

A  
MAP  
OF  
MISREADING

HAROLD  
BLOOM

A map of misreading

*Harold Bloom*

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Oxford New York Toronto Melbourne

## Introduction: a meditation upon misreading

This book offers instruction in the practical criticism of poetry, in how to read a poem, on the basis of the theory of poetry set forth in my earlier book, *The Anxiety of Influence*. Reading, as my title indicates, is a belated and all-but-impossible act, and if strong is always a misreading. Literary meaning tends to become more under-determined even as literary language becomes more over-determined. Criticism may not always be an act of judging, but it is always an act of deciding, and what it tries to decide is meaning.

Like my earlier book, *A Map of Misreading* studies poetic influence, by which I continue *not* to mean the passing-on of images and ideas from earlier to later poets. Influence, as I conceive it, means that there are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts. These relationships depend upon a critical act, a misreading or misprision, that one poet performs upon another, and that does not differ in kind from the necessary critical acts performed by every strong reader upon every text he encounters. The influence-relation governs reading as it governs writing, and reading is therefore a mis-writing just as writing is a misreading. As literary history lengthens, all poetry necessarily becomes verse-criticism, just as all criticism becomes prose-poetry.

The strong reader, whose readings will matter to others as well as to himself, is thus placed in the dilemmas of the revisionist, who wishes to find his own original relation to truth, whether in texts or

(2)  
r

504  
72

12

in reality (which he treats as texts anyway), but also wishes to open received texts to his own sufferings, or what he wants to call the sufferings of history. This book, as a study of creative misreading or the belatedness of poetic reading, is also a prolegomenon to further studies of revisionism, and to the ambivalences of canon-formation that rise from revisionism.

What is revisionism? As the origins of the word indicate, it is a re-aiming or a looking-over-again, leading to a re-esteeming or a re-estimating. We can venture the formula: the revisionist strives to *see* again, so as to *esteem* and *estimate* differently, so as then to *aim* "correctively." In the dialectical terms that I will employ for interpreting poems in this book, re-seeing is a *limitation*, re-estimating is a *substitution*, and re-aiming is a *representation*. I displace these terms from the context of later or Lurianic Kabbalism, which I take as the ultimate model for Western revisionism from the Renaissance to the present, and which I intend to study in another book.

Kabbalah, which means "the given," is a particular tradition of images, parables, and quasi-concepts relating to God. Its principal twentieth-century scholar, Gershom Scholem, regards it as a variety of "mysticism," and certainly it has mixed with and fostered a myriad who have experienced extraordinary states of consciousness. But Scholem's own descriptions of Kabbalah emphasize its work of *interpretation*, of revisionary replacements of Scriptural meaning by techniques of *opening*. All Kabbalistic texts are interpretative, however wildly speculative, and what they interpret is a central text that perpetually possesses authority, priority, and strength, or that indeed can be regarded as *text itself*. *Zohar*, most influential of Kabbalistic books, is the true forerunner of Post-Enlightenment strong poetry, not in its grotesque content or its formless forms, but in its *stance towards the precursor text*, its revisionary genius and mastery of the perverse necessities of misprision. The psychology of belatedness, which Freud partly developed but partly concealed or evaded, is the invention of Kabbalah, and Kabbalah remains the largest single source for material that will help us to study the re-

visionary impulse and to formulate techniques for the practice of an antithetical criticism.

Isaac Luria, sixteenth-century master of theosophical speculation, formulated a regressive theory of creation, in a revision of the earlier Kabbalistic emanative theory of creation. The Lurianic dialectic of creation has been studied illuminatingly by Scholem, particularly in his recent book *Kabbalah*, and the reader is referred to it as background for the theoretical parts of my book. But all that is strictly necessary for my purposes here are a few remarks on Luria's system.

