

Thoreau's Autumnal, Archetypal Hero: Captain John Brown

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HENRY Thoreau met John Brown on only two occasions, so far as we can tell, at Concord, in the winter of 1857 and in May of 1859.¹ He was not as directly involved with Brown's activities as such other New Englanders as Merriam, Sanborn, and Higginson. Yet of the literary tributes to Brown (by Emerson, Whittier, Howells, the Alcotts (father and daughter), and others) gathered in collections from Redpath's famous *Echoes of Harper's Ferry* to the modern *A John Brown Reader*,² only Melville's compact symbolic lyric, "The Portent," has the literary impact and complexity of Thoreau's "A Plea for Captain John Brown." "A Plea" has, moreover, become a recurring model for teachers and theorists of persuasive speaking and writing, often subjected to detailed analysis of its rhetorical virtues. It is also clearly the most successful of Thoreau's own three essays on Brown, and its structure contrasts favorably with that of Thoreau's other polemical essays.³ This continuing literary status of "A Plea for Captain John Brown" and its pre-eminence among so many other literary treatments of John Brown, however, are not only the product of its virtues as a piece of rhetorical persuasion, which are many, but of its additional suggestive and symbolic force as one aspect of Thoreau's autumnal vision.

Thoreau's autumnal vision takes, roughly, three forms — each filled out with many moving particulars. First, in the "Friday" section of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, in essays on "Autumnal Tints" and "Wild Apples," in several poems, and in his *Journal*, Thoreau describes and narrates autumn as literal subject, the sea-

sonal pictures and changes he witnessed in the natural world around him at Concord. Second — in these and other writings such as "A Plea for Captain John Brown" — he explores the symbolic tonality of his direct autumnal experience and also of certain related topics. By alluding to literary and mythological traditions of autumn, and thereby appealing to our own archetypal responses to the season, he may suggest wider applications for his literal subject, more universal meanings. Third, he may, explicitly or implicitly, link both his literal subject and its larger meanings to the autumn of his own life, his own sense of the decline of powers and the coming of death. Thus, Thoreau's autumnal vision may be, and often is, at once vividly literal, archetypally symbolic, and intensely personal.

The archetypes of life and of literature have their historians and their anatomists. In Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, we find frequent allusion to our autumnal theme, and one whole section on "The Mythos of Autumn: Tragedy." To quote from his earlier, more explicit essay, "The Archetypes of Literature": "It is the deliberate expression of a will to synchronize human and natural energies at that time which produces the harvest songs, harvest sacrifices, and harvest folk customs that we call rituals All the important recurrences in nature, the day, the phases of the moon, the seasons and solstices of the year, the crises of existence from birth to death, get rituals attached to them, and most of the higher religions are equipped with a definitive total body of rituals suggestive, if we may put it so, of the entire range of potentially significant actions in human life In the solar cycle of the day, the seasonal cycle of the year, and the organic cycle of human life, there is a single pattern of significance, out of which myth constructs a central narrative around a figure who is partly the sun, partly vegetative fertility, and partly a god or archetypal human being. . . ." Then, a brief summary of the archetypes of autumn: "The sunset, autumn and death phase. Mythos of fall, of the dying god, of violent death and sacrifice and of the isolation of the

hero. Subordinate characters: the traitor and the siren. The archetypes of tragedy and elegy."⁴

Another source for such archetypal patterns is, obviously, Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, as revised by Theodore Gaster, especially "Part III: Death and Resurrection: the Rhythm of Nature," "Part IV: Dying and Reviving Gods," and "Part V: Spirits of the Corn and Wild,"⁵ as well as Gaster's own *Thespis: Ritual, Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East*.⁶

In the autumn of his own life, Thoreau published or readied for publication a group of essays that cluster, as it were, around an unwritten autumnal center. Taken together, and read in autumnal terms, this constellation of essays makes an elaborate and moving affirmation, at a significant time in his own life, of Thoreau's autumnal vision. These essays, some of whose autumnal images have been considered by Sherman Paul⁷ are: "Autumnal Tints," "Wild Apples," "The Succession of Forest Trees," "Walking," and "A Plea for Captain John Brown." Already linked in time, these essays, by their autumnal qualities, give added meaning to one another. At the same time, as a group, they almost provide us with a new version of literary form, a structure at once so free and so organic as to defy any more exact delineation. And even Captain John Brown, as we shall see, has a role to play in this autumnal vision.

In the middle of October, 1859, John Brown raided Harper's Ferry. He was captured, then tried, and hanged on December 2nd. Whether we attribute the autumnal setting of John Brown's last deeds and last days to historical accident or transcendental design, we can hardly give Thoreau much credit for the timing. But what effect this apt coincidence may have had on Thoreau's response to John Brown is another matter. For this reason, and for others, we may conjecturally place Thoreau's essay "A Plea for Captain John Brown" within, if just within, the bounds of his autumnal vision.

