordered events while Whitman relies on his own personal accounts and adopts the persona of “soldier poet.” The result of these differing viewpoints is that Melville relies on a system of metaphor and other poetic conventions while Whitman employs free verse and other less conventional and arguably more personal and empathetic language in his depiction (McWilliams 182). McWilliams’s reading of the two works lacks a discussion of either “The Portent” or “Year of the Meteors” as exemplifying these differences, nor does he mention either poem in analysis, though his reading of the authors’ perspectives on the war helps to explain why Melville vests Brown alone with the title of “meteor of war” and Whitman bestows this honor on nearly every political and cultural occurrence within that year.

Robert Penn Warren’s reading of *Battlepieces* also compares Melville’s Civil War verse to Whitman’s, noting that Whitman’s verse is “synthetic” in that uses “representational images…which draw into focus and unify whatever attitudes and emotions are already available
in the reader” while Melville’s poetry is more “analytic” as it calls into question the unifying power of these images and therefore “exploits the difficulty of acceptance” of these images by the reader (817). Though Warren also fails to mention either poem dealing with Brown (a fact that is puzzling as he authored a Brown biography in 1929), his explanation of the poets’ differing styles further explains the difference in their portraits of Brown. If Whitman seeks unification of images and emotion, as Warren asserts, he would not, presumably, have highlighted a figure of divisiveness that evoked emotions which become nearly impossible to unify into a single reader response. He portrays Brown merely one of a series of portentous events that unite as symbols only of the coming conflict. Melville’s Brown, on the other hand, takes on a series of symbolic attributes that only complicate his eventual symbolic significance. In his portrayal, Melville revels in the complexity of Brown as an omen in a tone that can indeed be called “analytic”. Though both poets use the meteor metonymy, Whitman’s Brown is one of a series of portents while Melville’s remains a complex portrait of one portentous figure. John Brown is meteor, not man, in each poem, but Whitman’s refusal to allow this image its natural symbolic importance reiterates the fact that John Brown, though now a symbol, continued to divide the nation well after the Civil War.

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_The Portent_

(1859)

_Hanging from the beam,_
_Slowly swaying (such the law),_
_Gaunt the shadow on your green,_
_Shenandoah!_
_The cut is on the crown,_
_(Lo, John Brown),_
_And the stabs shall heal no more._
Herman Melville, a writer who had earned acclaim from his contemporaries for his novels of the South Seas and slightly less acclaim from his masterpiece *Moby Dick* began, upon an “impulse imparted by the fall of Richmond” in 1866, to compose a volume of Civil War poetry entitled *Battlepieces* (Melville 1). Melville’s poetry, dismissed by scholars of the American Renaissance like F.O. Matthiessen as “very illuminating for his inner biography” but “adds little to his stature as an artist” still remains largely unexplored by critics (494). And yet his poem “The Portent,” the opening poem of *Battlepieces*, has caught the attention of critics both of Melville and of John Brown due to his famous metaphor dubbing Brown “the meteor of war.”

That Brown is compared by Melville and other writers of the time to a meteor is, according to critics Zoe Trodd and John Stauffer, a key feature in the first phase of what they call the “John Brown cycle” – a mythmaking process undergone by Brown’s contemporaries and which continues throughout history and literature in the writings of those who study his trial and execution. “We can identify” Trodd and Stauffer state in the introduction to their book aptly named *Meteor of War: The John Brown Story*, “four particularly widespread and repeated phases” of this cycle which include Brown as “the Force of Nature, the Christian Martyr, the Mad Villain, and the American Hero” (Trodd and Stauffer 4). As previously demonstrated, these
images of Brown are prevalent throughout the Civil War era. Thoreau and Emerson evoked Christ and nature frequently in their discussions of Brown, and Julia Ward Howe, whom Trodd and Stauffer neglect altogether, was crucial in Brown’s role as war hero. Though this study does not pretend the scope of Trodd and Stauffer’s, “Phases” seems a bit too simplistic to describe the rapid metamorphosis of the Brown image before and after the war. “Phases” likewise suggest that each phase, and the symbolism during it, is mutually exclusive of the next, which is not entirely true during these pivotal years. Though Brown’s image may settle into a cycle of phases later as his deeds are weighed and reconsidered throughout history, at this early stage Brown is constantly changing.

Though there can be no doubt that Melville’s equating Brown to a meteor portrays him as a force of nature, Trodd and Stauffer’s own thorough explication of the poem suggests that Melville is employing the meteor/Brown metaphor as well as many other metonymies to portray Brown as not merely a force of nature but that he also endows him with a host of other symbolic meanings (246-7). Melville’s portrayal of Brown suggests then that “phases” of Trodd and Stauffer’s “John Brown cycle” may not be mutually exclusive, but rather may intertwine and intermix to create a far more complicated picture of this complicated man made myth. This reading of “The Portent” will acknowledge the phases suggested by Trodd and Stauffer, but will also suggest that Melville’s poem points not to a comprehensive reading of Brown as a force of nature, but rather invests him with a series of symbolic significances that culminate in his role as portent.