The Lurianic story of creation now seems to me the best paradigm available for a study of the way poets war against one another in the strife of Eternity that is poetic influence. Luria's story, in whatever version, has three main stages: *Zimzum*, *Shevirath hakelim*, *Tikkun*. *Zimzum* is the Creator's withdrawal or contraction so as to make possible a creation that is not himself. *Shevirath hakelim* is the breaking-apart-of-the-vessels, a vision of creation-as-catastrophe. *Tikkun* is restitution or restoration—man's contribution to God's work. The first two stages can be approximated in many of the theorists of deconstruction, from Nietzsche and Freud to all our contemporary interpreters who make of the reading subject either what Nietzsche cheerfully called "at most a rendezvous of persons," or what I myself would call a new mythic being—clearly implied by Paul de Man in particular—the reader as Overman, the *Überleser*. This fictive reader simultaneously somehow negatively fulfills and yet exuberantly transcends self, much as Zarathustra so contradictorily performed. Such a reader, at once blind and transparent with light, self-deconstructed yet fully knowing the pain of his separation both from text and from nature, doubtless will be more than equal to the revisionary labors of contraction and destruction, but hardly to the antithetical restoration that increasingly becomes part of the burden and function of whatever valid poetry we have left or may yet receive.

The closest aesthetic equivalent to Lurianic contraction is *limita-*

tion, in the sense that certain images limit meaning more than they restore or represent meaning. Breaking-apart-of-the-vessels is like the aesthetic breaking-apart and replacing of one form by another, which imagistically is a process of *substitution*. *Tikkun*, the Lurianic restitution, is already almost a synonym for *representation* itself.

The first five chapters of this book are devoted to the theory and techniques of misprision or strong "misreading." The last six chapters are given to interpretative instances: poems by Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning, Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens, Warren, Ammons, Ashbery. In the first half, a voyage back to literary origins is made, in quest of a map of misreading. From the intimate alliance between poetic origins and poetic final phases, the voyage goes back first to the process of how literary tradition is formed, next to the sources of that process in a Primal Scene of Instruction, and finally to a meditation on belatedness. This meditation centers on influence as a sixfold, defensive trope for the act of reading/misreading. The relation of tropes, defenses, images, and revisionary ratios is then worked out in a chapter that accompanies the map of misprision, goal of this critical quest. A full-scale reading of one poem, Browning's *Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, then illustrates the use of the map. The map is our guide, in the last section of the book, through many versions of influence, from Milton to the present day.

This final section begins with an analysis of Miltonic allusion, in regard to the trope of metalepsis or transumption, the classical equivalent of the final revisionary ratio that Isaac Luria called *gilgul*, the reincarnation of a precursor through his descendants' acts of lifting up and redeeming the saving sparks of his being from the evil shells or broken vessels of catastrophe. A chapter on Milton's descendants from Wordsworth to Tennyson follows, after which the remainder of the book deals with American poets, starting with the prose seer and poetic theorist Emerson, whose relation to subsequent American poets is parallel to Milton's relation to British poets after him.

## Part I CHARTING THE TERRITORY

# I

## Poetic origins and final phases

Strong poets are infrequent; our own century, in my judgment, shows only Hardy and Stevens writing in English. Great poets—even Yeats and Lawrence, even Frost—may fail of continuous strength, and major innovators—even Pound and Williams—may never touch strength at all. Browning, Whitman, Dickinson are strong, as are the High Romantics, and Milton may be taken as the apotheosis of strength. Poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead, and from an even more triumphant solipsism. Enormous gifts, the endowment of a Coleridge, or of a lesser but still considerable talent like Eliot, do not avail where strength is evaded, or never attained. Poetic strength, in this sense, rises only from a particular kind of catastrophe—as ordinary consciousnesses must regard the terrible incarnation that can lead to a poet like the very old Hardy or the very old Stevens. This chapter will move from the primal catastrophe of poetic incarnation on to a description of the relation of poetic strength to poetic influence, and then to the final phases of Hardy and Stevens.

