

Norman O. Brown: A 20th Century Intellectual Odyssey

"Look upon me! I'll show you the Life of the Mind!"

Charlie Meadows (aka Karl "Madman" Mundt)
as he sets the hotel on fire in *Barton Fink*

It's time for a recovery and reassessment of North American thinkers. Marshall McLuhan, Leslie Fiedler and Norman O. Brown are the linked triad I would substitute for Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, whose work belongs to ravaged postwar Europe and whose ideas transfer poorly into the Anglo-American tradition. McLuhan, Fiedler and Brown were steeped in literature, classical to modern. They understood the creative imagination, and they extended their insights into speculation about history and society. Their influence was positive and fruitful: They did not impose their system on acolytes but liberated a whole generation of students to think freely and to discover their own voices....

My argument is that the North American intellectuals, typified by McLuhan, Fiedler and Brown, achieved a new fusion of ideas—a sensory pragmatism or engagement with concrete experience, rooted in the body, and at the same time a visionary celebration of artistic metaspaces—that is, the fictive realm of art, fantasy and belief projected by great poetry and prefiguring or own cyberspace.

Camille Paglia, February 17, 2000.

Introduction

The evolution of Norman O. Brown's thought seems at first glance to be completely unique. I can well imagine that librarians were puzzled about how to classify some of his books when they first appeared, and it is still anyone's guess as to where to look in a bookstore for a copy of *Love's Body*. I personally believe that Brown should be canonized as one of the great 20th century philosophers, and I am re-reading him with a view to demonstrating how he anticipated or paralleled major developments in philosophy during the last half of the century.

I first read *Life Against Death* in the summer of 1964, after graduating from college. It had been recommended to me by a classmate in a way that seemed to indicate he found it sexually liberating. I was in need of sexual liberation, but I was also intrigued by the philosophical implications of Freud. I also purchased a copy of *Eros and Civilization* by Herbert Marcuse at the same time.

The two books that had affected me most profoundly during college were *Being and Time* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In addition to my new interest in psychoanalytic theory, I was also discovering Zen Buddhism via Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki. In retrospect it is not surprising that Brown would become my lifelong intellectual companion and virtual mentor. I have re-read portions of *Love's Body* countless times, and many of the books on my shelf were purchased because they were cited in the footnotes to *Life Against Death* or *Love's Body*.

At the same time I have continued to wrestle with Heidegger; and have often felt that there was some level at which Heidegger, Brown and Buddhist thought were converging even though I could never make a coherent case for such a thesis. I shall not attempt to do so in this essay, but I feel compelled to confess that I am inclined to push things in that direction. Brown does make two suggestive references to Heidegger in *Closing Time*, but I have only recently come across anyone who mentions Heidegger and Brown in the same book, much less breath.

I was delighted to find a book entitled *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences On His Work* by Richard May, and my first impressions of "postmodern" thought seem to indicate a connection or parallel of some sort between Heidegger and Joyce. I have discovered that while I was at Yale I

missed out on a series of lectures being given across the campus by Paul Ricoeur on Freud, and I have begun reading Ricoeur as well as Gadamer in the hope of finding an interpretation of the legacy of Heidegger which speaks to me more intelligibly than Heidegger himself. Marcuse is, of course, a connection of sorts between Heidegger and Freud, but I never found Marcuse particularly inspiring or sympathetic. (I caught a whiff of the snob beneath his revolutionary's uniform.) Needless to say it has not escaped my attention that Hermes, the subject of Brown's first book, is the patron saint of Hermeneutics. So even though this essay will simply be an attempt to trace the development of Brown's thinking, there is behind it a desire to glue back together parts of my mind.

Biographical Context

Norman Oliver Brown was born September 25, 1913 in El Oro, Mexico. His parents had met on a ship when his father, Norman C. Brown, whom Brown described as a poor younger son, had left England to seek his fortune as a mining engineer in Mexico. His mother Marcarita was one-half German, one-quarter Spanish and one quarter Peruvian Indian. She was on her way from Germany where she was raised to visit relatives in Havana. The family returned to England so that Norman and his sister could be educated there. While Brown was at Balliol College, Oxford, he met Christopher Hill, who in 1984 dedicated a book to him "in gratitude for fifty years' friendship, stimulus and provocation." (Hill is the foremost historian of the English Revolution and was master of Balliol for 1965 to 1978.) In 1936, Brown came to the United States, a decision that he described in a 1970 interview as a "decisive gesture:"

I left my motherland and my mother and father and did not see them again for more than twenty-five years. There was no quarrel or rupture but there was a deep and permanent separation.

This exile seems to me a true metaphor of the way I find myself in life. I fell in love with my new-found-land—America. I think that in England I would have died for lack of cultural and intellectual space. And I do believe in the future of America far more than I believe in the future of Europe. America means to me the possibility of open space, of clearing away the rubbish of the past. And yet I guess I'm contradicting myself about being an exile. I'm saying both that I'm in love with this country and that I feel everywhere an exile.

American then and now symbolizes to me a climate, spiritual and cultural, in which it is possible to think about what it would mean to bring an end to that nightmare which is history. (Keen-32)

He married Elizabeth Potter, October 1, 1938, and they have four children: Stephen R., Thomas N., Rebecca M. and Susan E. Brown. He attended the University of Chicago and received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1942. He was a professor of languages at Nebraska Wesleyan University for a year, and then during the war he worked for the Office of Strategic Services as a research analyst doing what someone writing a jacket blurb for *Life Against Death* chose to describe as "pressing the cloaks and sharpening the daggers." From 1946 to 1962 he taught at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, starting as an assistant professor of classics and becoming J.A.Seney Professor of Greek. He was a Ford Foundation teaching fellow in 1953-54 and a Guggenheim fellow in 1958-59. From 1962 to 1968 he was Wilson professor of Classics and Comparative Literature at the University of Rochester, and after that he spent the rest of his career as a professor of Humanities at Cowell College, University of California, Santa Cruz.

Brown's first book, *Hermes The Thief: The Evolution of a Myth* published in 1947 grew out of his studies at the University of Wisconsin. It was followed by a translation of Hesiod's *Theogony* with an extended introduction published in 1953. The publication of *Life Against Death* in 1959 marked a critical turning point in Brown's life. It grew out of one crisis and precipitated a second. He has described the impetus for the book as well as the discoveries which it entailed in his own writing.

The first indication of the real impact of his exploration of Freud is a Phi Beta Kappa Speech he gave at Columbia University in May 1960 entitled "Apocalypse: The Place of Mystery in the Life of the Mind." The ultimate fruit of his encounter with Freud is *Love's Body* published in 1966. His next book in 1972 was a "conversation" with James Joyce and Giambattista Vico, entitled *Closing Time*.

The dust jacket blurb for *Closing Time* lists among Brown's work a book called *To Greet the Return of the Gods*, but so far as I can tell he never published a book by that title. The rest of his published writings were shorter essays, many of which were collected in *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* published in 1991.

Hermes The Thief

In an address to a conference in 1989 Brown described *Hermes The Thief* as "a good Marxist interpretation of classical mythology." Even though it appeared during the McCarthy era, I doubt that anyone on the House Un-American Activities Committee sought to hold Brown accountable for his subversive views. The book is a scholarly interpretation of an ancient myth. It is Marxist in its interpretation of changes in a myth as a reflection of changes in the economic structure of the society.

In the preface to the book Brown explains the approach he is taking:

This study of the Greek god Hermes explores the hypothesis that the interrelation of Greek mythology and Greek history is much closer than has generally been recognized. Such a hypothesis seems almost inescapable in the face of the radical transformation that the attributes and personality of Hermes underwent during the archaic period of Greek history. What I have sought to do here is to correlate these changes with the revolution in economic techniques, social organization, and modes of thought that took place in Athens between the Homeric age and the fifth century B.C. (H-v)

To the casual reader the book may well seem "academic" in the pejorative sense of the word. Even the comments from colleagues cited on the back of the paperback reissue can be read as damning with faint praise. Charles H. Reeves ventured that it "was of first importance to any future study of the mythology of Hermes" and Erwin R. Goodenough calls it "one of the most interesting little studies I have seen for a long time." Goodenough does say it "exemplifies the combination of thorough learning, imaginativeness, and courage out of which alone scholarship can build her house." Certainly compared to *Life Against Death* or *Love's Body* it seems mundane (as do, in my opinion, most other books). It is difficult for the non-professional to assess the courage or even imaginativeness of the work, but it is certainly easy to see the thorough learning which has been characteristic of everything Brown has done.

Most of *Hermes The Thief* seems like the kind of laborious scholarly work that lays the foundation for profound understanding of an alien or distant culture. It is rooted largely in etymology or philology, and it draws

on anthropological research dealing with a wide range of ancient or primitive cultures. The interest in the historical dimension of words and of the relevance of anthropology are traits it shares with Brown's later work.

Brown's labeling of the work as Marxist was made in the context of describing changes in his own "historical identity." I interpret this to mean that the driving force in his life was political even if he work was academic. While I can only speculate about why or how Brown chose the topic for his book, my instincts tell me that Brown probably chose Hermes because the seemingly incongruous or even contradictory traits attributed to him offered a prime opportunity to make the case for a Marxist interpretation of the relationship between ideas and economic social structure. The myth of Hermes evolved as the conditions of society changed.

Brown discusses the myth in relation to three broad phases in the development of Greek society: the earliest tribal period, the subsequent period during which the city-states were organized under monarchies and the later democratic period which also coincided with a transition from an agrarian economy to an economy centered around the tradesmen and merchants of the marketplace. Much of the book is devoted to an analysis of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, which he describes as "the canonical document for all subsequent descriptions and discussions of Hermes the Thief." (H-66) One payoff of the book is the dating of the composition of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* as 520 - 519 B.C. This is achieved by an analysis of the relationship between the depiction of Hermes and other events or works whose dates are known including some Greek vases depicting Hermes.

I shall not try here to do justice to Brown's analysis. It is interesting, thorough and persuasive. It is also more infused with his political sympathies than one might expect in such a discussion, but it never struck me as forcing ideas or events to fit into a Marxist framework.

During the tribal stage of Greek society Hermes was associated with boundaries between villages and as a result he was associated with primitive forms of trade.

The most primitive form of trade, "silent" trade, has features which we have already noticed in the cult of Hermes. In "silent" trade the parties to the exchange never meet: the seller leaves the goods in some well-known place; the buyer takes the goods and leaves the price. The exchange generally takes place at one of those points

which are sacred to Hermes -- a boundary point, such as a mountaintop, a river bank, a conspicuous stone, or a road junction. The object so mysteriously acquired is regarded as the gift of a supernatural being who inhabits the place, and who there fore is venerated as a magician and culture hero. (H-39)

When trade evolved to the point where it was took place primarily in the central market place of the city-stage, Hermes remained associated with trade; but the traits attributed to him changed.

*The magico-religious ideas surrounding trade on the boundary in the age of village communities persisted, in modified form, after the village community had been absorbed by the city-state. Hermes followed trade from the perimeter of the village community to the center of the city-state, the agora, and became Hermes *agoraios*. This did not, however, result in the obliteration of his original cult centers...This disjunction in the location of the cult is paralleled by a disjunction in the mythological representations of Hermes current in classical times. On the one hand he is the god who was born in the mountains of rugged Arcadia, the companion of the nymphs and other deities of the wilds, the friend of shepherds who, like the swineherd Eumaeus in the *Odyssey*, lived and worked "in a wooded spot in the uplands." On the other hand he is the friend of merchants, portrayed by Aristophanes as the very type of the "city slicker" or "man of the agora." This split personality of Hermes is explained by the history of Greek trade.(H-43)*

Brown sees the evolution of the myth of Hermes as an expression of the conflict between an emerging class of merchants or craftsmen and the traditional aristocratic class of landowners. The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, which he even describes as "propaganda," is the work of an author who is deliberately reinterpreting a myth with a view to reinforcing or legitimizing a new ethic.

