

Appendix 1: "Glimpses that would make me less forlorn:"
Norman O. Brown and M. C. Richards

"Demos/elite. Aristos/demos, remaining problems. When I am dead and you write about me, begin with that premise." NOB to DP.

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*. . . he is, you say, you are sure, an initiate – (last person to say this to me so, seriously, was my theosophical mother, 20 years ago!) but you say all must be poets. I have felt torn between these aristocratic and democratic proclivities.
--NOB to MC Richards, May 19, 1960*

Norman O. Brown met M. C. Richards, the poet and potter, at a poetry reading at Wesleyan, April 19, 1960. At the risk of conflating two distinct events, I'll guess that the poet was Charles Olson, and that the Olsons, M.C., and possibly others ended up in Nobby's kitchen after the reading. M.C. knew Olson from Black Mountain College, and she knew Norman O. Brown by having read *Life Against Death*, on the recommendation of John Cage.

A few days after their meeting the night of the reading, MC called Nobby, and then began a correspondence. Nobby had told her that he would like to "see her poetry," and MC sent him some (which Nobby didn't read for several weeks).

A number of letters were exchanged. MC asked Nobby if he really meant what he said in LAD. This seemed to be a magic question, and Nobby responded at length, telling MC that "the man who wrote that book is dead. . . The only question is will there be a resurrection?" MC wrote about Black Mountain College and the Bohemian, experimental lifestyle of the faculty and students, in which Nobby seemed to have had a keen interest. Nobby mentioned his self doubts, and the growing ("extreme") disjunction he was feeling between himself and his academic world.

The tone of the letters warmed quickly, and emotional intimacies were exchanged along with matters intellectual. In his letter of May 19, quoted above, Nobby writes: "I don't think I want to visit you before May 31: a little bit afraid of mistaking your presence for my future." May 31 was his Phi Beta Kappa address at Columbia (which Nobby didn't finish until the night of the 30th).

Nobby penned a short note to MC the night before the Columbia address, stating that he was violently exhausted, asking if she had understood his evasions, and asking if he could call, adding “Please,” underlined, at the bottom of the note.

Then followed a two week hiatus, until Nobby, breaking his “pledge” not to write until he had heard something of MC’s reaction to the speech, swallowed his pride and wrote to her anyway. Nobby’s son Stephen had suffered a nervous breakdown at college, causing Nobby to cancel his writing retreat at Yaddo, but hoping that the cancellation might have a bright side, Nobby added “When is it you said you would be back?”

And all this time at the same time there are things going on inside of me in which you are concerned. Yes MC you are there although I don't know and I can't really ~~care~~ control how it looks on the outside to you. Things are going on inside of me soul and even body -- in the body a steady pitch of excitement which makes it hard to concentrate; and hard to sleep at nights -- in the soul I can't and don't want to try to say. Anyway & in this condition, alone and with no guidance. I have to trust instinct and something like Socrates daimon (the one which only said no): and truly it has told me -- it did tell me at the end of May -- to keep distance between you & me: and I thought (and gave thanks) afterwards that this was so that I might ~~be~~ unprompted make these commitments that appeared in my phi beta speech . . . Dear MC perhaps you do not know from through what blackness, what shadow; what nigredo (ich grolle nicht) I have been. Your sunny Nausicaa dream blinded me: I put the letter away (quite literally) till today.

At the end of the letter Nobby acknowledges that he still owes MC a letter about her poems. In another letter Nobby excuses himself for taking so long to get to the poems, how he didn’t want to read them “prematurely.” (Perhaps. Or perhaps he was afraid that he wouldn’t like them.) He never does say very much:

I don't know what to say (about the poems); if we skip the clever footnotes. I feel some very special relation between Word and Life in you; of which I want to feel more before I say more ... It seems, it feels like a quality (a relation) I want (do not have) for myself; that I might learn from you : and so best be {reticent serious} and say no more direct on this.