The beginning image is purposefully vague. The reader cannot, initially at least, discern what exactly is “hanging from the beam.” This vagueness creates, and maintains, a sense of uneasiness caused by this lack of information. The reader is constantly presented with
unexplained images. Something is “hanging and “swaying” on a beam, but it is not until the phrase “such the law” that the reader realizes that we are witness to an execution. Likewise, it is not until the person is named, “John Brown,” that we realize exactly what we are witnessing. This initial confusion creates an immediate atmosphere of uneasiness and reinforces the title’s assertion that the full meaning of the spectacle cannot be determined in present time.

The poem begins, and remains, in the present tense. But even as the poem occurs in the present moment, a moment defined by the date appearing underneath the title “1859,” the year of Brown’s trial and execution, the poem was neither composed nor published until 1866. Stanton Garner, a biographer of Melville, notes this discrepancy in *The Civil War World of Herman Melville*, arguing that this created a distance between Melville and his subject that prevents the poem from becoming supportive or dismissive of Brown, “Had he composed it while the passions evoked by the incident were still fervent, he might have expressed alarm or admiration, but he did neither” (46). Having written this poem posthumously, Melville attributes symbolic significance to an event that, upon an examination of the past, proved prophetic. The poem is, as Garner notes, a “recalled portent” (47). That this recalled portent pretends a poetic present only adds to the omnipotent effect of both the poem and the figure on which it was based. The unnamed speaker is recalling not the present, but a specific moment in history in which a man became a symbol.

As Brown’s body is “hanging from the beam” and “slowly swaying” on the scaffold, the reader is struck not by what is being witnessed, but rather by what has not – the actual execution of John Brown. He is, in the first lines of the poem, already dead. The execution has already been carried out, and the body of the condemned is now lifelessly “swaying.” That the actual death of Brown is never shown- that it remains an unstated, but logically assumed, image in the poem
further stresses the symbolic nature of the subject. Now that Brown is dead, he is ripe for symbolic comparisons that were perhaps not appropriate when he was alive.

The “slowly swaying” body has an added significance for critics. Henning Cohen, a critic of Melville’s poetry, in that it establishes a strain of “kinetic images” that are echoed in the “nearly identical syllable count in the corresponding lines of the two stanzas” (203). That is, the swaying of the body helps to distinguish the swaying of the meter and the swaying of the poem itself. Critics Trodd and Stauffer add another dimension to this swaying, noting that Melville uses the “swinging motion of the symbolic figure to suggest that the country too is in flux” near the outbreak of the Civil War (Trodd and Stauffer 248). Stanton Garner agrees with this reading, adding that the swinging of Brown’s body “counts off the diminishing months, days, and hours remaining before the consequences of [Brown’s] audacity are manifested in the outbreak of war” comparing the swaying of the body to the swaying of a clock’s pendulum (Garner 46). Whether the swaying of Brown’s body denotes the swinging of a clock or the swaying of a nation, the image of Brown moving back and forth undoubtedly establishes a mood of uneasiness, and a motion that persists even after death. The reader is immediately confronted with a powerful and gruesome image of a dead body, but the speaker fails to directly explain the significance of the swaying. As the body sways, the poem sways, and the reader sways along with it. The image is both detailed and vague, and serves to immediately put the reader into an immediate state of flux as we strive to assign meaning to this gruesome spectacle.

The poem leaves little room for speculation as to the cause of the swaying of John Brown’s body. The next phrase, “such the law” connotes that it is the state of Virginia, and by extension, the federal and state governments, that have condemned this man to die. “Law” also potentially refers to the distinction between the higher moral law, which Emerson and Thoreau
felt that Brown was following, and the man made, fallible law which punished Brown. It is here that Melville attributes his first symbolic significance to Brown—he is a man who has violated the laws of his state and is hence executed by it. “The law,” and hence the state which enforces that law, are responsible for this spectacle which the speaker has witnessed. The speaker seems ambiguous as to how much he agrees with this fact, vesting the poem with a sense of disapproval. Brown’s death has become the symbol for the defiance of the law, and he has paid the ultimate price for this defiance. By including the law and the state as an integral part of Brown’s death, Melville is joining writers like Henry David Thoreau in questioning the state’s right to enforce a law that may not be moral to begin with.

The next lines deal not with the body on the scaffold, but the “shadow on the green” grass cast on the “Shenandoah” valley by that body. It is in these lines that John Brown comes to symbolize not only a man who died in defiance of a law, but becomes instead a symbol of death itself. The Shenandoah Valley is, according to Henning Cohen, “noted for its fertility beauty and had already accumulated a romantic aura” which makes it synonymous with life itself. Cohen further notes that the “shadow” of Brown’s lifeless body on this green valley connotes the entrance of death into this life affirming scene, thus the phrase “shadow on your green/Shenandoah” marries the concepts of life and death in the poem (203). The word “Shenandoah,” along with the name “John Brown” are the only words repeated in the poem, and the only words which are granted a line to themselves, adding to their significance. This forms, according to Cohen, a “double refrain in which enhances the meaning as well as the formal unity of the poem. The Shenandoah refrain suggests life, fertility and peace; the John Brown refrain suggests devastation, death, and war” (Cohen 204). That the Shenandoah Valley, once an image evoking life will now, after the entrance of Brown and the Civil War, become forever an image of death
suggests that the coming conflict will be so cataclysmic that it will redefine places like the Shenandoah Valley. The purity of the valley and the nation will be tainted by blood and violence, and can never again remain a pure image of peace and tranquility. John Brown, now the symbol of death itself, will haunt this valley forever, as the repeated phrases suggest, and will become synonymous with the area once known for its Edenic beauty.

