

THE WRITINGS OF NORMAN O. BROWN — *LIFE AGAINST DEATH*

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ix—(Brown inherited) from the Protestant tradition a conscience which insisted that intellectual work should be directed toward the relief of man's estate.

xi—We are concerned with reshaping psychoanalysis into a wider general theory of human nature, culture, and history, to be appropriated by the consciousness of mankind as a new stage in the historical process of man's coming to know himself.

xii—Psychoanalysis represents a new stage in the general evolution of human self-consciousness.

3—There is one word which, if we only understand it, is the key to Freud's thought. That word is “repression.” The whole edifice of psychoanalysis Freud said, is based up the theory of repression.

4—Freud: “The whole of psychoanalytic theory is in fact built up on the perception of the resistance exerted by the patient when we try to make him conscious of his unconscious.”

Freud: “The essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting or keeping something out of consciousness.” Brown: The essence of repression lies in the refusal of the human being to recognize the realities of his human nature.

6—Freud's first paradox, the existence of a repressed unconscious, necessarily implies the second and even more significant paradox, the universal neurosis of mankind...Neurosis is not an occasional aberration; it is not just in other people; it is in us, and in us all the time.

9—Man is the animal which represses himself and which creates culture or society in order to repress himself.

10—Neurosis is an essential consequence of civilization or culture...We must be prepared to analyze clinically as neurosis not only the foreign culture we dislike, but also our own.

80—Sadism represents an extroversion of the death instinct, a transformation of the desire to die into the desire to kill.

106—The essential point in the Freudian diagnosis of human sociability was seen by Roheim: men huddle into hordes as a substitute for parents, to save themselves from independence, from “being left alone in the dark.” Society was not constructed, as Aristotle says, for the sake of life and more life, but from defect, from death and the flight from death, from fear of separation and fear of individuality.

148—If we retain the original insight that reenactment is a prerequisite for gaining consciousness of the repressed unconscious, we must suppose that there is no direct channel of communication between consciousness and the repressed unconscious, with the result that the repressed unconscious energies must go out into external reality before they can be perceived by consciousness. Freud:

Anything arising from within that seeks to become conscious must try to transform itself into external perceptions.

The repressed impulses must first find real objects in the external world and attach themselves to the real objects before their nature can become manifest to the subject.

154—The transformation of psychoanalysis into a project to change human culture is the solution to the unsolved problem of the transference. The transference was necessary because the unconscious can become conscious only if it is transformed into an external perception, and the external perception had to be based on enactment and on actual love (or hate).

In more technical terms, the unconscious can become conscious only through projection onto the external world. But...human culture is a set of projections of the repressed unconscious. Like the transference, human culture is created by the repetition compulsion and constantly produces new editions of the infantile conflicts. Like the transference, human culture exists in order to project the infantile complexes into concrete reality, where they can be seen and mastered.

155—Human history, as neurosis subject to the law of the increasing return of the repressed, through its long evolution from totemism to monotheism on the one hand and the modern state on the other, has projected more and more of the Oedipus complex into the external world, where it can be seen and mastered.

Human culture is thus one vast arena in which the logic of the transference works itself out; the infantile fantasies which create the universal human neurosis cannot themselves be directly apprehended or mastered, but their derivatives in human culture can. Human consciousness can be liberated from the parental (Oedipal) complex only by being liberated from its cultural derivatives, the paternalistic state and the patriarchal God. Thus culture actually does for all mankind what the transference phenomena were supposed to do for the individual.

158—The aim of psychoanalysis—still unfulfilled, and still only half-conscious—is to return our souls to our bodies, to return ourselves to ourselves...Hence, since sublimation is the essential activity of soul divorced from body, psychoanalysis must return our sublimations to our bodies; and conversely, sublimation cannot be understood unless we understand the nature of the soul in psychoanalytic terminology, the nature of the ego.

Sublimation is the “ego-syntonic” way of disposing of libido. The deflection of libido from its original aim in sublimation is a deflection caused by the influence of the ego; the

desexualization is the consequence of passing through the crucible of the ego. Sexual energy is bodily energy, and the desexualized energy is disembodied energy, or energy made soulful.

161—When the beloved (parental) object is lost, the love that went out to it is redirected to the self; but since the loss of the beloved object is not accepted, the human ego is able to redirect the human libido to itself only by deluding the libido by representing itself as identical with the lost object. In Freud's words,

When the ego assumes the features of the object, it forces itself, so to speak, upon the id as a love-object and tries to make good the loss of that object by saying, 'Look, I am so like the object, you can as well love me.'

