

Norman O. Brown. *The Challenge of Islam: The Prophetic Tradition.*

Lectures, 1981. Intro. Jay Cantor. Ed. Jerome Neu. Santa Cruz: New Pacific Books • Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2009. 164 pp. ISBN 9781556438028 (paperback).

The present volume comprises transcribed lectures on Islam of the eminent late philosopher and critic Norman O. Brown, delivered at Tufts University in 1981. (Versions of two of these lectures were published in his *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* [University of California Press, 1991] as chapters 5 and 6, “The Prophetic Tradition” and “The Apocalypse of Islam”.) They are preceded by a significant introduction by Jay Cantor, who situates the chapters to follow against the broader trajectories of Brown’s thought. His famous *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Wesleyan, 1959), Cantor writes, is a “profound and original rereading of psychoanalysis, charting the course of a neurosis called civilization”; his later *Love’s Body* (Random House, 1966) argues that “there is only poetry—symbol commenting on symbol.” The poetic imagination, as envisaged by Brown, seeks through the “continual production of symbols (prophecies of desire’s realm, as Blake might have called them)” to “[enact] erotic acts of thinking, producing a strange amalgam, an analytic method of symbol creation”—a discourse “at once symbolically creative and expository” (xv). Thus Brown’s work harbors the promise of a “prophetic critique”: a discourse that may judge the “triumphalist ‘progress’ inscribed in the history of the technological West as no progress at all” (xii). History for Brown is instead the “book of symbols” produced by culture and politics, a book that is not narrative or linear so much as recursive and refracted. And Islam, as part of the repressed history of the West, allows Brown to discover new material according to the same themes. As Cantor writes, “To see the textures and creations of history as esoteric runes whose reading can reveal the collective psyche of an epoch, of the body, or the cosmos itself...is not, for Brown, to leave history behind, but to thicken its textures, expand its meanings, and never simply to wish away its conflicts” (xvi).

Brown’s genius, more than a method and less than a theory, lay essentially in his ability to see the similarities in “underlying themes and hidden desires of different systems; he would carefully remove the encrustations of habit, and reveal a thought’s underlying algebra, its archetypal shape. Then he would set out to find identities with other thoughts” (xiv). This is reflected in how he reads Islam, whose history (as he views it) comprises “a series of decisive (requiring decision) apocalyptic moments, moments that will recur throughout a history that has no set end-point. These moments must (through the action, the cooperation with God’s call by the believer’s response) break through the crust of the familiar way of doing business (whether globalized or traditional), and lead one to an action that will necessarily be historical and personal (towards purification) because the drive of God’s will is always towards unity,

both within and without" (xxv).

The occasion of his lectures, Brown begins Lecture 1, was in large part precipitated by his discovery of his own "total inability" to understand the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which drove him to "do [his] homework" (2) in reconsidering Islam. (The historical moment of the volume thus bears an uncanny resemblance to the surge of funding for Islamic studies following the 2001 attacks on the United States—were only early twenty-first century reconsiderations as inventive or generous!) He articulates his central thesis: "Islam is not another cultural tradition. (...) It is not another oriental tradition: it is an alternative, a rival interpretation of *our* tradition. (...) Islam is a wager that Christianity has gone wrong" (3). This first chapter addresses the emergence of Islam as a Semitic prophetic tradition on the margins of world empires yet outside the repetition compulsion of east versus west; it disrupts the conventional, whiggish periodization of Ancient-Medieval-Modern (5). Rather, "universal history with cosmopolitan intent" (the title of the lecture) requires the recognition that civilization "from start to finish" is a theocratic and the city itself a theopolitical structure. Prophecy, in Brown's view, emerges as a critical response to the injustice, inequality, and idolatry of the polis.

Lecture 2, "Islam and Judaism," refuses the history of victors. Brown relates the emergence of Islam to the Ebionite heresy of a gnostic Judeo-Christianity whose theology maintained the Mosaic Law as reformed by Jesus the prophet. Brown does not reduce Islam to Ebionism but insists, "legitimacy is not determined by triumph. And Islam, in this context, by picking up and reactivating what was from the point of view of orthodox Christianity a development destined to failure, changes the picture of our notion of history and success and failure" (16–17). Jewish Christianity, that is, by insisting on the absolute distinction between God and prophet and the union of God and prophecy, "anticipated, and helps to explain, the Islamic point of view" (18). Thus, making continuous references to proximate developments in Islam, Brown elaborates the adoptionist theology of the Ebionites, their federal universalism, their critique of kingship as of the temple priesthood, and their notion of baptism as the primary emblem of purification rather than redemptive sacrifice—all with a view to understanding, with Schoeps, the world-historical "paradox" by which "Jewish Christianity indeed disappeared within the Christian church, but was preserved in Islam" (27).