Not only as trickster, but also as thief Hermes symbolizes the new commercial culture. In his speech to Maia, which, as one commentator has said, contains the gist of the whole Hymn, Hermes deduces his justification of a career of theft from the ethical principles of acquisitive individualism--the duty of self-help and the doctrine that money is the man. An even more obvious clue to the meaning of the Hymn is contained in the reason advanced by Apollo for demanding that Hermes swear an oath not to steal his property--"Son of Maia, messenger full of shifty guile, I am afraid that you may steal from me both my lyre and my curved bow; for you have received from Zeus the office of establishing the practice of commerce among mankind." Apollo explicitly identifies commerce with theft.

This equation of commerce with theft has been compared to the attacks on the profit motive in some modern economic theories. Whether or not the comparison is justified, the point of view expressed in the Hymn is virtually axiomatic in Greek moral philosophy. Everyone is familiar with the aristocratic prejudice against retail trade and manual labor, rationalized by Plato into the ethical doctrine that all professions in which the end is profit are vulgar and incompatible with the pursuit of virtue. The prejudice is ultimately derived from the conflict between the traditional patriarchal morality, sustained by the aristocracy, and the new economy of acquisitive individualism—the conflict of Metis and Themis in Hesiod. One of the results of this attitude was to identify trade with cheating, and the pursuit of profit with theft. (H-79-80)

Hermes is depicted as the hero of the story and as an equal of Apollo, who expresses the traditional disdain for commerce. As Brown puts it, "In a society which shares Benjamin Franklin's opinion that commerce is generally cheating, the merchant is a thief whatever he does; it is only natural for him to react by justifying and idealizing theft." (82)

The theme of strife between Hermes and Apollo translates into mythical language the insurgence of the Greek lower classes and their demands for equality with the aristocracy. The Hymn thus reflects the social crisis of the archaic age--the crisis depicted by Solon when he says that the unrestrained pursuit of wealth has brought Athens to the verge of "civil war within the community of kindred," and by Theognis when he says that no city remains long at peace "when this becomes the aim of evil men, individual profits at the expense of the common weal; thence come civil wars and the shedding of kindred blood and tyrannies." It is the crisis that Solon attempted to solve by a redistribution of "status" and "privilege":...(H-85)

Brown also uses this conflict to explain an earlier depiction of Hermes by Hesiod in his *Works and Days*. In this case the depiction of Hermes is less than sympathetic, and the reason is that Hesiod's sympathies lie with the traditional aristocracy rather than the emerging middle class.

In this conflict Hesiod is wholeheartedly on the side of Themis; he is the first nostalgic reactionary in Western civilization. In his view acquisitive individualism is "robbery," a concept which is based not on a practical casuistry distinguishing permissible from impermissible gain, but on a rejection in principle of the profit motive, as is the sin of avarice in the ethic of medieval schoolmen. (H-60)

These quotations may give the impression that the book is even more Marxist than Brown intended it to be. There is, of course, a nice ideological twist in that the Greek critique of the profit motive or acquisitive individualism is a "nostalgic reactionary" one rather than a revolutionary one. The real point, however, is that Brown is dealing with the evolution of the myth of Hermes via sophisticated literature written by individuals whose point of view can be analyzed in terms of the social conflicts of the day. For the most part he is not dealing with myth in the sense of unselfconsciously generated folk tales associated with primitive religious cults or magic. He makes this distinction clear himself and argues that it is important to realize that Greek myths were a dynamic, evolving form of literature. He emphasizes that the religious cults themselves were dynamic and often in conflict with each other.

What does the poet mean by attributing to Hermes equality with Apollo? Hermes and Apollo are symbols of rival forces in the social and political conflict of the archaic age: the myth credits the lower classes with having achieved the equality they fought for. But Hermes and Apollo are not symbols invented by the poet; he is writing about two recognized Greek cults. His mythical description of the relations between Hermes and Apollo is not only an interpretation of the social scene but also an interpretation of the relations between the two cults. (H-89)

The Hymn not only asserts the existence of rivalry between the cults of Hermes and Apollo in consequence of the intrusion of Hermes into spheres previously reserved for Apollo, but also, as a propagandistic effort on behalf of Hermes, is itself testimony to the truth of its assertion. This idea that the two cults were in conflict has not been taken seriously by modern historians of Greek religion, many of whom seem to treat Greek religion as if it were a coherent system of dogma. They seek to establish a harmonious division of labor between Hermes and Apollo within the musical sphere: some say that Hermes is the god of simple rustic music, Apollo the god of the more advanced forms;; others that Hermes is the lyre-maker, Apollo the lyre-artist; still others that Hermes is the patron of the lyre, Apollo of the cithara. The variety of solutions in itself suggests that the whole approach is a mistaken one. This tendency to reduce the dynamic contradictions of Greek mythology in its vital period to a dull, flat consistency dates back as far as the learned Hellenistic mythographers. (H-93)

What is perhaps most interesting in all this is the underlying set of assumptions about the function of myth. Brown is reacting against traditional ways of interpreting Greek religion.

Nineteenth-century scholarship tended to explain the variety of attributes ascribed to each of the Greek gods by establishing purely logical connections between them. Hermes' patronage of music was "derived" from his pastoral functions, or from his connection with funeral ceremonies, or from the music-making faculty of the wind, with which Hermes was identified by the school that regarded all the Greek gods as symbols of natural forces. This method, which reduces Greek religion to a series of syllogisms, leaves no room for the influence of environmental conditions on religion, or for the emergence of genuine novelties in response to changes in the environment. (H-95-96)

He sees a clear difference between the function of myth in a primitive tribal culture and the function of it in an urban, commercial culture. The poet or painter dealing with mythical figures in Athens in the 6th century B.C. is interpreting a tradition within a social context totally different from the social context which gave birth to the tradition. Brown's focus is not so much on the ultimate origins of the myths, as on the way in which they evolved as the society changed or even the way in which they were used to reinforce or resist changes that were taking place. He interprets the poet's use of traditional myths as an attempt to bestow legitimacy on a party in a conflict. Rather than simply singing the praises of the merchants and craftsmen, the poet tells a story about the god most closely associated with them. He is limited in how much liberty he can take with the elements of the myth, but he has enough latitude to produce a depiction of Hermes which is radically different from that contained in earlier poems.

Brown concludes that the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* was probably written for Hipparchus, perhaps even commissioned for a banquet. It is a piece of literature designed to appeal to a specific audience, a sophisticated entertainment which caters to the interests of a class in the society. The reinterpretation of mythic elements serves to bolster the status of that class or the legitimacy of their claims. To the extent that it may have also found acceptance with a wider audience, it can be seen as functioning as propaganda.

The psychological anthropology underlying this discussion is not explicitly developed or explained. He cites *Myth in Primitive Psychology* by Bronislaw Malinowski as an authoritative source:

As Malinowski says, "myth comes into play when rite, ceremony, or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity." He also shows that precisely because myth has this "functional, cultural, and pragmatic aspect," it is continually subject to change in response to changes in human behavior. (H-46)

This may be to me the most intriguing moment of the book. The reader gets a glimpse of the ground on which Brown is standing and in retrospect can see that it is really an ice floe about to break loose. What we learn here about Malinowski's theories on the function of mythical thinking is broad and general enough to cover any number of ideas, and without consulting Malinowski directly we can not pretend to do justice to theoretical basis for Brown's discussion of Hermes. What seems clear though is that myth is an "afterthought." What is primary is some form of behavior (rite or ceremony) or a "rule" for behavior which requires verbal reinforcement or justification of some sort. Myth is a method of condoning or sanctioning behavior.

When the myth in question is a literary creation of an individual in a fairly "advanced" society, it is easy to see how it is intended to function in this manner. It is as Brown indicates "propaganda" for one side of a social conflict. Part of what it does, however, is to draw on the "authority" of the tradition, and its persuasive power is a function of some more basic power which this tradition has. There is no obvious or self-evident reason why "old" ideas should be persuasive, i.e. why "antiquity" should provide an aura of sanctity or legitimacy. There is some way in which an appeal to ancient authority is an appeal to something more fundamental.

Brown's untangling of the disparate traits attributed to Hermes as an indication of the way in which a myth has evolved along with the society which gave birth to it is an important insight. It is refreshingly clear-headed in comparison to some attempts to "interpret" a myth by picking and choosing whatever elements in it seem to fit the desired end. It is very different from the sort of intellectual wordplay found in Richard E. Palmer's

essay “The Liminality of Hermes and the Meaning of Hermeneutics,” which is an attempt not to explain the disparate aspects of Hermes but to use them to conjure up a sense of something which may or may not be ineffable. He begins by citing Heidegger:

“By a playful thinking that is more persuasive than the rigor of science, “ Heidegger tells us, the Greek words for interpreting and interpretation – hermeneuein, hermeneia – can be traced back to the god Hermes.

The essay is an attempt to explicate the notion of hermeneutics in the broadest philosophical sense, and his evocation of Hermes may provide some useful imagery.

As a god of magic and mystery and sudden good luck, Hermes is the god of sudden interpretive insights that come from an ability to approach daytime reality with liminal freedom.

We need not concern ourselves here with what “liminality” is. Suffice it to say that I found Palmer’s essay interesting but not as evocative as I expect it is intended to be, and it seems clear to me that his use of the myth of Hermes is a rhetorical device comparable to a “riff.” “Playful thinking that is more persuasive than the rigor of science” is a phrase I would be happy to apply to Brown’s later writings, but with *Hermes The Thief* I am satisfied with the rigors of science.

Hesiod’s Theogony

The charm of classical mythology, which has won so many readers for Ovid’s Metamorphoses, has failed to save Hesiod’s Theogony from neglect. The general reader of the Theogony, while admiring individual episodes, such as the story of Prometheus, cannot find a coherent purpose or unified structure in the poem as a whole; large tracts of the poem -- the genealogical catalogues -- seem to be inspired by no purpose higher than dull encyclopedism. For proper appreciation of the Theogony the general reader needs the help of a scholar. (HT-7)

Brown set out to rectify this situation with a fresh translation of the poem and a 40-page introduction published in 1953 while he was a professor of classics at Wesleyan University. Given the fact that the book is still in print almost 50 years later, it may be fair to say he succeeded. His introduction is

divided into three parts. The first examines the structure of the poem to reveal its coherence and to justify his conclusions about which portions of the text are interpolations added subsequently by other writers. The second interprets the meaning of the poem. The third compares the poem with a comparable work from Babylonia to underscore what is original in Hesiod.

Brown's analyzes the structure of Hesiod's poem in terms of themes related to three aspects of the cosmos: physical, divine and human. The schema he develops based on these three themes enables him to see the relevance of some passages which other scholars had concluded were later interpolations. It also enables him to admire the structure and coherence of a poem others had felt was incoherent.

