

Norman O. Brown, 1913–2002

Norman O. Brown was born in New Mexico in 1913 and educated at Balliol College, Oxford, and at the University of Wisconsin. His tutor at Oxford was Isaiah Berlin. A product of the 1930s, Brown was active in left-wing politics – for example, in the 1948 Henry Wallace presidential campaign – and his work belongs within the history of Marxist, as well as psychoanalytic, thought. During World War II, he worked in the Office of Strategic Services, where his supervisor was Carl Schorske and his colleagues included Herbert Marcuse and Franz Neumann. Marcuse urged Brown to read Freud, leading, in 1959, to Brown's most memorable work, *Life Against Death*. Brown taught Classics at Wesleyan University and was a member of the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Although *Life Against Death* made him an icon of the New Left, he successfully eschewed publicity, insisting to the end on his primary identity as teacher.

There is still no better introduction to *Life Against Death* than the one that Brown wrote in 1959. The book was inspired, he explained, by a felt 'need to reappraise the nature and destiny of man'. The 'deep study of Freud' was the natural means for this undertaking. His motives, Brown continued, were political in the most profound sense of the term: 'Inheriting from the Protestant tradition a conscience which insisted that intellectual work should be directed toward the relief of man's estate, I, like many of my generation, lived through the superannuation of the political categories which informed liberal thought and action in the 1930s.' 'Those of us who are temperamentally incapable of embracing the politics of sin, cynicism and despair', he added, were 'compelled to re-examine the classic assumptions about the nature of politics and about the political character of human nature.'

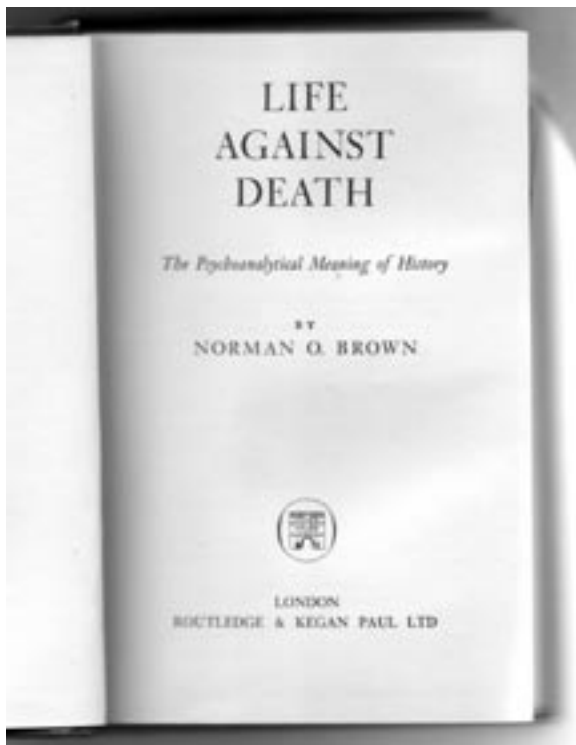
How did it come about, at the dawn of the 1960s, that Freud appeared as the successor to a 'superannuated', but not yet surpassed, Marxist project? *Life Against Death* addressed this question. Until the 1960s, as Marx had well understood, the overwhelming fact of human life had been the struggle for material existence. The 'affluence', 'cybernation', and 'conquest of space' that were becoming apparent signalled that this struggle need no longer dominate. As John Maynard Keynes prophesied, even a glimpse at 'solving the economic problem' would provoke a society-wide 'nervous breakdown' or creative illness in which the ends of society would come in for re-examination. Marxism lacked the means for this re-examination but psychoanalysis did not. However, Freud in the 1950s was understood to be a conservative refuter of liberal and Marxist illusions of progress and not as their successor. As Norman Podhoretz – then a student who, along with Jason Epstein, discovered and promoted the book – noted, Brown disdained the 'cheap relativism' of Freud's early critics such as Karen Horney and Erich Fromm and understood that 'the only way around a giant like Freud was through him'.

Brown's reading of Freud in *Life Against Death* had two main theses. First, Brown offered a riddle: 'How can there be an animal that represses itself?' Freud's texts offered a solution. The determining element in human experience, in Brown's reading, was the fear of separation, which later takes the form of the fear of death. What we call individuation is a defensive reaction to this primal fear and is 'based on hostile trends directed against the mother'. Driven by anxiety, the ego is caught up in 'a causa sui project of self-creation'; it is burdened with an 'unreal independence'. The sexual history of the ego is the evidence of this unreality. Desexualization (the transformation

of object-libido into narcissistic libido) is the primary method by which the ego is built up.