But, as previously discussed, this poem is not the first time John Brown had entered the literary landscape of the Shenandoah Valley. It was in this same location that Julia Ward Howe had, only a few years before, first heard the Massachusetts 12th Infantry sing “John Brown’s Body,” and it was in this valley, in Washington DC, that she composed the lyrics to “Battle Hymn.” So while Melville’s “shadow on the green” may be the most gruesome mention of John Brown haunting the Shenandoah, it was by no means the first.

The “shadow of death’s” entrance into the Shenandoah Valley is the beginning of a series of omniscient images foreshadowing war. The Shenandoah Valley, here tainted only by Brown’s blood, became one of the most blood soaked battlegrounds of the Civil War. Brown’s life would not be the last that is lost there, but it did, the speaker reminds us, have the notoriety of being the first. This biblical imagery reminds the reader that this valley would become the scene of more gruesome spectacles than Brown’s execution.

The omnipotent warning that Brown’s shadow cast upon the valley has a special significance to Staunton Garner, who claims that the image of the shadow is not only a portent, but carries another connotation that adds a Christian element to the image. Brown, who had been saturated with such imagery by both Thoreau and Howe, was already vested with Christian symbolism, and Melville continued this comparison. “The shadow cast along the valley by John Brown’s body is the portent to which the title refers” he says, then goes to ascribe a biblical
significance to the image “it is a forewarning of a conflict that will befoul and disfigure the region into a ‘valley of the shadow of death’” (47). Garner refers to Psalm 23, in which the speaker roams a valley but has no fear. Instead, he has faith in God: “Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art there to comfort me.” Yet there seems to be no comfort in this shadowed valley. Instead the speaker presents us with a valley in which evil, in the form of war, will most definitely enter, and no faith that any God will prevent this destruction. Though Garner notes the possible allusion, he fails to mention the implications of such a Godless valley. If there is no guide through the valley, there can likewise be no salvation from this violence. If Melville is alluding to the valley of the shadow of death in these lines as Garner claims he is, than he is likewise denying this valley its God and leaving those who dwell it in unprotected. That this valley has no “shepherd” to guide also evokes the previous associations of Brown as the shepherd in Emerson’s work, in which he praises Brown’s familial profession as farmer.

If Melville presents us with a valley of death without a shepherd, he also presents us with a Christ without salvation. “The cut is on the crown” has been widely read as an image of Christ’s crucifixion (Garner 47; Reynolds 446). One of the many connotations of “crown” is Christ’s crown of thorns, a comparison that not only likens Brown to Christ, but to the concept of martyrdom in general. John Brown as a martyr to the cause of abolitionism was a favorite symbol of both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau after his execution. Unlike these writers, however, Melville fails to offer any other parallels between Brown and Christ other than the manner of their death. As Melville is composing this after the war took its toll on the valley only heightens the feeling of omnipotence which pervades this poem. But in comparing
Brown to Christ only in his martyrdom, Melville is divorcing the idea of salvation from sin from the Christ image, and making the very concept of resurrection impossible.

While Brown’s “cut” may carry heavy Christian connotations, the “stabs” which “shall heal no more” provide a more tangible image of his death. The “stabs” are the literal wounds inflicted upon Brown by the soldiers who captured him. These wounds also carry the connotation of the wounds inflicted upon Christ at his crucifixion, further fusing the image of Brown with Christ. The fact that Brown’s wounds “shall heal no more” suggests that they were once healing themselves, as all wounds do, and are not now that he is dead. Brown’s death is simplified in this potent image as merely an interruption of a process of healing, one of the natural processes of life. Melville’s vision is decidedly not one of transcendence, but of painful stagnation. Brown’s wounds, much like the wounds of the rapidly dividing nation, will not have a chance to heal because of this execution. Unlike Christ, Brown will not have the opportunity to resurrect except as the image of a war now over.

Yet even as certain parts of Brown’s body are exposed, such as the cut on his crown or the stabs on his body, others are veiled. “Hidden in the cap” is Brown’s face, covered by the hood placed on him by the executioner. The fact that his face is hidden is highlighted by the next line in which the speaker equates his hidden face with his anguish, presumably for his own death, that none can portray or “draw.” No person, the speaker notes, can presume to gaze either upon John Brown’s face or his suffering; hence this extremely public execution of which the speaker is a spectator retains an element of privacy. Critics Trodd and Stauffer further note that the fact that Brown’s face is hidden “emphasizes his role as abstraction” and makes him a fitting vehicle for symbolism (Trodd and Stauffer 249). The speaker, like the reader, is cannot make symbolic sense of this veiled figure, and is hence acknowledging that “none can draw” any conclusions
about the meaning Brown’s death adequately. Melville leaves many gaps in this train of imagery, suggesting that this spectacle may be beyond the power of images or words ability to convey.