In technical Freudian terms, an identification replaces object-love, and by means of such identifications object-libido is transformed into narcissistic libido. The lost objects reinstated in the human ego are past objects; the narcissistic orientation of the human ego is inseparable from its regressive orientation...The separation in the present is denied by reactivating fantasies of past union, and thus the ego interposes the shadow of the past between itself and the full reality of life and death in the present.

162—What we call "character" is this shell imprisoning the ego in the past:

The character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes.

What we call "conscience" perpetuates inside of us our bondage to past objects now part of ourselves: the super-ego

unites in itself the influences of the present and of the past. In the emergence of the super-ego we have before us, as it were, an example of the way in which the present is changed into the past.

163—The starting point for the human form of cognitive activity is loss of a loved reality:

The essential precondition for the institution of the function of testing reality is that objects shall have been lost which have formerly afforded real satisfaction. (Freud)

But the lost objects are retained and are what the cognitive ego is looking for...Human consciousness is inseparable from an active attempt to alter reality, so as to "regain the lost objects." The reality which the ego thus constructs and perceives is culture; and culture, like sublimation (or neurosis) has the essential quality of being a "substitute-gratification," a pale imitation of past pleasure substituting for present pleasure, and thus essentially desexualized.

165—In sublimation the erotic component, what is projected is these infantile fantasies, not the reality of the id. Sublimation is the continuation not of infantile sexuality but of infantile

dreaming;...Culture, therefore, the product of sublimation, is, in Plato's words, the imitation of an imitation; in Pindar's words, the shadow of a dream.

166—The real nature of the primal fantasies is revealed by the fact that they cannot be remembered, but only re-enacted...The infantile fantasy substitutes for the reality of living-and-dying. Or to put it another way, they do not exist in memory or in the past, but only as hallucinations in the present, which have no meaning except as negations of the present.

168—As Ferenczi said, the tendency to rediscover what is loved in all the things of the hostile outer world is the primitive source of symbolism...Nonbodily cultural objects (sublimations) inherit the fantasies, and thus man in culture, homo sublimans, is man dreaming while awake...Fantasies, like everything else, exist only in the present, as hallucinations in the present, and must be attached to objects in the present. According to psychoanalytic theory, after their detachment from the body (in Freud's blunt style, after masturbation is given up) they are projected into reality, forming that opaque medium called culture, through which we apprehend and manipulate reality.

But the ego cannot get rid of the body: it can only negate it, and by negating it, dialectically affirm it. Hence all symbolism, even in the highest flights of sublimation, remains body symbolism...Infantile sexuality (in the infantile sexual organizations) negates the world and attempts to make a world out of its own body. Sublimation negates the body of childhood and seeks to construct the lost body of childhood in the external world. Infantile sexuality is an autoplastic compensation for the loss of the Other; sublimation is an alloplastic compensation for the loss of the Self.

169—The child has to make a choice between love of self and love of the other: according to Freud, the boy's self-love or narcissism turns him away from his mother. But the self so loved is fraudulent: self-love replaces parental love, but, according to Freud, only at the cost of splitting the ego into parent and child. Through the institution of the super-ego the parents are internalized and man finally succeeds in becoming father of himself, but at the cost of becoming his own child and keeping his ego infantile.

170—Hence the hidden aim of sublimation and the cultural process is the progressive discovery of the lost body of childhood.

The repressed unconscious can become conscious only by being transformed into an external perception, by being projected. According to Freud, the mythological conception of the universe, which survives even in the most modern religions, is only psychology projected onto the outer world. Not just mythology but the entirety of culture is a projection. In the words of Spender, "The world which we create—the world of slums and telegrams and newspapers—is a kind of language of our inner wishes and thoughts."

The first breakthrough of the insight which flowers in psychoanalysis occurs in German idealism, in Hegel's notion of the world as the creation of spirit and, even more, in Novalis' notion of the world as the creation of the magic power of fantasy. In fact, there is a certain loss of insight reflected in the tendency of psychoanalysis to isolate the individual from culture. Once we recognize the limitations of talk from the couch or rather, once we

recognize that talk from the couch is still an activity in culture, it become plain that there is nothing for psychoanalysis to psychoanalyze except these projections—the world of slums and telegrams and newspapers—and thus psychoanalysis fulfills itself only when it becomes historical and cultural analysis. It also follows that consciousness of the repressed unconscious is itself a cultural and historical product, since the repressed unconscious can become conscious only by being transformed into an external perception in the form of a cultural projection.

