

# *Prophets, Publics, and Publication: The Case of John Brown*

RICHARD H. BRODHEAD

THE BEST KNOWN PICTURE of John Brown from the twentieth century is John Steuart Curry's painting in the Kansas Statehouse. In it, Brown stands head and shoulders above the soldiers of the Civil War, calling forth their struggle with his furious spiritual force. His hair on end and white beard waving, his wild eyes aglint with holy fire, this Brown has the face of a frontier Jeremiah, and his body, spread wide as on a cross, frames the scene with his twin weapons of Bible and gun.

Curry's painting dates from the late 1930s, but not dissimilar images were already in circulation at the time of John Brown's death. In the anonymously authored *Life, Trial and Execution of Captain John Brown*, a compilation of newspaper stories rushed into print to capitalize on the excitement produced by the Harper's Ferry raid and its aftermath, Brown is introduced under the triple aspects of 'madness,' 'boldness,' and 'heroism' and then described this way: 'So strange a career as his has not arrested the public attention since Joe Smith was shot in the Carthage jail. His rank among the world's notabilities will be among such fanatics as Peter the Hermit, who believed himself commissioned by God to redeem the Holy Sepulchre from the hands of the infidels—

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RICHARD BRODHEAD is professor of English at Yale University.

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Joanna Southcote, who deemed herself big with the promised Shiloh—Ignatius Loyola, who thought that the Son of Man appeared to him, bearing his cross on his shoulders, and gave him a Latin commission of mighty import. . . . It was Brown's idea that he was divinely appointed to bring American Slavery to a sudden and violent end.<sup>1</sup>

As these examples show, John Brown has always cut a particular kind of figure in American civic mythology: in these images and in countless others, Brown appears as a modern instance of the high prophetic type. In all of American history few people have been so profoundly identified with the prophetic as John Brown. But if he supplies a leading case, Brown is far from the only American to have been identified in this way. Though it would seem the essence of prophetic selfhood that it is altogether exceptional, for actual people to persuade themselves or others that they are new incarnations of the prophetic has been, if not exactly an everyday occurrence, then certainly not a rare event. Prophetism has led a vigorous life in this country from the earliest days and shows no signs of waning now.

It is easy to name the markings of the kind of self we would term 'prophetic.' Such men and women are human like the rest of us until something sets them apart. They are made different by an act of knowing: the experience of seeing through common reality, the shared sense of things that had seemed real enough heretofore, to something that feels far more deeply real, the founding conditions of existence itself. This sense of things imposes itself on this figure in an irresistible, inescapable way—in Carlyle's memorable phrase: 'Fly as he will, he cannot get out of the awful presence of this Reality. . . . The Flame-image glares-in upon him.'<sup>2</sup> And it is the further mark of the prophet that his knowing brings absolute conviction. We know prophetic figures by their

1. *The Life, Trial and Execution of Capt. John Brown: Being a Full Account of the Attempted Insurrection at Harper's Ferry, Va.* (1859; facsimile reprint, Miami, Fla.: Mnemosyne Publishing Co., 1969), 7–8.

2. Thomas Carlyle, 'The Hero as Prophet,' *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841; reprint, Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 45.



Fig. 1. John Steuart Curry, 'The Tragic Prelude,' c. 1937-42. The original mural, depicting John Brown in a larger-than-life stance, hangs in the Kansas Statehouse. Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.

incurribility, their immitigable certainty that what they know is the truth.

Along with conviction, prophetic knowing also imposes a sense of appointment, a mission to witness this revelation to the world. In its most familiar form the prophet's mission is to speak the Truth to the world that has forgotten or refused to know it—"To Preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood,"<sup>3</sup> in the words of Melville's Father Mapple. But in a common variant, the prophet is commissioned not just to speak but to enact what he knows, to visit it on the world through a testamentary deed—a deed that will seem bizarre, even monstrous, to common sight, because that sight is blind to the truth that requires and justifies the deed.

Figures who fit the description I have sketched are not hard to call to mind. The ranks of the fanatic and the psychotic, never underpopulated in American life, have always been thick with

3. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851), chapter 9, 'The Sermon.'

self-conceived prophetic types. The Unabomber, now known to be Theodore Kaczynski, is a person who felt sure he knew a Truth, ignored by the common world, that commissioned him to perform acts of violence against computer experts. In March 1997, ten months before the Unabomber made his guilty plea, the prophetic came to public visibility in the mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate community, the thirty-plus followers of the man known in secular reality as Marshall 'Herff' Applewhite but in the realm of revelation as Do. This prophet was the bearer of a revelation that required its followers to separate themselves from the things that tied them to this-worldly life: first their families, later their genitals, and finally their bodies themselves. Four years before Heaven's Gate, this country was riveted by the confrontation in Waco, Texas, between the federal government acting as enforcer of 'normality' and the Branch Davidian community, a group living by the different truth witnessed by their prophetic leader—Vernon Howell by worldly name but David Koresh (*koresh*, Cyrus, the anointed one, the messiah) within the Kingdom of the Spirit.<sup>4</sup> More than nine hundred residents of Jonestown, Guyana, took their lives in 1978 in obedience to the final dictate of the flagrant Jim Jones, the man who said to a woman reporter: 'I don't have a complex, honey. I happen to know I'm the Messiah.'<sup>5</sup>

As this brief catalogue will suggest, assertions of prophetic individualism have produced some of the bloodiest and weirdest episodes in American history. But however richly they have contributed to it, the sick and strange have held no monopoly on the tradition of personal prophetism. The same form of selfhood has been seized by figures who bear a very different cultural charge, figures linked to some of the high points in the history of American creativity.