The poem’s imagery at this point does move farther away from Brown’s physical body and further into the abstract. Yet the final lines settle, perhaps too quickly, on the desired metonymy. These lines reveal the final symbolic comparison the speaker bestows on this spectacle as John Brown becomes a prophetic figure who links the fate of the landscape with the his own. What was once vague is now clearly stated, “So your future veils its face/Shenandoah.” The future of the region is now concrete –the Shenandoah Valley can no more see the future before it any more than it can look upon Brown’s masked face, though, paradoxically, the fate of one is directly dependent upon the fate of the other. This strange mixture of sight and blindness, of omnipotence and fatalism, becomes the pivotal image of the poem. Brown embodies a paradox by the end of the poem. He becomes a future that can be predicted, but not prevented. He becomes the embodiment of fatalism itself.

As the speaker clearly states the final symbolic importance of John Brown as portent, as a man whose face reflects the future, the sounds of the poem serve to reinforce what the reader has come to doubt – that John Brown’s fate and the fate of the nation are inexorably bound. The speaker draws our attention to important phrase “future veils it face” through both sound and alliteration. The word “future” contains the lowest frequency vowel sound ‘oo’ twice, giving the word an appropriately ominous tone that fills the throat and instills a sense of foreboding or dismay in the listener, as low frequency vowels connote importance and grandeur as well as dread. These and their connotations are linked through assonance to the word “face” linking the fear and dread to the veiled face of John Brown, the cause of such anxiety. The fact that the “f” sound is a fricative and hence connotes a pause or break in breath as well as thought gives a
listener a moment of pause to consider the weight of both this phrase and its meaning. Logic failing, the speaker now relies on sound to reinforce the meaning of his imagery. The low frequency vowels and hesitant fricatives create a ominous and foreboding mood with sound that perhaps cannot be matched with words.

But for all the symbolism both the reader and the speaker are unable to see through Brown’s veiled face, there is a part of Brown’s body that can be seen under the hood. From under the hood that veils this prophet’s face comes a “streaming beard,” indicating that though both Brown’s face and the future of the valley are concealed in part, they cannot be covered completely. That the beard is “streaming” from beneath the cap furthers the kinetic imagery noted by Henning Cohen, as the movement of the beard is no doubt caused by the “swaying” of the body on the gallows. The image of the beard streaming resembles the tail of a comet in its whiteness and motion, establishing a connection between Brown and the celestial body which will become the most tangible and concrete of the poem.

It is in these final lines that the speaker utters the most poignant of all his metonymies. Encased by parentheses that almost suggest a whisper, John Brown is referred to as “weird.” Though Brown is undoubtedly “weird” or unusual in appearance with his “streaming beard,” the speaker is suggesting that he is also “weird” in that he is prophetic, like the “weird sisters” of Macbeth. He is now a means by which the future can be predicted.

The poem ends by adding a final symbolic significance to this now fully prophetic figure – he is now “the meteor of war.” By comparing Brown to a meteor, critics Trodd and Stauffer assert that Melville is employing one of the most prevalent metaphors associated with Brown “metaphors that draw on images of the sky are among the John Brown’s most consistent emblematic and symbolic forms” (1). This particular stellar comparison is employed by Henry
David Thoreau in “Plea” to different end. Thoreau states that Brown’s career was “meteor like, flashing across the sky, then disappearing” (136). Thoreau stresses the impermanence of the meteor, reiterating the fact that the meteor comparison is fitting in that it connotes not only other worldliness but temporality, as meteors occur only for a short time and are not permanent fixtures in the sky.

Melville utilizes this connotation of meteor, but adds the omnipotence that Thoreau could not, in 1859, have anticipated. Yet Melville was not the first to invest a meteor with an ominous meaning. Meteors have, according to Henning Cohen, been associated in literature and in history with “wars and disasters since the time of the Anglo-Saxon chronicles” (204). Considering the history of the meteor image, both recent and long past, and Melville’s final symbol seems exceedingly appropriate when applied to Brown.

Critic Kenneth Ljungquist believes that this meteor comparison may not be completely figurative for Melville and other writers of the time, but rather inspired by an “actual astronomical event” which took place “between John Brown’s assault on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry on October 16 and his hanging on December 1859” in which a “meteor shower dazzled the Northeast and was widely covered in the press” (675). Ljungquist goes on to examine several periodicals of the time, including the Berkshire County Eagle, a paper which he asserts that Melville “regularly consulted”. In one such newspaper the shower was referred to as containing “luminous whiteness” which Ljungquist argues “the author of Moby Dick would not be insensitive to” (676). Reynolds also attributes Melville’s comparison to “an unusual astronomical event which took place in the skies over the Northeast.” As he notes from Harpers New Monthly Magazine of June 1868, “A serious of meteor showers appeared, highlighted by a tremendous meteor that raced in a bright streak and then exploded” (383). While the effect of
these newspapers’ accounts on Melville’s composition will never be entirely known, it is nonetheless an important to note that these articles undoubtedly link the portrayal of Brown in the papers to the portrayal of Brown in poetry of the time.