I rely in this discussion upon the theory of poetry, Vichian and Emersonian in origin, that I have expounded recently in *The Anxiety of Influence*. The theory, deliberately an attempt at de-idealizing, has encountered considerable resistance during my presenta-

tion of it in a number of lectures at various universities, but whether the theory is correct or not may be irrelevant to its usefulness for practical criticism, which I think can be demonstrated. I take the resistance shown to the theory by many poets, in particular, to be likely evidence for its validity, for poets rightly idealize their activity; and all poets, weak and strong, agree in denying any share in the anxiety of influence. More than ever, contemporary poets insist that they are telling the truth in their work, and more than ever they tell continuous lies, particularly about their relations to one another, and most consistently about their relations to their precursors. One of the functions of criticism, as I understand it, is to make a good poet's work even more difficult for him to perform, since only the overcoming of genuine difficulties can result in poems wholly adequate to an age consciously as late as our own. All that a critic, as critic, can give poets is the deadly encouragement that never ceases to remind them of how heavy their inheritance is.

Catastrophe, as Freud and Ferenczi viewed it, seems to me the central element in poetic incarnation, in the fearsome process by which a person is re-born as a poet. Perhaps I should say catastrophe as Empedocles viewed it, for the dualistic vision of Empedocles is the necessary start of any valid theory of poetic origins; but then Empedocles was Freud's acknowledged ultimate precursor, even as Schopenhauer was a closer and rather less acknowledged precursor. The dialectic of cosmic love and hate governs poetic incarnation: "At one time they are all brought together into one order by Love; at another, they are carried each in different directions by the repulsion of Strife." Initial love for the precursor's poetry is transformed rapidly enough into revisionary strife, without which individuation is not possible. Strife, Empedocles held, caused the initial catastrophe, separating out the elements and bringing the Promethean fire of consciousness into being. Poetry is identical neither with a particular mode of consciousness nor with a particular instinct, yet its birth in an individual is analogous to the Empedoclean catastrophe of consciousness and the Freudian catas-

trophe of instinctual genesis. Empedocles and Freud alike are theorists of *influence*, of the giving that fashions the taker. We move from ocean to land by a drying-up of the oceanic sense, and we learn sublimation through our preconscious memories of a glacial catastrophe. It follows that our most valued activities are regressive. The great Ferenczi, more fecund than Freud or Empedocles at envisioning catastrophes, almost as fecund as Blake, rather frighteningly saw all sexual love as regression, a drive back to ocean. Poetry, perhaps unlike sexual intercourse, most certainly is regressive, as Peacock so charmingly saw. I turn therefore to some surmises upon the catastrophe of poetic incarnation. How are true poets born? Or better, as the Age of Sensibility liked to ask, what makes possible the incarnation of the Poetical Character?

Desiccation combined with an unusually strong oceanic sense is the highly dualistic yet not at all paradoxical answer. Here we can cite the most truly poetic of all true, strong poets, P. B. Shelley, whom it is no longer quite so fashionable to malign, a welcome change from the days of my youth. I will summarize the dedicatory stanzas to *The Revolt of Islam*, stanzas as much one of Whitman's starting-points as one of Yeats's, and stanzas highly relevant to those similarly Shelley-obsessed poets, Hardy, who owed Shelley so many of his ecstatic breakthroughs, and Stevens, who owed Shelley his fiction of the leaves, and of the wind, and of most other movements of the spirit. There is no fuller vision of poetic incarnation in the language, not in Collins, Coleridge, Blake, Keats, not even in *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, for Shelley was at once a major skeptical intellect and a unique master of the heart's impulses, and he turned both these forces to the study of poetic origins, seeking there the daemonic ground of his own incurable and involuntary dualism. Stevens, however one loves him, hardly compares well with Shelley on this frightening ground, for he lacked both Shelley's intellectual penetration and Shelley's astonishing *speed* of perception, a speed crucial in the dark realms of origins.

At a particular hour, Shelley says, his spirit's sleep was burst,

when he found himself weeping, he knew not why, as he walked forth upon the glittering grass, on a May dawn. But this hour, though it turned quickly from tears to a sense of power, of a sublime hope, was followed rapidly by "A sense of loneliness, a thirst with which I pined." To repair this desiccation, the young poet set forth upon erotic quests, all of which failed him, until he encountered his true epipsyche, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, whereupon the spirit of solitude left him. He tries to end in the sense of "a serener hour," yet this hope seems vain, for "I am worn away,/And Death and Love are yet contending for Their prey." The Dedication's climax anticipates the close of *Adonais* some four turbulent years later, for the last vision of Shelley and Mary shows them:

Like lamps into the world's tempestuous night,—  
Two tranquil stars, while clouds are passing by  
Which wrap them from the foundering seaman's sight,  
That burn from year to year with unextinguished light.