4. On the origins of the name 'Koresh,' see James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 42, 59–60.

5. Cited in David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of Jim Jones, the People's Temple, and Jonestown* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 61.

The United States is famously a nation of churchgoers, for instance, but it has also produced more than its share of church founders. These are individuals who asserted prophetism in its strongest form, modern claimants to that direct human contact with the divine once claimed by the likes of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. In his first vision in 1821, Joseph Smith claimed that he heard directly from God that God's truth was to be found in no existing church. Later visions appointed him to found a new church grounded in his own revelations: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which now counts more than ten million members.

From Ellen White's Seventh Day Adventism to Mary Baker Eddy's Church of Christ, Scientist, to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, Joseph Smith has had plentiful company in the ranks of religious prophets. But the prophetic has by no means confined its activities to the formal religious domain. American political history bears the deep impress of American prophetism, which has energized and given shape to some of this country's most important opposition movements. The American antislavery movement (as later the Civil Rights movement) found a major weapon in prophetic self-assertion and would be scarcely recognizable without its contributions. The great figures in the rhetorical, pacifistic stage of this struggle won moral force through their passionate embrace of the prophet's rhetorical stance. I am thinking of William Lloyd Garrison, whose thunderous denunciations were described by Thomas Wentworth Higginson as resembling newly discovered chapters of Ezekiel, or Sojourner Truth, christened the Libyan Sibyl by Harriet Beecher Stowe.<sup>6</sup> But prophetism was no less central to those who made slavery the object of direct, violent physical resistance. Nat Turner, leader of the

6. Higginson's description is quoted in Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 326. Sojourner Truth emerged from and drew on a number of antebellum prophetic cultures. Truth was a resident of the Holy Zion community of the prophet Matthias (Robert Matthews), then a follower of the millenarian Father William Miller, before she found the antislavery cause. See Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

most potent slave revolt in the United States in the nineteenth century, the Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831, was propelled to this revolutionary massacre by an experience of divine revelation. (The *Confessions of Nat Turner* offers this colloquy: 'As I was praying one day at my plough, the Spirit spoke to me. . . . Question – what do you mean by the Spirit? Ans. The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days.'<sup>7</sup>) As Turner's narrative recounts, it was a vision that commissioned him to his apocalyptic revolutionary insurgency: 'And on the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.'<sup>8</sup> John Brown, a student of Nat Turner's rebellion and the great exponent of direct, physical antislavery action in the 1850s, mounted his insurgencies as a divinely appointed individual breaking worldly laws in tribute to higher laws: in the form, this is to say, of prophetic self-assertion.

Alongside religion and politics, American prophetism has also found a major outlet for its energies in artistic creation, particularly in literature. Writers such as Walt Whitman and Herman Melville were stirred by the same fantasies of spiritual election that afflicted or inspired their non-literary contemporaries, and their fantasies of prophetic appointment helped release them, as they released others, to their most individualistic self-assertions. Whitman was deep in the throes of prophetic self-identification when he wrote the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), a great piece of testamentary writing and a volume that does to prevailing poetic custom what Joseph Smith did to the established

7. *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va., as Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray* (Baltimore, Md.: Lucas and Deaver, 1831). My quotation is taken from the reprinting of the *Confessions* in Henry Irving Tragle, ed., *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), 308.

8. Tragle, ed., *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831*, 310.

church: drain received forms of its authority and recreate them in an energetic, deeply idiosyncratic way. The high-water mark of Melville's creativity—the years that encompass the writing of the prophet-centered novel *Moby-Dick* (1851)—is the time when he was elated and tormented by the idea of himself as the elect bearer of a deep counter-knowledge, 'the sane madness of vital truth.'<sup>9</sup>

As I understand it, the idea of the prophetic self circulates in ours as in other cultures in what might be called the repertoire of identities, as one idea of what a self can be. When people become prophets, instead of entertaining this idea with the usual detachment, they identify with the prophetic self: project themselves into this concept and use it to tell themselves who they are. When this idea is strongly embraced, prophetic self-recognition yields far more than self-description. Psychically investing in the idea that one's true self is a prophetic self typically unleashes a massive surge of energy, an elating sense of privilege, and the boldness bred of the sense that one is entitled, even required, to do unaccustomed things.