Whether imagined or inspired, the meteor comparison which ends “The Portent” remains the most poignant in that it encapsulates perfectly those which precede it. It is the artful culmination of symbolic imagery that haunts the entire poem. The prophetic nature of the subject, only hinted at near the beginning, disguised in metaphor after metaphor, in image after image, is now condensed into this final phrase and the reader is left with a paradoxically complex view of a complex person. John Brown is all these things: prophet, portent, death, and martyr. And yet perhaps he is more still, for as Trodd and Stauffer note, “the metaphor of the meteor’s trajectory across the sky recalls a figure whose legend changes as it flashes.”(Trodd and Stauffer 1). Though the image of Brown changes throughout the poem, it retains the supernatural strangeness fitting the man whose life and death was the cause of so much political and spiritual turmoil for a rapidly changing nation.
Year of Meteors

1859-1860

Year of Meteors! brooding year!
I would bind in words retrospective some of your deeds and signs,
I would sing of your contest for the 19th Presidentiad.
I would sing how an old man, tall, with white hair, mounted
the scaffold in Virginia,
(I was at hand, silent I stood with teeth shut close, I watch’d,
trembling with age and your unhealed wounds you
mounted the scaffold;)
I would sing my copious song of your census returns of the
States.
The tables of population and products, I would sing of your
ships and their cargoes,
The proud black ships of Manhattan arriving, some filled with
Immigrants, some from the isthmus with cargoes of gold,
Songs thereof I would sing, to all that hitherward comes would
welcome I give,
And I would sing fair stripling! Welcome to you from me,
young prince of England.
(Remember you surging Manhattan’s crowds as you passed with
your cortege of nobles?
There in the crowd stood I, and singled you out with
attachment;)
Nor forget I to sing of the wonder, the ship as she swam up my bay,
Well shaped and stately the Great Eastern swam up my bay, she was
600 feet long,
Her moving swiftly surrounded by myriads of small craft I
forget not to sing.
Nor the comet that came unannounced out of the North flaring
in heaven
Nor the strange huge meteor procession dazzling and clear
shooting over our heads,
(A moment, a moment long ago it sailed its balls of unearthly light
over our head,
Then departed, dropt in the night, and was gone;)
Of such, and fitful as they, I sing- with gleams from them
would I gleam and patch these chants
Your chants, o year mottled with evil and good – year of forebodings.
Year of comets and meteors, transient and strange- lo! even
here one equally transient and strange!
As I flit through you hastily, soon to fall and be gone, what is
Herman Melville would not be the only poet in 1865 to compose a poem which featured John Brown, nor would he be the only poet to feature Brown in a poem along with a meteor. Walt Whitman’s poem “Year of Meteors” first appeared in his 1865 edition of *Drumtaps* and was later included in his “Birds of Passage” section of *Leaves of Grass* in 1871, 1872, and 1876 (Whitman 200). In this poem, John Brown is merely one of a series of images which are meteor like. Though the meteor does include fate-filled connation much like Melville’s “The Portent,” Whitman’s meteor is primarily a symbol of transience and temporality. That John Brown dies at the very beginning of this poem, before the meteor image can fully develop, suggests that Whitman, while feeling it necessary to include Brown as one of his many meteors of the year, does not invite his image or memory to the transcendent spectacle at the end of the poem. John Brown’s execution is, however, one of only three events which Whitman pretends to witness in this portentous year.

The events Whitman chooses to portray in this poem are not necessarily the same events that a historian would choose to include. The events he describes include Brown’s execution and Lincoln’s election, and also the perhaps less significant arrival of Prince Edward VII in New York City. By placing Brown in league with these other more minor and more positive historical events, Whitman appears to be inverting the traditional symbolism of the “Year of Meteors” to stress positive images of life rather than Melville’s visions of death and destruction. These positive images cumulate in Whitman’s transcendental slant on an event which other writers have deemed dangerous and portentous and exclusively Brown oriented – the meteor shower of 1859-60. This meteor shower becomes an event loaded with transcendental glory for Whitman rather than a symbol of coming doom for other writers. While acknowledging Brown’s place in
“Year of Meteors,” Whitman goes on almost to dismiss him and strip his historical shower of any negative connotations, replacing them with images of change and hope.

Like “The Portent,” Whitman’s “Year of Meteors” is written posthumously and refers, as the subtitle suggests, to a specific moment in history. Unlike “The Portent,” this poem does not pretend a present tense. The typical Whitman first person “I” is followed by “would” insinuating that he is not present, nor was he, but leaves the suggestion as a comment on what could have been observed had he been in this moment. The speaker admits that this is a somewhat artificial act, that he “would bind in words retrospective” some of the “deeds and acts” that made this year so momentous. He is using a poetic license of sorts to implore the reader to allow this construction after the fact, to allow him to “bind” or put together in “words” a poem which imagines this year as a series of events which, retrospectively, unify in theme. He is referring to the act of composing itself, and is hence licensing himself as poet to re-arrange symbols and events to reach the meaning he chooses to reach. Walt Whitman is constructing this year, and the reader is aware of that from the first lines.

