

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9319-4822>

Rob Wilson

University of California
at Santa Cruz

Transfiguration as World- -Making Practice of Conversion: Being Always Converting as Theo-Poetics from Norman O. Brown to Bob Dylan

Abstract

By a transfigurative recoding of selfhood and a quasi-Biblical intertextual analogizing of historical events into figures across space and time, Bob Dylan shaped his initial conversion as a poetic name-change from Zimmerman-to-Dylan (as he would later write more broadly across the larger body of his poetry). This theo-poetic transformation of identity into a more poetic and spiritual being is what Norman O. Brown theorized, in *Love's Body* and *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* if not throughout his works early and late, as the world-transforming tactic of “figural interpretation, [that] discovered world-historical significance in any [everyday trivial] event—an event which remains trivial for those who do not have eyes to see.” *Transfiguration* for Brown (as for the metaphor-rich Dylan) was not just a figural, intertextual, or rhetorical shift of tropes, it also implied all the more so a biomorphic *metamorphosis* of self and the world, soul and matter, bios and logos. This shift of self and the world occurs via a morphological transformation of terms and forms in the event of *metanoia*. Such metaphoric twists and turns of apocalyptic metamorphosis aim to remake the world into more fluid, multiple forms of becoming and uplifting as befits what a flourishing imagination longs for (via transubstantiation) and what Brown defines (and Dylan performs as) so many feats of *transfigurative metamorphosis*: what Brown calls “Metamorphosis, or transubstantiation.” “Transubstantiate my form, says Daphne [as the muse to poet Apollo, archetypal Greco-Roman figure] through the incarnational claim, ‘be leaf’ (belief).” In this essay, Brown will take on the role of the muse Daphne provoking and inspir-

ing poet-figures like Apollo to embrace what he defines as the process of “be leafing” (believing) patterns. Belief would take place relentlessly in a world-transforming poet like Bob Dylan, in many ways the most important poet of his world era.

Slowa kluczowe: konwersja, Norman O. Brown, Bob Dylan, transfiguracja

Keywords: conversion, Norman O. Brown, Bob Dylan, transfiguration

[...] the soul and the world are one in a third hidden thing, in imagination of which the work [of poetic transfiguration] arises.

Robert Duncan

After the fall; in old age: *sero te amavi, pulchritudo tam antiqua et tam nova, sero te amavi*. Late I learnt to love thee, beauty as ancient as thou art new; late I learnt to love thee.

Norman O. Brown, translating St. Augustine’s *Confessions*
into the figure of *Love’s Body*

I was interested in the new and profound [intertextual] ways in which, especially in the songs of this century, Dylan’s songwriting engages in what he has called “transfiguration.” That is something he has always done with the traditions of folk, as he pretty much spelled out in the Nobel Lecture in June 2017. There he spoke of picking up and internalizing the vernacular, but the way he describes that process is notable: “You’ve heard the deep-pitched voice of John the Revelator and you saw the Titanic sink in a boggy creek. And you’re pals with the wild Irish rover and the wild colonial boy.” Heard, saw, pals with. That early transfiguration through the intertextual process leads to a parallel outcome with the classical authors...

Richard F. Thomas.¹

Bob Dylan once told a “Rolling Stone” interviewer, when his late-style album *Tempest* (2012) had just come out wherein he conjured a lifetime of tropes, masks, genres, selves, and prosodic forms of poetic-musical creation into a caustic style that has been called his “redeeming strangeness,” “Transfiguration is what allows you to crawl out from under the chaos and fly above it. That’s how I can still do what I do and write the songs I sing and just keep on

¹ K. Robinson, *Worlds Out of Worlds: A Look2 Essay on Robert Duncan*, “Ploughshares” 2014, Issue 124 (Fall), <https://www.pshares.org/issues/fall-2014/worlds-out-worlds-look2-essay-robert-duncan> [accessed: 17.02.2021]; N.O. Brown, *Love’s Body*, Berkeley–London: University of California Press 1966, pp. 205–206; R.F. Thomas interview with S. Conficoni, Bob Dylan at 80: Interview with R.F. Thomas, Author of *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, 24.05.2021, in the Italian journal “Kalporz,” <https://www.kalporz.com/2021/05/bob-dylan-at-80-interview-with-professor-richard-f-thomas-author-of-why-bob-dylan-matters/?fbclid=IwAR3SafhXn1hMkVNLqFsU7IL0Bc1BM9kBi8szjZ2v5QoGGJwB13sD0W1n9oE> [accessed: 17.02.2021]. See also R.F. Thomas, *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, New York: Harper Collins 2018.

moving.”² Dylan went on to explain to baffled journalist Mikal Gilmore what he meant literally, spiritually, and geopolitically as posited against the more everyday claims of empirical neo-liberal reality. Dylan’s vocational drive to creation-via-transfiguration occurs by means of a mutating and performative poetics of survival and career transformation. This takes place in what is recognized as a “never-ending” performance on globe-circling roads years after year. Dylan’s poetic thus enacts what we can call a perpetual ludic metamorphosis that initially allowed him to transform his birth self, Robert Allan Zimmerman, into the song maker and writer the Nobel Prize Committee on Literature glowingly recognized in 2016 as world-important poet.