In ethical terms, prophetism is a perfectly ambivalent tradition, giving rise equally to great creation and great destruction, as my two lists suggest. People will always want to sort out these branches and label one the truly prophetic and the other its monstrous or perverted twin. But both are authentic byproducts of prophetic identification, and both realize that identity's core idea. The message of prophetic selfhood is that one has access to an absolute truth unavailable to others that commands you to act in departure from worldly norms: a freeing from the authority of custom that makes way for extravagant invention and equally extravagant depravity or eccentricity. Realized one way, the thought that one's self is divine yields the lyric-egotistic flights of Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Realized another way, the identical thought yields the demented messianism of Jim Jones. Ted

9. I discuss Melville's experience of prophetic identification in *The School of Hawthorne* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 17-47. The quotation is taken from Melville's 1850 review-essay 'Hawthorne and His Mosses.'

Kaczynski retired to a solitary cabin to live out the antiworldly truth he knew, and at his trial his antisocial self-enclosure was used as proof of his insanity.<sup>10</sup> But living alone in a cabin and living out a self-devised countercultural ethic has been regarded as the sign of Thoreau's genius: the same prophetic deviation enabling arrival at radically different ends.

The study of American prophetism leads in a hundred directions, most of which I must here leave unexplored. But since I am addressing the American Antiquarian Society, the central shrine of American print culture, on this occasion I have thought to look at the intersections of prophetism and print. My project here is to explore what happens when this communications medium and this form of selfhood come into collision: a story with many parts.

To begin, prophetism commonly entails a cult of immediacy. The onset of the prophetic often involves the conviction that the ultimate terms of experience, which had seemed to be available only in a mediated way—through a church, for instance, or through a civil justice system—are suddenly available to be experienced directly, through direct vision or intuition. Pressed to say how she knew which Massachusetts ministers had their authority from God and which merely from an ecclesiastical establishment, the antinomian Anne Hutchinson made the shocking reply: '... by an immediate revelation. . . . By the voice of [H]is own spirit to my soul.'<sup>11</sup> (Compare Nat Turner: 'The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days.') When Joseph Smith came home after his first vision, he was assured by a minister that he not only did not have but could not possibly have had such a vision, since

10. Before Kaczynski quashed their effort to mount an insanity defense, his lawyers undertook to move his cabin from Montana to Sacramento, California, on a flatbed truck with the idea of showing it to the jury and asking: 'Would anyone but a certifiable lunatic choose such a primitive abode?' William Finnegan, 'Defending the Unabomber,' the *New Yorker*, March 16, 1998, 63. The sizes of Kaczynski's and Thoreau's cabins are compared in William Glaberson, 'Walden Was Never Like This,' *The News of the Week in Review*, *New York Times*, December 7, 1997.

11. 'The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court of Newtown,' reprinted in David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy: A Documentary History* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), 337.



direct communion with divinity had ceased in apostolic times. His reply could only be: 'However, it was nevertheless a fact that I had had a vision'<sup>12</sup>—and his church formed around his witness that revelation happened not only in olden days but also in our time, and to a person like oneself.

At its outer limits, prophetism is known by its hostility to all forms of mediated experience, and this includes the mediations of writing and print. In their first, overtly enthusiastic phase, the Shakers of Mother Ann Lee, according to her bitter deconverted follower Valentine Rathbun, placed 'their whole knowledge in their religion, on their pretended visions, prophecies and signs'<sup>13</sup>—in immediate intuitions and stirrings of the spirit, that is to say, not truths written down in books. (It will be remembered that early Shaker hymn singing eschewed fixed lyrics, relying for words on the action of immediate inspiration.) Timothy Allen, a Yale-trained minister who spent three weeks in 1743 'even Swallowed up in God,' was suspended from preaching when he claimed that the Bible, the mediated Word of the Lord, had no more standing than 'an old almanac' if its reading were not 'accompanied by the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit.'<sup>14</sup> Such derogations of the authority of writing gave rise to a variety of moves against the book. In the earliest years of Shakerism, Ann Lee, herself illiterate, seems to have opposed teaching reading and writing to children. Timothy Allen's New London school, the Shepherd's Tent, set up in opposition to the misbegotten ways of Yale, based its education not on book learning but on training students in the arts of unmediated divine inspiration. In a once-notorious extremity, in a moment of inspiration, James Davenport, one of Allen's colleagues, led a group of enthusiasts to the New London waterfront where they engaged in a ritual book-

12. I cite Smith's 1838 account of his first (1821) vision from Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. *Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 1989) 1: 274.

13. Quoted in Clarke Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion from the Camisards to the Shakers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 196.

14. Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion*, 124, 121.

burning—an 'awful affair' for which he felt 'deep and lasting Humiliation' when the prophetic fit had passed.<sup>15</sup>

But if in one modality prophetism is hostile to the print, in another it is in love with it, and seems to wish nothing so much as to seize this medium and make it its own. In classic form the prophet is the bearer of the Word, the one appointed to say to his people (I quote Ezekiel): 'Thus says the LORD GOD.' Some figures in the American tradition have borne the word through the traditional act of prophetic speaking: I think especially of Martin Luther King, America's great twentieth-century preacher-orator, lifelong repeater of the phrase 'God sent me here to say.' But in far more cases, American prophetism has taken the form of the will not to speak but to write. L. Ron Hubbard, thought a charlatan by many but a prophet by some (prophets are always prophets only to those who accept their revelation), was a writer of pulp fiction who managed to effect a crossover from science fiction writing to prophetic writing. (Both forms found their breeding ground for Hubbard in *Astounding* magazine.) In the late 1930s Hubbard felt moved to write '*the book*,' a book that would 'revolutionize everything' and 'have greater impact upon people than the Bible.'<sup>16</sup> This has not been a rare sensation among American would-be writers: Americans who have felt commissioned to write new gospels would fill a large asylum. One inhabitant would be Charles Guiteau, the man who assassinated President James Garfield by divine appointment in 1881, who had earlier felt divinely appointed to deliver a hitherto-unknown truth to the