The first image of this “brooding year” in which Whitman contemplates the implications of events upon history is the “19th Presidentiad,” or the Presidential Elections of 1860 which became the topic of an essay by Whitman in the same year. In this essay, he calls for a candidate that possessed the virtues of the working man. “I would be much pleased to see some heroic, shrewd, fully-informed, healthy-bodied, middle-aged, beard-faced American blacksmith or boatman come down from the West across the Alleghenies,” Whitman says “and walk into the Presidency, dressed in a clean suit of working attire, and with the tan all over his face, breast, and arms; I would certainly vote for that sort of man, possessing the due requirements, before any other candidate” (Whitman 13). This presidential race would end in the election of Abraham
Lincoln, arguably Whitman’s favorite political figure and the subject of many of his poems. But, as critic John McWilliams notes about Drumtaps in general, the events of this poem are out of chronological order (181). Abraham Lincoln was elected President near the end of 1860, yet this reference appears before the execution of John Brown, which took place in December 1859. By inverting the chronological order of these events and imposing his own structure to the year, Whitman appears to be placing the Lincoln candidacy in a higher regard historically than the execution of John Brown. His speaker is attempting to “bind” them together in close juxtaposition perhaps because of Whitman’s well known admiration of Lincoln.

While there is a reference to the 19th Presidentiad in the first lines of the poem, it is not this event that Whitman chooses to make his first poetic image in “Year of Meteors” but rather John Brown’s execution. Here Brown is not the symbolic stuff of Melville or Thoreau but a figure that seems strikingly human. He is “an old man” who is described in quite physical, mortal terms as “tall, with white hair.” Brown is not depicted as heroic but fallible and almost feeble with the signs of age as he climbs the scaffold. That John Brown is portrayed in such strikingly human terms suggests that Whitman is stressing not the symbolic nature of Brown but rather the ordinary, less mythic aspects of his execution. Brown is somewhat demystified in this portrayal as the speaker highlights not his politics but his person as he meets his death. The romanticized martyr of Emerson and Thoreau’s earlier writings is replaced by Whitman with a stark portrait of an ordinary man’s death.

Though Whitman does give a setting to this scene, he leaves it as only “Virginia.” The landscape is not described, let alone open for symbolic interpretation as it is in Melville. Virginia seems to serve only as a place marker, not as a symbolic device as in “The Portent.” The relative vagueness of the surroundings connotes that even though this is occurring in a specific place at a
specific time, there may be more universal significance to this spectacle. Though it happened in Virginia, it could, in the reader’s mind, have been anywhere at any time. Like Melville’s “The Portent,” the setting of this execution could, considering the publication date, evoke images of war and destruction that plagued Virginia throughout the war.

While the setting may not add weight to this spectacle, the fact that it is witnessed twice by the speaker certainly does. The speaker revisions the hanging, this time as a spectator, for, as Trodd and Stauffer note, this is a poem in which Brown “mounts the scaffold twice” causing a “poetic spasm” (250). As the speaker witnesses this event, he comments, “I was at hand, silent I stood” for he is unable to speak at the sight of Brown climbing to the noose. That the speaker is temporally silenced is a detail that Trodd and Stauffer contend “reminds the reader that Brown is silenced while the poet speaks on” (250). This moment of silence is observed by a speaker who has throughout the poem been constantly reminding the reader of the speech act itself, highlighting through his lack of speech the importance of the event. John Brown’s execution is perhaps the only moment in the poem which remains “unsung”.

Though the speaker places himself in intimate physical near contact with the condemned man, he “stood very near” the “old man,” suggesting that he is, fact, close enough in proximity to suggest a degree of commradory, he does not express sympathy or sorrow for his fate, nor does he attribute these feelings to his subject. John Brown is “cool and indifferent” as he awaits his fate. His only “trembling” is due to “age.” This speaker does note Brown’s “unhealed wounds,” but they play a much less significant role here than in “The Portent,” reiterating the fact that Brown is losing symbolic importance.

Likewise, the speaker himself stands with “teeth shut closed” neither smiling nor frowning as he watches the event that is about to occur. This is perhaps the most puzzling aspect
of the poem in that the speaker takes great care to describe the humanity of Brown, the mortality of a man rather than his symbolic importance, but stops short of a sympathetic portrayal. He neither damns nor praises the condemned but remains a silent and stone faced observer. Yet despite the lack of outward comment or showing of emotion, the speaker does describe the scene in painstaking detail, as if to suggest that while his personal sympathies are not effected by this spectacle, it is a moment of extreme significance.