171—Sublimation is the search for lost life;...Sublimation is the mode of an organism which must discover life rather than live, must know rather than be. As a result of its origin in object-loss (first loss of the Other, then loss of Self) human consciousness (the ego) is burdened not only with a repressive function distinguishing men from other animals, but also with a cognitive function distinguishing men from animals.

Thus human consciousness, in addition to the function of exploring the outside world, is burdened with the additional task of discovering the sequestered inner world...Projections, with their fetishistic displacement of inner fantasies, must distort the external world...Projections bring the inner world to consciousness only under the general sign of negation or alienation; their relation to the inner world must be denied.

231—If we take seriously the position that human history is the history of a neurosis, then psychoanalysis (unless Freud was sent to us by God) is inside the neurosis, and the neurosis itself must always have contained those “attempts at explanation and cure.”

264—The modern psychology of possession is superimposed over a deeper psychology of giving, and is constructed, by the process of denial, out of its archaic opposite.

The archaic institution of the gift is the clue to the psychology of the whole sector of the sacred-superfluous. In the archaic economy gift and countergift organize the division of labor; prestige and power are conferred by ability to give; gifts are sacred and the gods exist to receive gifts (do ut des). Hence the principle of nonenjoyment, the compulsion to work & to produce an economic surplus, is contained in the need to give; an economic surplus is created in order to have something to give; archaic man does not enjoy because he needs to give.

265—What then is the psychology of the need to give? We have already postulated a connection between the need to give and the principle of nonenjoyment: that is to say, the psychology of giving takes us beyond egoism, beyond the desire for individual happiness—in Freud's phrase, beyond the pleasure principle.

Archaic gift giving (the famous potlatch is only an extreme example) is one vast refutation of the notion that the psychological motive of economic life is utilitarian egoism. Archaic man gives because he wants to lose; the psychology is not egoist but self-sacrificial. Hence the intrinsic connection with the sacred. The gods exist to receive gifts, that is to say sacrifices; the gods exist in order to structure the human need for self-sacrifice.

281—The basic characteristic of sublimation is the desexualization of sexual energy by its redirection toward new objects. But as we have seen, desexualization means disembodiment. New objects must substitute for the human body, and there is no sublimation without the projection of the human body into things; the dehumanization of man is his alienation of his own body. He thus acquires a soul (the higher spirituality of sublimation), but the soul is located in things. Money is “the world’s soul.”

284-5—The death instinct is the core of the human neurosis. It begins with the human infant’s incapacity to accept separation from the mother, that separation which confers individual life on all living organisms and which in all living organisms at the same time leads to death. It is in the nature of finite things, says Hegel, that the hour of their birth is the hour of their death. Hence the incapacity of the human species to die, and therefore to live, begins at birth, in what psychoanalysis calls the birth trauma. Thus the Platonic argument for immortality really amounts to a denial that we were ever born. Humanity is that species of animal which cannot die...

Mankind’s diversion from the actuality of living-and-dying, which is always in the present, is attained by reactivation in fantasy of the past and regressive attachment to fantasy of the past, ultimately the womb from which life came. Thus again the incapacity to accept death only results in the morbidity of an active death wish.

286—The ambition of civilized man is revealed in the pyramid—the achievement of the first modern individualists. In the pyramid repose both the hope of immortality and the fruit of compound interest. As Heichelheim showed, the Iron Age, at the end of which we live, democratized the achievements of the Bronze Age (cities, metals, money, writing) and opened up the pursuit of kings (money and immortality) to the average citizen. But the inevitable irony redresses the balance in favor of death. Death is overcome on condition that the real actuality of life pass into these immortal and dead things; money is the man; the immortality of an estate or a corporation resides in the dead things which alone endure.

287—Civilized economic activity has this death-defying and deadening structure because economic activity is sustained by psychic energy taking the form of sublimation. All civilized sublimation, and not only the pursuit of money, has this structure. Thus in the first of his odes Horace sees poetry as a career, like all careers (trader, soldier, athlete, etc.), basically characterized by self-sacrifice and instinctual renunciation; it is nevertheless worthwhile if success will enable him “to strike the stars with head sublime.” At the end of the third book he celebrates his success:

I have wrought a monument more enduring than bronze, and loftier than the royal accumulation of the pyramids. Neither corrosive rain nor raging wind can destroy it, nor the innumerable sequence of years nor the flight of time. I shall not altogether die.

I shall not altogether die—the hope of the man who has not lived, whose life has been spent conquering death, whose life has passed into those immortal pages.