15. On early Shaker hostility to books and education, see Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion*, 196–99. Stephen J. Stein reminds us that it was only in the second generation, as Shakers began to institutionalize a religion grounded initially on spontaneous enthusiasm, that this group turned to writing and publishing, generating an official history and a printed theology. *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 66–87. On the New London book-burning, see Garrett, *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion*, 124–25, and, for a fuller account of the background, Harry S. Stout and Peter Onuf, 'James Davenport and the Great Awakening in New London,' *Journal of American History* 70 (1983): 556–78. Davenport's subsequent self-abasement is expressed in his 'Confession and Retraction' (1744), reprinted in Darrett B. Rutman, ed., *The Great Awakening: Event and Exegesis* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1970), 68.

16. Russell Miller, *Bare-Faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987), 79–80.

world in print. (Guiteau's gaseous volume was modestly entitled *The Truth*.)<sup>17</sup> Richard Meyers, the bowling alley pinsetter who shot my grandfather in Dayton, Ohio, in 1955 after God instructed him that bankers must be put to death, would be another. When police searched Meyers's room, they found a manuscript of his religious insights, the Bible to match this prophet's gun.

But as usual with this category, the same fantasy of prophetic authorship that has been embraced by the delusional and psychotic has also led to other ends. Joseph Smith spent much of the year 1829 reading his golden plates with divine assistance and dictating the revelation for publication. Since its appearance in 1830, *The Book of Mormon* has circulated as the material sign of Smith's prophetic gifts and the new scripture of Smith's new church. *Song of Myself* is not so much a poem as a newer testament, a promulgation of the news of what the divine is and where it is to be accessed, and its author had his own experience of afflatus and divine appointment. Whitman referred to the composition of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* as 'the Great Construction of the New Bible.'<sup>18</sup>

To the extent that prophets feel driven to communicate, however otherworldly their message, they are impelled to engage with this world's mechanisms of communication. And if some are content to reach a tightly bounded sect, others have wished to reach a larger audience, which requires recourse to mass media instruments. The Unabomber, the most uncommunicative of modern prophets, seemed to want to speak only through his deeds; but after seventeen years of bombings, he too felt an irresistible urge to speak the truth he knew. In 1995 he persuaded the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* to publish his gospel 'Industrial Society and Its Future' (universally known as The Unabomber Manifesto): the publication that led to the unraveling of his identity and so to his arrest. The Heaven's Gate community came together around Do and Ti's revelations in the 1970s and was long

17. Guiteau's urge to gospelize is described in Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Trial of Assasin Guiteau* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 32-35.

18. Edward F. Grier, ed., *Walt Whitman: Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 1: 353. The journal entry is from June 1857.

content to maintain its separation from the world. But when the time for final ascent to the Level Above Human came nearer, this end-time cult became more communicative; and its communications strategies showed an almost connoisseurial appreciation of contemporary communications technologies. In 1992 this group made a series of satellite TV broadcasts entitled 'Beyond Human—The Last Call,' addressed to the group's 'lost sheep.' In May 1993 they purchased a large ad in the national and international editions of *USA Today* to bring news of a 'Last Chance to Advance Beyond Human' before the public. And in September 1995 this group—many of whose members held jobs as computer techies (their company was appropriately called Higher Source)—went online with their end-time prophecy and final offer of redemption, '95 Statement by an E. T. Presently Incarnate.'<sup>19</sup> David Koresh's 'decoded message of the Seven Seals,' a manuscript he believed God gave him the privilege to write 'in direct answer to his prayers,'<sup>20</sup> survived the Waco fire by being carried out on a diskette. Prophets can be deeply old-fashioned and deeply new-fangled at the same time.

In the cases mentioned thus far, the medium of publication is envisioned as a more or less neutral agent. The prophet's message is thought of as complete before he shares it, and the sharing only transmits it beyond his personal range. But it is the nature of media that they mediate, that is, help construct the messages they appear merely to convey. I now turn to consider the way print technologies might be thought to participate in constituting the prophetic, and for my proof case I return to John Brown.

As I began by noting, John Brown's life as a public figure has been virtually synonymous with his recognition as a prophetic type. We might now ask, how did that identification arise? Brown had many careers (most of them painful failures) before he

19. The history of the Heaven's Gate communications strategies is recounted in Jwodny ('a student'), 'Overview of the Present Mission,' dated April 1996, [www.heavensgate.com](http://www.heavensgate.com). For background, see John R. Hall, *Apocalypse Observed: Religious Movements and Violence in North America, Europe and Japan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 149–82.

20. Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 189.

emerged as the divinely appointed warrior against slavery, but accounts of Brown's personality emphasize certain traits throughout his life: strength of will, austerity, zealous religious conviction, severe impatience with human imperfections, a talent for sustained moral outrage, and so on. These are, we could say, proto-prophetic personality traits, so one answer to my question would be that Brown was thought prophetic because he was a person of the prophetic type.

But in truth, these traits by themselves did not compel prophetic recognition. Early accounts of Brown do not invoke this analogy. It is prominent only at the end of his career, at which time it becomes virtually inescapable. George Gill, a member of Brown's antislavery band in the years leading up to Harper's Ferry (Brown appointed him secretary of the treasury in his Provisional Government), broke with Brown in 1859 and refused to participate in the Harper's Ferry raid. Gill later suggested that it was Brown's growing prophetism that made him finally intolerable: 'His immense egotism coupled with love of approbation and his god idea begot in him a feeling that he was the Moses that was to lead the Exodus of the colored people from their southern taskmasters. Brooding on this, in time he believed that he was God's chosen instrument, and the *only one*, and that whatever methods he used, God would be his guard and shield, rendering the most illogical movements into a grand success. . . .'<sup>21</sup>

This suggests that as Brown gathered himself toward his final self-assertions, his intensifying self-dedication was accompanied or even fueled by new feats of self-visualization, ever stronger imaginings of himself as a prophetic self. 'Prophetic' here is not just something Brown 'is' but something he *takes himself to be*, and this sense of self is overwhelmingly strong in his late appearances. William A. Phillips met Brown in Kansas in June 1856, February

21. George B. Gill to Richard Hinton, July 7, 1893, reprinted in Louis Ruchames, *A John Brown Reader* (1959; reprint New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1969), 240. On the changes of spiritual stance in his earlier career that enabled Brown's prophetic self-identification, see John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), particularly 118-23.

1857, and in early 1859. His three interviews chart an intensification of prophetism so powerful as to be almost appalling in its final phase. The Brown of Phillips's last interview out-Ahabs Ahab in his monomaniacal obsession with the evil of slavery, which inspires a rage he almost literally cannot contain. 'The whole powers of his mind (and they were great) had been given to one subject. . . . The absorbing and consuming thoughts that were within him seemed to be growing out all over him,'<sup>22</sup> Phillips memorably writes. In his mania Brown seems at points simply paranoid and delusional, as when he assures Phillips that President Buchanan is secretly working to deny the North a future army by sending federal ships off on long cruises. But in the course of this interview, Brown's seeing what others do not see, with its truth vouchsafed by no evidence but the prophet's special powers of mind, abruptly pivots from paranoid delusion to something with the quality of real vision when he begins to describe the Civil War—an event unapparent to the world in 1859 but already present to the prophet's eye. Convinced that 'we are on the eve of one of the greatest wars of history,' Brown puts himself forward as a divine instrument, a weapon in God's holy war: 'For my part, I drew my sword in Kansas when they attacked us, and I will never sheathe it until the war is over.'<sup>23</sup> The allusion is to Ezekiel 21:5, where the Lord says: 'All flesh shall know that I the LORD have drawn my sword out of its sheath; it shall not be sheathed again.' (Anyone who thinks it is only foreign religions that can be taken to justify terrorism and holy war has much to learn from John Brown.)

The Brown who appears in these passages is so impressive as to completely dominate the mind; but if we step back a bit, we might notice something curious about the interviews. Phillips makes clear that Brown sought him out on these occasions, and, further,

22. W[illiam] A. Phillips, 'Three Interviews with Old John Brown,' *Atlantic Monthly* 44 (December 1879): 738–44. Quotation, 743.

23. Phillips, 'Three Interviews with Old John Brown,' 744. John Stauffer points out that Brown and his allies had learned the notion that war justified the abolition of slavery from John Quincy Adams. Stauffer, *Black Hearts of Men*, 26–35.

that he saw Brown the final time only because Brown's lieutenant John Henrie Kagi insisted after Phillips initially refused the meeting. Now, Phillips was a Kansas correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, which means that Brown was seeking out not just a friend but a reporter for the largest-circulation newspaper in the United States. Given this fact, the conclusion seems inescapable that when he talked to Phillips, Brown was not just voicing unmasterable prophetic thoughts but consciously 'confiding' those thoughts to a man who could give them broad exposure in print.

The notion that Brown not only sincerely identified with the prophetic but also calculatingly helped circulate the image of himself as prophet receives ample reinforcement from other sources. James Redpath wrote a romantic account of a visit to John Brown's camp in the wake of the Pottawatomie massacre (in which he denied Brown had had a part) in 1856. The introduction to this piece, involving a disorienting search that suddenly discovers a perfectly concealed military camp, comes straight out of Sir Walter Scott and sets Brown up as a noble border warrior. Once in camp, however, Redpath depicts Brown not as a Kansas *Ivanhoe* but as an Old Covenanter or primitive holy man:

In this camp no manner of profane language was permitted; no man of immoral character was allowed to stay, excepting as a prisoner of war. [Brown] made prayers in which all the company united, every morning and evening; and no food was tasted by his men until the Divine blessing had been asked of it. . . . Often, I was told, the old man would retire to the densest solitudes, to wrestle with his God in secret prayer. One of his company subsequently informed me that, after these retirings, he would say that the Lord had directed him in visions what to do; that, for himself, he did not love warfare, but peace—only acting in obedience to the will of the Lord, and fighting God's battles for His children's sake.<sup>24</sup>

24. James Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 113. John R. McKivigan, 'James Redpath, John Brown, and Abolitionist Advocacy of Slave Insurrection,' *Civil War History* 23 (1991): 293–313, gives the background to Redpath's involvement with Brown. I have been unable to locate the first place of publication of Redpath's visit to Brown's camp. It had clearly appeared before the 1860 *Public Life* since it is reprinted in the *Life, Trial and Execution*.

