

A close-up photograph of a fountain pen nib, likely a Montblaster Meisterstück, pointing towards the text. The pen is silver with a black grip section. The background is a blurred page of text from an old book, with some words like 'of their', 'thought by', 'of your', 'few', 'and', 'the playground', 'towards', 'no', 'to', 'who', 'of', 'the', 'of', 'the', 'of', 'the', 'of', 'the', 'of', 'the' visible. The text is in a classic serif font, possibly from a 19th-century text.

**Bloom  
de Man  
Derrida  
Hartman  
Miller**

**DECONSTRUCTION  
AND CRITICIS**



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# Deconstruction and Criticism

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HAROLD BLOOM · PAUL DE MAN

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## Preface

This is neither a polemical book nor a manifesto in the ordinary sense. If it wants to “manifest” anything, by means of essays that retain the style and character of each writer, it is a shared set of problems. These problems center on two issues that affect literary criticism today. One is the situation of criticism itself, what kind of maturer function it may claim—a function beyond the obviously academic or pedagogical. While teaching, criticizing, and presenting the great texts of our culture are essential tasks, to insist on the importance of literature should not entail assigning to literary criticism only a service function. Criticism is part of the world of letters, and has its own mixed philosophical and literary, reflective and figural strength. The second shared problem is precisely that of the importance—or *force*—of literature. What does that force consist in, how does it show itself? Can a theory be developed that is descriptive and explanatory enough to illuminate rather than pester works of art?

There are many ways of describing the force of literature. The priority of language to meaning is only one of these, but it plays a crucial role in these essays. It expresses what we all feel about figurative language, its excess over any assigned meaning, or, put more generally, the strength of the signifier vis-à-vis a signified (the “meaning”) that tries to enclose it. Deconstruction, as it has come to be called, refuses to identify the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning and shows how deeply such logocentric or incarnationist perspectives have influenced the way we think about art. We assume that, by the miracle of art, the

"presence of the word" is equivalent to the presence of meaning. But the opposite can also be urged, that the word carries with it a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning. Literary language foregrounds language itself as something not reducible to meaning: it opens as well as closes the disparity between symbol and idea, between written sign and assigned meaning.

Deconstructive criticism does not present itself as a novel enterprise. There is, perhaps, more of a relentless focus on certain questions, and a new rigor when it comes to the discipline of close reading. Yet to suggest that meaning and language do not coincide, and to draw from that noncoincidence a peculiar strength, is merely to restate what literature has always revealed. There is the difference, for instance, between sound and sense, which both stimulates and defeats the writer. Or the difference which remains when we try to reduce metaphorical expressions to the proper terms they have displaced. Or the difference between a text and the commentaries that elucidate it, and which accumulate as a variorum of readings that cannot all be reconciled.

Our essays move toward a theory of this difference, but because they retain the form of commentary they also move toward a theory of commentary. They expose the difficulty of locating meaning totally within one textual source. (Derrida's double analysis is an emblem of this, an expanding hendiadys, exegesis within or upon exegesis.) Each text is shown to imbed other texts by a most cunning assimilation whose form is the subject both of psychoanalytic and of purely rhetorical criticism. Everything we thought of as spirit, or meaning separable from the letter of the text, remains within an "intertextual" sphere; and it is commentary that reminds us of this curious and forgettable fact. Commentary, the oldest and most enduring literary-critical activity, has always shown that a received text means more than it says (it is "allegorical"), or that it subverts all possible meanings by its "irony"—a rhetorical or structural limit that prevents the dissolution of art into positive and exploitative truth.

If Federal Law obliged us to list the ingredients of our book, we would have to acknowledge a higher than average proportion



of theory in the form of poetics and semiotics, and philosophical speculation generally. The separation of philosophy from literary study has not worked to the benefit of either. Without the pressure of philosophy on literary texts, or the reciprocal pressure of literary analysis on philosophical writing, each discipline becomes impoverished. If there is the danger of a confusion of realms, it is a danger worth experiencing. Since the era of the German Romantics, however, and of Coleridge—who was deeply influenced by the philosophical criticism coming from Germany around 1800—we have not seen a really fruitful interreaction of these “sister arts.” Yet the recent revival of philosophic criticism, associated with such names as Lukács, Heidegger, Sartre, Benjamin, Blanchot, and even Richards, Burke, and Empson, is like a new dawn that should not fade into the light of common day. The important place taken in these essays by Romantic poetry is also worth noting: perhaps we have begun to understand what kind of thinking poetry is, especially Romantic poetry that was often held to be intellectually confused or idle. The emphasis on Shelley in some of the essays reflects an earlier scheme to acknowledge the importance of Romantic poetry directly, by focussing all contributions on that poet.