In the 2012 interview with Rolling Stone, Dylan cryptically alluded to a Hells Angels motorcycle fatality in Southern California as somehow linked to his own motorcycle accident as well as reflecting “old mystical books” from the Vatican Library in Rome where archives of Medieval typology and luminous mysteries of transfiguration were stored and Dylan had visited during his Rome concerts where he met Pope John Paul II and sang “Blowing in the Wind” for his holiness.³ This poetic name change from Zimmerman to Dylan, as the poet was implying, can be considered the poet’s first *conversion* of self-identity into a more spiritual, poetic, and creative being: Dylan was following the mandate of non-conforming identity he may have taken from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays or from the larger surrounding American culture of self-driven metamorphosis that became energized across the 1960s as a self-fashioning idiom of post-Beat adventure and self-quest for change. As Norman O. Brown now and again recodes and translates this Pauline mandate to convert, “And be not conformed to this world [*be nonconformists*]; but be ye transformed [*metamorphose yourselves*] by the renewing of your mind.”⁴

To explain his life-changing transfiguration to a semi-skeptical journalist Gilmore, Dylan quotes from the long-forgotten biography *Hell’s Angel: The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and the Hell’s Angel Motorcycle Club* (2001) to contend that when this Bobby Zimmerman, president of the San Bernardino Hell’s Angels, had died in a traumatic motorcycle accident at Bass Lake, Cal-

² M. Gilmore, *Bob Dylan Unleashed*, “Rolling Stone,” 27.03.2012, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-dylan-unleashed-189723/> [accessed: 17.02.2021].

³ For a prosody-based study of Dylan’s mutating yet coherent poetics of masking and metamorphosis album by album, see T. Hampton, *Bob Dylan’s Poetics. How the Songs Work*, New York: Zone Books 2019. On Dylan’s poetics of transfiguration more broadly considered as an American spiritual and cultural-political tactic, see also R. Wilson, *Tangled Up in Blue Poetics. Timothy Hampton Reads a Bob Dylan for the Ages*, “Los Angeles Review of Books,” 24.05.2019, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/tangled-up-in-blue-poetics-timothy-hampton-reads-a-bob-dylan-for-the-ages/> [accessed: 17.02.2021].

⁴ This sentence is from Saint Paul, *Romans*: 12: 2 as translated from the Greek into an American popular culture idiom by Norman O. Brown and is used as the main epigraph to *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (1991), p. v.

ifornia in 1964, and when Dylan later had his own motorcycle accident along the back roads of Woodstock, New York in 1966, that his given family identity of Robert Alan Zimmerman as Jewish middle-class son from Hibbing, Minnesota in 1941 was abolished. In effect, Dylan claims, he was “transfigured” into what would become lifelong poetic identity as *Bob Dylan*. “You know what this [process] is called? It’s called transfiguration,” Dylan prods Gilmore and the rock audience. “Have you ever heard of it?... I’m not like you, am I? I’m not like him, either. I’m not like too many others. I’m only like another person who’s been transfigured. How many people like that or like me do you know?” Bob Dylan as Hibbing son was overcome as Bob Zimmerman, and became the son and heir of Dylan Thomas, King David, Woodie Guthrie, Walt Whitman, Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands, and God (if not necessarily in that order).

By such a brashly mystical recoding of selfhood and willed analogizing of these two motorcycle “accidents” separated across space and time from Southern California to rural New York state, Dylan in effect was enacting (as he would across the larger body of his poetry) what Norman O. Brown had theorized and embraced, in *Love’s Body* (1966) if not throughout his many books early and late, as the modernist tactic of “figural interpretation, [that] discovered world-historical significance in any [everyday trivial] event—an event which remains trivial for those who do not have eyes to see.”⁵ *Transfiguration* for Brown was not just (or merely) a figural, inter-textual, or rhetorical shift of tropes, as we will discuss, it also all the more so implied a creatural *metamorphosis* of self and world, soul and matter, bios and logos, via a morphological transformation of bio-poetic forms that remade the world into something befitting what the flourishing imagination longed for (via transubstantiation) as what he termed (in his 1991 book-length elaboration) *Apocalypse and/ or Metamorphosis*: “Metamorphosis, or transubstantiation: we already and from the first discern him [alluding to passages from Jesus, Ovid, the I Ching, and Eric Auerbach’s “figura”] making this thing other... Transubstantiate my form, says Daphne [as muse to Apollo, the archetypal Greco-Roman poet].”⁶ As Brown contends in the opening essay to this collection, “Apocalypse: The Place of Mystery in the Life of the Mind,” invoking the Book of Revelations, Moses, George Fox, Jesus, and finally William Blake, “Thus the authority of the past is swallowed up in new creation, the word is made flesh. To see with our own eyes is second sight. To see with our own eyes is second sight” [sic]:

⁵ N.O. Brown, *Love’s Body*, “Judgment,” p. 238. Brown backs up this interpretation of poetic “realism” (as enacted in the writing styles of James Joyce, Robert Duncan, Hilda Doolittle, or Freud) as “the modern analogue of Medieval typology” with embedded allusions to the *New Testament* of Matthew (chapter XXV) and *Mimesis* by Eric Auerbach, p. 238. Further citations from *Love’s Body* will occur parenthetically to LB.

⁶ N.O. Brown, *Daphne, or Metamorphosis, Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, Berkeley: University of California 1991, p. 8.

Twofold Always. May God us keep/ From single vision and Newton's sleep."⁷ Transfiguration, in Brown's sense, implies metamorphosis, and entails, in effect, what he calls an apocalypse in the time-space compression of a conversionary "second sight" of metaphoric beauty making world, earth, self, and cosmos new.