Redpath's Brown is a brazen piece of media hype. A man who really knows no limits, Redpath goes so far as to confer on Brown Nat Turner-like otherworldly visions that Brown never claimed to have. But the interesting thing about Redpath's account is that while it seems to portray a simple, good old man or holy innocent, there is reason to suspect that Brown was complicit in the coverage and collaborated in the image-construction that it performs. A peculiarity of Redpath's story is that the camp so secret that neither friend nor enemy can find it is nevertheless 'found' without much trouble by a reporter, Redpath too having been a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*. Redpath may have been a shrewd seeker, but it seems more likely that the camp sought or arranged his visit and 'allowed' him to find it. (One cannot help thinking of CNN's visits to Osama bin Laden's caves.) Similarly, the report of Brown's colloquies with the Lord may be a pure Redpath fabrication, but it could also suggest that Brown's camp was feeding Redpath a story he could report as true ('one of his company subsequently informed me . . .'). Brown, after all, had media knowhow built into his guerilla army from the first. Kagi, Brown's lieutenant at Harper's Ferry and the secretary of war in his 1859 Provisional Government, had been a newspaper correspondent before he became a conspirator.<sup>25</sup>

The culminating event of Brown's career, the raid on Harper's Ferry, was consciously conceived as a terrorist act, a bolt from the blue designed to 'strike terror into the heart of the slave States.'<sup>26</sup> The raid ended with twenty-four dead, including ten of Brown's men and two of his sons. Brown was captured and prepared for trial, and in the glare of publicity that surrounded these shocking events Brown found further outlets for self-depiction and self-promotion. One of the most fascinating documents to survive from John Brown's career is 'A Conversation with Brown,' an

25. *Life, Trial and Execution*, 26, introduces Kagi as 'the Kansas correspondent of the "National Era," and associate editor of the Topeka "Tribune."'

26. The phrase comes from Richard Hinton's August 1858 interview with Brown and Kagi reprinted in Richard Warch and Jonathan F. Fanton, eds., *John Brown* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 55.



interrogation taken down on October 18, 1859, two days after the raid. In it, a carefully maintained new John Brown appears: a person not wrathful, violent, or obsessed but courteous, affable, sensitive, humane. I had no intention to inflict harm or create terror, Brown tells his questioners. To the contrary: 'I wanted to allay the fears of those who believed we came here to burn and kill.' (These remarks so outraged a bystander that he blurted out: 'That is not so. You killed an unarmed man.') Asked if he considered himself 'an instrument in the hands of Providence,' Brown replies with modest self-respect but no fanatic shrillness, 'I do.' Asked, 'How do you justify your acts?', he replies again with moral firmness but studious inoffensiveness: 'I think, my friend, you are guilty of a great wrong against God and humanity—I say it without wishing to be offensive—and it would be perfectly right in any one to interfere with you so far as to free those you wilfully and wickedly hold in bondage. I do not say this insultingly.'<sup>27</sup> I was motivated by nothing but the principles of the religion you and I both profess, Brown replies. No offense, but the only difference between you and me is that I actually believe the things you pretend to believe: believe them enough that I feel compelled to live them out.

The simple, good man trying to do what God and conscience say is right makes a memorable appearance here. But what is not immediately clear from the statement is that it represents a conscious act of self-projection, literally a piece of broadcasting. When asked at the start whether he would be more comfortable if 'visitors' were cleared from the session, Brown replies that he welcomes this audience and the chance it gives him to 'make himself and his motives clearly understood.' It seems no accident that these 'visitors' were in fact mainly reporters. (*Life, Trial and Execution*, in reprinting 'A Conversation,' referred to its author as 'one of that ubiquitous class of persevering inquirers known as Reporters.') At certain points in the interrogation Brown makes it obvious that he is speaking not to his interrogators but past them

27. 'A Conversation with Brown,' reprinted in Warch and Fanton, *John Brown*, 68–78. Quotations, 69, 70, 73, 71.

to the reporters and, beyond them, the readers of their papers. 'I want you to understand, gentlemen . . . and you may report that,' one tell-tale reply begins.<sup>28</sup>

The October 18 'Conversation' shows John Brown in the act of converting the prison interrogation into a celebrity media interview. In doing so he marks a new chapter in the social history of the prophetic. All prophets perform their prophetic selves to some social audience. One novelty of John Brown is that he had access to a new scale of audience, the mass audience opened up by new print-culture instruments. Mass-circulation newspapers printed on rapid new presses and the telegraph lines that carried messages without the slow travel of a physical bearer were new inventions between the 1830s and 1850s. In John Brown's adult lifetime these new technologies created new social realities in the United States: in particular, a public that could read and follow up-to-date national news. With these instruments in place, events that used to be reported to local readerships and then slowly carried to a distance could be carried to national audiences at the speed of a telegraphic signal. Nat Turner's revolt of 1831 was covered in Virginia papers in accounts that were gradually reprinted elsewhere. By the time Brown went to Kansas, his words could be printed in New York or Boston the next day.