It should be repeated, in conclusion, that the critics amicably if not quite convincingly held together by the covers of this book differ considerably in their approach to literature and literary theory. *Caveat lector*. Derrida, de Man, and Miller are certainly boa-deconstructors, merciless and consequent, though each enjoys his own style of disclosing again and again the “abysm” of words. But Bloom and Hartman are barely deconstructionists. They even write against it on occasion. Though they understand Nietzsche when he says “the deepest pathos is still aesthetic play,” they have a stake in that pathos: its persistence, its psychological provenance. For them the ethos of literature is not dissociable from its pathos, whereas for deconstructionist criticism literature is precisely that use of language which can purge pathos, which can show that it too is figurative, ironic or aesthetic.

GEOFFREY HARTMAN



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# I

HAROLD BLOOM

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## The Breaking of Form

### I

The word *meaning* goes back to a root that signifies "opinion" or "intention," and is closely related to the word *moaning*. A poem's meaning is a poem's complaint, its version of Keats' Belle Dame, who looked *as if* she loved, and made sweet moan. Poems instruct us in how they break form to bring about meaning, so as to utter a complaint, a moaning intended to be all their own. The word *form* goes back to a root meaning "to gleam" or "to sparkle," but in a poem it is not form itself that gleams or sparkles. I will try to show that the lustres of poetic meaning come rather from the breaking apart of form, from the shattering of a visionary gleam.

What is called "form" in poetry is itself a trope, a figurative substitution of the as-it-were "outside" of a poem for what the poem is supposed to represent or be "about." Etymologically, "about" means "to be on the outside of" something anyway, and so "about" in regard to poems is itself only another trope. Is there some way out of this wilderness of tropes, so that we can recover some sense of either a reader's or writer's other-than-verbal needs and desires?

All that a poem can be about, or what in a poem *is* other than trope, is the skill or faculty of invention or discovery, the heuristic gift. Invention is a matter of "places," of themes, topics, subjects, or of what Kenneth Burke rephrased as the implicit presence of forms in subject-matter, and named as "the Individuation

of Forms." Burke defined form in literature as "an arousing and fulfillment of desires." The Burkean formula offered in his early *Counter-Statement* is still the best brief description we have:

A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence. [P. 124]

I will extend Burke, in a Burkean way, by investing our gratification not even in the disruption of sequence, but in our awareness, however precarious, that the sequence of parts is only another trope for form. Form, in poetry, ceases to be trope only when it becomes topos, only when it is revealed as a place of invention. This revelation depends upon a breaking. Its best analogue is when any of us becomes aware of love just as the object of love is irreparably lost. I will come back to the erotic analogue, and to the making/breaking of form, but only after I explain my own lack of interest in most aspects of what is called "form in poetry." My aim is not to demystify myself, which would bore others and cause me despair, but to clarify what I have been trying to say about poetry and criticism in a series of books published during the last five years. By "clarify" I partly mean "extend," because I think I have been clear enough for some, and I don't believe that I ever could be clear enough for others, since for them "clarity" is mainly a trope for philosophical reductiveness, or for a dreary literal-mindedness that belies any deep concern for poetry or criticism. But I also seem to have had generous readers who believe in fuller explanations than I have given. A return to origins can benefit any enterprise, and perhaps an enterprise obsessed with origins does need to keep returning to its initial recognitions, to its first troubles, and to its hopes for insight into the theory of poetry.

By "theory of poetry" I mean the concept of the nature and function of the poet and of poetry, in distinction from poetics, which has to do with the technique of poetical composition. This distinction between the concepts "theory of poetry" and "poetics" is a

fruitful one for knowledge. That *de facto* the two have contacts and often pass into each other is no objection. The history of the theory of poetry coincides neither with the history of poetics nor with the history of literary criticism. The poet's conception of himself . . . or the tension between poetry and science . . . are major themes of a history of the theory of poetry, not of a history of poetics.