To back up this embodiment of what Brown would more fully connect to the *fourfold* meanings of Judeo-Christian Medieval typology (literal, figurative, moral, and spiritual levels of writing/ reading) given a Dionysian dynamism in *Love's Body*, Dylan goes on to elaborate a deeper reading into Catholic theology to back up his radically self-messianic claim to world-shattering rebirth and Judaic self-sacrifice via accidental yet fateful transfiguration: "About a year later, I went to a library in Rome and I found a book about transfiguration, because it's nothing you really hear about every day, and it's in that mystical realm, and I found out only enough to know that, uh, OK, I'm not an authority on it, but it kind of sets you straight on what sets you apart." Dylan even goes on to allude to the Mormon latter-day prophet Joseph Smith's autobiography *No Man Knows My History* to affirm another analogous transformation of individual life-history into a version of Judeo-Christian mystery, spiritual uplift, and prophetic conversion: "The title [*No Man Knows My History*] could refer to me."⁸ Dylan had notoriously claimed, back in 1975, that the name Bob Dylan "was given to me—by God" in a moment of "inspiration"; indeed, his earliest use of this Dylan Thomas-echoing Welch last name goes all the way back (beyond these latter two motorcycle accidents) to Dinkytown folk clubs in the college metropolis of Minneapolis around 1958 or 1959 where he started to perform in a mimic voice as the Guthrie-like poetic drifter blowing into town from the Dust Bowl roads of working-class Americana, Bob Dylan.⁹ Still, Dylan's deviously well-crafted autobiography *Chronicles Volume One* (2004) also alludes to this same Hell's Angel Bobby Zimmerman incident to ratify his enduringly mytho-poetic name change into Bob Dylan: "The muffler fell off his bike, he made a U-turn to retrieve it in front of the pack and was instantly killed. That person is gone. That was the end of him."¹⁰ Robert Zim-

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁸ See *Bob Dylan Unleashed*. On Dylan's claims to "transfiguration," see also G. Maxwell, *How Does It Feel? Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Bob Dylan, and the Philosophy of Rock and Roll*, Nashville, Tennessee: Persistent Press 2015, pp. 215–219. Maxwell argues for the literal conjunction of these two Zimmermans as a death and rebirth journey: "In his narrative of the two Bobby Zimmermans, Dylan seems to imply that something like the order of the world sacrificed another man with the same name as him to literalize the death of one of the most transformative figures in history's original identity," p. 219.

⁹ See R. Wilson, *Be Always Converting, Be Always Converted: An American Poetics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2009, "Becoming Jeremiah Inside the U.S. Empire: On the Born-Again Refigurations of Bob Dylan," p. 171.

¹⁰ B. Dylan, *Chronicles Volume One*, New York: Simon & Schuster 2004, p. 79.

merman from the Iron Ranges of Hibbing, with the help of God and the Hell's Angels, was dead and reborn as a poet: he had troped and transfigured himself into the world-refracting and prolific poet-musician, Bob Dylan, whose body of work has endured in influence and shape since his debut album *Bob Dylan* (1962) into the post-Beat quests, risks, rage, sagas, caritas, sins, composite voices, and history-drenched album of spectral recall that is *Rough and Rowdy Ways* (2020).¹¹

This latest work of music and poetry comprises an allusive, richly classical and intertextual, if not perversely sublime album of pirate-radio inspiration and American-historical transfiguration, expressed as a meta-historical vision with uncanny lines juxtaposing Kennedy's Dallas assassination in 1963 with the 1921 black assassination by mass lynching in "Murder Most Foul," "Take me back to Tulsa, to the scene of the crime."¹² The whole latter-day album embodies a post-Beat quest (in the explicit wake of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Corso born like Dylan says "on the wrong side of the tracks") for poetic transfiguration of cliché into an on-the-road self-metamorphosis and world transformation of the Florida boondocks into some American Parnassus made eternal and new, as in these stanzas from a gorgeous muse-quest song, "Key West (Philosopher Pirate)":

From down in the boondocks, way down in Key West
 I'm searching for love, for inspiration
 On that pirate radio station
 Coming out of Luxembourg and Budapest
 Radio signal, clear as can be
 I'm so deep in love that I can hardly see
 Down on the flatlands, way down in Key West
 Key West is the place to be
 If you're looking for immortality
 Stay on the road, follow the highway sign
 Key West is fine and fair

¹¹ As Burke Nixon writes of the shifty affects as transfigured in *Rough and Rowdy Ways*, "the septuagenarian Nobel Prize-winner offers us something far more lively: an album full of boasts, threats, jokes, taunts, laments, come-ons, and declarations of love, sometimes all in the same song," "Commonweal," 10.07.2020, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/man-many-moods> [accessed: 17.02.2021].

¹² As Dylan had shrewdly remarked of US post-Hiroshima history in a May 3, 2007 "Rolling Stone" interview with Jann S. Wenner, "The atom bomb fueled the entire world that came after it. It showed that indiscriminate killing and indiscriminate homicide on a mass level was possible [...]. If you look at all these early [rock] performers, they were atom-bomb-fueled." See the online archive for "Rolling Stone," <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/bob-dylan-hits-the-big-themes-from-religion-to-the-atomic-age-242544/> [accessed: 17.02.2021].

