

Walking with Nobby

CONVERSATIONS WITH NORMAN O. BROWN

by Dale Pendell

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For the Dionysian Principle—
that gives us hope, if neither solace nor rest.

Abbreviations to works
of Norman O. Brown
cited in the text:

<i>HT</i>	<i>Hermes the Thief</i>
<i>LAD</i>	<i>Life Against Death</i>
<i>LB</i>	<i>Love's Body</i>
<i>FPTM</i>	"From Politics to Metapolitics"
<i>CT</i>	<i>Closing Time</i>
<i>A/M</i>	<i>Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis</i>
<i>LHR</i>	"Love hath Reason, Reason None"

•

(*FW* refers to *Finnegans Wake*, by James Joyce)

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Norman O. Brown commonly referred to himself as "NOB" (pronounced "N. O. B."). In this book I omit the periods.

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- v *Abbreviations*
- viii *Biography*
- xi *Preface*

- 2 *Fall Creek, June 1993* NOB's house; chance; NOB's palinode; the Coyote Principle; God's poisonous mushroom; reincarnation & Buddhism; DP's story of a funeral; chance/divination/luck; random killings; LSD & the unconscious; Hitler as a problem; occultism; *Love's Body* too Christian; John Cage, chance, & poetry; DP talks about squirrels; Nietzsche & compassion; the responsibility of writers; Dionysus & Apollo.

- 39 *Pogonip, January 1994* The Oneida community; complex marriage; the Savior as the clitoris; politics; Antinomianism; Elaine Pagels & Christianity's irredeemable flaw; Robert Graves & Laura Riding; the Grateful Dead; "make love, not war"; the Sixties; mass psychology & fascism; sheep & goats; tragedy & farce; puns & false etymology; Christianity; marriage, love, & affairs; M. C. Richards; NOB's conventional life; DP's Jungian tendencies; NOB & the arcanum.

- 81 *Wilder Ranch, July 1995* Camille Paglia; DP meets a Marxist-Freudian; censorship; Aristos/Demos; the State; King Lear; *Love's Body* too Christian; alcohol; a herd of cattle; *Hermes the Thief*; Cabeza de Vaca; fathers & mothers; Oedipal dreams; Justice; Chance; Reincarnation & Buddhism; Christ/Dionysus; Justice/Geometry; Pascal; money as shit; wild pigs; Artemis & "what *really* happened"; Dionysus/Shiva; a naked girl; Mormonism; the goddess naked; *Pharmako/Poeia* & literal metaphors; mothers; mother's bedroom; Milton & the Bible.

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143 *Sunset Beach, January 1996* DP on drugs; death; the *pharmakon* & Serres' parasite; Freud & cocaine; Marx, Blake, Camille Paglia & "the canon"; *sobria ebrietas* & ecstasy; the War of Poisons; Maxwell's Demon; wagers; Daniel Dennett; Wendy Brown; "Nature"; Spinoza; hemlock; Jacques Derrida; the "Soul" & Buddhism; DP's scourge.

175 *Fall Creek, March 1997* Marriage; Oedipus & the vagina; women; Christ/Dionysus; Ariadne; Nietzsche; love/chance; Blake; NOB's lost book; the language of poetry; Dionysus & Coyote; love; DP's wasted life; mistakes & wagers; Nothing; Epilog.

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NORMAN O. BROWN, 1913—2002

Norman O. Brown, scholar, philosopher, and poet, was a fearless intellectual of exceptional integrity, ready to follow the implications of his ideas wherever they might lead. His methodology was one of exploration rather than an explication or rationalization of a preconceived premise. His axioms were minimal and traditional, rooted in the classics, in myth, and in poetry. He wasn't afraid to admit his mistakes; to the end of his life his concern was to get it right, that his efforts and legacy would not shame him as he joined the immortals.

Popularly, he is perhaps best known for a few of his more quotable and radical aphorisms, such as

Freedom is poetry, taking liberties with words, breaking the rules of normal speech, violating common sense. Freedom is violence.

or

I am what is mine. Personality is the original personal property.

or

The money complex is the demonic, and the demonic is God's ape; the money complex is therefore the heir to and substitute for the religious complex, an attempt to find God in things.

Brown was born 1913 in El Oro, Mexico, 10,000 feet above sea level. His father, Norman Charles Brown, was a mining engineer, Anglo-Irish-Protestant from Donaghmore, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland. His mother (whom his father met on a ship on his way to Mexico) was Cuban-Alsatian, "with the beautiful, exotic name of Margarita Maria Catalina Coloma Deschwendt." In 1921 Brown's father moved the family first to Ireland, and then to England, so that his children could have a British education. Brown excelled in school, usually ranking at the top of his classes, as well as being captain of the rugby team, and won scholarships. He earned his BA and MA at Balliol College, Oxford, where his philosophy tutor was Isaiah Berlin. After graduation, Brown

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emigrated to the United States to earn his Ph.D., in Classics, at the University of Wisconsin, under A. D. Winspear. Brown believed (proudly) that he had triple citizenship: Mexican, British, and American.