Poetic incarnation results from poetic influence, here the influence of Wordsworth, particularly of his Great Ode, *Intimations of Immortality*. No poet, I amend that to no strong poet, can choose his precursor, any more than any person can choose his father. The *Intimations* Ode chose Shelley, as Shelley's *To a Skylark* chose Hardy, the way starlight flows where it flows, gratuitously. Whether we can be found by what is not already somehow ourselves has been doubted from Heraclitus through Emerson to Freud, but the daemon is not our destiny until we yield to his finding us out. Poetic influence, in its first phase, is not to be distinguished from love, though it will shade soon enough into revisionary strife. "Protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli" is a fine reminder in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a book whose true subject is influence. Poets tend to think of themselves as stars because their deepest desire is to be an influence, rather than to be influenced, but even in the

strongest, whose desire is accomplished, the anxiety of having been formed by influence still persists.

Shelley understood that the *Intimations* Ode, and its precursor, *Lycidas*, took divination as their true subject, for the goal of divination is to attain a power that frees one from all influence, but particularly from the influence of an expected death, or necessity for dying. Divination, in this sense, is both a rage and a program, offering desperate intimations of immortality through a proleptic magic that would evade every danger, including nature itself. Take the darkest of Freudian formulae, that "the aim of all life is death," reliant on the belief that "inanimate things existed before living ones." Oppose to it the inherent belief of all strong poets, that the animate always had priority, and that death is only a failure in imagination. Say then that in the process of poetic incarnation the ephebe or new poet, through love, experiences an influx of an antithetical power, antithetical both to the entropy that is nature's and to the unacceptable sublimity of Ananke, goddess who turns the spindle of the Freudian instinctual drive back to the inanimate. All poetic odes of incarnation are therefore Immortality odes, and all of them rely upon a curious divinity that the ephebe has imparted successfully, not to himself, but to the precursor. In making the precursor a god, the ephebe already has begun a movement away from him, a primary revision that imputes error to the father, a sudden inclination or swerve away from obligation; for even in the context of incarnation, of becoming a poet, obligation shines clear as a little death, premonitory of the greater fall down to the inanimate.

Poets tend to incarnate by the side of ocean, at least in vision, if inland far they be. Or if some blocking agent excludes any glimpse of that immortal sea, various surrogates readily enough are found. Poets whose sexual natures manifest unusual complexity—Byron, Beddoes, Darley, Whitman, Swinburne, Hart Crane, among so many others—rarely get very far away from the ocean of incarnation. Poets of more primary sexuality avoid this overt obsession,



generally following the Wordsworthian pattern, in which a haunting noise of waters echoes every imaginative crisis. Here we need to brood on the full context of poetic incarnation, remembering that every strong poet in Western tradition is a kind of Jonah or renegade prophet.

Jonah, the aggrieved one, whose name means "dove," descends into the ship, and every such ship "was like to be broken." When he descends from ship into the sea, "the sea ceased from its raging." "I leaped headlong into the Sea," Keats said, to learn there "the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks." The Sea:

. . . with its mighty swell  
Gluts twice ten thousand caverns, till the spell  
Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.

Jonah, in flight from open vision, was swallowed up and closed in darkness. When the sirocco blew upon the rescued prophet, he wished again for darkness, and the author of his book, giving God the last word, never tells us whether Jonah returned to his vocation. Call Jonah the model of the poet who fails of strength, and who wishes to return to the Waters of Night, the Swamp of Tears, where he began, before the catastrophe of vocation. It is only later, awash in the Word, that the poet questing for strength can sing, with Thoreau:

Now chiefly is my natal hour,  
And only now my prime of life;  
Of manhood's strength it is the flower,  
'Tis peace's end, and war's beginning strife.