If you lost your mind, you will find it there...¹³

Key West is on the horizon line

Grant Maxwell has interpreted the turning-point event of self-transfiguration, in Dylan's life as it moves from folk guitar to electric instruments, as "a kind of prolonged death and rebirth initiation throughout the mid-sixties similar to those experienced by shamans in numerous cultures across the world," as he rightly proclaims in his insightful study *How Does It Feel?* that this Zimmerman-turned-Dylan had "died and was reborn through something like the Christian process of Transfiguration."¹⁴ At the loftiest spiritual extreme from the New Testament and what are called the Luminous Mysteries of the Rosary, these claims by Dylan must recall (via scriptural prefiguration) the light-drenched *transfiguration* of Jesus wherein this small-town Jewish carpenter's son named Yeshua from the ill-considered backwater town of Nazareth becomes radiant with grace and charismatic glory ("his face shining as the sun, and his garments became white as the light") while praying upon a mountain, and (as the Apostle Peter soon realizes) he is suddenly conversing with the Messiah-prefiguring Hebraic prophets of the old legalistic dispensation, Moses and Elijah, to the astonishment of the baffled disciples (who remain all too fearfully literal-minded and don't yet have "eyes to see, and ears to hear"). The head fisherman (and soon to become first Roman Catholic pope), Simon Peter, oddly offers Jesus to build three tents to house him and these two visionary Hebraic specters, that in its literalness causes all the grace, aura, and glory of messianic transfiguration to vanish in an instant.¹⁵

The Fourth Luminous Mystery of Transfiguration was proclaimed by Saint John Paul II as part of the Rosary, which explains or implies through prayerful recitation that the transfiguration had prepared the apostles for the coming tragedy of the Passion by prefiguring and strengthening their faith in the Risen Jesus, even as Jesus fulfilled and overcame the legalistic prophets Moses and Elias who calmly recognized and accepted Yeshua's messianic presence in

¹³ These specific Dylan song lyrics (as are the others in this essay) are quoted from the Official Bob Dylan online site, <https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/key-west-philosopher-pirate/> [accessed: 17.02.2021].

¹⁴ *How Does It Feel?*, p. 215. As Maxwell claims of Dylan's self-transfiguration as a death and rebirth journey, "A 71-year-old Dylan, in a simultaneously more open and more cantankerous mood than usual [to the "Rolling Stone" interviewer], declares unequivocally that he was fundamentally transformed in his twenties, that he died and was reborn through something like the Christian process of Transfiguration, the recipient of which becomes spiritually exalted, taking on an aspect of divinity, a process that bears a striking similarity to the shamanic initiation elucidated by Mircea Eliade and others."

¹⁵ The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 17: 1–8, Mark 9: 2–8, Luke 9: 28–36) describe this messianic transfiguration, and the Second Epistle of Peter later refers to it (2 Peter 1: 16–18).

this vision of his trans-material radiance.¹⁶ Dylan's own belated anti-modern claims for poetic transfiguration of self and world, proclaimed early and late in his own career, are drenched in such a *theo-poetics* of trans-empirical transfiguration, remaining close in meaning to Vico's root sense of *poesis-as-divinare*, an Early Humanist figure who remains close to Norman O. Brown's own world-comparative reading tactics activating transfiguration-as-transubstantiation in an apocalyptic and world-shattering *metamorphosis*.¹⁷ As Dylan avowed in early interviews with his first biographer-critic, Robert Shelton, on the verge of what would become his life-shattering conversion from before and after in 1978 to Jesus and the prophets as expressed in the triad of overtly evangelical albums *Slow Train Coming* (1979), *Saved* (1980), and *Shot of Love* (1981), if not more cryptically in the ironically entitled *Infidels* (1983). Dylan's career-long drive to write and sing poetry and prophecy remained utterly vocational, literary, and world-transforming as an obligation to become perpetually reborn as poet and musician, living out his identity as Bob Dylan by mask, trope, disguise, and metaphor. As Dylan early affirmed to anyone who would doubt this vocational commitment in the wake of King David, Arthur Rimbaud, Bertolt Brecht, and Allen Ginsberg et al, "I consider myself a poet first and a musician second. I live like a poet and I'll die like a poet."¹⁸

We would at this point invoke Norman O. Brown's no less grandly prophetic and career-summarizing hyperbole urged at the end of *Love's Body* to justify what we have been elaborating here as the world-shattering metamorphosis of Bob-Zimmerman-into-Bob-Dylan as troping event of *poesis* that simultaneously transfigures history into metaphor; reality into mystery; identity into mask; definition into hyperbole; and trivial letter into manifest signatures of the holy spirit. As Brown prophetically urges, "The antinomy between mind and body, word and deed, speech and silence, overcome. Everything is only a metaphor; there is only poetry" (LB, 266). *There is only poetry* here means that to seek "love's body" is to seek to express and embody (as Dylan would via endless proliferation of masks and metaphors) the perpetual world-transfiguration of the profane and seemingly "trivial" everyday surroundings into sacramental presence and communal end-time fulfillment. This transformation of history into metamorphosis via signs of poetic-becoming into metaphor,

¹⁶ See these contexts of allegorical interpretation as elaborated in the Rosary & Confraternity site on the Luminous Mysteries, fourth decanate on the mystery of "Transfiguration," <https://www.rosarycenter.org/homepage-2/rosary/how-to-pray-the-rosary/luminous-without-distractions/> [accessed: 17.02.2021].

¹⁷ For a Vico-based approach to reading, see R. Wilson, *Reading Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's "Dictee" as Spiritual Dictation. Falling into the Korean Uncanny*, "Uncanny: Revista de Estudos e Culturais" 2016, no. 3, pp. 9–18.

¹⁸ *Bob Dylan talks to Robert Shelton, "How Does It Feel to Be On Your Own," "Melody Maker,"* 29.07.1978, as archived online at: <https://www.expectingrain.com/dok/int/shelton1978.07.29.html> [accessed: 17.02.2021].

mask, and figura remakes not just the blocked, alienated, and bordered self but also de-reifies the broken world: in a process that moves from a deworlding of what Brown indicts as fundamentalist literalism into a world enacting as his regenerative master-trope of “love’s body.”