During World War II, Brown worked for the OSS, the Office of Strategic Services (along with Carl Schorske and Herbert Marcuse) trying to understand fascism. After the war he obtained a position at Wesleyan University. His first book, *Hermes the Thief*, is an investigation of why the god of thieves and trickery became the god of commerce, a study which led him to Hesiod's *Theogony*, which he translated.

After the defeat of Progressive Henry Wallace (for whom Brown had worked) in the 1948 presidential campaign, Brown became disillusioned with electoral politics and sought a deeper understanding of historical and cultural processes. To this end he began an exhaustive study of Freud, culminating in *Life Against Death: the Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (1959), which won him international recognition. In 1966, while teaching at the University of Rochester, Brown published *Love's Body*, a continuation and refinement of his ideas in a poetic style. Brown himself considered *Love's Body* to be his definitive work.

In 1968 he came to the newly created University of California, Santa Cruz, where he was named Professor of Humanities in recognition of the breadth of his studies. While at Santa Cruz Brown published *Closing Time* (1973), a study of James Joyce and Giambattista Vico, and *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (1991), his final collection of essays. During this period Brown also published in several of the leading poetry and literary magazines.

In the last decade of his life, in which these conversations occurred, he had become interested in the idea of chance, and how it might help solve what he perceived as problems in *Love's Body* and his attempt to formulate a Dionysian Christianity.

PREFACE

The most valuable standpoints are always the last to be found, but the most valuable standpoints are always the methods. —Nietzsche

My first walk with Norman O. Brown was in the early 1980s. After a hiatus from formal schooling of fifteen years, I had enrolled in the University of California at Santa Cruz to complete my undergraduate studies, and, at the encouragement of Lynn Sukenick, was taking Brown's class on mythology. In addition to his stature as a world-class intellectual, Brown was also a great teacher, confrontative in a direct and personal way that caught many students off guard, either baffled or, in my case, outraged. The final straw was a quote from Vico's *New Science*:

Poetic truth is metaphysical truth, and physical truth which is not in conformity with it should be considered false.

I wrote the professor an acerbic letter, parodying some of his lines, and Professor Brown, evidently amused by my emotional response, suggested a walk. On that short walk (which was just crossing the campus on the trails through the redwoods), I was told:

1. that I bore an attitude of amused contempt;
2. that my writing was contemplative and not active;
3. that my criticisms were merely the most common feelings on the campus and not useful in the least; and
4. that I would never see the goddess naked.

It was only the last barb that got me. Goddesses were an object of study and interest for me, and seeing them naked, I believed, something like a birthright for a poet. The old fox had not only outraged my intellect, but insulted my destiny.

I responded with a letter and a poem, and that led to further walks. Nobby liked my poetry, but we argued about everything else. After my graduation, we kept in touch only by occasional

letters, until, in 1993, prompted by my friend Tom Marshall and several of Nobby's ex-students living in Mexico, I reestablished personal contact. Tom was taking regular walks with Nobby, and suggested that I do the same. I wrote to Nobby, then called him, and we set a date for the next week.

Nobby had retired from active teaching at this time, and he walked almost every afternoon (except for weekends, which were reserved for family). If he didn't have company, he walked alone. Nobby followed a routine, and adhered to it strictly. He worked in the morning until twelve, when his wife Beth served lunch. Then he napped, then out to walk at one. Nobby was a strong walker, even in his eighties when he used a cane, and we often covered three or four miles. The walks were punctuated by stops and starts, brief rests on logs or on the ground, and frequent laughter. We both carried index cards with us, and each of us would occasionally pen down a phrase, a reference, or an idea.

Sometimes on our early walks I tried to show off by quoting lines or stanzas from poems that I knew by heart. At such times, Nobby would merely purse his lips and nod, or grunt and say "That's good." It was only later that he began to recite quotations himself—usually long passages from the classics, and as often as not in Greek.¹

¹ Nobby's repertoire went far beyond the passages he had learned as a student, and included poems and passages from his current studies. Memorization, for the most part, is no longer considered to be either essential to, or even a part of, learning. That is, no one thinks that by "merely" memorizing something that one "understands" it. (One thinks of Julien Sorel). On the other hand, how deep could anyone's understanding be, if that person doesn't know the relevant passage "by heart?" In Zen koan practice, every case must be memorized (some of them are lengthy). The student must first be able to recite the case back to the teacher before presenting his "understanding" of it.

These walks span several years—during that time Nobby and I met sometimes weekly, weather permitting, sometimes monthly, sometimes less frequently. The format was fairly constant: meet at one o'clock at Nobby's house, drive to one of a half dozen favored trailheads, and then walk for several hours. Then home by five, because he ate at six. This last rule was seldom violated, and was evidently an issue of domestic contention if it were.