Nobby does, however, continue to follow MC’s reading list:

Your ~~letters to~~ letters too burn with an immediate life and love. All I want in reticent reply to say is that all my thought and the forward movements of them (Skinner to Barfield to Carrouges to Steiner: to MC Richard; & my phi beta

speech is here somewhere) this summer seem to be directed toward our next meeting.

In late June Nobby complains about not receiving any letters: "Where are you MC?" And he asks (again) if MC thinks he should publish his Phi Beta Kappa speech. Another letter mentions the "telepathic bodiless communication" between them, which Nobby says "was becoming too crowded with signs bewildering signals and both of us talking at the same time."

In early July MC writes to Nobby in more detail about the depth of her feelings, how she has been wrestling with his ambivalence, and how "I sometimes feel as if we were bound together upon some quest."

In the same letter MC discusses a meeting with John Cage:

In order to emphasize the impact of your book and my meeting with you, I contrasted my own behavior with John's, although it had been he who had known you, he who had urged me to read your book. But when we came to discuss it together, I left him far behind. He said as much. He could not follow nor share all my combinations, he could not grasp what was stirring me so deeply because he has not my interests in, for example, metamorphosis and organism, nor my particular history which made my meeting with you so meaningful to me; nor any nose for the occult; neither had then nor has now, therefore, any real notion of the quality of my interest in your works and in you. Not that he should have. Nor was he concerned to have. Nor did we discuss it, except that he said to me how much more I had gotten from it even that he had. I was trying to tell you that thought in a sense it was he who was your acquaintance, it was I who recognized you. He was stimulated, so to say, but I was increased, by your words.

Nobby answered with praise for the letter, and how he was "trying the meanwhile not to shrivel up with inadequacy . . . trying to bear the beams of love."

On July 25 there was finally a tryst, evidently at MC's home in Stony Point, after which Nobby began to retreat in earnest.

NOB to MC:

It feels good today to have been with you yesterday – the really true things come as surprises don't they? I got up this morning with well-being in my breathing & was surprised – And was surprised ~~to~~ again when it expanded & included my wife as I sat at breakfast telling her about you : and she caught it too & sent it back. Isn't that nice? So let's leave it right there. With one more

glance to my right front where your ikon is you four feet away saying what is it yes peace pity mercy love yes.

NOB to MC:

I just got your letter (at 11:30 am Friday) & have no time to say much – so that is already too late for your proposal – perhaps next week, in the middle of.... (weekends are full of children in one way or another) –

And please take another good look at me ---- stop look listen! – There is Paracelsus says a kind of angel or demon which is not but for ever seeks to be incarnated in a body – you will find the exact quotation in the appendix to L. Durrell's Justine.

NOB to MC, (undated, but early August? A visit from MC?):

My son Stephen is in pain and painful. We take him to N.Y. on Wednesday: from where he wants to hitch hike to a Gulf port & his ship. We won't be back till very late Wednesday night. And I am not at all sure I can psychically leave my wife alone on Thursday: probably not. I guess the only thing I can do is telephone you Thursday about the chance of Friday. Please do be patient. I am beset & cannot move freely. It is a relief to hear you say you are over a hump.

Since last Friday your visit I have been in some tailspin of confusion & disorder; complementary I guess to your previous suffering; and certainly crushing my previous (becalmed?) calm. there is as you say a violent soul-body process in the works, imperious & painful: our peaceful coexistence is mined with exploding discordances, And full of humiliating surprises: I have been shown that there are still primitive incubi and succubi in my basement.

NOB to MC (probably mid-August):

. . . But I cannot leave Beth right now – neither tomorrow, nor early next week. There are family assignments & obligations & she would rightly interpret my taking off for a day as desertion –

. . . Or perhaps recuperation is setting in on the dark side of the moon: I feel like saying that deep down all is well maybe – With you too, I trust. Separation, (death!) separateness, you know must be affirmed – No?