In such far-reaching tropological contexts, we might recall this starkly definitive claim for what Brown called the *agon* of “metapolitics” from *Love’s Body* (225): “Overcoming the world: overcoming the government of the reality-principle, which is the prince of darkness, the ruler of the darkness of the world. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the world. The reality-principle is the power-principle, *Realpolitik*, the keeper of the prison. To liberate flesh and blood from reification, overthrow the reality principle” (LB 233–234).¹⁹ Such claims to theopoetic transformation of the geopolitical reality-principle might well describe Dylan’s own recurring Jeremaic persona of caustic denunciation and radical liberation as expressed in works like “Jokerman,” “Gotta Serve Somebody,” “Saved,” “All Along the Watchtower,” and “Chimes of Freedom.” If the all-too-Pauline call to conversion collaged in this *Love’s Body* passage on Judgment (taken from *Ephesians* VI: 12) might have a caustic evangelical resonance to it in the late-capitalist era of Bush 2 and the faux-golden hand of Donald Trump, Brown’s claims for “overcoming the world” might better ring with poetic prophecy and the *ut unim sint* (“that they might become one”) force of coalitional solidarity if we invoked these beatitude-drenched lines that close Dylan’s work of prophetic liberation, “Chimes of Freedom” (1964) recalled from Civil Rights era struggles:²⁰

Through the wild cathedral evening the rain unraveled tales
 For the disrobed faceless forms of no position
 Tolling for the tongues with no place to bring their thoughts
 All down in taken-for-granted situations
 Tolling for the deaf an’ blind, tolling for the mute
 Tolling for the mistreated, mateless mother, the mistitled prostitute
 For the misdemeanor outlaw, chased an’ cheated by pursuit
 An’ we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing...
 Tolling for the aching ones whose wounds cannot be nursed
 For the countless confused, accused, misused, strung-out ones an’ worse
 An’ for every hung-up person in the whole wide universe
 An’ we gazed upon the chimes of freedom flashing.

¹⁹ See also N.O. Brown, *From Politics to Metapolitics* [in:] D. Pendall, *Walking with Nobby. Conversations with Norman O. Brown*, San Francisco: Mercury House 2008, pp. 201–214.

²⁰ See Bob Dylan’s official site: <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/chimes-freedom/> [accessed: 17.02.2021].

In such works by Dylan, as Brown had mandated across the “open field” of relentless provocation and multiple collage that is *Love’s Body*, “Freedom is poetry, taking liberty with words, breaking the rules of normal speech, violating common sense” (LB, 244). The ultimate (apocalyptic) geopolitical and psycho-geographical aim is to free the dualistic imagination from imprisonment by any reified worldview of binary enclosure and move towards what Brown called (in his essay “Dionysus in 1990”) “polymorphous bodily intercommunication” (A/M 193). Such a poetic vision would activate a dynamic of world-becoming (via figurative-laden semiotics) given to embody desires, masks, sacrifices, communions, fusions, losses, risks, dangers, and the energies of *metamorphosis*. Thus transfigured, citizens of the world republic of letters would become members of a multi-sourced communal unity Brown calls “love’s body,” in effect by dying out as an estranged, lone, bounded, possessive, and enclosed bodily form, to become changed and made new via perpetual creation and destruction into “an apotheosis of the perishable.”²¹

Troping upon love’s new-made body as a political force for life-transformation in contexts of world politics, Brown gets to the *radical* root of transgressive meaning latent inside the trope of *rebirth* by redefining the conversion experience as a call to social-becoming and world-remaking. Brown enacts this multi-sourced and braided metamorphosis-cum-transfiguration, most memorably, in his re-translation and reframing of Saint Paul’s Greek text (from *Romans 12:2*) into some kind of decolonizing hybrid English fusing the mandates of Emerson and myths of Ovid with the revolutionary resistance of Martin Luther King et al, which he affixes as the collaged Biblical epigraph to his great last book *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*: “And be not conformed to this world [*be nonconformists*]; but be ye transformed [*metamorphose yourselves*] by the renewing of your mind.” A 60s-haunted will to self-transformation and social change leads Brown to translate Christian *metanoia*—meaning to go beyond (*meta*) ordinary worldly mind (*nous*) as “the renewing of your mind”— into an Emersonian self-relying mandate to practice non-conforming social vision and a Dionysian will to tropological mutation: rebirth affirmed and refigured as perpetual *conversion-to-life-becoming*. This *poesis* of metamorphosis happens again and again, across the body of this late work, as when Brown affirms in the aptly named talk, “Dionysius in 1990,” “We cannot live without imagination; adorning and exaggerating life; lavishing of itself in change.”²²

Christopher Leigh Connery frames Brown’s *worldly* dynamic of poesis as an ongoing and non-conforming “revolutionary project”: “Transformation,

²¹ I am quoting and paraphrasing from Norman O. Brown’s interview with John Dotson on his *Ars Poetica* radio show on KAZU, December 1991, as transcribed by K. Bey Sharpe.