The basic "deal," at the beginning at least, was that Nobby wanted to learn about plants, a subject I knew well. In return, Nobby offered "The Western Tradition." Nobby once told me, "You should have known me when I had teeth." Well, that's a terrifying thought, because Nobby loved to attack, and hitting below the belt was all too often his preferred mode. After I got my bearings I came to expect personal attacks, accepted them, sometimes was able to make a few digs of my own, and finally we had one of those special understandings where one can say *anything*. No hold was barred, and no subject taboo, and baiting was an expected part of the dialogue.

My purpose here is not to present any summary or explication of Brown's philosophy.² Rather, hopefully, in some of our exchanges, I can offer a glimpse into the methods of mythopoetic thought. And perhaps some hint of the wit, sarcasm, and heart of the ferociously irreverent man behind the philosophy.

As Nobby's walks were always personal, this has to be my story as well as his.

² The first full-length philosophical study of Brown's work, *The Resurrection of the Body*, by David Greenham, appeared while this book was being prepared for press, and is recommended for those philosophically inclined. The book somewhat emphasizes the early Brown, though it runs through to *Closing Time*.

FALL CREEK, JUNE 1993

Professor Norman O. Brown and his wife Beth lived in Pasatiempo, a gated community built around a golf course a couple of miles above Santa Cruz. There was a guard at the gate but I never stopped and the guard always waved. The Brown residence was up above the far end of the golf course, a California ranch style house nicely landscaped in front and back, surrounded by chaparral.

Nobby answered the door and then excused himself to get into his walking shoes. Beth said hello and we exchanged pleasantries until Nobby returned. Nobby asked me where I'd like to go. I said I didn't know, where did he have in mind? Nobby said "let's go to Fall Creek." I said fine and we decided to go in my car. Nobby retrieved his automatic gate opener out of his car, so that we could use the back entrance. Nobby knew the shortest way to Felton, and directed me, advising me which lanes were best to be in at the different stoplights. We were in Felton in five minutes.

The Fall Creek Trail is a loop walk of about three miles with splits in the trail on both the outbound and inbound legs,

NOTES

¹ This was NOT what I was expecting. It was as if in the eight years since I had last seen Nobby we had exchanged our roles. At our last meeting Nobby had been the one chiding me about my scientific attitude. Since then I had been heading for the NOB of divine madness, the 1967 NOB, and here was the 1993 NOB seemingly headed toward what I considered the most non-magical of reductions.

² I had no idea what he was talking about. Maybe Nobby wasn't sure himself. Later that year Nobby wrote:

The idea of chance, so much identified with John Cage; my friend since 1960; but I would not listen. I was a determinist; first a Marxist determinist; then Freudian determinist. The world of chance; the world of chance mutations. In Love's Body, Ch. XII, it says "Nothing happens for the first time." That is dead wrong: everything happens for the first time. That is the meaning of chance; it contradicts both the Christian idea of eternity and the Nietzschean idea of eternal recurrence. (LHR, see Appendix 2)

Nobby was uneasy with this piece. On the title page of the typescript it says "NOT TO BE CITED. IN PROCESS OF REVISION." Early in 1995 Nobby discussed the paper by telephone with Jay Cantor. Jay followed up their conversation with a letter:

The chance universe leads you then to a new sense of non-recurring time. Mutations occur often, or often enough, so that recurrence is unlikely, and newness is likely indeed. But I don't think this requires you to say that everything happens for the first time.

I think this leads to an epistemological problem, in any case. Language—and knowledge—depends on recurrence ...

In May of 1995 I wrote to Nobby and added a third layer: "I disagree with Jay: think that chance does indeed require everything to be happening for the first time. All the time. (And in each repetition!)"

On the other hand, am I the only one who thinks that "recurrence" is being taken too literally? What about, as I've heard people say, "And then with my next girlfriend, the exact same thing happened...."? Like that. Nobby may have been thinking of Heraclitus: fire/newness/Dionysus. Snow also has a way of making "all things new."

resulting in four possible permutations—of which we only ever used three. Mostly it is an easy, flat trail through the redwoods, though on one route there are several short steep climbs where we would use our hands to grasp shrubs or outcropping boulders. The trail crosses the stream several times.

The understory is typical coast redwood forest—trillium, violets, wild ginger, elk clover, blackberry and thimbleberry. Ivy and periwinkle are rampant, despite occasional attempts by the park rangers at control.

We were able to park the car within a quarter mile of the trailhead. We both grabbed light jackets to take along—somewhere the sun was shining, but not in a redwood forest. With his hat and cane, Nobby looked rather jaunty.

Nobby started by asking about my family, then again inquired about my job. Feeling rather virtuous, I told him that after having lived most of my life as a street poet (mountain variety), having a regular job in corporate America was developing my character. Nobby laughed derisively, “How schoolboy. Haven’t you gotten over that yet?” We were off.

NOB: I am looking at chance. I think that life is an accident.¹

DP: Welcome to the twentieth century.

NOB: The old NOB, of *Love’s Body*, where I differed from Cage—I now think that NOB was wrong and that John Cage was right.²

DP: So are you going to recant?