I have quoted this paragraph from Curtius' great book, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Excursus VII). My own books from *The Anxiety of Influence* through my work on Wallace Stevens are all attempts to develop a theory of poetry in just this sense. The poet's conception of himself necessarily is his poem's conception of itself, in my reading, and central to this conception is the matter of the sources of the powers of poetry.

The truest sources, again necessarily, are in the powers of poems *already written*, or rather, *already read*. Dryden said of poets that "we have our lineal descents and clans as well as other families." Families, at least unhappy ones, are not all alike, except perhaps in Freud's sense of "Family Romances." What dominates Freud's notion is the child's fantasy-making power. What counts in the family romance is not, alas, what the parents actually were or did, but the child's fantastic interpretation of its parents. The child provides a myth, and this myth is close to poets' myths of the origin of their creativity, because it involves the fiction of being a changeling. A changeling-fiction is one of the stances of freedom. The changeling is free because his very existence is a disjunction, and because the mystery of his origins allows for Gnostic reversals of the natural hierarchy between parents and children.

Emerson, in his most idealizing temper, said of the poets that they were liberating gods, that they were free and made others free. I would amend this by saying that poets make themselves free, by their stances towards earlier poets, and make others free only by teaching them those stances or positions of freedom.

Freedom, in a poem, must mean freedom of meaning, the freedom to have a meaning of one's own. Such freedom is wholly il-

lusory unless it is achieved against a prior plenitude of meaning, which is tradition, and so also against language. Language, in relation to poetry, can be conceived in two valid ways, as I have learned, slowly and reluctantly. Either one can believe in a magical theory of all language, as the Kabbalists, many poets, and Walter Benjamin did, or else one must yield to a thoroughgoing linguistic nihilism, which in its most refined form is the mode now called Deconstruction. But these two ways turn into one another at their outward limits. For Deconstruction, irony is not a trope but finally is, as Paul de Man says, "the systematic undoing . . . of understanding." On this view, language is not "an instrument in the service of a psychic energy." De Man's serene linguistic nihilism welcomes the alternative vision:

The possibility now arises that the entire construction of drives, substitutions, repressions, and representations is the aberrant, metaphorical correlative of the absolute randomness of language, prior to any figuration or meaning.

Can we prevent this distinguished linguistic nihilism, and the linguistic narcissism of poets and occultists, from turning into one another? Is there a difference between an *absolute* randomness of language and the Kabbalistic magical absolute, in which language is totally over-determined? In Coleridge's version of the magical view, founded on the Johannine Logos, synecdoche or symbol also was no longer a trope, but was the endless restitution of performative rhetoric, or the systematic restoration of spiritual persuasion and understanding. This remains, though with many refinements, the logocentric view of such current theorists as Barfield and Ong.

Whether one accepts a theory of language that teaches the dearth of meaning, as in Derrida and de Man, or that teaches its plenitude, as in Barfield and Ong, does not seem to me to matter. All I ask is that the theory of language be extreme and uncompromising enough. Theory of poetry, as I pursue it, is reconcilable with either extreme view of poetic language, though not

with any views in between. Either the new poet fights to win freedom from dearth, or from plenitude, but if the antagonist be moderate, then the agon will not take place, and no fresh sublimity will be won. Only the agon is of the essence. Why? Is it merely my misprision, to believe that good poems must be combative?

I confess to some surprise that my emphasis upon strong poets and poems should have given so much offence, particularly to British academic journalists, though truly they do live within a steadily weakening tradition, and to their American counterparts, who yet similarly do represent a waning Modernism. The surprise stems from reading historians as inevitable as Burckhardt, philosophers as influential as Schopenhauer, scholars as informative as Curtius, and most of all from reading Freud, who is as indescribable as he is now inescapable. These writers, who are to our age what Longinus was to the Hellenistic world, have defined our Sublime for us, and they have located it in the agonistic spirit. Emerson preceded all of them in performing the same definition, the same location for America. These literary prophets teach us that the Greeks and the Renaissance were fiercely competitive in all things intellectual and spiritual, and that if we would emulate them, we hardly can hope to be free of competitive strivings. But I think these sages teach a harsher lesson, which they sometimes tell us they have learned from the poets. What is weak is forgettable and will be forgotten. Only strength is memorable; only the capacity to wound gives a healing capacity the chance to endure, and so to be heard. Freedom of meaning is wrested by combat, of meaning against meaning. But this combat consists in *a reading encounter*, and in an interpretive moment within that encounter. Poetic warfare is conducted by a kind of strong reading that I have called misreading, and here again I enter into an area where I seem to have provoked anxieties.