²² N.O. Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, p. v and 183. Further citations will occur parenthetically to A/M.

metamorphosis, ending, apocalypse: these were to be historical phenomena, never merely psychic, but in the world.”²³ Rebirth, expressing claims of being “born again” or “born from above” as variously phrased and figured as world-shattering story of “clairvoyant perception,” can be seen, in these materialized and creatural terms as a performative act of transfigured remaking of self and world entangled into malleable unity, as in Dylan’s reimagined life-history invoked above.²⁴ Never just Judeo-Christian, even if Brown draws heavily upon such sources from the canonical convert Saint Augustine to the Thief on the Cross whom the crucified Jesus vows to take with him into Paradise, rebirth becomes richly coded as polyvocal, polymorphous, broken open, freed up; not a dead scripture bound to the Bible but a breathing body of transfigured being communing with and as the world: “In freedom is fusion. Pentecostal freedom, Pentecostal fusion. Speaking with tongues: many tongues, many meanings” (LB, 253). “Many tongues” here prefigures, I think, the kind of multicultural and postcolonial world of expanded and differentiated being Brown was calling into being as love’s utopic body. Brown in effect moves beyond any strictly univocal or ethnocentric meaning to transfiguration as world-remaking practice: for, as he earlier and often had affirmed, “Pentecost is madness. The god is Dionysius” (LB, 221); that is, not just the resurrected logos of the crucified Jesus but embodiment of the ecstasy-devoured god from Nietzsche’s will to creative empowerment and from Euripides’s cross-dressing and wine-and-vengeance drenched god in *The Bacchae*.

Brown’s repeated use of *transfiguration* stays close to such wild Dionysian transformations and what he tropes into trans-binary English as both-and “apocalypse and/or metamorphosis” linking self and world, hence embodies more than just an intertextual figuration of deconstructed rhetoric, and signifies more than just a propositional reckoning of an ordinary language tied to the reality-principle of servitude, determination, ordinary selfhood and abjection.²⁵ In his deeply resonant usage, Brown echoes the origins of the Greek word *metamorphosis* (μεταμόρφωσις) which suggests a change of form, character, and appearance or function that is also a change of biological being, remaining resonant with biomorphic, alchemical, even magical changes of life-form and world-belonging as in the fables of Ovid (A/M, 8) or *The Bacchae*. To some extent, the original Latin word for *transfiguration* would push this process of life-form change closer to *figura*, meaning tied to the tropes

²³ Ch. Connery, *In Memoriam: Norman O. Brown*, ed. J. Neu, Santa Cruz, CA: New Pacific Press 2005, p. 52.

²⁴ I here invoke the language of ‘prophetic clairvoyance’ and Dionysian ‘theophany’ from Norman O. Brown’s interview with John Dotson on his *Ars Poetica* radio show on KAZU, December 1991.

²⁵ For a fuller elaboration of Brown-influenced claims for *metanoia* across a range of writers and sites, see R. Wilson, *Be Always Converting, Be Always Converted*, pp. 7–10, 99, 160, 199, 212.

and turns of language and rhetoric that alter world view and perception, as later happens in the Prospero-like white magic of Shakespeare's sonnets and romances. The later Latin-based shift from Cicero's and Quintilian's use of *figura* to denominate rhetorical "figures of speech" (*figura dicendi*) to the more grandly theo-patristic use of *figura* to signify "a prophetic foreshadowing of things to come" via linkages between Old and New Testaments, had been memorably elaborated by Erich Auerbach, whom Brown often draws upon to enact and advocate for such a figural understanding. Still, slippages between these two meanings still happen in post-Christian uses of *transfiguration*.²⁶ As one web-based dictionary summarizes this Christianizing narrowing of the trope from Ovid to Jesus, "While the Latin root, *transfigurare*, means 'change the shape of,' *transfiguration* was first used in English to mean 'the change in appearance of Christ.'"²⁷ Hayden White, Brown's colleague and co-mentor in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California at Santa Cruz, influentially created a "metahistorical" discourse approach to the languages and writing styles used by historians as shaped and governed by master tropes of metaphor, irony, synecdoche, and metonymy. As White argues in the discursive wake of Nietzsche and Foucault, "Figures of speech are the very marrow of the historian's individual style." "Remove them [tropes] from his discourse," Brown urges, "and you destroy much of its impact as «explanation» in the form of an «ideographic» description."²⁸

To be sure, Brown was the uncanny master of both uses of *figura* in language and historical figuration as rhetorical trope and as world metamorphosis: *Love's Body* activates rhetorical-poetic uses as well as more overtly sacramental-incarnational meanings to show transfiguration-by-imagination as in his repeated invocation of *hic corpus meum est* (this bread is my body... this chalice holds my blood) to refer not just to the holy communion sacrifice but to eating more broadly as in Chapter IX of *Love's Body* on "Food": "Our body is an incorporated body; we are what we eat (*man ist was er isst*). We are father (mother) eaten. The species is cannibalistic" (LB, 165). Metaphor is not just witty conceit but is "really metamorphosis" [LB 168]) incorporated into worldly practice, taking place (as in shared eating) in the communal drive to overcome disunifying boundaries, splits, breaks, wounds, and polari-

²⁶ See E. Auerbach, *Figura* [in:] *idem*, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984, pp. 21–29 ff. To signify history as "eternal recurrence," Brown approvingly invokes Tertullian's "idea of prefiguration is of certain events corresponding to other events, as type to antitype...prophecy and fulfillment" (LB, 200).

²⁷ See Vocabulary.com definition for "transfiguration": <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/transfiguration> [accessed: 17.02.2021].

²⁸ H. White, *Historicism, History, and the Imagination* [in:] *idem*, *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore–London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1978, p. 105; see also pp. 114–118; and on Erich Auerbach, pp. 158–159.

ties “between ego and external world” (LB, 148) In Brown’s strongest sense, reiterated against the deconstructive grain of skeptical irony, this means that transfiguration is “Metamorphosis, or transubstantiation” (A/M, 8), but also it means that “metamorphosis is a trope, or turning: a turn of phrase of figure of speech” (A/M, 9).