Hesiod's compositional technique, which is still close to Homer's and to the tradition of oral composition, does not make the relationship of parts to each other and to the whole explicit in the manner to which the modern reader is accustomed; hence the poem has the superficial appearance of being loose and amorphous. But the basic design has a monumental simplicity and grandeur; it is, if anything, formalistic to the point of stiffness. There is a geometric pattern reminiscent of the geometric style in early Greek art, a style which is roughly contemporaneous with Hesiod. (HT-14-15)

He views the poem as a literary work which is reinterpreting traditional mythic elements, but he also compares Hesiod to the prophet Amos and describes him as "a prophet of religious truth." Brown has, however, a Marxist perspective on religion. In his comparison to the Babylonian creation epic known as the *Enuma Elish*, he says:

If we discount some features in the Enuma Elish that correspond to the later imperialist phase in the Bronze Age and to the Babylonian supremacy in Mesopotamia, we can see how the major themes of the poem -- the conflict between creativity and inertia, the conflict between nature and the state, the theocratic notion of the state, the enslavement of man to the state -- correspond to the major structural principles in Mesopotamian society. We can also understand how, from the third millennium B.C. and for two thousand years, the annual recitation of the Enuma Elish on New Year's Day helped to maintain the structure of that society. (HT-46-47)

His reason for discussing the *Enuma Elish* is that the contrast between it and the *Theogony* helps highlight unique features in the *Theogony* which Brown relates to differences in the political structure of Greek society at the time. Hesiod's sources for the myths were Homeric poetry, local Greek oral tradition, and perhaps mythological literature from the Near East. (HT-36)

The way in which he interpreted or modified elements in these sources Brown sees as an indication of the way in which Greek society was different both from its earlier forms and from the type of society represented by Babylonia.

The universe, according to the Theogony, is dynamic and full of polar tensions. So was Greek society. Definitions of the essence of Greek culture vary depending on the culture with which it is, explicitly or implicitly, contrasted. A historical definition would take as its point of departure the difference between Greek culture, as one specimen of the early Iron Age, from the Bronze Age cultures which preceded it. The Greeks, the pioneers of the early Iron Age, developed a form of civilization in which power was diffused and decentralized, in contrast with the monolithic concentration of power in the Ancient Near East....The diffusion of power in the Greek city-state set the stage for a more or less permanent state of competition or conflict between individuals and classes, which, as it developed, made rapid mutations in political, economic, and cultural forms inevitable. Thus Greek culture was faced with two characteristic problems: how to find unity in diversity, and how to find a permanent principle in the midst of flux. These later became the classic problems of Greek philosophy; it is Hesiod's achievement to have formulated them first in mythopoetic terms. (HT-46)

Myth and mythic poetry are forms of thought which precede "philosophical" thought.

Hesiod lived in an age innocent of philosophy. He presupposes an audience familiar with the idiom of mythical thinking and accustomed to speculate on the great questions of life in that idiom. We must therefore translate his speculations into our own idiom, which is primarily philosophical. (HT-15)

One implication of the structure of the poem and of Hesiod's use of the traditional genealogical catalogue is that

[t]he key to the speculative structure of the Theogony is the idea of history: in Hesiod's view, the present order of the universe can only be understood as the outcome of a process of growth and change. (HT-15)

The assumptions about myth and religion informing Brown's interpretation of the *Theogony* seem basically the same as those underlying *Hermes The Thief*, but it may be worth exploring them a bit more before looking at the way in which Brown's thought evolved after 1953. Because I do not instinctively view religion from a Marxist perspective, I find myself groping for some way to understand the implications of Brown's ideas about myth.

The Theogony, like all mythical poetry, is a reinterpretation of traditional myths in order to create a set of symbols which give meaning to life as experienced by the poet and his age. (HT-35)

Brown's focus is on the way the traditional myths have been reinterpreted. He is interested in showing how Hesiod's version of the cosmic creation myths is an indication of the particular economic, political and cultural environment in which he lived. But what does it mean "to create a set of symbols which give meaning to life?" And is the difference between myth, poetry and philosophy a difference in "idiom?" I might be inclined to agree that in some way myth, poetry and philosophy are analogous symbolic constructs, but I suspect I would not be seeing them in the same light Brown was in 1953. To say that a set of symbols gives meaning to life is, to my mind, a way of saying that any experience inevitably involves a matrix of ideas, images, attitudes, moods, feelings, decisions, projects, etc. that give the experience its form or make it an experience and that there is a shared matrix which constitutes the "world" in which we live. This may be vague enough to fit Brown's interpretation of myth as well, but it does not do justice to the central concepts of Marxism.

In his famous description of religion Marx said:

Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed man's self-consciousness and self-awareness so long as he has not found himself or has already lost himself again. But, man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (CC-1)

What is missing for me in a Marxist understanding of religion is the idea of some kind of basic transformation of the self which can accompany religious experience, be it "conversion," "redemption," or "enlightenment."

I tend to view Marxism in terms of Arthur Koestler's distinction between the Yogi and the Commissar as representative of two extremes in response to the discrepancy between human desires and the world, i.e. change the soul or change the world. This is admittedly a simplistic distinction, but it may help to highlight something about the psychology implicit in the Marxist concept of religion. In all fairness Marx's description of religion cited above does not necessarily ignore the profound emotional or psychological effect of religious belief. It interprets the effect of religion on the personality of the individual as an indication of the extremity of the situation in which that individual exists, and it views that situation not as something inherent in all human existence but as a condition of the social, political or economic realities of a particular moment in history.

Reality for Marx is not something objective which can be contemplated; it is human activity and as such it is most visible in the state or society. Religion is a product of that activity, but it is suspect because the current state of society is inauthentic or is an expression of man as estranged from his true nature.

The criticism of religion disillusion man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself. (CC – 2)

Seeing any religion as an expression of a particular form of social organization is the first step towards liberation from that form of social organization. As Marx says elsewhere, "All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice." (TF –2)

Brown concludes his introduction to the *Theogony* with:

Hesiod's vision of the realities of the Iron Age instructed and inspired some of the greatest social thinkers of Greece, such as Solon and Aeschylus. We today are still living in the Iron Age. From Hesiod we can gain insight not only into his life, but also into our own. (HT-48)

It is easy to read this as a pat confirmation of "the charm of classical mythology" with which he began the introduction, but it is also possible that it is a deeply felt confession of the ideological motivation driving his scholarly work. The polar tensions in Greek society which could only be

understood via the idea of history are still alive today and need to be seen clearly if we are to liberate ourselves.

The introduction to and translation of Hesiod's *Theogony* are solid professional work which gives no indication that its author was undergoing any sort of intellectual or spiritual crisis. Brown's later description of the period during which this work was done casts it in a different light:

My first historical identity, my Marxist ideology, was wrecked in the frozen landscape of the Cold War, the defeat of the simplistic hopes for a better world that inspired the Henry Wallace campaign for the Presidency in 1948. Things were happening in history that Marxism could not explain. (AM-158)

After the publication of his translation of Hesiod's *Theogony*, Brown embarked on his journey into the implications of Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

In 1953 I turned to a deep study of Freud, feeling the need to reappraise the nature and destiny of man. Inheriting from the Protestant tradition a conscience which insisted that intellectual work should be directed toward the relief of man's estate, I, like so many of my generation, lived through the superannuation of the political categories which informed liberal thought and action in the 1930's. Those of us who are temperamentally incapable of embracing the politics of sin, cynicism, and despair have been compelled to re-examine the classic assumptions about the nature of politics and about the political character of human nature. (LD- ix)

Life Against Death

Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History was published in February of 1959. Although he was encouraged by the publication of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* in 1955, which he acknowledged in the introduction to *Life Against Death* as "the first book, after Wilhelm Reich's ill-fated adventures, to reopen the possibility of the abolition of repression," (LD xii) Brown felt as though he were venturing into uncharted territory and writing an "eccentric" book.

This book is addressed to all who are ready to call into question old assumptions and to entertain new possibilities. And since new ideas will not come if their entry into the mind is subject to conformity with our old ones and with what we call common sense, this book demands of the reader—as it demanded of the author—a willing suspension of common sense. The aim is to open up a new point of view. The task

of judicious appraisal, confronting theoretical possibility with the stubborn facts of present events and past history, comes later. (LD-ix)

The reason that the book is inevitably eccentric goes beyond the requirements of maintaining an open mind for new paradigms. It has to do with the nature of Freud's insights and with the tensions or conflicts within Freud's own thought. Freud dealt with inherent connections between lofty ideals and gross physicality.

It is a shattering experience for anyone seriously committed to the Western traditions of morality and rationality to take a steadfast, unflinching look at what Freud has to say. It is humiliating to be compelled to admit the grossly seamy side of so many grand ideals. It is criminal to violate the civilized taboos which have kept the seamy side concealed. To experience Freud is to partake a second time of the forbidden fruit; and this book cannot without sinning communicate that experience to the reader. (LD -x)

One of the things Brown concluded as he studied Freud was that Freud's thought evolved in ways that Freud himself never fully resolved. He sees a clear difference between the optimistic assumptions about science and progress underlying Freud's earlier ideas and a darker more complex intuition into man's self-destructive tendencies which informs Freud's later theories. He also sees a clear difference between the ideas which had spawned a "school" of therapeutic technique for disturbed individuals and the broader theoretical ideas which had implications for understanding all of mankind and history. Brown's book is not just a summary and restatement of Freudian theory; it is a critique and reinterpretation of it.

The difficulty of this enterprise can be seen by the catastrophe of so-called neo-Freudianism. It is easy to take one's stand on the traditional notions of morality and rationality and then amputate Freud till he is reconciled with common sense—except that there is nothing of Freud left. Freud is paradox, or nothing. The hard thing is to follow Freud into that dark underworld which he explored, and stay there; and also to have the courage to let go of his hand when it becomes apparent that his pioneering map needs to be redrawn. (LD-x)

Any colleague who thought *Hermes The Thief* was courageous would surely have viewed *Life Against Death* as suicidal. Looking back in 1990 Brown said, "In my first exuberant surge of premature post-Marxist energy..., I wagered my intellectual life on the idea of finding in Freud what was missing in Marx." (AM

1790) He has also described the venture as “the first revision of my historical identity” and said

Revisioning as I have experienced it is not a luxury but life itself, a matter of survival; trying to stay alive in history; improvising a raft after shipwreck, out of whatever materials are available: bits of books, the fragments we shore up against our ruin. Historical identity is made out of identifications: ancestral figures we identify with, the authors who are our authorities. Carving our own persona (“mask”) in their image.” (AM 158)

Brown begins his discussion of Freud with the concept of repression, which he says is “the key to Freud’s thought.” (LD-3)

The whole edifice of psychoanalysis, Freud said, is based upon the theory of repression. Freud’s entire life was devoted to the study of the phenomenon he called repression. The Freudian revolution is that radical revision of traditional theories of human nature and human society which becomes necessary if repression is recognized as a fact. In the new Freudian perspective, the essence of society is repression of the individual, and the essence of the individual is repression of himself. (LD-3)

The conclusion to which Brown is driven in his interpretation of the idea of repression is that “the difference between ‘neurotic’ and ‘healthy’ is only that the ‘healthy’ have a socially usual form of neurosis” (LD-6) or, to follow the idea to its logical conclusion:

Freud’s first paradox, the existence of a repressed unconscious, necessarily implies the second and even more significant paradox, the universal neurosis of mankind. Here is the pons asinorum of psychoanalysis. Neurosis is not an occasional aberration; it is not just in other people; it is in us, and in us all the time. ... The Interpretation of Dreams is one of the great applications and extensions of the Socratic maxim, “Know thyself.” Or, to put it another way, the doctrine of the universal neurosis of mankind is the psychoanalytical analogue of the theological doctrine of original sin. (LD-6)

In the introduction Brown has already indicated that he was surprised in the course of his explorations to discover affinities between Freud and “a certain tradition of mystical heresy of which the most important modern representative is Jacob Boehme.” (LD xii) Brown brought to his study of Freud both a sense of extreme urgency and a broad range of cultural knowledge which enabled him to conclude that psychoanalysis is “the missing link between a variety of movements in modern thought—in poetry, in politics, in philosophy—all of them profoundly critical of the

inhuman character of modern civilization, all of them unwilling to abandon hope of better things.” (LD-xii)

In tracing the development of the idea of repression Brown views Freud’s later ideas as containing the more fully realized and profound insight into the relationship between repression and society or culture.