Lecture 3, "Islam and Christianity," continues this resolutely comparative approach with a focus on the two Christian heresies of Gnosticism and Docetism. If orthodox Trinitarian Christianity takes God's incarnation as a "literal historical fact" to be the decisive historical event, effectively accounting for history save for one's personal salvation, the Gnostic/Docetic alternative insists that prophecy (rather than incarnation) is the mode in which the divine and the human miraculously meet (33). Hence the importance of the prophetic

vision and its creative imagination drawing on the imaginal realm as it calls to theomorphic reality. And hence the bridge between Brown's Blakean sensibility and the subject of these lectures. It is only through Islam, Brown concludes, that we can understand "heretical Christianity" (32).

Lecture 4, "The Book," proves "a homage to the Qur'ān" (45). Brown deeply understands the *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān. He describes Islam's distinct "theology of the Word": the primordial *logos* is scripture, not spoken; it is not unambiguously speech but is an arche-writing, the well-guarded Tablet prior to the division between speech and writing. He cites Derrida here, and Mallarmé, and Vico, but does not press the point; he does not, as is tempting these days, suggest that Islam somehow prefigured various periods of Western literary criticism or philosophy. Most of his comparative references are to Joyce, due only to whom (he says) Westerners can dimly apprehend the event of the Qur'ān. For the Qur'ān, he says, like *Finnegan's Wake*, effects a "destruction of human language"—the Qur'ān reveals language as "crushed," citing Nasr, "by the power of the Divine Word" (50–51). This is the destruction of meaning and the semiotics of representation, turned entirely to an untranslatable event of effective (performative) force. Comparing Nietzsche's "aphoristic fragmentation" and contrasting Dante's closed structure with the Qur'ān's more fluid simultaneous totality, Brown reflects on its challenges to Western readers. The Qur'ān is a "break" with mimesis, with realism. If Homer and the Bible (Auerbach) have "taught us to trust narrative, have given us the idea that understanding takes the form of a story...and that history is the story of what actually happened," the Qur'ān rather "is a thunderclap putting an end to that" (55). Its narratives differ: God is not an actor in eschatological dramas. Islam's scripture instead "abruptly retracts the historicity of God. Beyond drama, beyond irony...the sublime" (58).

The present lectures are the work of a humanist in the best sense of the term, a self-professed "amateur" in Islamic studies. And they demonstrate, as he hopes at the outset, that you really can "get quite far if you apply yourself and even keep your amateur status" (2). But there remain moments when his creative genius is limited by this same status, in that its scope is bounded by the limited secondary sources he draws on: Nasr, Hodgson, Massignon, Wensinck, and especially Lewis and Corbin (see his recommended bibliography: 105–106, "The Essential Books"). This is clearest in the following chapters, where his reliance on the latter two develops into highly overstated arguments especially about the difference between Sunnī and Shī'ite "orientations". This is primarily a function of academic Islamic studies in the late 1970s (just following the publication of *Orientalism*). The sources available to him date these lectures, making their frequent prescience all the more uncanny.

Lecture 5, "The Succession," seeks to give a "sense of the mixture, as in Shakespeare," of the "human factor and the issue of principles at this critical

moment which is so fateful for the rest of Islamic history” (62). He sketches two modes of theopolitical authority: the Sunnī orientation, which insists there is to be no more prophecy and that the practice and historical memory of the Madina community are sufficient, and the Shī‘ite orientation, by which the successor has to be a living leader (as opposed to a diffused principle of communal authority) “entrusted” with the authoritative interpretation of the sublime Word (71). From contrasting principles of authority, however, Brown then concludes that the “doctrine of the imām enabled Shī‘ism to break out of that immobility which inherently threatens and finally overtook Sunnī Islam.” This is the tired closing of the gates of *ijtihād*, sufficient at Brown’s historical moment to explain the Sunnī world’s languor. Before Hallaq and with Lewis, Brown understands Shī‘ism to “[renew] the Gnostic impulse which is the heart of Islam” and which Sunnism forsakes in its prototypical compromise—not with worldly authority, as in other polemics, but with a rather flat notion of tradition as the reproduction of the past. Yet Shī‘ite Islam too for Brown is confronted with the intractable problem of the relationship between prophecy and theology, that is, the problem of history, and seeks to redress this relation in its thoroughly tragic mode. The problem itself however is originary: its elements are distinctively crystallized across various prophetic traditions but, as set forth in Brown’s first lecture, are internal to theopolitics and so civilization itself.