At the most poetic or sacramental extreme of introjection, the eating of food as “love’s body” resonates with the Christological sacrifice as well as the figural transformation of the external world into “real presence; in the present” (LB, 172). “The transubstantiation of the Eucharist is the transfiguration of the Resurrection” (LB, 174), here and now always broken open, burned up, sacrificed, let go—the “glorified body without spatial limitation” (LB, 174). Or, as figured back into Greek mythopoetic terms, “Dionysius, the mad god, breaks down the boundaries; releases the prisoners; abolishes repression; and abolishes the *principium individuationis*, substituting for it the unity of man and the unity of man with nature” (LB, 161). In this making new of language into sacramental presence, metaphors and events recur, recapitulate, renew, and thus turn history into recurring event and periodic return as death-and-rebirth: “It is a gathering up of time; a transfiguration of time; [renewing] the transfiguration, in which Moses and Elijah appeared unto them [the apostles] as present, talking with Jesus” (LB, 208). “Symbolic consciousness,” repeated through the use of analogy and correspondence in poetry as in recursive human history, “makes figural interpretations to accomplish the transfiguration” (LB, 208–209). In such transfigurations of history into poetry and myth, we can “rise from history to mystery: *ab historia in mysterium surgere*” (LB, 214), reworlding the world into sacred presence²⁹ and mystery, at once ordinary and charismatic as image.

Writing against reduction to any univocal literal meaning (LB, 192–195) or “unilinear time” (LB, 200), Brown’s vision of poetic metamorphosis moves from Ovid and Jesus through Emerson, Spinoza, and Nietzsche down into his beloved contemporary poets Robert Duncan, H.D., Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Edward Dorn, and Jerome Rothenberg’s *Technicians of the Sacred* if not across genres to artists like John Cage, The Grateful Dead, and Bob Dylan. In Brown’s abiding world-poetics vision of transfigured rebirth, as he radically reaffirmed to John Dotson during a KUSP FM radio interview in Santa Cruz in 1991, “...Christianity also includes, I hope Dionysians, and also apostates like William Blake and James Joyce, but also Muhammad, who was also, as I see him, a reformer of this tradition.”³⁰ Rebirth via transfiguration and metamorphosis thus becomes open-ended and yet recurs, reverts, reca-

²⁹ Here, Brown invokes Gregory the Great as cited in Auerbach’s amazing essay, *Figura*.

³⁰ Quotation from Norman O. Brown’s interview with John Dotson on his *Ars Poetica* radio show on KAZU, December 1991.

pitulates, collides, and potentially reverses the domination of time or history by death-forces and powers and enclosing determinations of the reality-principle: “Redemption is not in remote (historical) identification with a (unique) event in the past... Redemption is in the second coming, the reincarnation, his presence in the present in us” (LB, 202). In effect, *transfiguration* takes such metaphors and events from the past and projects them forward into the present and future, for this recurrence makes them new: *beauty as ancient as thou art new* as Augustine affirmed of his own belated conversion to the Christian sacraments. Against such hopeful claims for transformative meaning-making as I have affirmed here, via Dylan and Brown’s claims for poesis, we would still need to confront what cultural historian Carl E. Schorske calls Brown’s “final, almost frantic para-religious search for a world that could be unified in its irreducible multiplicity through the laws of chaos or the structure of chance.”³¹ Or, hear again the far-ranging critical *negations* of Herbert Marcuse voiced caustically against the anti-historical and sacramental ‘mystifications’ of his friend Brown in *Love’s Body*: “No Eucharist, no crucifixion, no resurrection, no mysticism... and don’t jump into [Zen] Nothing.”³² To which Brown responded, in a passage all the more poetically *repeating* his own claims, in the book’s against-the-material-grain vision, “Love comes empty handed (*Love’s Body*, p. 237); the eternal proletariat; like Cordelia, bringing Nothing.”³³ Blessed are these empty-handed ones, for theirs is already the kind kingdom of the blessed spirit, the unity of laboring body and the world in everyday beatitude.

Reframing Brown’s terms of transfiguration eco-poetically forward, as in the bio-centered and wildly “Dionysian outdoors” (LB, 229) works of Dale Pendell, transfiguration in effect translates the given world of subject-formation into an actively creative process of a trans-species bonding with flora and fauna, ingesting the pharmakon of the green world as healing and poisoning gnosis. The bio-magus Pendell, like his mentor Brown, enacts in his scholarship so many entangled processes of *worlding*, *deworlding*, and (all the more so) *reworlding*; projecting out beyond the “autopoiesis” of alienated individual selfhood to create a new green world closer to the emergent meaning of “sympoiesis,” as this term has been used by Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing to embody an experimental remaking of the *self-with-world* beyond the androcentric world of univocal and world-separated human meaning.³⁴ We can find such a *vatic* world prefigured in what poet-scholar Nathaniel Mackey calls

³¹ C.E. Schorske, *In Memoriam: Norman O. Brown*, p. 86.

³² H. Marcuse, *Love Mystified. A Critique of Norman O. Brown* [in:] *idem, Negations. Essays in Critical Theory*, London: Mayfly Books 2009; London: Penguin 1968, p. 183.

³³ See Brown’s response to Marcuse’s February 1967 critique from *Commentary* as reprinted in “Negations,” p. 186.

³⁴ See D. Haraway, *Sympoiesis* [in:] *idem, Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2016, pp. 117–125.