Perhaps, in common parlance, we need two very different words for what we now call "reading." There is relaxed reading and alert reading, and the latter, I will suggest, is always an agon. Reading well is a struggle because fictions and poems can

be defined, at their best, as works that are bound to be misread, that is to say, troped by the reader. I am *not* saying that literary works are necessarily good or bad in proportion to their difficulty. Paul Valéry observed that "one only reads well when one reads with some quite personal goal in mind. It may be to acquire some power. It can be out of hatred for the author." Reading well, for Valéry, is to make one's own figuration of power, to clear imaginative space for one's own personal goal. Reading well is therefore not necessarily a polite process, and may not meet the academy's social standards of civility. I have discovered, to my initial surprise, that the reading of poetry has been as much idealized as the writing of it. Any attempt to de-idealize the writing of poetry provokes anger, particularly among weak poets, but this anger is mild compared to the fury of journalists and of many academics when the mystique of a somehow detached yet still generous, somehow disinterested yet still energetic, reading-process is called into question. The innocence of reading is a pretty myth, but our time grows very belated, and such innocence is revealed as only another insipidity.

Doubtless a more adequate social psychology of reading will be developed, but this is not my concern, any more than I am much affected by the ways in which recent critical theories have attempted to adumbrate the reader's share. A theosophy of reading, if one were available, would delight me, but though Barfield has attempted to develop one in the mode of Rudolph Steiner, such an acute version of epistemological idealism seems to me remote from the reality of reading. Gnosis and Kabbalah, though heterodox, are at once traditional and yet also de-idealizing in their accounts of reading and writing, and I continue to go back to them in order to discover properly drastic models for creative reading and critical writing.

Gnostic exegesis of Scripture is always a salutary act of textual violence, transgressive through-and-through. I do not believe that Gnosticism is only an extreme version of the reading-process, despite its deliberate esotericism and evasiveness. Rather, Gnosticism as a mode of interpretation helps to make clear why all



critical reading aspiring towards strength *must* be as transgressive as it is aggressive. It is in Kabbalah, or belated Jewish Gnosis, that this textual transgression is most apparent, thanks to the superb and invaluable labors of Gershom Scholem. Scholem's researches are a demonstration that our idealisms about texts are poor illusions.

When I observe that there are *no* texts, but only interpretations, I am not yielding to extreme subjectivism, nor am I necessarily expounding any particular theory of textuality. When I wrote, once, that a strong reading is the only text, the only lie against time that endures, one enraged reviewer called my assertion a critic's sin against the Holy Ghost. The holy ghost, in this case, turned out to be Matthew Arnold, greatest of School Inspectors. But Emerson made my observation long before me, in many contexts, and many others had made it before him. Here is one of them, Rabbi Isaac the Blind, thirteenth-century Provençal Kabbalist, as cited by Scholem:

The form of the written Torah is that of the colors of white fire, and the form of the oral Torah has colored forms as of black fire. And all these engravings and the not yet unfolded Torah existed potentially, perceptible neither to a spiritual nor to a sensory eye, until the will [of God] inspired the idea of activating them by means of primordial wisdom and hidden knowledge. Thus at the beginning of all acts there was pre-existentially the not yet unfolded Torah. . . .

Rabbi Isaac goes on to insist that "the written Torah can take on corporeal form only through the power of the oral Torah." As Scholem comments, this means, "strictly speaking, there is no written Torah here on earth." Scholem is speaking of Scripture, of what we must call Text Itself, and he goes on to a formulation that I would say is true of all lesser texts, of all poems more belated than the Torah:

Everything that we perceive in the fixed forms of the Torah, written in ink on parchment, consists, in the last analysis, of interpre-

tations or definitions of what is hidden. *There is only an oral Torah:* that is the esoteric meaning of these words, and the written Torah is a purely mystical concept. . . . There is no written Torah, free from the oral element, that can be known or conceived of by creatures who are not prophets.