The later Freud, as we shall see, in his doctrine of anxiety is moving toward the position that man is the animal which represses himself and which creates culture or society in order to repress himself. Even the formula that society imposes repression poses a problem rather than solves it; but the problem it poses is large. For if society imposes repression, and repression causes the universal neurosis of mankind, it follows that there is an intrinsic connection between social organization and neurosis. Man the social animal is by the same token the neurotic animal. Or, as Freud puts it, man’s superiority over the other animals is his capacity for neurosis, and his capacity for neurosis is merely the obverse of his capacity for cultural development. (LD-10)

In a typical fondness for clarity via extremity Brown summarizes this as “the doctrine that all men are mad.” (LD-11) The link between neurosis and culture inspires Brown to view cultural history as an appropriate subject of psychoanalysis. He is pushed in this direction by Freud’s own writings and not surprisingly he seizes on Freud’s ideas about myth and religion.

A reinterpretation of human history is not an appendage to psychoanalysis but an integral part of it. The empirical fact which compelled Freud to comprehend the whole of human history in the area of psychoanalysis is the appearance in dreams and in neurotic symptoms of themes substantially identical with major themes—both ritualistic and mythical—in the religious history of mankind. The link between the theory of neurosis and the theory of history is the theory of religion, as is made perfectly clear in Totem and Taboo and Moses and Monotheism.

And the link affects both ends linked. Freud not only maintains that human history can be understood only as a neurosis but also that the neuroses of individuals can be understood only in the context of human history as a whole. (LD-12)

It is in this understanding of religion where Brown sees the possibility that Freud may supply what was lacking in Marx.

Even Marx—in the same passage in which the notorious formula “opiate of the people” occurs—speaks of religion as “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world.” But Marx, lacking the concept of repression and the unconscious—that is to say, not being prepared to recognize the mystery of the human heart—could not pursue the line of thought implied in his own

epigram. Psychoanalysis is equipped to study the mystery of the human heart, and must recognize religion to be the heart of the mystery. (LD-13)

Another way in which Freud may take us beyond Marx is in the idea of progress or the end towards which the dialectic of history is leading. Because Marxism defines man in terms of labor and history in terms of the progress towards the overcoming of the need for “labor,” its vision of utopia is self-contradictory. Marxism implies that history will always be driven by the generation of new “needs.” It has no way of distinguishing between inherent human needs and spurious culturally produced needs, and it sees no end to the struggle for liberation. For Brown, however, psychoanalysis

...offers a theoretical framework for exploring the possibility of a way out of the nightmare of endless “progress” and endless Faustian discontent, a way out of the human neurosis, a way out of history. In the case of the neurotic individual, the goal of psychoanalytical therapy is to free him from the burden of his past, from the burden of his history, the burden which compels him to go on having (and being) a case history. An the method of psychoanalytical therapy is to deepen the historical consciousness of the individual (“fill up the memory-gaps”) till he awakens from his own history as from a nightmare. Psychoanalytical consciousness, as a higher stage in the general consciousness of mankind, may be likewise the fulfillment of the historical consciousness, that ever widening and deepening search for origins which has obsessed Western thought ever since the Renaissance. If historical consciousness is finally transformed into psychoanalytical consciousness, the grip of the dead hand of the past on life in the present would be loosened, and man would be ready to live instead of making history, to enjoy instead of paying back old scores and debts, and to enter that state of Being which was the goal of his Becoming. (LD-10)

It is not surprising that Brown should eventually turn to James Joyce as a compatriot in his struggle to awaken from the nightmare of history. First though he must make his way from politics to poetry.

The second key concept Brown sees in Freud is sublimation. Culture, and therefore history, is the result of sublimation and in Freudian terms is to be understood via the sexual organization of the body. Ultimately Brown’s reading of Freud results in the idea that human life and culture need to be understood on the basis of a dialectical relationship between life and death, Eros and Thanatos. He re-interprets Freud’s concept of a death instinct and comes to the conclusion that human history and culture as we know it is the

result of an inability to accept death. The refusal to accept death as inextricably bound up with life produces aggression and the desire to dominate reality in a quest for immortality.

In abstract terms Brown's conclusions are immediately attractive to anyone who shares his concerns about mankind's ability to self-destruct and his desire inherited from the Christian tradition for the "relief of man's estate." But Brown knows that the heart of Freud is not to be found in abstraction. Abstraction is a symptom of the disease, and Brown indeed has the courage "to take a steadfast, unflinching look at what Freud has to say." (LD-x)

There is, however, more than courage and scholarship informing Brown's love affair with Freud. There is an amazing energy of liberation infusing *Life Against Death*, a delight in the discovery which is also felt to be shocking or repugnant—a delight in the rediscovery of the grossly physical dimension of human life. The book begins on the surface as a scholarly discussion of Freud as a philosopher from the point of view of a Marxist steeped in classical learning. As soon as it confides to its reader that "all men are mad," it opens the door to the playful delight which Brown glimpses through the idea of an "erotic sense of reality." (LD-316)

The climax of both his courageous commitment to intellectual honesty and his liberated delight in the possibility of accepting both life and death comes in his analysis of the connection between Freud's concept of anal eroticism and Martin Luther's vision of salvation by faith alone. He warms his reader up with an exercise in literary criticism dealing with Jonathan Swift's "excremental vision," but nothing can really prepare the novice for his no-holds-barred exploration of Luther's experience of the Devil and the significance of the fact that the turning point in Luther's spiritual life occurred while he was defecating. (It is worth noting that this was written several years before Osborne's play helped people reappraise Martin Luther.) No matter what one thinks of Freud or what else one takes away from this encounter with Brown, his discussion of Luther and the Protestant Reformation is a mind altering experience. The reader follows Brown into a universe which is turned completely upside down and for which the only adequate approximation seems to be a painting by Hieronymus Bosch.

When I first read *Life Against Death*, my impressions of Freud were tempered by the knowledge that my mother, whose own massive intellect I

felt had long since come unplugged from the real issues of her life, occasionally read Freud because she was so amused by how preposterous his ideas were. Reading Brown's explanation of anality confirmed in spades the preposterousness of Freud's ideas, but proceeded to make even the most preposterous completely believable and relevant to an understanding of culture and history. Fortunately I was young enough to find this experience exciting rather than threatening. That Brown should have made this journey in his forties when he was already an established and respected classics professor and that this was really only the first step in his odyssey gives some indication of what he means by "revisioning" his identity.

The ultimate point of Brown's explication of Luther is the re-interpretation of the connection between capitalism and Protestantism. Freud lead Brown down into the depths of the human soul, but Brown's ultimate concerns are still political or social. Weber's widely accepted thesis that the Reformation made possible the emergence of capitalism is seen from a completely new perspective. I cannot begin to do justice to Brown's analysis of Luther's visions. He is willing to listen to what Luther actually said and not bowdlerize it in the way the Lutheran church has tended to do. He takes seriously Luther's experience of the Devil and his convictions concerning the diabolical nature of usury and the capitalistic economic activity which he saw engulfing Germany.

Our generation, which has happily thrown away the accumulated wisdom of the race as to the nature of the Devil, is liable to dismiss Luther's vision of the demonic in capitalism as mere rhetoric, as a way of expressing irrational and hysterical dislike...{But} the proposition that "there is the devil in it" is Luther's most profound attempt to explain.. We are beginning to realize that the mythical archetypes of the race, of which the Devil is one, say things which it is still not possible to say in any other way (unless psychoanalysis has found a way). Through the archetype of the Devil mankind has said something about the psychological forces, inside man himself, sustaining the economic activity which ultimately flowered into capitalism. (LD-219f)

Luther's visions of the Devil enable Brown to see the connection between Protestantism and Freud's concept of anality as a form of sexual organization of the body. He emphasizes the true bodily nature of anal fantasies and is not willing to let anality simply be reduced to a metaphor for a class of interpersonal relations. He sees Luther as dealing with physicality in its most extreme form. Luther's doctrine that the Devil is the master of

this world and that nothing man can do in this world will ensure his salvation represents “a massive withdrawal of Eros from sublimations. (LD-232) ” Because Brown has seen the connection between Freud’s death instinct and his analysis of the anal stage of sexual organization, he is able to see this devaluing of all sublimation as an ascendancy of the death instinct. Luther’s insight is essentially the same as Freud’s understanding of the nature and origin of sublimation except that Luther is driven by a hope for salvation which is absent in Freud. Psychoanalytical theory has no utopian vision to offer and in Brown’s view is crippled by this lack.

Protestantism is seen as the point in “the psychic history of civilization” at which “the death instinct becomes master of the house.” (LD-232) There is considerably irony in the fact that the relationship between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism is generally viewed in positive terms, and Brown focuses on a Freudian analysis of money as a means of revealing the true nature of contemporary society and culture. Nowhere are Brown’s Marxist roots more obvious than in his analysis of money.

My Marxist background had given me a healthy prejudice against money-making. Imagine my excitement when I discovered Sandor Ferenczi’s article called “The Ontogenesis of the Interest in Money”; with its immortal conclusion, “After what has been said money is seen to be nothing other than deodorized, dehydrated shit that has been made to shine.”(AM-179)

Because money is universally regarded in economic theory as the epitome of rationality, Brown relentlessly pursues the Freudian implications of its archaic roots in magic and ritual. Psychoanalytic theory seems to offer a more coherent explanation of the phenomenon of money than current economic theories of exchange, which make no sense when applied to anthropological evidence of behavior in primitive societies. Starting with the fact that the most notable feature of archaic money is the complete uselessness of the items chosen as the medium for storing and exchanging wealth, Brown makes the case that the explanation for money is to be found in the ritualistic context in which it is used and that ultimately this context must be understood in terms of the domain of sacred power.

The ultimate category of economics is power, but power is not an economic category...[P]ower is in essence a psychological category...

Power was originally sacred, and it remains so in the modern world. Again we must not be misled by the flat antinomy of the sacred and the secular, and interpret as “secularization” what is only

a metamorphosis of the sacred. If there is a class which has nothing to lose but its chains, the chains that bind it are self-imposed, sacred obligations which appear as objective realities with all the force of a neurotic delusion. The perception that class war is sustained by myths underlies Sorel's classic On Violence. And on the other side, the perception that the essence of capitalism is the magnetic leadership of the entrepreneur was systematically elaborated into an economic theory by Schumpeter... Psychoanalysis takes the final step of showing the origin of the myths which sustain social power and power struggles in the repression of the human body. (LD-251f)

This brief glimpse will have to suffice as an example of how a Freudian understanding of money becomes a fulcrum which enables Brown to pry open the meaning of a variety of cultural assumptions and relationships: rationality versus irrationality; sacred versus secular; utility versus uselessness; guilt, debt and obligation; the relationship between time and money; even the nature of the city and the desire for immortality. It seems impossible to summarize convincingly Brown's argument without retracing each of his steps. One cannot rely on a common understanding of the psychoanalytic terminology he uses, because part of what he is doing is re-interpreting the terminology.