Lecture 6, “Revolutionary Islam,” closely continues these themes. For Sunni as well as Shī‘ī traditions, Brown writes, Islamic history is a “story of failure”, at least following the early Caliphs. Its failure of unity (the early *fitnas*) meant that there was no imperial council organizing Islamic theology: its classical doctrines are “shaped in dissension” (77), and the prophetic impulse of critique found itself “unable to conquer the state” (78) and its violence. In the wake of this defeat, Brown elaborates the idealized schematic of the prior chapter, Sunnī Islam took up an oppositional attitude forced into various accommodations, while Shī‘ī Islam repudiated the existing structures altogether to adopt a position of “permanent revolution”. This chapter culminates with a marvelous if overstated lengthy section on the antinomian tendencies of Isma‘īli revolutionary esotericism. However, the trajectory of these chapters suggests that the Nizari “Old Man of the Mountain” is the logical culmination of Islam’s prophetic tradition, which yet—while opening fascinating avenues of critical engagement, much in the vein today of Agamben’s references to Islam—relies too heavily on a principled contrast between Sunnī and Shī‘ī configurations of theocracy.

Lecture 7, “Mystic Islam,” completes the lecture series by offering a meditation on themes of prophecy as divine epiphany and beauty as hierophany. Brown weaves between Augustine, Keats, Blake, Dante, C.S. Lewis, Ibn ‘Arabī, Rumi, and Plato, ruminating on the relationship between embodiment, love,

beauty, and theology. “In that theology of creative love, creation is *itself* to love” (102). He concludes with a quotation from Ibn ‘Arabi, and announces the end of his testimony.

A related lecture delivered at the 1983 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion is included as an appendix to this lecture series. Titled “Shi‘ite Islam: The Politics of Gnosticism”, this text proceeds in critical dialogue with Corbin, masterfully condensing and reprising the above themes of messianism and political tragedy.

Comparing aspects of Jay Cantor’s introduction and the lectures themselves provides an instructive contrast. Cantor proficiently expounds the key motifs of Brown’s thought (recourses to the body and its desires, symbols, the relation between prophecy, history, and poetry), and adequately summarizes the following lectures. When accounting for Brown’s interest in Islam, however, Cantor introduces a distance that is not reflected in the lectures themselves. Cantor asks, regarding the prophet who Brown insists will inaugurate the new, transformed political order, “What is the revised understanding of ‘God’ here required (as our previous understandings, including Islam, or Promethean deification have so clearly failed)?” (xx-xxi). He says, “It is surely not, I think, Brown’s argument that our answer could be Allah, the road already taken, but that the question of what will judge our world, what will both incite and direct our revolutionary desire, is both still open and more pressing than ever...” (xxx). Yet what Brown calls “the challenge of Islam”, its articulation of justice with history, is manifestly *not* over (for a political-theoretical elaboration that draws on Brown for precisely this argument, see his friend Robert Meister’s recent opus *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* [Columbia, 2011]), and this its competing claim in and of the Western tradition is arguably precisely what drew Brown to turn to Islam in his historical moment. Cantor’s sanitizing assurances (Islam is *surely not* the answer, Islam has *so clearly* failed) are exactly the kinds of interpolations that are refreshingly absent from Brown’s lectures, which make no effort at securing that distance and so are free to explore his topics without the moralism it invites and expresses.

Finally, deplorable though it is to end the review on this note, the book is littered with typographical mistakes far beyond the occasional misplaced comma or ad hoc diacritic: the back cover prints “Qu’ran” for “Qur’an”, Cantor’s introduction is filled with comma splices and incongruous verb tenses, and quotes in the lectures are idiosyncratically cited and formatted. The publication of these provocative and stirring lectures ought to be heralded across the humanities as posthumous testament to a lively, humble, restless, humorous, allusive, and daring genius, all of which means their poor production is all the more regrettable.

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