At the end of August the Browns vacationed on Block Island and Nobby had a minor car accident, colliding with a telephone pole. He wrote to MC that he hoped she would visit "as soon as I am ready." There is no indication that she did, or was more specifically invited. In October Nobby was back at Wesleyan, teaching classes. MC had sent him a poem about Block Island, which Nobby took several weeks to read. Nobby

said that he read the dedication “with emotion” and that “*it restored my self-respect to be part of such a poem or person.*” Nobby closed the letter telling MC “not to fret” and that they would surely gather together by All Saints Day. They did not.

On the 31st Nobby wrote to MC about his ambiguous feelings about returning to teaching, adding that between teaching and family life he had little energy for anything else.

Strangely there has been reborn in ~~my~~ me the social, political, prophet-radical. I am obsessed with the Decline of the West in the world: and burning with savage indignation at our local microcosm and its decadence. It seems as if in the previous six months I was permitted a distant glimpse of another world, enough to confirm my hatred of this world.

In mid November, MC, in desperation one might suppose, wrote to Nobby’s mother, Margarite, in England. After introducing herself and some shop-talk about Jungian analysis and anthroposophy, she noted the change in Nobby’s mood:

Since our summer meeting, Nobby's mood has changed. He writes to me very rarely now...but in his most recent letter, October 31, he says, "Strangely there has been reborn in me the social, political, prophet-radical. . . .

She closed her letter with: “I do not know why he deliberately turns his back upon what he wants most.”

Margarite answered the letter in early December, explaining some of her son’s character by referring to his natal chart:

For one can see that Norman is torn between Opposites and suffers accordingly. And Saturn in Gemini in his horoscope casts a very depressing almost hateful influence on all matters controlled by the 7th House, but Saturn here also stands for profundity of thought.

Your friendship with Norman must have been a mutually enriching experience which will have a lasting effect for which you both will be grateful, though out-(xx) there may be a dividing of the ways. It happens in life that one must let a loved one follow his own path even though it may mean separation and sadness.

MC must have written to Nobby first, asking if writing to his mother would be ok with him, because Nobby wrote to her on November 15:

You write a wonderful letter full of reality and also life and hope. It is not given to me to be able to reply in kind. And so I want to keep silent altogether. In solitary confinement: I don't know how long the stretch is. But that is the way it has to be.

My mother is not in solitary confinement (though old). It will be a great thing for her to hear from you. And I bet she will answer with a letter to you much more rewarding than this one. Please forgive this hopeless communication: I suppose it is part of your karma and hard to bear. But everything in your letter, everything you say about yourself and the way you say every thing, tells me you are strong and strengthening, healing. With me it is not yet so. So forgive me.

The final break came on January 15, 1961:

MC -

My semaphore system is terribly crude. I beg you to excuse it : excuse it is the right word : it is so crude. -----

But I must have distance : I have no choice : I must obey imperative instinct. And pass it on to you. Noli me tangere. At least that's the way it is now ----

And as for you I feel I have not even the right to utter good wishes : utterly benevolent I am : but utterly unable to see what's good for you. But you will get it, whatever it is - Your Jungian teachers seem to understand.

NOB

MC didn't answer for six months, when Nobby sent her a short friendly note, mentioning that he got occasional snippets of news about storms in her life from John Cage. The letter is worth quoting in full.

26 June 1961, MCR to NOB:

Dear Norman O Brown of NOB fame,

I cannot truly say that my heart leapt up when I saw the letter in your handwriting today, but it did experience some kind of motion. I visited Charles Olson on my way up here (to teach pottery for 3 weeks at HAYSTACK MOUNTAIN SCHOOL OF CRAFTS). And we talked about you a whole lot. Charles and Betty had apparently stayed with you in Middletown and the last time I saw Charles was in your kitchen etc. We talked deep. I was fierce and passionate in my perplexity and my wounds over you. Not that it came out that

way necessarily, but now as I sit here I feel that it was like that. We talked about the problems of incarnation, burying the depths, the far reaches, into the surface, into the membrane: the eye, the hand, the corpus (Christi?). To see your bodily reaction to my presence breathing effected eyes & nose running temperature rising etc. Everything turning in upon itself to fight the battle. Well anyway

