

US \$10

EARLY MEMOIRS by
NORMAN O. BROWN

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IN MEMORIAM: NORMAN O. BROWN



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NORMAN O. BROWN

Edited by Jerome Neu



Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth;
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy!

James Clifford

Each of us knew a particular Nobby. This is mine...

I knew him as a younger colleague. When I interviewed for a job in HistCon, he took me for a walk in what seemed then like an endless labyrinth of fire trails above the campus. By the end I was completely wrung out from his relentless questions—exhausted, yet somehow exhilarated.

Nobby gave something very important to a young scholar: he took you seriously. There wasn't much small talk on those walks. You had to come up with something that was "news." It was as if you were always reporting from the front lines. And so you struggled to meet the challenge, and sometimes you even convinced yourself that you had.

The conversations were ongoing. He stayed in touch. Every now and then I would get short, sometimes gnomish, letters from him. Perhaps a response

to a book review I had written, or a reference connected to some previous exchange. The notes turned up in my Kresge mailbox: small, sealed manila envelopes, neatly addressed. No multi-use envelopes for these communicués! No post-its with “f.y.i.”

Recently I came across one of them, struck in a book of Charles Olson’s poems. Let me share it with you...

Jim

I am intoxicated by this little quote—M. Moore on H. James—on what it is to be American; I want to share it with somebody. I thought it might appeal to your sense of geography, and action (=Olson on Melville etc.

NOB

And taped to the sheet the passage from Marianne Moore:

Some complain of his [Henry James’s] transferred citizenship as a loss; but when we consider the trend of his fiction and his uncompromising denouements, we have no scruple about insisting that he was American; not if the American is, as he thought “intrinsically and actively ample...reaching westward, southward, any-

where, everywhere,” with a mind “incapable of the shut door in any direction.”

Nobby had many alter-egos. Henry James, here, is an American who chose English citizenship, the opposite of Brown, who left England for America. Nobby’s projects and life choices always had to be, at some level, world historical. What was this “America” he had given himself to? We talked about that: about my hero, William Carlos Williams, Nobby’s entanglement with the more troubling Ezra Pound, and Charles Olson representing, perhaps, a kind of synthesis. In any event, a way forward in that American poetic tradition, leading on to contemporary poets we both admired like Susan Howe...

Nobby knew a lot of poetry by heart. I’ll never forget walking into the Kresge Steno pool to find him reciting the whole of Keats “Ode to Psyche” for Betsy Wooten and her colleagues. (“...A bright torch, and a casement ope at night/To let the warm Love in!” Some steno pool!) I later asked Nobby to recite it at my wedding.

I don’t have much poetry memorized. But on that very first walk, we talked about some lines from

"Maximus to Himself" that I had managed to remember:

Olson:

It is undone business
I speak of, this morning
with the sea
Stretching out
From my feet

America was undone business for Nobby; and it was big, fundamentally expansive...

I worried about that: Olson's Melville at the whale ship's masthead, striding like a giant across the Pacific Ocean, Henry James's active amplexness... "reaching westward, southward, anywhere, everywhere..." Weren't these just evocations of imperial ambition?

We argued about this. Thinking big wasn't a problem for Nobby. He was a revolutionary thinker who wanted to be in tune with a really expansive history that would make everything (as Joyce put it in *Finnegans Wake*) "roll wholly over." And he didn't shrink from visions of violent change. (What would he say about today's universal adversary, "the terrorist"?)

When I took refuge, as I often did, in appeals to diversity and cultural relativism, he would say: "Well, we Marxists..." or "We Muslims..."

Yet if there was an undeniable universalism in Nobby's prophetic tradition, made up of braided Greek, Hebrew, Christian, Islamic, and American elements, this was not in any ordinary sense a closed or ethnocentric vision. For Nobby's universalism was always undone business. It was always looking for ways to be retranslated, made new. And the heretic, the prophet, and yes, the terrorist, were always in the wings, ready to unmake any finality or earthly dominion.

And there was the amazing example—which many of us were roped into—of his late, serious, engagement with Islam. It went on, at high intensity, for several years. Interlibrary loan worked overtime! I recall, more than once, meeting Nobby leaving the library on Friday afternoon, clasping a big pile of books for weekend processing.

And even though, as with all his detours and alteregos, the path to Islam eventually led back to Blake, to *Finnegans Wake* and the rest, the sustained effort to understand was remarkable and deep.

How little this restless, expansive interest has in

common with today's arrogant, ignorant imperialism! How unlike the repressive moralism that now rules our land, slamming shut the open doors of Norman O. Brown's America!

I really miss having Nobby around, to talk about these things.

Christopher Connery

Norman O. Brown—Revolutionary.

No doubt my title will give some of you the shock of misrecognition that I've felt listening to other versions of Nobby's life today.

Norman O. Brown, Revolutionary? But that's not it.

Well, so be it.

I studied with Nobby as an undergraduate, and like many of his friends here, had my mind blown on walks in the woods—the best part of my life at UCSC—after I came back here to teach. I still teach Nobby's work, in a course called *The 1960s*. The course is about world revolution. I teach his work alongside Mao, Guevara, Fanon, Debord, the Weather Underground. He came to my class in the spring of 1992, and he was happy to have his work considered in that company. In that class, he met undergraduate