“the aphoristic mode and verse-like ventilation” of *Love’s Body*,³⁵ as when Brown juxtaposes Jack Kerouac, Jesus, Buddha, and Geza Roheim on the beatitude of “nothing” as projected again and again from the void: “Admit the void, accept loss forever... Freedom in the use of symbolism comes from the capacity to experience loss. Wisdom is mourning; blessed are they that mourn” (LB 260). “Call the world, if you please, the Vale of Soul-Making,” English poet John Keats predicated in a formulation Brown invoked to back up his claims to self-dispersal and negative capability as the ability to let go of the given world, to *deworld* it into loss, emptiness, and the void.³⁶ World-making was a process of soul-making, in effect, and soul-making was world-making as well; the boundary becomes mystically and mythically porous in this radical vision of “vatic vocation” that can still illuminate and transform the reified, blocked, baffled, alienated world we face.³⁷ The proper response to such poetry, as *Love’s Body* affirmed and *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* showed in illustrative chapters on Daphne, Actaeon, the Georgics, and Blake et al, was to project more metaphor, generate more prophecy, more transfiguration as the future to come: to project such new meaning as “a new creation, or not at all; poetry or not at all” (LB, 248).

Dale Pendell, that polymath scientific-poetic whiz of flora-and-fauna bonding in the High Sierras who created *Pharmako Poeia* and related bio-poetic concoctions of sacred and forbidden green-world knowledge, had asked Brown in *Walking with Nobby: Conversations with Norman O. Brown* if the ever-walking and heaven-talking magus if he had listened much to Bob Dylan’s lyrics. Nobby answered something to the effect “No but tell me more about him!” (or did I imagine this passage amid their dialogues on the music of the Grateful Dead?).³⁸ In *Closing Time*, in the chapter “An Interlude of Farce,” Brown cites Dylan’s ominously medieval end-time lyric “All Along the Watchtower,” but he uncharacteristically *misquotes* the second line (changing Dylan’s image of the “thief” voice to a “priest”), as if restaging his own belated agon of prophecy and irony taking place between the voices of Saint Paul and Hermes the Thief. This what the master-collagist terms, in this late *closing-time* context, sacred *litany* versus comedic *farce*, mockery versus myth, irony versus metaphor:

³⁵ N. Mackey, *In Memoriam: Norman O. Brown*, ed. J. Neu, Santa Cruz, CA: New Pacific Press 2005, p. 57.

³⁶ See N.O. Brown, *Mystic Islam* [in:] *idem, The Challenge of Islam: The Prophetic Tradition*, ed. J. Neu, Santa Cruz, CA: New Pacific Press 2009, p. 99.

³⁷ N. Mackey, *ibidem*, p. 59.

³⁸ I have searched for but cannot find this passage in *Walking with Nobby*. For a transspecies, radical, and ecologically informed vision of ‘worlding’ that touches on myriad flora and fauna, see D. Pendell, *Pharmako Poeia. Power Plants, Poisons & Herbcraft*, Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books 2010, with Foreword by Gary Snyder.

There must be some way out of here
Said the joker to the priest.³⁹

Brown himself, like Dylan, was long haunted by the moralizing voice of the priest, what Dylan called in “Jokerman,” the process of “keeping one step ahead of the Persecutor Within.” Surely, Norman O. Brown would have included the Lazarus-like Bob Dylan poetics of song in his apostate vision of post-Judeo-Christian and brashly Dionysian poetics and admire (if only laughing from beyond the grave) this Tambourine Man’s prolific and oceanic re-making of ‘love’s body’ into endlessly regenerated love songs from the early 1960s to the Covid-ridden years of *Rough and Rowdy Ways* with its Americana cast of muses and devils, dead presidents and jukebox history, affects mingled with romantic venom and sublime wonder. Both Dylan and Brown embraced what I have argued here is their perpetual transfiguration of the thrown world of Scarlet Town and the bleak North Country into poetry, redemption, and songs sent from the shifting beatitude of Desolation Row and Love’s Body. To instantiate such a Dionysian-Christian transfiguration and will to inventive trans-historical collage, Brown might even want to include his colorful poem from 1974, published in the UC Santa Cruz college newspaper with the Puritan-trope name, *City on the Hill*, while he was teaching undergraduate world literature courses at Cowell College. *We Must Write a Letter to Robert Duncan* as the poem is called, is written as a choral echo-chamber ‘response’ and ‘correspondence’ to the poetry lines and imagery collaged from Robert Duncan, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Philip Sydney, Jesus, St. Paul, William Blake, Walt Whitman, Denise Levertov, and Jack Kerouac. As Brown heightens, affirms, and transfigures the commonplace capitalist world of the 1970s into an altered space-time of airy, heavenly, and angelic forces and green-world ecological presence,

Poetry calls us
to respond
or correspond
That all the woods may answer and their echo ring. [...]
Poetry is heightened speech.
Which leaves the little ego behind below,
As butterfly leaves chrysalis,
And goes up into the air the common air
Of impersonal truth
And collective consciousness:
Together with him this day in heaven.
“Author’d in Heaven” (Blake); “Angeled in Heaven” (Kerouac);

³⁹ N.O. Brown, *Closing Time*, New York: Random House 1973, p. 45. Dylan’s lyric is from the 1967 album *John Wesley Harding*, <http://www.bobdylan.com/songs/all-along-watchtower/> [accessed: 17.02.2021].

A choir
The choir invisible⁴⁰

Living by transfigurations of the commonplace world into some material-spiritual “choir invisible” of love’s body, one can follow the mandate of perpetual metamorphosis Norman O. Brown has turned into a gerundive verb like *worlding*. For in order to break with the ordinary political world of “little ego” battle and collective forgetting, the self needs to *metamorphose* into a force for poetry and belief: “And be not conformed to this world [*be nonconformists*]; but be ye transformed [*metamorphose yourselves*] by the renewing of your mind.”⁴¹

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⁴⁰ N.O. Brown, *We Must Write a Letter to Robert Duncan*, “City on a Hill Press,” 7.03.1974.

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