Though he does not offer a particularly sympathetic portrait of the man, it is clear that Whitman felt John Brown was influential enough to include in *Leaves of Grass* as he notes in journal that he plans to write a poem which will “Sing the death of Kepler—Columbus—Cervantes—John Brown—Burns” (Glicksburg 161). Whitman planned to “sing” of these famous men in the same way he sung of the other subjects of *Leaves of Grass*. As the editor of this collection of manuscripts Charles Glicksburg says in his note to this jotting by Whitman, “Unaffected as Whitman claimed to be by the capture and execution of John Brown…it is evident from this fragment that he planned writing a poem which would celebrate his death in the company with that of Columbus, Kepler, and Cervantes.” Glicksburg goes on to note that “Though the draft contains abundant notes on the life of Columbus, there are none on John Brown” (161). As this poem never materialized, critics like Glicksburg are merely speculating as to how much Whitman may have “celebrated” Brown’s life, but this note nonetheless is evidence that Whitman was planning to include Brown in his poetry and that he felt he was of enough historical value to be placed in rank with Columbus in verse. Columbus, the alleged founder of the New World, was a person of arguably greater historical weight than Brown, and perhaps Whitman felt this comparison too contrived and abandoned the prospect.
For whatever reason, Whitman chose not to draft this poem, but to instead include Brown within the “Year of Meteors,” and chose also not to align himself politically or ideologically with Brown as he did so. This poem does not praise Brown’s politics, nor condemn them – it offers seemingly no comment on his political stance even as it portrays him as being historically important. David Reynolds attributes this lack of enthusiasm to Whitman’s own beliefs about abolitionism: “Whitman stood opposed to abolitionism” Reynolds says “which he considered a great danger to the union” (449). Whitman would then be opposed to any figure whose actions would prove portentously to help to sever that union. Gay Wilson Allen also offers commentary on Whitman and his opposition to abolitionism. While Allen acknowledges that Whitman was opposed to abolitionism chiefly because it “threatened to break up the union,” he also offers a parallel between Whitman’s personal political beliefs and those of the abolitionists. “Whitman, the son of a carpenter and friend of the working man,” Allen says, would, while being opposed to the abolitionist movement in general, have supported their advocacy of outlawing slavery in the new territories because it was “an ominous threat to free labor” developing in such states to be (164). Thus while Whitman would undoubtedly dislike Brown for the threat his actions at Harper’s Ferry brought to the union, he might, despite disdain for Brown’s violent tactics at Osawatomie, agree with Brown that slavery should not have been spread to the new border states of Kansas and Nebraska, even if they disagreed as to why and how this must be achieved. Whitman’s political stance on the expansion of slavery as well as his dislike for violence helps explain why his portrayal of Brown is so unsympathetic yet historically detailed.

Walt Whitman’s stance on slavery and abolitionism remains an ongoing debate among critics, and remains vague in this poem as Brown disappears after these lines. The next images in the poem are distinctly more positive and less foreboding. “Ships and their cargoes” are arriving
in his native New York; they are pouring “immigrants” and “cargoes of gold” into the port of
“Manhattan”. The same voice that before observed the death of Brown is now singing in praise
and welcome of these new arrivals to the city:

    Songs thereof I would sing, to all that hitherward comes would
    welcome I give,

As critics Trodd and Stauffer note about this poem, John Brown, the symbol of departure in
death has now been replaced by images of arrival, and “Brown is the only person departing” this
poem (250). As these images of departure have been replaced with more positive images of
arrival and greeting, the poem seems to invert its own logic. Now, life is occurring instead of
death, ships are coming to port, filled with new life and new beginnings which serve as stark
contrast to the death in the first section of the poem. John Brown, now dead, has become only a
part of a whole historical portrait painted by the speaker. John Brown is now a part of something
much larger than Melville’s “meteor of war;” he is a part of the flux of the entire nation.

    Whitman then turns his attention and description to one arrival in particular. A great
dignitary, it seems, is also arriving in the port of Manhattan in 1859:

    Welcome to you from me,
    young prince of England.

Whitman biographer Justin Kaplan explains this reference, noting that these lines are about “the
Prince of Wales” who would become the “first royalty to visit New York” and would later be
known as King Edward VII (257). Whitman is also at hand for this arrival much like he was
present at Brown’s execution, speaking through parentheses which connote an aside, a private
reaction:

    (Remember you surging Manhattan’s crowds as you passed with
     your cortege of nobles?
    There in the crowd stood I, and singled you out with
    attachment;)
This time, Whitman’s voice is filled with welcoming praise, as he notices the future King and “singles him out” from the crowd surrounding him as he welcomes him to New York. This is a moment in history which Whitman does not apparently mind being a spectator to – he welcoming the Prince’s arrival, expressing “attachment” with him. Whitman’s stone faced reaction to Brown seems even more apathetic in contrast.

The third event Whitman describes in the poem is the meteor shower of 1859, an event typically associated with Brown (Ljungquist 674-5; Trodd and Stauffer 1-5; Reynolds 383) but fails to include him in its symbolism. Historically, Whitman is correct to include this astronomical anomaly, yet the implication of this meteor is very different in this poem than it was in Melville, or even Thoreau. There is little implication of omnipotence in this meteor shower - it is an event to be witnessed by all, and is hence a symbol of unity as the poetic voice pleads us to remember:

> the strange huge meteor procession dazzling and clear
> shooting over our heads,

The meteor is “strange” here, but this strangeness seems outweighed as it is also “dazzling and clear” as it “shoots” over the collective heads of the nation. It is a “procession” as much as the ships which were arriving at the port of Manhattan or the Prince and his couriers who were walking the streets of New York City for the first time. It is not, though, a symbol of negative times to come. The fact that the meteor “shoots” rather than soars also evokes a past of gunfire and war.