The chapter entitled "Filthy Lucre" is a demonstration of the extent to which Brown has found in psychoanalytic theory a new mode of thought which he can apply to all of the anthropology and mythology he had soaked up in his classical studies. The perception of contemporary "facts" of life as ways in which ancient sacred rituals have metamorphosed and still hold us enthralled is a seed which bursts into full bloom in Brown's subsequent writings.

The point at which Brown traces the evolution of the Trickster of ancient mythologies into the Christian Devil highlights the thread of continuity in Brown's thought as well as underscoring the new Freudian element:

In classical antiquity, the period of the most perfect sublimation, the figure of Hermes is produced by sublimation-negation of anality. Though vestiges of unsublimated anality remain, simple excrement is replaced first by the symbolic heap of stones and then by the symbolic bag of money (compare the bag in which, according to Margaret Mead, the Arapesh carefully collect their magic dirt). Luther's Devil is a negation of the classical sublimation; sublimation is repudiated because the body is perceived as fallen and filthy; the Devil regains, by a return of the repressed, his excremental character, but his anality is not cathected with libido, or magic life, as in the magic-dirt

complex, but is seen as death. The whole evolution from Trickster to Devil and on into the pseudosecular demonic of capitalism shows the progressive triumph of the death instinct.

The sublimations of civilized man desiccate the magic out of the human body and thus represent a victory for the reality-principle. But to desiccate the magic out of the human body is to desexualize it; on the path of sublimation a victory for the reality-principle is also a victory for the death instinct. The process must end where Luther said it ended, in the dominion of death over the body and the entire realm of visible reality. A new stage in the history of the money complex begins in modern times, with the Reformation and the rise of capitalism. On the one hand definitive sublimation is attained at last by a final repression of the awareness of the anal-erotic sources of the complex: up til then the pursuit of money appears to have been inhibited by the knowledge that lucre is filthy. And on the other hand there is a turn against the sublimation, a withdrawal of libido from sublimation, a desexualization of the sublimation itself. (LD-302f)

Even though the driving force behind *Life Against Death* is a Marxist influenced critique of capitalism, it is obvious that Brown has weighed anchor and left whatever haven he had found in a Marxist port. In his re-interpretation of the “rationality” of money one can see the shore disappearing as he sails into treacherous seas beyond politics and economics where he must conclude that

[M]odern science, as criticized by Whitehead, is one aspect of a total cultural situation which may be described as the dominion of death-in-life. The mentality which was able to reduce nature to a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colourless; merely the hurrying of material endlessly, meaninglessly” —Whitehead’s description — is lethal. It is an awe-inspiring attack on the life of the universe; in more technical psychoanalytical terms its anal-sadistic intent is plain. (LD-316)

The conclusion of the book is still filled with a sense of political urgency and a determination to find a way out of the current historical situation. Brown sees through the Positivistic optimism which characterized Freud’s early thought, but he refuses to yield to the *fin de siecle* Stoic pessimism with which Freud consoled himself in later life. The hope which he finds in Freud seems primarily to be a matter of Brown’s own determination not to give up hoping, but there is also the sense that he has glimpsed something through Freud which he himself does not fully comprehend but which inspires him to believe there is a way out.

The path of sublimation, which mankind has religiously followed at least since the foundation of the first cities, is no way out of the human neurosis, but, on the contrary, leads to its aggravation.

Psychoanalytical theory and the bitter facts of contemporary history suggest that mankind is reaching the end of this road.

Psychoanalytical theory declares that the end of the road is the dominion of death-in-life. History has brought mankind to that pinnacle on which the total obliteration of mankind is at last a practical possibility. At this moment of history the friends of the life instinct must warn that the victory of death is by no means impossible, the malignant death instinct can unleash those hydrogen bombs. For if we discard our fond illusion that the human race has a privileged or providential status in the life of the universe, it seems plain that the malignant death instinct is a built-in guarantee that the human experiment, if it fails to attain its possible perfection, will cancel itself out, as the dinosaur experiment canceled itself out. But jeremiads are useless unless we can point to a better way. Therefore the question confronting mankind is the abolition of repression—in traditional Christian language, the resurrection of the body. (LD-307)

In his exploration of Freud's ideas Brown has been determined to remain faithful to the empirical, clinical basis of the ideas while at the same time insisting on the logical (or perhaps dialectical) consistency of the conclusions drawn from the observations. I want to say that he holds Freud's ideas accountable in some intellectual sense. If the concepts of repression and sublimation are valid, they have radical implications which must be thought through and not ignored. This thinking through is largely a matter of seeing connections not just with other ideas but with the facts of human history. The implications are interpretations of historical and anthropological evidence of human behavior as well as altered perceptions of contemporary attitudes, ideas and behavior. He does not hesitate to take sides in controversies over the interpretation of Freud's ideas or even to reject a universally accepted interpretation if he feels it betrays the initial insight or flies in the face of what appears to him to be obvious cultural evidence. He is willing if necessary to cast overboard even the most cherished ideals and assumptions of civilization if the insights and evidence provided by a Freudian perspective offer some glimmer of hope for the human race. He has a premonition of what liberation or the resurrection of the body may entail, but at the end of the book he is still wrestling with the real meaning of his new position. All that is clear is that the human self and even the human body needs to be re-imagined. Scientific thinking and logic must give way at least to dialectics if not "poetry." Everything is up for grabs, and there seems to be a not just a new found hope that the human race can avoid self-destruction but a new sense of what it means to be alive.

The book attracted some attention when it first appeared, but the paperback eventually became a cult classic on campuses. Brown and Herbert Marcuse both became heroes of the counter-culture movement of the Sixties, with Marcuse appealing more to radical activists while Brown appealed to “hippy” end of the spectrum, especially after the publication of *Love’s Body*. Marcuse was able to adapt Freud to what remained essentially a Marxist perspective, but Brown’s encounter with Freud took him away from Marx into territory associated with mysticism. The book was indeed “eccentric” when it was written, but it helped spawn a new academic discipline called “psychohistory.” Philip Pomper’s book *The Structure of Mind in History: Five Major Figures in Psychohistory* is among other things an attempt to assimilate *Life Against Death* back into the mainstream of academia.

In an interview ten years after the publication of *Life Against Death* Brown attempted to overcome a natural reticence concerning his personal life and responded to a question about whether he had himself ever been in analysis:

Since I am trying to overcome my reticence and strain in the direction of autobiographical disclosure, I think I should say that I have never been in analysis. So Life Against Death is an attack on my father Freud, who claimed that none but he could do it without being analyzed. With a kind of Protestant or Promethean arrogance I did it myself. More recently, as life and age catch up with me, I realize that one pays a price for doing it this way. Working my way by myself through psychoanalysis has not given me anything that could be called peace of mind. In fact—here’s another disclosure for your interpretation—it gave me insomnia. Until I wrote Life Against Death I was a perfect sleeper. But when I learned to interpret my dreams the power to dream and to sleep was taken from me. Freud said he came to disturb the sleep of the world. In my case he succeeded.

...[I]f one had known in advance what one was getting into, I suppose one wouldn’t have done it. I have been very impressed, when I look back on my own experience, by how Life Against Death was started in a spirit of almost absurd play of ideas, as if one could explore these ideas and not get hurt by pure play. But I’ve been impressed to the extent that one gets sentenced by one’s own sentences. One explores certain things in play and then in a strange way they become commitments with which one has to live. I have gained a deep respect for the demonic power of the word. Words are not idle. They have consequences. (Keen-36)

While reading *Life Against Death* does not give at least this reader the impression that its author is idly playing with ideas, it is easy to see from its aftermath how Brown could say this in retrospect. The venture starts out as an intellectual exploration, much of the movement through the book is an unfolding of ideas and the implications of ideas on a fairly abstract level. The consequences of these ideas, the impact of them on his own mind and their implications for the further progress of his intellectual or spiritual life only became apparent to him after the completion of the book. It is clear that Brown in his determination to think through Freud has pulled the rug out from under himself.

In his preface to *Love's Body* Brown describes what happened to him after the publication of *Life Against Death*:

At least in the life of the mind, ventures should be carried through to the end. This book is a continuation of a voyage begun with Life Against Death; a continuation faintly foreshadowed in the last chapter of that book, "The Resurrection of the Body." But as is said over and over again at the end of Euripedes' plays, the demonic is polymorphous; the gods decree many surprises; expectations were not realized; God found an opening for the unexpected; that was the way this business turned out. The continuity is fractured, and one item from the record is missing here, a Phi Beta Kappa Oration delivered to the Columbia University Chapter in May 1960 under the title, "Apocalypse: The Place of Mystery in the Life of the Mind." It records the shaking of the foundations; and faintly foreshadows, like false dawn, the end. (LB-ix)

Apocalypse: The Place of Mystery in the Life of the Mind

When Harpers published Brown's Phi Beta Kappa Oration in their May 1961 issue, the editor felt compelled to preface it with an introductory comment by Benjamin Nelson, a professor of history and sociology who had also written books entitled *Freud and the Twentieth Century* and *The Ideas of Usury*. The preface amounts to a disclaimer which distances the magazine from Brown's ideas by sprinkling several large grains of salt on them, and the magazine is careful to point out that the preface has been added with Brown's consent. Needless to say when the essay was republished in *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* there was no need to include Nelson's introduction.

Brown's address is a remarkably candid expression of the dilemma into which he thought himself with the help of Freud. He begins by citing H.G. Wells conclusion that "Mind was at the End of its Tether" and recognizes the risk he is taking in expressing his current state of mind:

I can guess what some of you are thinking—his mind is at the end of its tether—and this could be; it scares me but it deters me not. (AM-1)

He proceeds to offer a plea for a return to divine madness.

Our real choice is between holy and unholy madness: open your eyes and look around you—madness is in the saddle anyhow. Freud is the measure of our unholy madness, as Nietzsche is the prophet of the holy madness, of Dionysus, the mad truth. (AM-2)

What is needed is mystery, not just as a sense of wonder which prompts philosophical thought, but mystery in the sense of esoteric and secret knowledge that can not be expressed fully in words.

Mysteries display themselves in words only if they can remain concealed; this is poetry, isn't it? We must return to the old doctrine of the Platonists and Neo-Platonists that poetry is veiled truth; as Dionysus is the god who is both manifest and hidden; and as John Dunne declared, with the Pillar of Fire goes the Pillar of Cloud. (AM-3)

He does not hesitate to point out that the very notion of mystery is offensive to democratic ideals because it is essentially esoteric.

Democratic resentment denies that there can be anything that can't be seen by everybody; in the democratic academy truth is subject to public verification; truth is what any fool can see. This is what is meant by the so-called scientific method: so-called science is the attempt to democratize knowledge—the attempt to substitute method for insight, mediocrity for genius, by getting a standard operating procedure. (AM-3f)

He suggests that civilization oscillates between secrecy and publicity. There is an initial disclosure of some mystery which is the founding moment of a civilization and then the secret is made progressively more public until the civilization reaches a kind of bankruptcy.

And so there comes a time—I believe we are in such a time—when civilization has to be renewed by the discovery of new mysteries, by the undemocratic power which makes poets the acknowledged legislators of mankind, the power which makes all things new.

