

Brown Now: Communion, Mystery, and Public Knowledge

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One year has passed since “Brown: Into the Future,” a collaborative inquiry into the life and work of the late Norman O. Brown. That colloquy, by Brown’s colleagues and scholars of myriad persuasions, forms the basis for this special issue of *boundary 2*. Through novel appraisals and revived debates, various approaches to Brown’s vast interests were assembled and assessed. Even as a certain consecration seemed fated, nothing was out of bounds and nothing was sacred. This conference may be the last to converge so many students, friends, and thinkers of one of the twentieth century’s foremost iconoclasts. Mighty and strange, Brown’s prophetic imagination is often overlooked but ceaselessly vital.

Just a year on from that event, and very much has changed. “There is just that one collective sickness of the human race and all its generations,” Brown (1966: 88) writes in *Love’s Body*. “We are all in the same boat, or body.” That same body is today dispersed in sickness, and the time for consideration in commune—whether as staid academic conference or ceremonial celebration—is passed. Pestilence and isolation; university auster-

ity amid widening economic collapse; wildfire in the Redwood forests Brown incessantly wandered: today we meet a different world. The articles that follow, gleaned from cooperative reflection, testify to a mode of intellectual activity seemingly—or, at least for now—bygone.

For a thinker much attuned to the collective ferment of the bacchanal, Brown may have found today's global condition fateful: the appropriately atomized victory of a diseased liberal order. For Brown, individuation symptomized a drastic break from a Dionysian principle equally psychological, political, and pedagogic. He sought to restore a principle of communion among humans, and between humans and nature. "A little more Eros would make conscious and unconscious harmony between 'dialectical' dreamers of all kinds—psychoanalysts, political idealists, mystics, poets, philosophers—and abate the sterile and ignorant polemics," writes Brown (1959: 322) in *Life Against Death*. Communion, for Brown, is an epistemic as well as spiritual imperative.

There was the infamous Wake. Brown's senior seminar on literary modernism became, through the years, a semester-long discussion of *Finnegans Wake*, and eventually a midnight-to-dawn group performance inspired thereby. The seminar—that conventional institutional form—collapsed into its Dionysian shadow. Public knowledge transformed into poetic utterance, and a mere class assignment—alienated, sallow—became a shared mythic event. As Brown was carried onto stage in a wooden coffin, emerging in a top hat to rowdy reception, the modern research university reverted to a more primordial mode.

Our conference attempted something of that rascal spirit. Dances were danced and songs sung, yet the debate was rigorous. Nostalgia tails Brown's life and work, and critical appraisal of the Brownian corpus was intended to push our considerations forward. The relevance of Brown's scholarship for the present moment is broad, and includes his investigations of the failing university model (in *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*), the boundaries between human and nonhuman (in *Life Against Death*), the utopian and revolutionary potential of Islam (in *The Challenge of Islam*), the practice and prophetic power of comparative literature (in *Love's Body*), the politics of philology and of myth (in *Hermes the Thief*). To engage with Brown means traversing the boundaries of the humanities and sciences and tarrying with concerns relevant to multiple publics. Not only transdisciplinary scholars, but artists, activists, and educators will welcome Brown's interests in ecological health, holistic pedagogy, and the promise of just futures. The essays gathered here take Brown's work as a point of departure for thinking possibility in political-social life and indeed in world-remaking.

The renewal of such a resource comes at the right moment. A year after our event, most of us, most of the time, confine ourselves to remote pedagogy and solitary labors punctured, perhaps, with street protest against the agonies of perpetuating inequity. The inimitable title of Brown's 1991 essay collection is almost too incisive: *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, indeed. Our confrontation with such a choice is blatant if not frustratingly banal, and the starkness of that ideographic slash defines our situation. It suggests that our choice may be already made. As apocalyptic conditions lurk (whether social or environmental or economic—there are almost too many to name) any decision to transform ourselves faces a metamorphosis underway.

In the first essay of that collection, Brown's 1960 address to the Phi Beta Kappa society at Columbia University, a distinction is made between an esoteric, elite knowledge and a public, democratic knowledge—a divergence of miracle from scripture. "Mysteries are intrinsically esoteric, and as such are an offense to democracy," Brown (1991: 3) remarks. "In the democratic academy truth is subject to public verification; truth is what any fool can see." Brown argues for "the discovery of new mysteries, by the undemocratic but sovereign power of the imagination . . . the power which makes all things new" (4). Not a rejection of truth, but an assertion of other truths, buried and waiting.

As a cooperative exploration among a certain assembled, the Brown conference could be considered an exercise in esoterica—a trade in ideas, as Brown puts it, "unpublishable because only some can see them" (3). For a more personal and hidden knowledge, what the Ch'an adepts call "a transmission outside the scriptures," was indeed apparent at our event, in the lore, poetry, memories, and humor exchanged among those in attendance. This concealed knowledge is here transposed into public, exoteric form—the published instantiation of the once occulted. The articles to follow may profane mystery through revelation, but something of the miracle is retained. The dead letter of scripture can yet be "made alive," as Brown (1966: 196) insists in *Love's Body*, through a sort of "spiritual interpretation."

This special issue—a critical tour of Brown's sovereign imagination—attempts such an interpretation. Barry Katz retraces Brown's intellectual evolution, from his study of classics to his engagement with modernism, as a push toward the mysterious. G. S. Sahota draws connections between Marxism, philology, and Islamic mysticism in Brown's work, wherein world literature becomes a methodology for political possibility. Jed Rasula examines the impact of the 1960s counterculture on Brown's intellectual orientation and understanding of the body politic. Daniel Tiffany investigates

Brown's "apocalyptic" poetics as a correlation between modern prophecy and avant-garde experimentation. Michael Davidson offers an archival examination of the relationship between Brown and Robert Duncan, and of the poetic potential hidden beneath academic convention. T. C. Marshall reflects on Brown's humor as a means of navigation between Joycean farce and Blakean prophesy, high philosophy and low art. Stephen Carter tracks Brown's politics and "metapolitics" through Freudian conceptions of fraternity and Brown's conception of the natural world. Rob Wilson compares the transfigurative impulses of Brown and Bob Dylan, wherein self and world, history and metaphor, are made anew through practices of mythopoesis and poetic prophesy. Andrew Schelling takes up Brown's pedagogical innovation and his use of poetry's "law of metamorphosis" in the context of countercultural Santa Cruz. Rebecca Herzig considers Brown's Dionysian perspective on higher education, positing madness, sacrifice, and "monstrous motherhood" as sources of possibility in the neoliberal university. Jay Cantor analyzes Brown's use of symbolism, mysticism, and the Marx-Freud dialectic as a means for reinvention and renewal. Included, as well, are poems inspired by or reflecting Brown, from Madeline Rose Hernandez, Nathaniel Mackey, Joseph Donahue, and Dale Pendell. "Spiritual interpretation"—of poetics, pedagogy, and prophesy, of technology, embodiment, and chaos—proliferates.

As we carry on, today, with more "distanced" forms of inquiry, we might yet seek the mutuality of utopia and catastrophe, scripture and miracle, individual and collective that emanates through the Brownian project. Brown's work offers tools for contesting the apparent inevitabilities—political, ecological, intellectual—that bear down. For Brown was always in motion; "But *that's* not it!" his constant refrain. In the wake of recent conceptual and cultural trends, and in a moment of deep anxiety and transformative possibility—in a time of apocalypse and/or metamorphosis—it is our objective to seek in Brown's work strategic openings for political, artistic, and social rupture. To make it alive. To make it new.

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References

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