The meteor take on an added significance as Whitman remembers the moment it occurred in the sky:

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(A moment, a moment long ago it sailed its balls of unearthly light over our head, Then departed, dropt in the night, and was gone;)

Whitman is stressing a different aspect of the meteor shower – that it is a temporary spectacle that arrives then departs, making it a perfect end to a poem about arrivals and departures. The temporality of the meteor is stressed in these lines, as the meteor was only visible for “a moment” then “was gone” while Whitman is only left with its memory. Its “balls of unearthly light” suggest that this is not a thing of the earth, but the heavens, hence is beyond mans reach and even his comprehension, other than to stress that it is beautiful only for a short while.

Whitman ends this poem with a typically transcendent image and a philosophical question:

As I flit through you hastily, soon to fall and be gone, what is this chant, What am I myself but one of your meteors?

The “you” he mentions can be read as the world, and Whitman is acknowledging that he himself shares qualities with his meteor. He, too, will “fall and be gone” from the earth’s view when he dies, and is hence also a beautiful and temporary flash in the sky. Everything in these last lines is transitory, even Whitman himself. By comparing himself to a meteor, Whitman is placing himself as a beautiful part of the natural world, and has hence transcended the physical boundaries of the earth and embraced the metaphysical realm of the sky through his “chant”, leaving behind all the images of death and destruction commonly associated with his symbol of choice and investing the meteor with a new, positive meaning.

By rewriting the history of this year to deemphasize John Brown, Whitman is likewise rewriting history to stress the positive moments in this portentous year. Whitman has redefined
the meteor image, and along with it, the image of Brown. Here, Brown’s death is dismissed in favor of more hopeful, more transient imagery associated with meteors. Looking back on a war that caused so much death and destruction, Whitman chooses to stress meteors that change and transcend rather than meteors that predict and preordain.

Whitman’s “Year of Meteors” differs from Melville’s “The Portent” in that it portrays Brown not as a symbolically loaded figure, but rather a deeply and tragically human man whose last moments are only one of a series of events witnessed by the speaker that year before the outbreak of war. Though the speakers silence along with his eye for detail do highlight this image as perhaps more significant than the rest, Whitman’s own views regarding abolitionism perhaps prevent his speaker from feeling any true sympathy for Brown. Unlike Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman does not allow Brown to be hero. Unlike Melville, he does not allow him to be a singular portent or meteor. To Whitman, he remains only a natural, yet eerie, symbol of change and destiny, who only helped to mark the “Year of Meteors.”

Both poets employ the meteor image, albeit to different ends, as a symbol associated not only with Brown but with the war his death played a part in inciting. Though the meteor is present in each of these poems, perhaps just as notable are the images of Brown which are absent. Gone is the Brown from Thoreau and Emerson whose ideals justify his deeds. Though Melville hints at the “law” having played a part in the fate of Brown, and by extension, the fate of the valley itself, he does not express sympathy for Brown’s demise, let alone stand as starkly oppose to it as Emerson and Thoreau each had. Also absent from these poems is the heroic Brown of the soldiers, or even the God of Howe’s “Battle Hymn.” Once the meteor image is in place, all previous definitions of Brown seem to fall by the wayside in favor of this new, more
ominous, reading. Brown is now only the meteor, flashing across the sky above the heads of these poets. He has ceased, in these works at least, to be a man at all.
Conclusion

Viewing each of these writers’ works on John Brown helps to ground their writing historically within the context of the political climate in which they lived and wrote more monumental works. Thoreau’s radical political stances are highlighted by his defense of John Brown. Emerson’s philosophy can seem inaccessible in both depth and range, but his words on Brown potentially open a gateway to an understanding of the values which shape this philosophy. Herman Melville’s monomaniacal Ahab is quite similar to his portentous “meteor of war,” a fact that reinforces the fact that he was obsessed with obsession. And without John Brown, Julia Ward Howe may never have earned the critical attention her other writings so desperately deserved. John Brown, and the war his death foreshadowed, provides an invaluable context for understanding the ideas of these important figures.

John Brown may be Emerson’s hero, Thoreau’s activist, Howe’s God, the soldier’s leader, Whitman’s rejected, and Melville’s meteor, he also always John Brown. While the purpose of this study was to highlight the ways in which John Brown and his image changed and evolved throughout the course of the war years, and in doing so examine how each writer employed this image to his or her own end, it remains difficult to completely divorce one John Brown from another. The fact that the Brown image was able, through the works of these writers, to change so rapidly and so completely allowed the image itself to remain fluid. This fluidity likewise opens the door for later writers to add and detract from Brown’s legacy at will, making him a figure who, like the meteor he embodies, reemerges throughout literary history.
Works Cited