Brown saw the enormous strategic asset the new media could be for the modern prophet, and he brilliantly exploited them to broadcast his prophetic message. He helped to make his widely covered trial a piece of high national drama. Brown was outraged by the efforts of his wellwishers to get him acquitted on a defense of insanity. Like others who have resisted this legal classification, including Charles Guiteau and Theodore Kaczynski, Brown insisted on being taken as the bearer and performer of an authentic private truth: a real prophet, not someone whose sense of divine appointment evidenced psychotic disorders. In court Brown contrived a highly moving spectacle of his noble nature, melodra-

28. 'A Conversation,' 68-69; *Life, Trial and Execution*, 44; 'A Conversation,' 74.

matically lying 'down on his cot at full length within the bar' and 'rais[ing] himself up in bed' to answer questions.<sup>29</sup> In his closing statement he transferred his case from the civil court to the court of divinely ordained moral law, proclaiming himself guilty of believing that the word of God is the absolute truth and the Golden Rule something men are meant to act out.

Starting with this speech, John Brown's last labor was to image himself in the figure of human holiness. Brown had long associated himself typologically with Biblical heroes. When he proposed his first guerilla army in 1851, the League of Gileadites, he envisioned himself as Gideon, whose small but super-dedicated band overthrew the Midianites in the Book of Judges. In 1856 Brown had written of his Kansas camp: 'We have, like David of old, had our dwelling with the serpents of the rocks and wild beasts of the wilderness.'<sup>30</sup> In the compulsive letter-writing that Brown engaged in between his sentencing and his execution—another act of self-broadcasting, since he well understood that the letters would be republished—he identifies himself in cyclical alternation with a gallery of holy figures. Sometimes he is the Apostle Paul on the eve of his martyrdom: 'I think I feel as happy as Paul did when he lay in prison. He knew if they killed him, it would greatly advance the cause of Christ.' Sometimes he is Samson, who had to endure failure and captivity to be able to pull down the temple of the Philistines: 'Had Samson kept to his determination of not telling Delilah wherein his great strength lay, he would probably have never overturned the house.' Sometimes he is the crucified Jesus himself: 'Let them hang me; I forgive them, and may God forgive them, for they know not what they do.'<sup>31</sup>

29. From the description of the second day of Brown's trial in *Life, Trial, and Execution*, 64–65. My sense of Brown's theatricality is indebted to Lacey Baldwin Smith, *Fools, Martyrs, Traitors: The Story of Martyrdom in the Western World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 229–62.

30. On the League of Gileadites, see Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge this Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown*, 2d ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 72–75. The David reference comes from a letter reprinted in Warch and Fanton, *John Brown*, 29.

31. Warch and Fanton, *John Brown*, 96, 94, 96.

The proof of Brown's command of both the cultural figurations of the prophetic and the cultural machinery of public self-creation is that he largely made 'John Brown' be the figure he projected. Paul Finkelman, the closest student of the public construction of Brown's image, has noted that there was a kind of interregnum in the first Northern reaction to Harper's Ferry, a pause during which the deep ambivalence Brown inspired—even *The Liberator* had first called Brown's raid 'misguided, wild, and apparently insane'—was unresolved. This ambivalence became resolved when the image of Brown as holy martyr gained authority over less favorable readings.<sup>32</sup> To return to the works that articulated this figure is to see writing that purports to say who John Brown 'is,' taking Brown's media feed and rebroadcasting it as truth.

Thoreau's passionate essay 'A Plea for Captain John Brown,' first delivered on October, 30, 1859, before Brown had been sentenced (and repeated in Boston and Worcester on November 1 and 3), contains one of the most virulent assaults on media opinion-making ever written. But the essay also reveals that, as he has become overwrought by the spectacle of John Brown's trial, Thoreau has himself become a newspaper addict: 'I read all the newspapers I could get within a week after the event.' The news-mediated versions of Brown's words—at this early date especially 'A Conversation with Brown,' which Thoreau quotes extensively—give Thoreau the stuff to build his heroic figure of the contemporary prophet. Thoreau specifically repeats Brown's self-symbolizing typologies, so that his Brown is once again a Samson: 'Read his admirable answers to Mason and others. How they are dwarfed and defeated by the contrast! On the one side, half brutish, half timid questioning; on the other, truth, clear as lightning, crashing into their obscene temples.' And his Brown is, again climactically, the crucified redeemer: 'And the only use to

32. Paul Finkelman, 'Manufacturing Martyrdom: The Antislavery Response to John Brown's Raid,' in Finkelman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harper's Ferry Raid* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 41–66. Quotation, 41.