Brown's bloody career came to its end in the autumn of 1859. It also came to its end in the autumn of Brown's own life — he was born in 1800 — and in the autumn of Thoreau's, for Thoreau had already had several attacks of the hereditary tuberculosis that was to kill him two-and-a-half years later, just as it had killed Thoreau's father, John Thoreau, the winter previous to Brown's last raid. At least three critics, Raymond Gozzi, Carl Bode, and C. Roland Wagner, have linked Thoreau's response to John Brown to the death of John Thoreau.⁸ Bode develops three propositions: "One is that Thoreau's hatred for the state was an extension of his Oedipal hatred for his father and of his occasional dislike (the other side of the coin of love) of his dominating mother. Another is that he finally found his father-substitute in John Brown, as the fanatical leader who detested the state and defied it to the death. The last is that Thoreau, with a history of conversion maladies, found his burden of guilt so great when his father and Brown died, both within the same year, that he became convinced he too must die in expiation" (pp. 112-113). Or, as Wagner puts it, "Is it possible that we are also being told that, because Thoreau shares in those crimes of violence, both he and Brown have to pay for them, that they must both be punished? Is the 'secret sharer' of Brown's terrible inner life at the edge of a confession? Perhaps Brown must be crucified because he killed the Father: he must take all the sins of Walden Pond upon his shoulders" (p. 133). How much these conjectured unconscious causations might carry through to our conscious or unconscious response to "A Plea for Captain John Brown" is still an open question, no doubt. But such psychological mechanisms, if valid, would at least reinforce John Brown's role in Thoreau's autumnal vision.

Thoreau, as was his custom, first composed his essay on Brown in his *Journal*, where the material on Brown interwove with the annual autumn observations and analogies.⁹ Only in the continuing *Journal* can the effect of this interweaving be responded to fully. But consider the entry for

19 October, in which the morning entry, six violent paragraphs on Brown's reported death, is followed by an afternoon of close natural observation, including the following: "Find the seedling *archangelica* grown about two feet high and still quite green and growing, though the full-grown plants are long since dead, root and stalk. This suggests that no doubt much of the radical spring greenness is of this character, — seedlings of biennials, and perhaps more of them a persistent or late growth from a perennial root, . . ." (XII, 402-03), concluded by another outburst of twenty-four additional paragraphs, just as violent as the first six, on Brown and the public reaction to his deeds. Or consider the following paragraphs from 12 November: "I do not know how to distinguish between our waking life and a dream. Are we not always living the life that we imagine we are? Fear creates danger, and courage dispels it. There was a remarkable sunset, I think the 25th of October. The sunset sky reached quite from west to east, and it was the most varied in its forms and colors of any that I remember to have seen. At one time the clouds were most softly and delicately rippled, like the ripple-marks on sand. But it was hard for me to see its beauty then, when my mind was filled with Captain Brown. So great a wrong as his fate implied overshadowed all beauty in the world" (XII, 443). This is followed directly by: "Nov. 15. A very pleasant Indian-summer day." And so on, until the paragraph of 30 November about tolling the Concord church bell at the time of Brown's hanging, followed by the customary close observation of the natural sights and sounds of autumn.

From these seasonal materials, in his mind if not in his final text, Thoreau could have drawn an appropriate mood and tone, of harvest, of death and renewal, of the Indian, whose tragically inexorable decline Thoreau foresaw in his association of the Indian's red face with autumnal tints and in the illusory half-promises of Indian summer, of man's own "Fall." And, of course, these associations may have been further intensified if, as was likely, Thoreau was pre-

paring or revising his other autumn essays at roughly the same time.

Along with these more "accidental" autumnal associations, Thoreau's most successful and most famous literary version of John Brown combines at least three of the archetypes of autumn. First, if *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack* was a kind of elegy for John Thoreau, Henry's brother, then "A Plea for Captain John Brown," and to a lesser extent the other two pieces on Brown, are a kind of elegy for Captain John Brown. For Thoreau speaks of Brown in the past tense, as if he were already dead. He is explicitly concerned for the reputation that Brown will leave after him, "for his character — his immortal life," (p. 845)¹⁰ rather than for any chance of saving Brown himself from the gallows. The opinions Thoreau gathers from newspapers and other voices of public opinion are an ironic procession of mourners speaking their tributes to the dead one. Thoreau does not question why this death had to come about, for he knows only too well, but he does offer consolation and hope for the future. And he makes Brown's impending death a comment on all death: "This event advertises me that there is such a fact as death — the possibility of a man's dying" (p. 843).