The power which makes all things new is magic. What our time needs is mystery: what our time needs is magic. Who would not say that only a miracle can save us? (AM-4)

As if this is not sufficient provocation for his Phi Beta Kappa audience he proceeds to explain that bondage to books is an obstacle to the rediscovery of mystery and magic.

There is a hex on us, the specters in books, the authority of the past, and to exorcise these ghosts is the great work of magical self-liberation. Then the eyes of the spirit would become one with the eyes of the body, and god would be in us, not outside. God in us: entheos: enthusiasm; this is the essence of the holy madness. In the fire of holy madness even books lose their gravity, and let themselves go up into the flame... (AM-6)

Fortunately this image has been preceded by a reference to Emerson's Phi Beta Kappa address in which he contrasted Man Thinking with the bookworm, and it is immediately followed by an equation of this holy madness with a tradition in Christianity represented by the Quaker George Fox. Even so it is not difficult to imagine that some of his audience at Columbia University might have found the image offensive. One could be tempted to compare this to another famous speech at a university some 27 years earlier given by thinker also associated with the idea of poetry as veiled truth: Heidegger's infamous Rector's address. And there have been serious critics who perceived Brown's later thought as politically dangerous. Alan Wolfe, looking back over the development of Brown's thought as he reviewed *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* in 1991 for *The New Republic*, wrote that

Brown's politics, understood as politics and not as poetry, raise the disturbing question of whether a certain kind of attack on the thinness of liberal culture inevitably leads to an authoritarianism prettified by the impression of organic wholeness....

Those who distrust authority are frequently authoritarians. Brown never wrote anti-Semitic articles for fascist newspapers, but he does admit that the Dionysian brew that intoxicates him can be discerned not only in the romanticism of Blake, but also in the upheavals of modern history—in the sexology of de Dade and the politics of Hitler...."The worship of irrationality that led George Sorel, Georges Bataille, and Wilhelm Reich into the far corners of right-wing politics is no reason, from Brown's perspective, to abandon the worship.

I do not intend to address Wolfe's criticism. It seems to me to be a sophisticated misreading of Brown which is colored by Wolfe's own deeply-felt political commitments and essentially the same objection to the direction Brown has taken that Marcuse expressed after the publication of *Love's Body*. The point here is simply that Brown took seriously the conclusions to which

he had been driven in his encounter with Freud and was willing to stand up in public and say what was on his mind. His Utopian demon and his intellectual rigor had forced him to conclude that liberation requires the awakening from the nightmare of history, the overcoming of the repetition compulsion by which we are bound to the past. He sees the emergence of psychoanalytical thought as the penultimate stage in the history of culture, the point at which culture has finally become conscious enough of itself to overcome both repression and sublimation. He has gleaned from Freud an understanding that the isolated individual is not real, that the individual personality like the culture in which it exists is a construct of neurosis and is inevitably divided against itself in increasingly destructive ways. He senses that the only real unification, both of the individual and of society, will be a mystical re-union; and he sees normal forms of thought and expression as symptomatic of the disease which is culture.

Love's Body

I did feel when writing Love's Body some kind of obligation to undo what I had done in Life Against Death. I wanted to release any followers I had acquired or at least to confuse them. Insofar as Life Against Death happened to end up making me a leader, I did want to get lost. I don't want to be a leader. Let me suggest an analogy. Shelley's poem "The Cloud" is about the metamorphosis of a cloud. "I bring fresh showers for the thirsting flowers," etc., but it is the last two lines that I identify with: "I silently laugh at my own cenotaph and arise and unbuild it again." I laugh at my own cenotaph. The previous book is a cenotaph. It is my grave, for I am no longer there. The grave is empty and, like the ghost in Hamlet, I like to travel underground and appear someplace else. Thus I felt under some existential stress to write Love's Body in order to torpedo Life Against Death, to destroy it as a position. And therefore in one sense to disclose that I am self-contradictory, that is to say an unstable person whom you should not trust. I wanted to release students from a position that might bind them. (Keen-33)

Love's Body is a very difficult book to describe, much less "explain." It is a kind of philosophical oratorio in 16 movements. Its style resembles the publication of the author's notecards rather than a systematic distillation from the notes that an academic reader would expect. There is a progression structuring the book which Brown has aptly described:

The turn to Freud was irreversible; but where it lead to was surprising. Love's Body (1966) begins with "Freud..." and ends with "there is only poetry." It was as if the change of direction taken

from Freud, resolutely pursued, in the end dictated a massive breakdown of categories of traditional “rationality” still accepted as authoritative by both Marx and Freud; that massive breakdown of traditional categories which Nietzsche baptized with the name of Dionysus. Already the last chapter in Life Against Death, not really knowing what it was saying, proposes “Dionysian consciousness” as a “way out.” (AA-180)

The progression from politics to poetry was precipitated not only by his incorporation of Freud, but also by a fresh influence.

I didn't know that the commitment to Eros would take me to poetry. At that uncertain juncture in my life, fate led me to California. It was Robert Duncan who introduced me to modern poetry, the New American Poetry, stemming from Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Pound and Williams, and their successors Olson and Duncan, took their place inside my mind as authors having authority over me. And so there was a movement set up from modern politics to modern poetry. The last sentence in Love's Body is “There is only poetry.” I am sentenced by my own sentence: how do you live with that? A movement or a tension, a dissention, a schism in the soul; between politics and poetry, between two kinds of revolutionism or vanguardism, between political vanguard and poetical avant-garde. The murky politics in the poetry of Ezra Pound highlights the contradictions. And the deep poetic connection between Ezra Pound and poets whose politics were the opposite of his, Olson and Duncan. (AA-159)

The movement in *Love's Body* from politics to poetry is also a movement from rationality to mysticism. The final words in *Love's Body* are actually a quote from *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* by Lama Anagarika Govinda about communication via silence which follows the conclusion that “there is only poetry.” The principal poet looming in the background of *Love's Body* is William Blake, and mystical interpretations of Christian scripture or dogma are a recurring theme. The movement in *Love's Body*, however, is not a linear movement from politics to poetry; it is more like a constant oscillation between two poles with each both undermining and illuminating the other. The style of the book is presumably an attempt to realize the dialectic of the Dionysian consciousness which Brown glimpses at the end of *Life Against Death*.

The difficulty of commenting on *Love's Body* is reflected in most of the reviews which greeted it when it appeared. My favorite is the diatribe by William S. Schlamm in *National Review*:

[I]f I have learned on thing from that nebulous collection of about 700 obscure puns, made up as “aphorisms,” it is a newly confirmed

conviction that no ass is dumber than an educated ass. This book has to be seen to be disbelieved..... Love's Body is an attempt at leading Freud ad absurdum by a process of agonizing puns which, however, ask to be taken as pensées. It is as if Pascal had written Candy.

Yes I've read the whole opus, from A to B, and the only saving grace I encountered was the author's pitiable lack of humor. Any man who can use the word "penis" in a philosophical treatise as often as N. O. Brown does, without a single smile, deserves the reader's sympathy—if only because, quite obviously, he cannot have experienced much pleasure from either language or sex. Like the beatniks (who, I trust, will mistake Love's Body for a bible of Zen), he must suffer from invincible and pompous boredom with himself.

Kai Erikson is a good a bit less hysterical in his acknowledgment of the problems posed both by the style and the content of the book in his review for *The American Scholar*:

It should be clear that the logic of Brown's position cannot really admit any kind of critical encounter: to say that it does not correspond to what biologists think they know about evolution or what anthropologists think they know about the origins of human culture or what ethologists think they know about instinct is not to say anything damaging at all, because Brown does not rest his thesis on anything so slender as data. The evidence of man's senses, disciplined by the methods of the various sciences, are part of the veil that Brown thinks man has drawn between himself and the truth, and he is hardly going to be dismayed if we tell him that those of us who operate out of the more routine academic specialties cannot find a place for his vision anywhere in our philosophies. So all we can do is ask how compelling we find that vision, how closely it matches the other furniture of our minds.

As for myself, I can report that I found Brown's account both fascinating and unacceptable. Brown would presumably ask that I be governed by my sense of fascination and abandon the frames of reference I ordinarily use to judge whether or not a thesis seems sensible, and the challenge is an interesting one; but I am caught short by what Brown would be compelled to call the neurosis of our age and what I am compelled to call the logic of scientific inquiry.

There are of course plenty of ideas in *Love's Body* which could be extracted and systematized, but most reviewers acknowledged that this would be to miss the point of the way in which Brown uses the ideas. As J.M. Cameron said in his unsympathetic review of *Love's Body* for *The New York Review of Books*:

There is in Love's Body a whole theory of symbolism that is the key to what may strike us as excessively vatic utterances....One

has the feeling that if only this theory could be set out formally one would grasp the rationale of the work. Of course, just this, according to Brown, is the indication of one's citizenship in the kingdom of repression: for how could one set out the theory formally without treating a contradiction as the sign of where one's exposition was going wrong?

The most appreciative readers of Brown were of course literary critics like Lionel Trilling and Leslie Fiedler. The best description of the style of *Love's Body* and Brown's later work is that given by Edward Said in his review of *Closing Time* for The New York Times Book Review:

Brown's own writing, especially here and in "Love's Body," is of a sort best described as literature. If for him "the body is a body politic," and genital organization is the tyranny of the genital over the other organs, the conventional literature and criticism with their fairly rigid habits of special pleading and exposition, are genital monarchs over the body of language. He would rather allow language a polymorphously perverse freedom in order that a page be where words can enact relations to each other for writer and reader, with an affirmation directly representative of man's sacred power for love and procreation. This ambition has no doubt contributed to Brown's favor with the counterculture formed during the 1960's. And no less true, it will continue to earn him the misunderstanding of most people for whom, not surprisingly, a scholar's book ought to be unreservedly straight and informative.

Brown, however, is too substantial an intelligence to be filed away easily. It is no exaggeration to say that in his work he is formulating very original modes of knowledge for humanists. He has abandoned the superficial mannerism of consecutive argument for a logic whose equivalent in language is the "naturalness" of etymological derivation and simultaneously, the shock value of a revealing pun. Instead of seeing things as discrete objects, Brown believes a truer knowledge can be obtained by fusing them together into a cubistic new entity. When he speaks about sexual coupling with reference to writers, he is not, I think, being modishly new; rather he is reviving one of the more interesting (and least studied) traditions of knowledge, the one by which one author sees the world almost obsessively in terms of another author he is never weary of addressing.

Brown does offer an explanation for the style of *Love's Body* in the text itself. The explanation probably can not stand on its own outside the context of the book where it can be nourished by the simultaneously developing themes of fire and food and symbolism and truth and resurrection, but it is a nice introduction to the style of the book.

Literal meanings are icons become stone idols; the stone sepulcher, the stone tables of the law. The New Testament remained

hidden in the Old, like water in the rock; until the cross of Christ broke the rock open. Iconoclasm, the word like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces.

Cf. Luther cited in Hahn, "Luthers Auslegungsgrundsätze," 190n. Jeremiah XXIII, 29. (LB-185)

Only the exaggerations are true. Credo quia absurdum; as in parables or poetry. Aphoristic form is suicide, or self-sacrifice; for truth must die. Intellect is sacrifice of intellect, or fire; which burns up as it gives light.

Cf. Bhagavad Gita, IV, 19.

Broken flesh, broken mind, broken speech. Truth, a broken body: fragments, or aphorisms; as opposed to systematic form or methods: "Aphorisms, representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to inquire farther; whereas Methods, carrying the show of a total, do secure men, as if they were at farthest."