What Scholem wryly asserts does not dismay what I would call *the poet in the reader* (any reader, at least potentially) but it does dismay or provoke many professional readers, particularly in the academies. One of my most instructive memories will be always of a small meeting of distinguished professors, which had gathered to consider the qualifications of an individual whom they might ask to join their enterprise. Before meditating upon this person's merits, they spontaneously performed a little ritual of faith. One by one, in turn, they confessed their belief in the real presence of the literary text. It had an existence independent of their devotion to it. It had priority over them, would be there after they were gone, and above all it had a meaning or meanings quite apart from their interpretive activity. The literary text was *there*. Where? Why, in editions, definitive editions, upon which responsible commentaries might be written. Responsible commentaries. For "responsible," substitute what word you will, whatever anxious word might match the social pieties and professional civilities that inform the spirituality of such occasions.

I only *know* a text, any text, because I know a reading of it, someone else's reading, my own reading, a composite reading. I happen to possess a somewhat preternatural verbal memory, particularly for verse. But I do not know *Lycidas* when I recite it to myself, in the sense that I know *the Lycidas* by *the Milton*. *The Milton*, *the Stevens*, *the Shelley*, do not exist. In a recent issue of a scholarly magazine, one exegete of Shelley passionately and accurately declared his faith that Shelley was a far more gifted imagination than he could ever be. His humble but worthy destiny, he declared, was to help all of us arrive at *the Shelley* by a lifetime of patient textual, historical, and interpretive work. His outrage was plain in every sentence, and it moved me deeply, even

though evidently I was the unnamed sinner who had compelled him to proclaim his passionate self-effacement.

Alas that words should be only words and not things or feelings, and alas again that it should be, as Stevens said, a world of words to the end of it. Words, even if we take them as magic, refer *only* to other words, to the end of it. Words will not interpret themselves, and common rules for interpreting words will never exist. Many critics flee to philosophy or to linguistics, but the result is that they learn to interpret poems as philosophy or as linguistics. Philosophy may flaunt its rigors but its agon with poetry is an ancient one, and never will end. Linguistic explanations doubtless achieve a happy intensity of technicality, but language is not in itself a privileged mode of explanation. Certainly the critic seeking *the* Shelley should be reminded that Shelley's poems *are* language, but the reminder will not be an indefinite nourishment to any reader. Philosophers of intertextuality and of rhetoric usefully warn me that the meanings of an intertextual encounter are as undecidable and unreadable as any single text is, but I discover pragmatically that such philosophers at best teach me a kind of double-entry bookkeeping, which as a reader I have to discount. Every poem becomes as unreadable as every other, and every intertextual confrontation seems as much an abyssing as any other. I subtract the rhetoricity from both columns, from rhetoric as system of tropes, and from rhetoric as persuasion, and return to where I started. *Jedes Wort ist ein Vorurteil*, Nietzsche says, which I translate as: "Every word is a *clinamen*." There is always and only bias, inclination, pre-judgment, swerve; only and always the verbal agon for freedom, and the agon is carried on not by truth-telling, but by words lying against time.

Freedom and lying are intimately associated in belated poetry, and the notion that contains them both might best be named "evasion." Evasion is a process of avoiding, a way of escaping, but also it is an excuse. Usage has tinged the word with a certain stigma, but in our poetry what is being evaded ultimately is fate, particularly the necessity of dying. The study of poetry is (or ought to be) the study of what Stevens called "the intricate eva-

sions of as." Linguistically these evasions constitute trope, but I urge a study of poetry that depends upon a larger vision of trope than traditional or modern rhetoric affords us. The positions of freedom and the strategies of lying are more than images, more than figurations, more even than the operations that Freud named "defense." Searching for a term comprehensive enough to help in the reading of poems, I offered the notion of "revisionary ratios," and found myself working with six of these, a number not so arbitrary as it has seemed to some. Rather than enumerate and describe these ratios again, I want to consider something of the limits that traditional rhetoric has set upon our description of poems.