While Brown's emphasis on the infant's psychical vulnerability was true to Freud, his one-sided denigration of the ego was not. According to Brown, what psychoanalysis considered the goals of development – 'personal autonomy, genital sexuality, sublimation' – were all forms of repression. Above all Brown criticized psychoanalysis for endorsing dualism: the separation of the soul (or psyche) from the body. The true aim of psychoanalysis, he argued, should be to reunite the two. This can be achieved by returning men and women to the 'polymorphous perversity' of early infancy, a state that corresponds to transcendence of the self found in art and play and known to the great Christian mystics, such as William Blake and Jakob Boehme. The key was to give up the ego's strivings for self-preservation; genital organization, Brown wrote, 'is a formation of the ego not yet strong enough to die'. Brown called repression the 'universal neurosis of mankind', a neurosis that every individual suffered.

History, or the collective individual, he continued, went through an analogous process of trauma, repression and the return of the repressed. History, then, had the structure of a neurosis. In particular, Brown saw the birth of capitalism as the nucleus of the neurosis, a critical period, somewhat akin to the stage of the Oedipus complex in the evolution of the individual. Just as, in Freud's original formulation, the infant



moved from anality to genitality, so, Brown believed, in the transition from medieval to modern capitalist society, anality had been repressed, transformed and reborn as property. Capitalism at root, Brown argued, was socially organized anality: beneath the pseudo-individuated genitality of early modern society, its driving force was literally the love of shit. The Protestants, he held, had been the first to notice this. Luther, in particular, regularly called attention to the Satanic character of commerce, by which Brown meant both its daemonic, driven character and its excremental overtones of possession, miserliness and control. The papacy's ultimate sin, according to Luther, was its accommodation to the world, meaning to commerce or the Devil. Once again, as for the individual, Brown viewed death as the portal to life. Max Weber, he argued, in linking Protestantism to capitalism, emphasized the calling but left out the crucifixion. According to Brown, 'the Protestant surrenders himself to his calling as Christ surrendered himself to the cross', meaning that a free, unrepressed merging with this world was the path to resurrection

and to the transcendence of the soul/body divide.

Life Against Death will always be associated with Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, which appeared four years earlier and which inevitably influenced Brown. Whereas Brown articulated his impossibly utopian vision of an unrepressed humanity in prophetic tones, Marcuse distinguished surplus repression – the repression imposed by alienated labour and class society – from necessary repression, the repression that was inevitably involved in separation from the mother, the struggle with the instincts, and death. Both books reflected the historic possibilities of automation, but Marcuse's added a note of realism missing in Brown's. Furthermore, in the ecumenical 1960s, the Christian substructure of Brown's thought was barely noticed, although it became even more prominent in his 1965 *Love's Body*. By contrast *Eros and Civilization*

was unremittingly secular. In one sense, however, Brown's book advanced beyond Marcuse's. Whereas Marcuse still suggested that most psychic suffering originated in social demands imposed on the individual from the outside, Brown was closer to Freud in grasping the 'mind-forg'd manacles' rooted in the painful facts of dependence and separation.

Although published in the 1950s, *Life Against Death* found its main audience among the polycentric, globally dispersed, revolution-oriented student and youth groups known collectively as the New Left. Just as such 'extremist' sects of the Reformation as the Anabaptists, Diggers and Holy Rollers sought to experience salvation on earth, so the New Left rejected Freud's insistence that repression was inevitable. In doing so, it served as a kind of shock troop, limning the horizon of a new society. *Life Against Death* spoke to its key preoccupations: the belief that the socio-political world was intrinsically mad, the rejection of the nuclear family, the desire to transcend distinctions and boundaries, to bring everything and everyone together, the rejection of sublimation and the achievement ethic in favour of authenticity, expressive freedom and play. Like *Eros and Civilization* it rested its claims on the ego's original, 'inseparable connection with the external world'. Giving voice to the communal ethos of the time, it provided an underpinning to the New Left's critique of instrumental reason, its desire for a new connectedness with nature, and its attempt to liberate sexuality from its genital, heterosexual limits; indeed, to eroticize the entire body and the world.

What, finally, can we say about a work whose tone and vision seem almost infinitely alien to our own 'post-utopian' times? Brown's perception of the liberating potential of the modern economy was not wrong, but it required cultural and political transformations that necessarily occurred only in partial and limited ways. If Brown missed the fact that the fantastic power of the modern economy can be and has been harnessed for life, he illuminated its dark and daemonic underside in ways that we have still not fathomed. It is also worth remembering that the dreams that arise in great periods of social upheaval do not disappear for ever. Rather, they go underground, as the 1960s went underground and were reborn in the women's movement, in the upheavals of 1989, and in the anti-globalization struggles of today. Memorializing Brown's death is one way to encourage what he believed in above all: rebirth.

Eli Zaretsky

Closing time

To gain entry into Norman O. Brown's seminar on *Finnegans Wake*, undergraduates were handed a randomly chosen passage from the novel and asked to free associate to it – for two hours. Free associate? Perhaps I was the only one who understood the assignment that way, and turned in a spiralling rhizome of questions and sentence fragments rather than a coherent essay. Later in the term, we students suspected that knowledge of a foreign language (or, better, two) meant an automatic place in the class. Teaching at a state university in northern California in the early 1970s, and a counter-cultural one at that, Brown could not expect students to arrive with or to pursue the elaborate classical training he had received. Many of us had not yet read Joyce's *Ulysses*, let alone Brown's *Love's Body* (whose title, we learned later, had come to Brown in a dream) or *Closing Time*, his study of the *Wake*. Some students had shown up only because of a story circulating around campus about the last time Brown had taught the *Wake* – that he had been carried in inside a coffin and had sat up suddenly, reciting paragraphs from memory. Our more Dionysian expectations ran up against

Brown's pedagogical demands – the importance of reading foreign languages in the original, of studying the most difficult texts, of being familiar with modern poets, of having an etymological dictionary always ready to hand.