This does not sound, in its first hush, like a strife's beginning, as here in Whitman:

The yellow half-moon enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the face  
of the sea almost touching,

The boy ecstatic, with his bare feet the waves, with his hair the atmosphere dallying,  
The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last tumultuously bursting. . . .

The dallying hair is the young Apollo's, and every ephebe is a new Phoebus, looking to name what cannot be named, finding it again as mysteriously as Ammons does here, in a long-dead hunchback playmate of remote childhood:

So I said I am Ezra  
and the wind whipped my throat  
gaming for the sounds of my voice  
I listened to the wind  
go over my head and up into the night  
Turning to the sea I said  
I am Ezra  
but there were no echoes from the waves. . . .

Poetic origins: the Incarnation of the Poetic Character, if an inland matter, takes place near caverns and rivulets, replete with mingled measures and soft murmurs, promises of an improved infancy when one hears the sea again. Just when the promises were betrayed, the Strong Poet himself will never know, for his strength (as poet) is never to suffer such knowing. No Strong Poet can deign to be a good reader of his own works. The Strong Poet is strong by virtue of and in proportion to his *thrownness*; having been thrown farther, his consciousness of such primal outrage is greater. This consciousness informs his more intense awareness of the precursors, for he knows how far our being can be thrown, out and down, as lesser poets cannot know.

Ocean, the matter of Night, the original Lilith or "feast that famished," mothers what is antithetical to her, the makers who fear (rightly) to accept her and never cease to move towards her. If not to have conceived oneself is a burden, so for the strong poet there is also the more hidden burden: not to have brought oneself forth,

not to be a god breaking one's own vessels, but to be awash in the Word not quite one's own. And so many greatly surrender, as Swinburne did:

A land that is thirstier than ruin;  
 A sea that is hungrier than death;  
 Heaped hills that a tree never grew in;  
 Wide sands where the wave draws breath;  
 All solace is here for the spirit  
 That ever forever may be  
 For the soul of thy son to inherit,  
 My mother, my sea.

Even the strongest, who surrender only at the end, brood too deep upon this beauty, as Shelley brooded: "The sea was so translucent that you could see the caverns clothed with the glaucous sea-moss and the leaves and branches of those delicate weeds that pave the bottom of the water." Their epigoni drown too soon, as Beddoes drowned:

Come follow us, and smile as we;  
 We sail to the rock in the ancient waves,  
 Where the snow falls by thousands into the sea,  
 And the drowned and the shipwrecked have happy graves.

The sea of poetry, of poems already written, is no redemption for the Strong Poet. Only a poet already slain under the shadow of the Covering Cherub's wings can deceive himself this profoundly, with Auden:

Restored! Returned! The lost are borne  
 On seas of shipwreck home at last:  
 See! In the fire of praising burns  
 The dry dumb past, and we  
 The life-day long shall part no more.

To know that we are object as well as subject of the quest is not

poetic knowledge, but rather the knowledge of defeat, a knowledge fit for the pragmaticists of communication, not for that handful who hope to fathom (if not to master) the wealth of ocean, the ancestry of voice. Who could set forth on the poet's long journey, upon the path of laboring Heracles, if he knew that at last he must wrestle with the dead? Wrestling Jacob could triumph, because his Adversary was the Everliving, but even the strongest poets must grapple with phantoms. The strength of these phantoms—which is their beauty—increases as the struggling poet's distance from them lengthens in time. Homer, a greater poet in the Enlightenment than he was even among the Hellenes, is greater yet now in our Post-Enlightenment. The splendors of the firmament of time blaze with a greater fury even as time seems to droop in its decay.

How (even with all hindsight) can we know the true ephebe, the potentially strong poet, from the mass of ocean's nurslings around him? By hearing in his first voices what is most central in the precursors' voices, rendered with a directness, clarity, even a sweetness that they do not often give to us. For the revisionary ratios that will be employed as means-of-defense by the maturing poet do not manifest themselves in the ephebe. They appear only when he quests for fire, when he seeks to burn through every context that the precursors created or themselves accepted. What we see in the ephebe is the incarnation of the poetical character, the second birth into supposed imagination that fails to displace the first birth into nature, but fails only because desire fails when confronted by so antithetical a quest, fiercer than the human can bear to undergo.