Second, Thoreau presents Brown as a kind of tragic hero, an exceptional man destroyed by stronger forces — but without any tragic flaw that Thoreau can see. (To Thoreau's modern readers, with the advantage of hindsight, the tragic flaw may be only too apparent.) At the beginning of his essay Thoreau had also considered Brown as three other kinds of hero: Revolutionary, Puritan, and Transcendental — none of them necessarily tragic, though all of them potentially so. But at the end Thoreau half-dramatizes Brown's capture and trial with near-cathartic intensity, mingling his own words with Brown's and his accusers': "Misguided!" "Garrulous!" "Insane!" "Vindictive!" So ye write in your easy-chairs, and thus he wounded responds from the floor of the armory, clear as a cloudless

sky, true as the voice of nature is: 'No man sent me here; it was my own prompting and that of my Maker. I acknowledge no master in human form'" (p. 845). In a curious way these pages, with their blend of tribute, suffering, and prophecy, recall Aeschylus' drama of the bound Prometheus, but with none of the wooden rhetoric of Thoreau's youthful translation.¹¹

In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer sums up the meaning of a world-wide pattern of ritual thus: "The killing of the god, that is, of his human incarnation, is therefore merely a necessary step to his revival or resurrection in a better form."¹² For Thoreau, Brown was "the redeemer of those in captivity. . . . the saviour of four millions of men," in this sense, like Christ (p. 844). But earlier in his essay Thoreau had written of Brown in directly vegetative terms: "in the moral world, when 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. This is a seed of such force and vitality, that it does not ask our leave to germinate" (p. 833).

The feasts and rituals described by Frazer and Gaster were either vernal, as with Christ and Adonis, or autumnal, to suit the double rhythms of spring and fall planting and harvest. Given the season of the year; given Brown's sacrificial role for the cause of slave freedom; given Thoreau's statement, "I see now that it was necessary that the bravest humanest man in all the country should be hung" (p. 845); given Thoreau's prophecy of a time "when at least the present form of slavery shall be no more here," when "we shall then be at liberty to weep for Captain Brown" (p. 846), that is, to mourn his death ritually: given all this, is it too far-fetched to suggest that besides writing of Brown elegiacally and tragically, Thoreau may 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 his world?

Such a reading of Thoreau's address on John Brown might give us a fuller sense of the creative forces that seized Thoreau and drove him until, as he said, "I put a piece of paper and a pencil under my pillow, and when I could not sleep I wrote in the dark" (p. 832). It might help explain why, even granting its more obvious rhetorical excellences, Thoreau's "Plea" has outlasted the many other tributes to Brown. In suggesting Brown as an autumnal, archetypal hero, Thoreau might have brought closer to the surface an awareness that, to many, was already implicit in John Brown's destiny and death, one that made sure that although John Brown's body might indeed be mouldering in the grave, his soul would go marching on.

To conclude, in the "Introduction" to *The Politics of Literature*, Paul Lauter explains his difficulty in writing an essay on Thoreau for the collection, how little he "knew about the dynamics of abolitionism, about Thoreau's real relationships to the movement or to John Brown" (p. 11).¹³ By "real" relationships he presumably means political ones. I began this essay with quotations from Northrop Frye, among others, to suggest possible archetypal significance for Thoreau's writings and, by implication, to place my brief consideration of Thoreau's John Brown within the context of a systematic body of archetypal criticism, both theoretical and practical. Some of the contributors to *The Politics of Literature* attack archetypal criticism as "ahistorical" and inhibitory of any real, i.e., political or social, engagement with literature. Yet Lauter and Louis Kampf concede that "Northrop Frye comes off rather worse than he should in some of the essays" (p. 40). Thoreau's "version" of John Brown in "A Plea for Captain John Brown" may help to reassure us how, as Northrop Frye has always maintained, concern for archetypal significance can nourish and sustain concern for the well-being of human society and, in the case of Henry Thoreau, for the mission and the importance of John Brown.

NOTES

- ¹Walter Harding, *The Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York: Knopf, 1966), pp. 415-26.
- ²James Redpath, ed., *Echoes of Harper's Ferry* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860); Louis Ruchames, ed., *A John Brown Reader* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1959).
- ³See my "The Structure of Protest: Thoreau's Polemical Essays," *Humanities Association Bulletin*, 20 (Fall 1969), 34-40.
- ⁴*Fables of Identity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), pp. 15-16.
- ⁵*The New Golden Bough* (New York: Mentor, 1964), pp. 273-587.
- ⁶(New York: Harper, 1961) revised edition.
- ⁷*The Shores of America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), pp. 395-411.
- ⁸Carl Bode, "The Half-hidden Thoreau," and C. Roland Wagner, "Lucky Fox at Walden," *Thoreau in Our Season*, ed. John H. Hicks (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1962), pp. 104-33; endorsing the unpublished dissertation of Raymond Gozzi (New York University, 1957).
- ⁹*Journal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 12, 400-58; October 19 to November 30, 1859.
- ¹⁰*Works*, ed. Canby (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937).
- ¹¹"The Prometheus Bound of Aeschylus," *The Dial*, 3 (January 1843), 363-86.
- ¹²*The New Golden Bough*, p. 306.
- ¹³Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter, ed., *The Politics of Literature* (New York: Random House, 1972).