Rhetoric has been always unfitted to the study of poetry, though most critics continue to ignore this incompatibility. Rhetoric rose from the analysis of political and legal orations, which are absurd paradigms for lyrical poems. Helen Vendler pithily sums up the continued inadequacy of traditional rhetoric to the description of lyric:

It remains true that the figures of rhetoric, while they may be thought to appear in a more concentrated form in lyric, seem equally at home in narrative and expository writing. Nothing in the figures of paradox, or irony, or metaphor, or imagery—or in the generic conventions of, say, the elegy—specifies a basis in verse.

John Hollander, who is our leading authority upon lyrical form, illuminates tropes by calling them "turns that occur between the meanings of intention and the significances of linguistic utterances." I want to expand Hollander's description so as to open up a hidden element in all criticism that deals with figuration. Any critic necessarily tropes or turns the concept of trope in giving a reading of a specific poem. Even our most sophisticated and rigorously theoretical critics are at work on a rhetoric of rhetoric when they believe themselves merely to be distinguishing between one trope and another. A trope is troped wherever there is

a movement from sign to intentionality, whenever the transformation from signification to meaning is made by the test of what aids the continuity of critical discourse. The increasingly scandalous instance is in the supposed critical distinction between metonymy and metaphor, which has become a shibboleth for weak interpreters. Jakobsonian rhetoric is fashionable, but in my judgment is wholly inapplicable to lyric poetry. Against Jakobson, I follow Kenneth Burke in seeing that the fundamental dichotomy in trope is between irony and synecdoche or, as Burke says, between dialectic and representation. There is precious little dichotomy between metonymy and metaphor or, as Burke again says, between reduction and perspective. Metonymy and metaphor alike I would trope as heightened degrees of dialectical irony, with metaphor the more extended. But synecdoche is not a dialectical trope, since as microcosm it represents a macrocosm without necessarily playing against it.

In lyric poetry, there is a crucial gap between reduction or metonymy and the part-for-whole representation of synecdoche. Metonymy is a mode of repetition, working through displacement, but synecdoche is an initial mode of identification, as its close association with the ancient topoi of definition and division would indicate. The topoi associated with metonymy are adjuncts, characteristics and notation, all of them namings through supposed cause-and-effect. A metonymy *names*, but a synecdoche begins a process that leads to an *un-naming*. While metonymy hints at the psychology of compulsion and obsession, synecdoche hints at the vicissitudes that are disorders of psychic drives. Regressive behavior expresses itself metonymically, but sado-masochism is synecdochic, in a very dark sense. I verge upon saying that naming in poetry is a limitation of meaning, whereas un-naming restitutes meaning, and so adds to representation.

This way of connecting trope and psychic defense, which to me seems an inevitable aid in the reading of poetry, itself has encountered a good deal of psychic defense in my more unamiable critics. What is the justification for linking language and the ego, trope and defense, in relatively fixed patterns? Partly, the ra-

tionale would depend upon a diachronic, rather than a synchronic, view of rhetoric, that is, upon an analytic rhetoric that would observe the changing nature of both linguistic trope and psychic defense as literary history moved from the Ancient world to the Enlightenment, and then on to Milton as prophet of Post-Enlightenment poetry. But, in part, the explanation for reading trope as defense and defense as trope goes back to my earlier observations on criticism as the rhetoric *of* rhetoric, and so on each critic's individual troping of the concept of trope. If rhetoric has its diachronic aspect, then so does criticism as the rhetoric of rhetoric. A study of Post-Enlightenment criticism from its prophet, Dr. Johnson, on to our contemporaries would reveal that its rhetoric was reborn out of Associationist psychology, and that the crucial terms of that psychology themselves stemmed from the topoi of a rejected classical rhetoric, ostensibly rejected by the Enlightenment but actually troped rather than rejected.