which you can put him is to hang him at the end of a rope! You who pretend to care for Christ crucified, consider what you are about to do to him who offered himself as the savior of four millions of men. . . . Some eighteen hundred years ago Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not Old Brown any longer; he is an Angel of Light.<sup>33</sup>

Before retreating from what he called 'this dreary business,' Emerson had joined in the sacralization of Brown, proclaiming that when executed 'that new saint' would 'make the gallows glorious like the cross.'<sup>34</sup> But Brown's best pupil and promoter was, not surprisingly, a reporter. In late 1859 James Redpath signed a contract with Thayer and Eldridge, the prophet-loving publishers who also brought out the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*, to write a biography of Brown, who was, as they expected, executed while the book was being composed. Published in January 1860 within a month of Brown's hanging, Redpath's *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* became a major bestseller (it sold 40,000 copies in its first few months and was in its forty-first edition twelve years later) and the major stabilizer of Brown's public image. Redpath's book reprints masses of relevant documents, among them the story of Redpath's visit to Brown's camp, 'A Conversation with Brown,' the final court statement, and Brown's letters to family and friends from prison. In deploying this array of materials, Redpath's book seeks to give an air of documentary factuality to its recounting of the slain hero's life. But within the book the 'facts' of Brown's biography are laid into a typological narrative frame that determines their meaning, a frame strikingly similar to what Brown himself had composed. Book One of Redpath's volume, dealing with Brown's childhood, is entitled 'He Keepeth the Sheep,' and begins with a scriptural passage on the recognition and anointing of David as God's chosen. Book Two, which gives us Brown in

33. 'A Plea for Captain John Brown,' *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 122, 126, 136-37.

34. Cited in Finkelman, 'Manufacturing Martyrdom,' 42.

Kansas, is entitled 'Goliath's Challenge Accepted,' with Brown the David appointed to slay the proslavery Goliath. In Book Three, which centers on Harper's Ferry, Brown takes up 'The Sword of Gideon'—the sword Brown had associated himself with in 1851. Book Four describes Brown in court and in prison as Samson 'Among the Philistines,' the captive man of God appointed to bring down the infidels' temple.<sup>35</sup>

In death, and because of the way he and his admirers produced the meaning of his death, John Brown became the holy martyr of northern American antislavery, a figure who could help legitimate and sacralize the violence of war to come. But if I have made Brown sound especially adept at mediating his prophetic image, I should emphasize that this gift was not his alone. Prophetism may be a condition of being, but it is also a social identity. No figure can become a prophet unless he can seem to have access to some deep truth; but no figure can become a prophet unless he can also persuade someone that he has this privileged power. This means that anyone who has won prophetic recognition must have practiced a successful act of communication: communication, exactly, of his prophetic status. And this means that part of the prophet's work is knowing how to work the available channels of communication.

When the audience is small, this communication can work through direct contact and the force of personal charisma. But when the targeted audience is larger, this must be amplified by the technologies that abstract messages from their physical bearers and carry them afar: prominent among them, the printed word. Nat Turner agreed to make the confession that would hang him because it was his way to publish the testament of his prophetic vision. (Turner on the verge of execution sounds just like John

35. Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown*, 10–11, 73–74, 185–86, 289–90. Finkelman, 'Manufacturing Martyrdom,' explains how Redpath's backers wrested the writing of Brown's biography away from an earlier candidate, Lydia Maria Child. He also documents the other aspects of the campaign by which a sacralized Brown was put in public circulation—including a planned national tour of Brown's martyred corpse which Brown's widow rejected.

Brown: 'Ques. Do you not find yourself mistaken now? Ans. Was not Christ crucified?')<sup>36</sup> What we know of Turner is what he got into print: *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, his prophetic biography. Martin Luther King published himself as a prophet through many media, from old-fashioned live speaking to new ones such as photojournalism and television. But print always played an important part in his communications strategy. When King went to jail in Birmingham, Alabama, on Good Friday 1963 (King was nothing if not self-consciously dramatic), he too used prison as a place to write, producing the famous letter that likens his imprisonment to that of other holy epistle-writers, for instance, Saint Paul. King's 'Letter from the Birmingham Jail' is now a canonical text, still spreading King's message and still supporting his prophetic status.

We will never study the history of the book primarily to study the prophetic. The prophet will always be an eccentric figure, broadcasting from the margins if with intermittent power. But where print is a dominant medium of communication, the study of the prophetic will always entail the study of print, as a means through which the prophetic is culturally created. 'What a text John Brown has given us,'<sup>37</sup> a Northern minister said after Brown's trial, and he was right. John Brown was not only a piece of writing: without his daring deeds his words would have had little force. But the meaning of those deeds relied on his scripting the terms in which they would be read. He accomplished this through a feat of private and public imagination enacted partly through the instrument of print.

36. *Confessions of Nat Turner*, 310. Thomas Gray indicates that Turner did not know that he was writing down the confession, but the deliberateness and coherence of Turner's self-presentation make this quite unlikely.

37. Quoted in Finkelman, 'Manufacturing Martyrdom,' 43.

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