John Brown: Portrait of a Martyr as an Old [Mad]Man

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Flailing devil-horn brows; cross-eyed glare; hook nose; unkempt beard; chiselled cheeks; reckless hair; and hands bound in the dark corners of canvas. John Brown: as depicted by Ole Peter Hansen Balling in earthy oil-paint tones, circa 1872.

It was my fourth visit to the National Portrait Gallery. I was not there for the art, but rather the Kogod Courtyard and Coffee Shop. Airy, flush green olive trees, showery water fountains, golden shards of light; it beat the stuffy DC summer streets and the even stuffier Library of Congress Newspaper Reading Room.

On this occasion, I paid more attention to the opening line of the textbox beneath Balling’s portrait:

_There were those who noted a touch of insanity in abolitionist John Brown…_

The previous weekend, my host institution had organised a field trip to Gettysburg. The most memorable part of the battlefield museum was—likely due to aforementioned portrait procrastinations—the section dedicated to Brown. Next to the display of a pike used at Harper’s Ferry, a bold, capital-lettered, mega-font question was emblazoned on the museum wall:

JOHN BROWN. MARTYR OR MADMAN?

And here I was one week later, back at the Portrait Gallery, staring at the same painting, asking myself that same question.

However, the question, most problematically, implies there is one correct answer from two diametrically opposed options. That is, it inherently suggests we might uncover a correct answer through text, object, relic, or some other objectified commemoration. The apparent quest to find the historical “truth” of whether Brown was “madman” or “martyr” by these means is, I suggest, quite frankly ludicrous; and we—“we” as historians, critics, museum professionals, publicans—would be better off recognising the cultural mechanisms that made (and continue to make) him both “madman” AND “martyr.” That is not to say we cannot discern further information from historical records and fact-based evidence. Equally important, however, is to situate Brown in that ambiguous space “between memory and history” (Nora) in order to underline the plurality of narratives the surround his legacy.

I returned to Scotland from a long US research trip and set upon my postdoctoral task of writing about Frederick Douglass’ tours of Britain in the 1840s and 60s. Douglass’ transatlantic tour of 1860 had one major purpose: to gain further international support for the
abolitionist North and highlight the continuing horrors of American slavery. Crucially, his crusade came just months after Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, and Douglass wasted no time in praising the heroics of this “martyr” abroad. In a serendipitous scholarly turn, Brown had come back to haunt me in bibliographic realms, beyond procrastinating gallery wanders.

In Newcastle, Douglass publicly stated that Brown was “not so wild and fanatical” (Blassingame 338) as many supposed; in Edinburgh, he passed a “high eulogium upon the character of the deceased” (318); while in Glasgow he saluted “John Brown, the hero, John Brown, the martyr” (325). Douglass was spreading news of Brown’s martyrdom far and wide, across the Atlantic periphery, just months after the fateful raid.

The very application and idea of “martyrs” tend to operate in spaces of social change, and are typically situated at historical action points (Schudson). If we are to go by this theory, the period of social change—in Brown’s case—was blatant (the abolition of American slavery); as was the historical moment (the eve of the Civil War). Mulvhill and Farmer go further to suggest that martyr stories are typically marked by personal quests, violence, institutional execution, and dramatic final actions that heroically demonstrate a commitment to a cause with disregard for one’s own life. Brown’s violent raid at Harper’s Ferry, theologically-infused commitment to ending slavery, and institutional hanging fit perfectly into these historical patterns of socio-religious martyrdom. So what’s the debate?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term “madman” as:

A man who is insane; a lunatic. Also more generally (also hyperbolically): a person who behaves like a lunatic, a wildly foolish person.

Problematically, the first part of the definition—“Insane”—connotes a male who cannot control their physical and mental faculties. Brown was committed to his final act, and recognised violence, imprisonment and sacrifice as a forum for abolitionism. Consequently, it might well be argued, as by Oates, that his actions suggest a form of heightened self-control (rather than lack of). However, the second part—to behave like a “lunatic” or “wildly foolish” person—more aptly fit Brown’s “madman” moniker. There is certainly a case for considering Brown’s final act at Harper’s Ferry as seeming “wildly foolish.” Even supporters such as Douglass described it as “mistaken,” if well intended (Blassingame 325); while some abolitionists—fearful of seeming murderous—were quick to condemn Brown as a “madman” (Nowlan 261). More famously, pro-slavery forces appropriated the unquestionably wild (if inconclusively ‘foolish’) actions of Brown into their wider attempts to blacken the cause of abolitionism.

Brown, then, became a cultural resource for interest groups to draw upon, define, explain, or galvanize a course of action or belief (Schudson 156). The cultural carriers, or reputational entrepreneurs (Fine), commemorating Brown effectively pick and choose ‘martyr’ or ‘madman’ at will in accordance of a wider ideological agenda. Depending on one’s point of view, Brown could be claimed a heroic martyr for African Americans, cold-blooded killer or even the whipping boy of neo-confederates (Gilpin 5). Such partisan representations through modes of
objectified commemoration (in the form of biographies, relics, rites, paintings, marches, literature and so on) stretch from 1859 to the present day; a true testament of Brown’s symbolic power in American culture.

As Jan Assmann asserts with regards to cultural memorial practice, “cultural memory reaches back into the past only so far as the past can be reclaimed as ‘ours’…” (Assmann 111). Those (and there have been many) claiming to reveal the “truth” about Brown spring to mind. He is theirs. That is, both Martyr and Madman, in all his symbolic glory.

It is clear that John Brown became, after his fateful act, a cultural object open to change and contestation. Brown’s historical legacy and reputational fluctuations were (and are) always dependent on partisan entrepreneurs, or commemorative mediators.

Yet, there is one final consideration to be made with regards to the supposed historical “truth” of Brown’s alleged “madness” or “martyrdom,” respectively. Even if a modern medical, neurobiological, or psychological analysis of Brown was possible, it is highly likely that his actions would be considered within the realms of what psychologists call a “clinical population.” That is, his class of behaviours stretched beyond the limits—psychological, mental, physical—of the normative, “healthy population.” But is it not this “madness” that always makes a martyr? In the specific case of Brown, the issue is complicated by competing layers of cultural memory. Brown’s purposeful actions against an indisputably cruel national institution should not be regarded as “insane.” Yet cultural carriers—books, paintings, interest groups, museum inscriptions—continue to suggest otherwise. Perhaps, this is why I was so enthralled by Balling’s painting in the first place. At once heroic and wild, dignified and violent, it remains a true, timeless, and aptly ambiguous portrait of a Martyr and Madman.

WORKS CITED


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