Why invoke a process that merely begins poets, as prelude to a consideration of the last phases of Hardy and Stevens? Because poets, as poets, and particularly the strongest poets, return to origins at the end, or whenever they sense the imminence of the end. Critics may be wary of origins, or consign them disdainfully to those carrion-eaters of scholarship, the source hunters, but the poet-in-a-poet is as desperately obsessed with poetic origins, generally

(S)

5/ despite himself, as the person-in-a-person at last becomes obsessed with personal origins. Emerson, most undervalued (in our time) of American moral psychologists, is acutely aware of the mind's catastrophic growth into full self-awareness:

It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. . . .

When the strong poet learns that he does not see directly, but mediately through the precursor (frequently a composite figure), he is less able than Emerson to accept a helplessness at correcting the eye of the self, or at computing the angle of vision that is also an angle of fall, a blindness of error. Nothing is less generous than the poetic self when it wrestles for its own survival. Here the Emersonian formula of Compensation is demonstrated: "Nothing is got for nothing." If we have been ravished by a poem, it will cost us our own poem. If the poetic self in us loves another, it loves itself in the other; but if it is loved, and accepts love, then it loves itself less, because it knows itself less worthy of self-love. Poets-as-poets are not lovable and critics have been slow to know this, which is why criticism has not yet turned to its rightful function: the study of the problematics of loss.

6/ || Let me reduce my argument to the hopelessly simplistic; poems, I am saying, are neither about "subjects" nor about "themselves." They are necessarily about *other poems*; a poem is a response to a poem, as a poet is a response to a poet, or a person to his parent. Trying to write a poem takes the poet back to the origins of what a poem *first was for him*, and so takes the poet back beyond the pleasure principle to the decisive initial encounter and response that began him. We do not think of W. C. Williams as a Keatsian poet, yet he *began and ended as one*, and his late celebration of his

Greeny Flower is another response to Keats's odes. *Only a poet challenges a poet as poet*, and so only a poet makes a poet. To the poet-in-a-poet, a poem is always *the other man*, the precursor, and so a poem is always a person, always the father of one's Second Birth. To live, the poet must *misinterpret* the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father.

But who, what is the poetic father? The voice of the other, of the *daimon*, is always speaking in one; the voice that cannot die because already it has survived death—*the dead poet lives in one*. In the last phase of strong poets, they attempt to join the undying *by living in the dead poets* who are already alive in them. This late Return of the Dead recalls us, as readers, to a recognition of the original motive for the catastrophe of poetic incarnation. Vico, who identified the origins of poetry with the impulse towards divination (to foretell, but also to become a god by foretelling), implicitly understood (as did Emerson, and Wordsworth) that a poem is written to escape dying. Literally, poems are refusals of mortality. Every poem therefore has two makers: the precursor, and the ephebe's rejected mortality.

7/ A poet, I argue in consequence, is not so much a man speaking to men as a man rebelling against being spoken to by a dead man (the precursor) outrageously more alive than himself. A poet dare not regard himself as being *late*, yet cannot accept a substitute for the first vision he reflectively judges to have been his precursor's also. Perhaps this is why the poet-in-a-poet *cannot marry*, whatever the person-in-a-poet chooses to have done.

Poetic influence, in the sense I give to it, has almost nothing to do with the verbal resemblances between one poet and another. Hardy, on the surface, scarcely resembles Shelley, his prime precursor, but then Browning, who resembles Shelley even less, was yet more fully Shelley's ephebe than even Hardy was. The same observation can be made of Swinburne and of Yeats in relation to Shelley. What Blake called the Spiritual Form, at once the aboriginal poetical self and the True Subject, is what the ephebe is so dan-

gerously obliged to the precursor for even possessing. Poets need not *look* like their fathers, and the anxiety of influence more frequently than not is quite distinct from the anxiety of style. Since poetic influence is necessarily misprision, a taking or doing amiss of one's burden, it is to be expected that such a process of malformation and misinterpretation will, at the very least, produce deviations in style between strong poets. Let us remember always Emerson's insistence as to what it is that makes a poem:

For it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought; he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet. . . .