I remember now as I did in Gloucester what you wrote to me that Paracelsus said something about creatures $\frac{1}{2}$ -angel and $\frac{1}{2}$ -demon, always seeking to incarnate. I wrote some poems about it at the time (about 13 months ago); good thing I don't have them with me or I would enclose them, and then where would we be, & up to our ears in Noli me tangerines. (And that was what got me too gets me now...that a guy like you, with a woman like me, would take Latin exits.) I was nuts about you, it's true; nuts about a man who glowed in the dark. Would glow with the light he gave off, or that I saw, at least: himself a-dazzle with the mystery, in a hard-cover binding to keep off the sparks.) Oh Norman O Brown, what I've been through since I last saw you. Through the protective covering: through the screen, through the goal posts. Storms, John said? Cataclysm rather. No that won't do. That's all decoration and dodging. I've been through death, NOB; I have experienced my own death. In Key West, after I wrote you last: The Key of Bones. No earth. Just the spot for an encounter, with ... I shudder as I put it down here. It is not to be spoken out. That's why I shudder as I read you Phi Bete speech. You talk about mysteries as if they could be made part of a curriculum. As if they could be "understood". What I know now, dear heart, is that truth is experienced by the total organism. That's why Saul (Paul) fell down when the light struck. The flesh does house the spirit, in every god-loving cell, and when they get separated, by grace or by demonism, the body swoons, goes deaf, goes blind, shakes, vomits. I have been invaded. It's a long story. And perhaps I have said too much as it is. More than you want to hear. But I have still the sense of companionship with you - in spite of attacks of rage - of grief - and I feel it is right to say so.

Love,

Another letter followed six months later sending New Year's greetings, "in warmth and love," and expressing her gratitude for their relationship. In September, 1962 Nobby wrote to MC in response to her request for support for a Guggenheim fellowship. In October MC attended a lecture that Nobby gave in Brooklyn and wrote him a long critique, ending the letter:

One last PSS: we are all real, Norman Brown, and don't you forget it. Basic Truth Department: "Eat cake & have it too; only in that way is last secret

dualism experienced as magic Tao-Diet to feed single magic Fire of Self and Other."

Nobby responded:

Dear MC

I learn slowly, but I learn – I think I now know what was wrong with my Brooklyn speech (though of course it was not wrong at all) – anyway my discovery took me to the idea of the Center; and I reread your Middletown address: from which I gathered flowers: also a great thirst for a book you mention – Paul Reys Zen Flesh Zen Bones – which I will be considering tomorrow – so as Groucho Marx says

Thank you

NOB

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The full depth of MC's influence on Brown may only be known when Brown's papers are available for scholars at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Special Collections.

It seems clear, however, that MC introduced Brown to a number of sources and topics that remained central to his thought for the rest of his life, including Buddhism, surrealism, and Owen Barfield's ideas on idolatry. It was an MC dream (it seems), that gave *Love's Body* its title, and much of the second half of the book may stem from the period of their relationship. "Daphne" surely resonates with her presence, as does the whole *To Greet the Return of the Gods* project. She gave him a glimpse of the dancing ground of the poets, of living satyr plays where poetry and myth intersect with life, and of fleshly love open and matter-of-fact enough to be called "free." She challenged his radicalism. She also challenged him to look at spiritual traditions outside of Christianity, and to consider that his mother's anthroposophy, and the esoteric and occult traditions generally, might not be all that crazy.

I think Nobby, ultimately, sided with the "canon" (and Rudolph Steiner is *not* in the canon). I don't think he wagered the "same as his mother," as he claimed. MC gave him back his anger and his indignation—*Life Against Death* had left him feeling that he was an extremist. With MC securing the left flank, Nobby was able to return to the center, where he could be the Old Testament prophet, preaching hellfire to the idol worshippers, and pointing to the Promised Land.