Bacon in McLuhan, Gutenberg Galaxy, 102-103.

Systematic form attempts to evade the necessity of death in the life of the mind as of the body; it has immortal longings on it, and so it remains dead. Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt. The rigor is rigor mortis; systems are wooden crosses, Procrustean beds on which the living mind is pinned. Aphorism is the form of death and resurrection: "the form of eternity."

Kaufmann, Nietzsche, 66.

(LB-187-8)

Love's Body begins with Hobbes and Locke and presents the 17th century political debates and revolutions as a retelling of the primal myth of the rebellion of the sons. It excavates the ideas underlying the debate between monarchy and representative democracy until it connects Locke's notion of private property with the idea of the soul or ego. Ultimately it reaches the point where he is able to say:

Union and unification is of bodies, not souls. The erotic sense of reality unmask the soul, the personality, the ego; because soul, personality and ego are what distinguish and separate us; they make us individuals, arrived at by dividing till you can divide no more — atoms. But psychic individuals, separate, unfissionable on the inside, impenetrable on the outside, are, like physical atoms, an illusion; in the twentieth century, in this age of fission, we can split the individual even as we can split the atom. Souls, personalities, and egos are masks, spectres, concealing our unity as body. For it is as one biological species that mankind is one — "the species-essence" that Karl Marx looked for; so that to become conscious of ourselves as body is to become conscious of mankind as one. (LB-82)

Brown sees in this idea not simply a Utopian fantasy of the unity of all mankind, but a confirmation of an even older tradition which is rarely connected with 17th century political theory:

God does not go for personalities; nor does the Last Judgment consist in the award of prizes to personalities for the performance of their parts. The performance principle must go; the show must not go on. The parts are not real: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus; he is not your personal Saviour. In the Last Judgment the apocalyptic fire will burn up the masks, and the theater, leaving not a rack behind. Freud came to give the show away; the outcome of psychoanalysis is not "ego psychology" but the doctrine of "anatta" or no-self: the ego is a "me-fabrication" (ahamkara), a piece of illusion (Maya), which disintegrates at the moment of illumination: "the self has been completely understood, and so ceases to be." And with the doctrine of no-self goes the doctrine of non-action: action is proper only to an ignorant person, and doing nothing is, if rightly understood, the supreme action. (LB-105)

Brown also sees William Blake in this tradition, which he would later describe as "the Prophetic Tradition, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam; and heresies in Judaism, Christianity and Islam." (AM –46) In *Love's Body* that tradition is evoked mainly via Blake, heretical Christianity and Buddhism and the connection is made via his re-interpretation of Freudian psychoanalytic theory.

When the problem in psychoanalysis becomes not repression, but symbolism; when we discover that even if there were no dream-censor we should still have symbolism; then personality (soul, ego) becomes not substance, but fiction, representation; and the primal form of politics becomes not domination (repression), but representation. (LB-109)

Brown uses the term "symbolical consciousness" to indicate the kind of thought which can see that the symbolic connections between the psychic life of an individual and the social or political institutions in which he participates are not just ideas but realities. The body politic is just as real as the body which engages in sexual intercourse and both are fictions. "The body, like the body politic, is a theater; everything is symbolic, everything including the sexual act." (LB-131) It is not that one can be "explained" by reference to the other; they are both the same reality.

The term "id" — "it" — taken from Nietzsche (via Groddeck), is based on the intuition that the conduct through life of what we call our ego is essentially passive; it is not so much we who live as that we are lived, by unknown forces. The reality is instinct, and instinct is impersonal energy, an "it" who lives in us. I live, yet not I, but it

lives in me; as in creation, fiat. Let it be; no "I," but an it. The "I-Thou" relationship is still a relation to Satan; the old Adversary; the Accuser; to whom we are responsible; or old Nobodaddy in the garden, calling, Adam, where art thou? Let there be no one to answer to....

The unconscious, then, is not a closet full of skeletons in the private house of the individual mind; it is not even, finally, a cave full of dreams and ghosts in which, like Plato's prisoners, most of us spend most of our lives—

The unconscious is rather that immortal sea which brought us hither; intimations of which are given in moments of "oceanic feeling"; one sea of energy or instinct; embracing all mankind, without distinction of race, language, or culture; and embracing all the generations of Adam, past, present, and future, in one phylogenic heritage; in one mystical or symbolical body. (LB-88-89)

What distinguishes this from a sentimental yearning for loving unification of mankind is Brown's idea that the whole concept of the brotherhood of man is symptomatic of a phase of cultural neurosis which became dominant in the 17th century and his understanding of the implications of symbolism.

Transubstantiation—the whole problem of symbolism. Metaphor is really metamorphosis; and the primal form of the sentence is Tat tvam assi, Thou art That; or, of bread and wine, hoc est corpus meum, this is my body. (LB-168)

The dawning realization of the symbolic nature of all thought and institutions and behavior is what emboldened Brown to stand before an audience of academics and disparage the worship of books.

Modern humanistic, literary, and historical scholarship, Geisteswissenschaft, is the pursuit of the literal truth; and it was the commitment to a literal interpretation of the Bible that modernized scholarship. Modern humanistic scholarship is the Renaissance counterpart of Reformation literalism. (LB-194)

Litralism does not get rid of the magical element in scriptural or historical interpretation. The Holy Spirit, instead of a living spirit in the present, becomes the Holy Ghost, a voice from the past, enshrined in the book. The restriction of meaning to conscious meaning makes historical understanding a personal relation between the personality of the reader and the personality of the author, now dead. Spiritual understanding (geistiges Verstehen) become a ghostly operation, an operation with ghosts (Geisteswissenschaft). The document starts speaking for itself, the reader starts hearing voices. The subjective dimension in historical understanding is to animate the dead letter with the living reader's blood, his "experience"; and simultaneously let the ghost of the dead author

slide into, become one with the reader's soul. It is necromancy, or shamanism; magical identification with ancestors; instead of living spirit, to be possessed by the dead (LB-199)

No things, but an iridescence in the void. Meaning is a continuous creation, out of nothing and returning to nothingness. If it is not evanescent it is not alive. Everything is symbolic, is transitory; is unstable. The consolidation of meaning makes idols; established meanings have turned to stone. (LB-247)

Perhaps this will suffice as an indication of the difficulty of summarizing *Love's Body*. As Brown says, "The proper response to poetry is not criticism but poetry." (LB-205) Any further explication of the book is beyond the scope of this paper.

Herbert Marcuse wrote a critique of *Love's Body* for *Commentary* magazine in which he essentially accused Brown of abandoning the fight and retreating into mystification.

Brown's "way out" leaves the Establishment behind—that is, the way out is indeed mystical, mystification. The symbolic interpretation works both ways: it reveals the latent, the real content of reality, and it symbolizes the real content: it mystifies the possibilities of liberation. Revolution, freedom, fulfillment become in turn symbolic—symbolic goals and events. Symbolic of what? The answer remains, must remain, shrouded in mystery, because Brown envisions an Absolute, a Totality, a Whole which swallows up all parts and divisions, all tensions and all needs, that is to say, all life. For such a totality does not exist in any sense or non-sense, and should not even be the vision of the free imagination because it is the negation of all freedom, and of all happiness (at least human happiness). (MN-240f)

Marcuse's reading of *Love's Body* is sympathetic up to a point, and he does seem to understand the impetus for the ideas in it; but he balks when Brown moves beyond the most basic tenets of his Marxism.

For there is such a thing as the Self, the Person—it does not yet exist but it must be attained, fought for against all those who are preventing its emergence and who substitute for it an illusory self, namely, the subject of voluntary servitude in production and consumption, the subject of free enterprise and free election of masters. There is even such a thing as property which is a factor and ingredient of true freedom (Marx knew it well): that which is properly mine because I am different from you and can be with you and for you only in this difference—boundaries to be enjoyed by you and by me. (MN-237)

Presumably Marcuse had the same reservations about *Life Against Death*, which already contained in its conclusions the idea that the way out is through the breakdown of the boundaries separating individuals with the realization that the self is not ultimately real. He may have overlooked the implications of the conclusion of *Life Against Death*, just as he wants to

believe that Brown still agrees with his ideas about liberation and will return to the fold.

Waking up from sleep, finding the way out of the cave is work within the cave; slow, painful work with and against the prisoners in the cave. Everywhere, even in your own land which is not yet found, not yet free, there are those who do this work, who risk their lives for it—they fight the real fight, the political fight. You have revealed the latent, the true content of politics—you know that the political fight is the fight for the whole: not the mystical whole, but the very unmystical, antagonistic whole of our life and that of our children—the only life that is. (NM-243)

Brown's response to Marcuse's critique published in the subsequent issue of *Commentary* begins in a wonderfully typical fashion:

My friend Marcuse and I: Romulus and Remus quarreling; which of them is the real "revolutionary."

He will not see the recurrence in revolution. Revolution is not a slate wiped clean, but a revolving cycle... Even newness is renewal. As it was in the beginning. The idea of progress is in question; the reality of Marx cannot hide the reality of Nietzsche. The thing is to change the world; but it is also true that everything remains always the same. The assignment then is (to put it simply) the simultaneous affirmation and rejection of what is; not in a system, as in Hegel, but in an instant, as in poetry.

There is eternal recurrence; there are "eternal object" (Whitehead); archetypes. This is a hard lesson. There is a sense in which war cannot be abolished... Or, there is an eternal object of which literal war is a false image, or inadequate idea. The thing to be abolished is literalism; the worship of false images; idolatry. Allen Ginsberg saw it just the way it is: Moloch. A false idol fed with real victims. This is no joke. (Nor is fire; Heraclitean fire.) (MN-243f)

Brown's willingness to attempt a more prosaic expression of some of the themes in *Love's Body* is perhaps worth quoting further because of its similarities to other parallel modes of thought and because of what it reveals about him personally.

*We have to surpass the Enlightenment notion that in the life of the species or of the individual there is a definitive change-over from darkness to light. Light is always light in darkness; that is what the unconscious is all about (*Love's Body*, p.216) Nor can the light become a current, always turned on, in ordinary prosaic language. Truth is always in poetic form: not literal but symbolic; hiding, or veiled; light in darkness. Yes, mysterious. Literalism is idolatry of words; the alternative to idolatry is mystery. An literalism reifies, makes out of everything things, these tables and chairs, commodities.*

*The alternative to reification is mystification (Love's Body, p.234) .
The world is actually not a collection of commodities. (MN-244f)*

With the whole world still in the bourgeois stage of competitive development and war, the thing to remember about Marx is that he was able to look beyond this world to another possible world, of union, communion, communism. What needs to be reiterated is not reassurance to the bourgeois that he will be able to carry his little old Self, Person, and Property into that world, but that the kingdom of heaven on earth is possible; and that other world, the negation of this jungle, cannot possibly be anything except Communitas. A higher form of chaos; instead of confusion, fusion (Love's Body, pp.248, 253).

*And, after Freud, we have to add that there is also a sexual revolution; which is not to be found in the bourgeois cycle of repression and promiscuity, but in a transformation of the human body, an abolition of genital organization. In deed, Love's Body shows that genital organization is the same thing as Self, Person, Property; and , therefore, the abolition of genital organization, foretold by Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*, turns out to mean what Marcuse calls the impossible unity and union of everything.*

Yes, indeed, there was a God that failed; that mortal God, the great Leviathan; or Moloch; discovered to be not only mortal but also dead, an idol. From literalism to symbolism; the lesson of my life. The next generation needs to be told that the real fight is not the political fight, but to put an end to politics. From politics to metapolitics.

