

Yet One More Book From Nobby

Back in the fall of 1980, not long after the fall of the Shah in Iran, Professor of Humanities **Norman O. Brown** gave a series of public lectures over at Oakes 105 exploring Islam and its relationship to his deep and erudite training in the classics, which until then had been for him a tradition of “Hebraism and Hellenism” inherited from the 19th century. I remember being impressed not only with his lectures, but also with the interplay between him and the packed-house audiences, which consisted of not just students, staff, and faculty, but people from the community at large. A quarter of a century later, following his death, I was assigned to process “Nobby’s” archive as part of my work for Special Collections. During that time, I came across sets of cassette tapes of two versions of the series, the one delivered at Oakes and one delivered by invitation at Tufts University in Massachusetts.

As I listened to them I realized they were more relevant than ever, and determined to get them published in some form or another. The resulting publication has just been released by David Watson’s New Pacific Press in cooperation with North Atlantic Books in Berkeley.

The Prophetic Tradition: The Challenge of Islam explores a wide-ranging array of topics concerning Islam. The transcriptions are by myself (pieced together over a half year’s worth of evening hours efforts), ably edited by UCSC professor Jerry Neu (who merged the two series), and joined with an introduction by Jay Cantor, former student and then life-long friend of Nobby, who is now a professor at Tufts University.

To quote from the Amazon website: “Throughout these lectures, which are remarkably pertinent today, Brown seeks to educate the reader on misunderstood areas of Islam, including the split between the Sunni and Shi’ite sects and Islam’s exemplification of the broad themes of art and imagination in human life. The author’s world-historical perspective of religion and tradition gives readers a crucial alternative to the divisive ‘clash of civilizations’ view that paints Islam as at odds with the West. He exposes the unifying strands between Islam and early Judeo-Christian doctrine, showing that Islam is in fact a genuine part of ‘Western’ tradition, and more importantly, part of a global tradition that embraces us all.”

Nobby was a frequent inhabitant (and heavy user!) of the library before – and after – his retirement. He was a great scholar and I’m more than happy to have had a hand in making this part of his wisdom and insight available to others.

Biographical information about and pictures of the inimitable Professor Brown (who incidentally used to kid me for carrying a briefcase) can be found at the web exhibit I did for his archive, at

<http://library.ucsc.edu/oac/exhibits/ms35web/intro/index.html>.

For more information on the book, released August 4th, and to read a couple of short excerpts, please go to the publisher’s website at <http://www.literaryguillotine.com/npp/coi.html>.

Mathew E. Simpson
McHenry Library
Online Archive of California (OAC)
& Preservation Units
Email: mathews@ucsc.edu

Renowned scholar and author Norman O. Brown dies at age 89

October 03, 2002

By Ann Gibb, Guest Writer 459-2496



Norman O. Brown, professor emeritus of humanities at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and author of *Life Against Death* and *Love's Body*, died October 2 at his residence in Santa Cruz, California. He was 89.

Brown's influential scholarship and teaching encompassed the classics, theology, history, psychology, sociology, and literature, among other disciplines. "He was a liberating, visionary scholar, the successor in the 20th century to Blake and to Nietzsche," said Jerome Neu, professor of philosophy at UC Santa Cruz and a longtime colleague of Brown.

When Brown's prize-winning book *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (1959) was published, Lionel Trilling called it "the best interpretation of Freud that I know." It was internationally acclaimed, ranking on the *London Observer's* list of best nonfiction books.

"Until I wrote *Life Against Death*, I was a perfect sleeper," Brown said in a 1970 interview. "But when I learned to interpret my dreams, the power of sleep was taken from me. Freud said he came to disturb the sleep of the world. In my case, he succeeded."

Life Against Death disturbed Brown in another way as well. It attracted a wide following among the 1960s activist generation of American students, creating unwelcome notoriety for a man who considered himself not a radical or a revolutionary, but rather a scholar and teacher. An attempt at a psychoanalysis of history, *Life Against Death* brought Brown fame in a variety of contexts, including the European intellectual community and the American counterculture. In 1966, *Time* magazine ranked *Life Against Death* "as one of the underground books that undergraduates feel they must read to be with it."

It was this kind of celebrity that Brown shied away from, and in describing his next book, *Love's Body* (1966), Brown said, "I did feel some kind of obligation to undo what I had done in *Life Against Death*. I wanted to release any followers I had acquired. I don't want to be a leader."

Known to friends, colleagues, and students as "Nobby," Brown was born in Mexico and educated in Europe; he trained in classics at Oxford University. "I wanted to go straight to the heart of the dynamo," was how Brown explained his decision to do graduate studies in America. After getting a Ph.D. in classics at the University of Wisconsin, he began teaching at Nebraska Wesleyan University.

His academic career was interrupted by World War II, during which Brown worked as a research analyst for the Office of Strategic Services. He returned to teaching after the war, chairing the Classics Department at Wesleyan University in Connecticut and then moving to the University of Rochester, where he was a professor of classics and comparative literature. He also published his first book, *Hermes the Thief* (1947), a sociological interpretation of mythology, greatly influenced by Marx.

Brown joined the faculty at UCSC in 1968 as a fellow of Cowell College and was appointed a Professor of Humanities, the only UCSC faculty member ever given that title. "I believe Norman O. Brown was the most distinguished faculty member in the history of UCSC. Certainly he was a model of what a teacher, a colleague, and an engaged intellectual should be," said Neu.

Brown taught a variety of courses, mostly through the History of Consciousness Department, until his retirement in 1981. His last two books were *Closing Time* (1973), and *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (1991), a collection of essays he had written over the course of 30 years.

Brown was known for his erudite and imaginative lecture style, which was often poetic. Speaking at a UCSC commencement in 1984, he told the new graduates: "It is not a matter of having a soul, or of saving it, but more actively a matter of soul-making. The soul is creative and must create itself: it is the creative imagination."

Brown is survived by his wife of 64 years, Elizabeth P. Brown; his sons Stephen and Thomas; daughters Rebecca and Susan; grandsons Alex Brown and Jeremy Gussin; and granddaughters Lisa Brown, Meika Scott-Brown, and Sara Gussin.

There will be a celebration of the life of Norman O. Brown on Saturday, October 19, at 3 p.m. at UCSC's Performing Arts Second Stage (the building next to the Mainstage in the Theater Arts Center). A map of that area of the campus is available at <http://maps.ucsc.edu/cmartscenter.html>.