This complex phenomenon needs to be studied in detail, and I am attempting such a study currently in a book on the Sublime and the concept of topos as image-of-voice in Post-Enlightenment poetry. Here I want only to extract a dilemma of the relation between style and idea in the perpetual, onward Modernizing march of all post-Miltonic poetry. From the poets of Sensibility down to our current post-Stevensian contemporaries, poetry has suffered what I have termed elsewhere an over-determination of language and consequently an under-determination of meaning. As the verbal mechanisms of crisis have come to dominate lyric poetry, in relatively fixed patterns, a striking effect has been that the strongest poets have tended to establish their mastery by the paradox of what I would call *an achieved dearth of meaning*. Responding to this achieved dearth, many of the strongest critics have tended to manifest *their* skill by attributing the dearth to their own synchronic view of language and so to the vicissitudes of *language itself* in producing meaning. A diachronic phenomenon, dependent upon Miltonic and Wordsworthian poetic *praxis*, is thus assigned to a synchronic cause. Deconstructionist criticism! refuses to situate itself in its own historical dilemma, and so by a

charming paradox it falls victim to a genealogy to which evidently it must remain blind. Partly, this paradox is due to the enormous and significant difference between Anglo-American poetic tradition, and the much weaker French and German poetic traditions. French poetry lacks not only early giants of the dimension of Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare, but it also is devoid of any later figures whose strength could approximate Milton and Wordsworth, Whitman and Dickinson. There is also the oddity that the nearest French equivalent, Victor Hugo, remains absurdly unfashionable and neglected by his nation's most advanced critics. Yet the "achieved dearth of meaning" in French poetry is clearly exemplified more even by Hugo than by Mallarmé, just as in English it is accomplished more powerfully by Wordsworth and Whitman than it is by Eliot and Pound.

If this judgment (however unfashionable) is correct, then it would be sustained by a demonstration that the revisionary patterns of Modern poetry are set by Wordsworth and Whitman (or by Hugo, or in German by the later Goethe), and by the further demonstration that these fixed or all-but-fixed relations between trope and defense reappear in Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry, in Hölderlin and Rilke, in Yeats and Stevens and Hart Crane. These patterns, which I have mapped as a sequence of revisionary ratios, are not the invention of belated moderns but of inaugural moderns, the High Romantics, and of Milton, that mortal god, the Founder from whom Wordsworth and Emerson (as Whitman's precursor) derive.

Ratios, as a critical idea, go back to Hellenistic criticism, and to a crucial clash between two schools of interpretation, the Aristotelian-influenced school of Alexandria and the Stoic-influenced school of Pergamon. The school of Alexandria championed the mode of *analogy*, while the rival school of Pergamon espoused the mode of *anomaly*. The Greek *analogy* means "equality of ratios," while *anomaly* means a "disproportion of ratios." Whereas the analogists of Alexandria held that the literary text was a unity and had a fixed meaning, the anomalists of Pergamon in effect asserted that the literary text was an interplay of differences and

had meanings that rose out of those differences. Our latest mimic wars of criticism thus repeat battles fought in the second century B.C. between the followers of Crates of Mallos, Librarian of Pergamon, and the disciples of Aristarchus of Samothrace, Librarian of Alexandria. Crates, as an Anomalist, was what nowadays Hillis Miller calls an "uncanny" critic or, as I would say, an "antithetical" critic, a student of the revisionary ratios that take place *between* texts. Richard McKeon notes that the method of Crates led to allegories of reading, rather than to Alexandrian or analogical New Criticism, and I am prepared to call my work an allegory of reading, though very different from the allegories of reading formulated by Derrida and de Man, legitimate rival descendants of Crates.

The breaking of form to produce meaning, as I conceive it, depends upon the operation of certain instances of language, revisionary ratios, and on certain topological displacements in language that intervene between ratios, displacements that I have been calling "crossings."

To account for these ratios, without defending here their name and their number, I have to return to my earlier themes of the aggression of reading and the transgression of writing, and to my choice of a psychic rather than a linguistic model in a quest for tropes that might illuminate acts of reading.

Anna Freud, in her classic study, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, notes that

. . . all the defensive measures of the ego against the id are carried out silently and invisibly. The most that we can ever do is to reconstruct them in retrospect: we can never really witness them in operation. This statement applies, for instance, to successful repression. The ego knows nothing of it; we are aware of it only subsequently, when it becomes apparent that something is missing.

As I apply Anna Freud, in a poem the ego is the poetic self and the id is the precursor, idealized and frequently composite, hence fantasized, but still traceable to a historical author or authors.



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