The great classicist and philologue was no antiquarian. Etymologies were valued because, as in 'The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words' (the text of choice in the seminar), they were the road to the unconscious. In that class I learned that the only response to poetry was more poetry. The *Wake* class was also my first exposure to theory, to the idea that thought, like numbers, could be squared, so to speak – taken to a higher level; and that this was what made thinking worthwhile. But only with the understanding that you then had to bring it back to matters at hand, to the present, to what was happening. Parents attending the 1975 commencement ceremony for which we had chosen Brown as our speaker were bewildered. Why was he talking about Portugal? What could an insurrection among Portuguese army rank and file – the end of the Salazar regime – possibly have to do with their young adult child's impending integration into the world of job applications and a career?

Radical thought transversals of the kind Brown appreciated were not looked upon favourably at the East Coast graduate school I attended. 'Well, you've certainly covered a lot of ground', was the grudging professorial response I received to my first presentation, on Balzac, but which had suddenly taken a lurch and veered into a discussion of Mao Zedong. The terse evaluation, from a narratologist, was delivered in an accent striving to sound British. (Brown, who was British, sounded like he grew up in Ohio.) When I returned to Santa Cruz several years later, this time as a colleague, I heard several, possibly apocryphal stories about Brown. How, while delivering a public lecture, he had been wrestled to the ground by an agitprop Bay Area character of the era known as 'The People's Penis' – in full costume. How a radical lesbian feminist author had erected a tent on his front lawn in Pasatiempo and refused to leave until he agreed to an interview. Actually, it was very easy to speak with Brown. He possessed an enormous curiosity about other people's work, their projects. In fact, what we experienced as his generosity – his willingness to read what one was writing and ponder it – was really nothing more than the effect of that far-reaching and restless intellectual appetite. There were only two requirements. First, you had to rid your writing of any gratingly academic prose; temporizing or posturing phrases like 'as I will clarify later on' or 'arguably the most rigorous' would be viciously scratched out on the returned text. And second, you had to submit to a strenuous mountain walk to pursue your discussion.

A small, compact man of regular, moderate habits, Brown was in good physical condition well into his eighties. Younger, more dissolute friends and colleagues had a hard time keeping up with him in the forest. But he had no shortage of fellow walkers – anthropologists, philosophers, poets, political theorists, historians – mostly, I think, because you could count on a better response to your work than you could hope to receive from your own cohort of disciplinary specialists. Nobby, as he was called, knew the forest trails very well. He used the rhythms of the walk dramatically: waving his walking stick for punctuation, abruptly stopping short, sometimes hitting you squarely on the back between the shoulder blades – 'You've got it!' He delighted in those moments when the conversation mimicked the landscape; when, suspended between the vectors of poetry and theory, you looked down and found yourself negotiating a treacherous passage across a fallen redwood over a chasm. Or when revelation came in the form of an unexpected juxtaposition of texts *and* the rare mushroom he had missed the week before. But the walks had a narrative logic as well. They began with the estranging effect of having your own work refracted through whatever else Brown was reading at the time: Hesiod, Ivan Illich, a book on Shi'ite mysticism. By the return stretch, though, something like the proper ratio of Freud

to Marx underlying your project had been ascertained. Looking back, I think it was mostly that: not enough Marx in some cases, not enough Freud in others. Go back to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In the last walks we took it seemed that a heavier dose of Freud was always the answer.

Brown's Freudo-Marxian theory of the 1970s coincided with the most sustained critique in American history of what we used to call 'the military-industrial complex'. That moment has now passed – in more ways than one. The names of Brown and his fellow travellers – Laing, the Black Mountain poets, Fromm, Merce Cunningham, Illich, Octavio Paz, Marcuse, John Cage, Denise Levertov – seemed to disappear quite suddenly in the late 1970s, under waves of translations from the French. And within the shell or cage of today's academic conventions, breeding ground for specialization and opportunism, it's not clear that the kind of intellectual courage Brown stood for – thought pushed to the borders of possibility mediated by a powerful grounding in the materiality of the text – is much valued any more. It's not clear that a figure like Brown could exist in today's university. Brown did not live what he wrote; those who wanted him to embody 'polymorphous perversity' were disappointed. But it was very hard to distinguish his thinking from his teaching. In this he exemplified a force and a moment in American intellectual life whose distance from us now can be measured by how little meaning the concept 'American intellectual life' seems to have at this moment.

Kristin Ross