From politics to poetry. Legislation is not politics, nor philosophy, but poetry. Poetry, art, is not an epiphenomenal reflection of some other (political, economic) realm which is the "real thing" nor a still contemplation of something else which is the "real action"; nor a sublimation of something else which is the "real," carnal "act." Poetry, art, imagination, the creator spirit is life itself; the real revolutionary power to change the world; and to change the human body. (MN-245f)

Closing Time

Closing Time, published in 1973, is a composition involving *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce and *The New Science* by Giambattista Vico. It weaves together quotations from both works with a commentary in an attempt to direct the reader towards a new idea of history and language which sees that mythology is the key to history and that "deeds are words." (CT-107) It is, perhaps, an attempt to revivify the insights of *Love's Body* with a new set of

allusions and metaphors, and it includes references to Holderlin, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida and others which indicate Brown's continuing insatiable appetite for learning. There is no mention of *Closing Time* in the preface or even the jacket blurb for *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, and one wonders if Brown's own estimation of it suffered after its publication.

Although it may be possible to "get" *Closing Time* without having read either *The New Science* or *Finnegans Wake*, I shall not implicitly make such a claim. Instead I shall let the conclusion of Edward Said's review in *The New York Times Book Review* satisfy the reader's immediate curiosity.

Brown is a genuine protestant. He stands opposed to the tendency in contemporary thought that puts even the language of art at a far remove from unmediated direct experience. Because Vico and Joyce spent their lives tearing, with great erudition, through the fabric of civilized discourse, de-sublimating it to reach the primitive reality beneath, he, too, urges the same sort of heroism. Unlike Nietzsche, Brown seriously believes that underneath articulate discourse there is the body, with a mute hieroglyphic language of its own to be deciphered for its unique wisdom, provided one can rise "from history to mystery." At times he is reminiscent of the Melville of "Moby Dick," hunting with knowledge and violence through time and space for the aboriginal white whale, itself a hieroglyphic of awesome barbaric intelligence. Brown's great theme is less despairing than Melville's: it is conjunction, or language as the human body being forever formed, reformed, informed by and in Blake's Eternal Imagination, contraries notwithstanding, resurrected in Vico's "mental dictionary," fertile in "Finnegans Wake," capable of all one's love and searching despite Freud's skepticism. Even as the vision seems too large to take in completely, the idea remains rich, "the common sense of the human race" (Vico), "the soul's groupography" (Joyce). (Said-3)

There is perhaps one note in *Closing Time* which is worth mentioning because it anticipates one of the more interesting tensions in Brown's last essays. He makes a reference to "Vico's occultist elitism" in contrast to "the Joycean principle of HCE / Here Comes Everybody." He quotes Vico's comments on "vulgar tongues" and "vulgar traditions" along with Vico's statement that "poetic sublimity is separable from popularity." On the penultimate page of the book he says "This is the Dionysian turn to the common man;" and "The customs and beliefs of the vulgar are normative." (CT-108) I have the impression that Brown may have come to view his own enormous erudition with some irony and his heart told him that access to the kingdom of heaven was not restricted to PhD's even though his own

path seemed to take him through an endless forest of books and ancient wisdom.

In “Daphne, or Metamorphosis” Brown had said:

Not everyone can play Finnegans Wake. But professors can. James Joyce is the apostle unto the professors. And the message is: Let's play. Or, let's practice metamorphosis. Or, let's change the subject. (AM-21)

In 1989 Brown is wrestling with the implications of Ezra Pound's fascism in terms of the relationship between elitist literary avant-gardism and revolutionary politics. He finds in Louis Zukofsky a “link between the two phases of my life, the Marxist and the modernist.” (AM-161)

In his retreat from the public to the personal, from the political to the domestic, Zukofsky was traveling the path traced by many members of his generation. But not by me. The body in Love's Body includes the body politic. Though not a sestina, Love's Body is obsessive: Nondom amabam, et amare amabam; quaerebam quid amaerm, amans amare. I need Augustine's Latin: “Not yet loving, but loving to love; seeking an object for my love, in love with love.” A trobar clu perhaps; a hermetic game of hide-and-seek with esoteric erudition; very far from the masses which constitute the body of love, Whitman's en masse.

There is no blame. There is no defect inherent in a record of struggle. The assignment remains, to not cease from exploration. There is no blame We all survive as best we can; always after shipwreck; improvising our own raft, revisioning our historical identity; to tell another story. (AM-175f)

The first reference to Heidegger in *Closing Time* comes in conjunction with the phrase “to greet the return of the gods.” (CT-41) This is also the title of a book listed in the “Books by Norman O. Brown” before the title page of *Closing Time*. Its position in the list seems to imply that it was written before *Closing Time*, and it is easy to imagine that *Closing Time* may have been delivered while the publisher was waiting for *To Greet the Return of the Gods*. When he was asked in 1970 about the direction he would be taking after the publication of *Love's Body* Brown responded:

I wrote a preface to Love's Body which in a very short space says three times “This is the end.” I'm not sure what that means. I think it means no more metaphysical overview flights in my career. In some sense I have come down to earth and the work I want to do from now on is concrete work with particulars, which is also for me poetry. Poetry I think is made with particulars, not with abstractions. I'm trying to get away from abstractions in my work and to poetize particular areas. I rather like a thing I have done called

“Daphne, or Metamorphosis,” published in Myth, Dreams, and Religion, edited by Joseph Campbell. My work also returns to politics. I would like to do a poetics of politics, a poetic approach to the structure of civilization. However, my experience is that the unexpected keeps breaking through. Thank God! Real discoveries are always surprises. I may yet be surprised—again. (Keen-39)

“Daphne, or Metamorphosis,” which was re-published in Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis was originally a paper delivered at a meeting of the American Philological Association in 1966. Phyllis Grosskurth described the event in Saturday Night:

Last winter, at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association of America in New York City, Norman O. Brown packed the grand ballroom of the Statler Hilton Hotel with academics who had come to hear him chant a dithyrambic prose-poem entitled “Daphne, or Metamorphosis,” a variation on his perennial theme that repression of sexuality leads to death and destruction, individual and collective. When he had finished, a group of distinguished professors got up in turn to fulminate, sneer and snipe at one of their own who has been read enough to become a bestseller. The only voice raised in Brown’s behalf was that of Leslie Fiedler who had the last quiet word: “Ladies and gentleman, at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association of America a miracle has occurred: a poem has been born.”(Grosskurth-30)

Brown later described this paper as a chapter in a book he intended to write but abandoned:

I started to write a Homage to Ovid, his Metamorphoses. It was to be the metamorphoses of his Metamorphoses through the ages down to our own times; a perpetual poem, or an eternal recurrence of archetypes; as if literature were all one book, just a footnote to Ovid; a book to end all books, like Finnegans Wake or Ovid’s Metamorphoses. (AM-142)

This presumably would have been *To Greet The Return of the Gods*. There was a similar paper entitled “Metamorphoses II: Actaeon” published in *New American Poetry* in 1972, which was a second chapter of the book; and in 1989 he described what happened when he had begun a third installment on Narcissus:

But Narcissus, another young hunter or shepherd destroyed by what he saw, the reflection of himself in the water—there I drowned, like Narcissus; lost in the endless replication of his own image in world literature; overwhelmed by the abundance; as in Ovid Narcissus says, inopem me copia fecit, “Plenty made me poor.” Or paralyzed by the proximity: iste ego sum—Could it be me? Narcissus is undone discovering his identity with his own reflection; we are undone discovering our identity with Narcissus, our identity made

out of identifications. I is an Other; some primordial and universal schizophrenia, as if our first experience of the self were self-alienation.

From mirror unto mirror, an eternal recurrence of meaningless alternatives. Looking into the mirror and seeing nothing. Or Lost in the Funhouse: Ovid's Metamorphoses turning into black comedy. John Barth says, "He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator—though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed." (AM-142f)

Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis

The essays comprising *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* are drawn from the 30 years following *Life Against Death* and were selected by Brown "as bearing on the story begun in *Life Against Death* and continued in *Love's Body*." They include the Phi Beta Kappa address and the pieces about Daphne and Actaeon along with essays on Spinoza, William Blake, Ezra Pound or the prophetic tradition of Islam. The final piece in the book written in 1990 is a discussion of the significance of the political upheavals in Eastern and Central Europe in the light of the unusual economic theories of George Bataille. Brown has discovered in Bataille a way to bring his thinking back to its roots in the concern for economic and social justice.

The key move in Bataille's transvaluation of economic value is to deflect the traditional Marxist notion of a "surplus" by connecting it with the Dionysian notion of life as the manifestation of a universal principle of excess. The whole notion of "surplus" then begins to waver: if there is no distinction between necessary and wasteful expenditure, if there is a necessity to waste, where is the "surplus"? The focus shifts from modes of production to modes of unproductive expenditure; from production to consumption; unnecessary, unconditional, exuberant, i.e. wasteful consumption. This perspective liberates us from the necessity of having to take "growth" as the self-evident destiny of all economic activity, and from the necessity of taking "demand," or desire manifested in the marketplace, as the ultimate and unquestionable indicator of human needs. Pandora's box, what do human beings really want, is open. It always has been open; now our eyes are opened. We can no longer continue with the conventional Marxist distinction between economic base, governed by technological rationality and economic necessity ("relations of production"), and ideological superstructures identified with a ruling class. (AM-185)

Once again Brown's ship has wrecked on the shores of a strange new world.

The new truth that cannot be avoided is the advent of the spendthrift masses, the advent of that new era designated in Finnegans Wake by the letters HCE: Here Comes Everybody. It is a truth promoted by socialist ideology (the “mass line”) and capitalist reality. Ascetic intellectuals (I am one of them), schooled in cultural criticism by such models of resistance as Herbert Marcuse, have assailed mass consumerism as “repressive desublimation,” controlled by a ruling class in order to “buy off” potentially revolutionary discontent. In this way Marcuse was able to combine (utopian) political radicalism with cultural elitism: the sacred heart of radicalism was located in great works of Art. But in the era of Here Comes Everybody, ascetic intellectuals have to rejoin the human race. Pushpin may be as good as poetry. A new age now begins. We will, as Euripedes says in Bacchae, have to submit to the verdict of the common man. The dependence of the world economy on mass consumption, and the intrusion of mass demands for consumer goods, to the frustration of the best-laid plans of the Central Committee, are the most hopeful signs in the most recent events (1988-1990). “His producers are they not his consumers?” (Finnegans Wake) “Here Comes Everybody” means that the human race is getting ready to discard the (childish, Oedipal) game whereby the mass of Slaves left the mystery (the burden, the guilt) of surplus consumption to their Masters. It would be something new in world history, something like an apocalyptic novelty, if our social and economic arrangements came to reflect a collective consensus that we are all members of one body, with a collective problem of surplus production and surplus consumption. There is no other way out of the flagrant maldistribution, and the futile quest for justice. (AM-190f)

He leaves with an open mind. “There is no telling how it will turn out.” (AM-197) He is not at all certain that human beings are up to the task of setting aside vicarious participation in spectacles.

It may well be that human beings can tolerate the Dionysian truth only if it is held at a distance, projected onto human or divine scapegoats, admitted under the sign of negation. Reality may be too much for us. We may, like Job, have uttered what we cannot understand. (AM-198)