Emerson would not acknowledge that meter-making arguments themselves were subject to the tyrannies of inheritance, but that they are so subject is the saddest truth I know about poets and poetry. In Hardy's best poems, the central meter-making argument is what might be called a skeptical lament for the hopeless incongruity of ends and means in all human acts. Love and the means of love cannot be brought together, and the truest name for the human condition is simply that it is loss:

And brightest things that are theirs. . . .  
Ah, no; the years, the years;  
Down their carved names the raindrop plows.

These are the closing lines of *During Wind and Rain*, as good a poem as our century has given us. The poem, like so many others, is a grandchild of the *Ode to the West Wind*, as much as Stevens'

*The Course of a Particular* or any number of major lyrics by Yeats. A carrion-eater, Old Style, would challenge my observations, and to such a challenge I could offer, in its own terms, only the first appearance of the refrain:

Ah, no; the years O!  
How the sick leaves reel down in throngs!

But such terms can be ignored. Poetic influence, between strong poets, works in the depths, as all love antithetically works. At the center of Hardy's verse, whether in the early *Wessex Poems* or the late *Winter Words*, is this vision:

And much I grieved to think how power and will  
In opposition rule our mortal day,  
And why God made irreconcilable  
Good and the means of good; and for despair  
I half disdained mine eyes' desire to fill  
With the spent vision of the times that were  
And scarce have ceased to be—

Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* can give us also the heroic motto for the major characters in Hardy's novels: "For in the battle Life and they did wage,/ She remained conqueror." The motto would serve as well for the superb volume *Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres*, published on October 2 in 1928, the year that Hardy died on January 11. Hardy had hoped to publish the book on June 2, 1928, which would have been his eighty-eighth birthday. Though a few poems in the book go back as far as the 1860's, most were written after the appearance of Hardy's volume of lyrics, *Human Shows*, in 1925. A few books of twentieth-century verse in English compare with *Winter Words* in greatness, but very few. Though the collection is diverse, and has no central design, its emergent theme is a counterpoise to the burden of poetic incarna-

tion, and might be called the Return of the Dead, who haunt Hardy as he faces towards death.

In his early poem (1887), *Shelley's Skylark*, Hardy, writing rather in the style of his fellow Shelleyan, Browning, speaks of his ancestor's "ecstatic heights in thought and rhyme." Recent critics who admire Shelley are not particularly fond of *To a Skylark*, and it is rather too ecstatic for most varieties of modern sensibility, but we can surmise why it so moved Hardy:

We look before and after,  
 And pine for what is not:  
 Our sincerest laughter  
 With some pain is fraught;  
 Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.  
 Yet if we could scorn  
 Hate, and pride, and fear;  
 If we were things born  
 Not to shed a tear,  
 I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.

The thought here, as elsewhere in Shelley, is not so simple as it may seem. Our divided consciousness, keeping us from being able to unperplex joy from pain, and ruining the presentness of the moment, at least brings us an aesthetic gain. But even if we lacked our range of negative affections, even if grief were not our birthright, the pure joy of the lark's song would still surpass us. We may think of Shelleyan ladies like Marty South, and even more Sue Bridehead, who seems to have emerged from the *Epipychidion*. Or perhaps we may remember Angel Clare, as a kind of parody of Shelley himself. Hardy's Shelley is very close to the most central of Shelleys, the visionary skeptic, whose head and whose heart could never be reconciled, for they both told truths, but contrary truths. In *Prometheus Unbound*, we are told that in our life the shadow cast by love is always ruin, which is the head's report, but the heart in Shelley goes on saying that if there is to be coherence at all, it must come through Eros.

*Winter Words*, as befits a man going into his later eighties, is more in ruin's shadow than in love's realm. The last poem, written in 1927, is called *He Resolves To Say No More*, and follows directly on "*We Are Getting to The End*," which may be the bleakest sonnet in the language. Both poems explicitly reject any vision of hope, and are set against the Shelleyan rational meliorism of *Prometheus Unbound*. "We are getting to the end of visioning/The impossible within this universe," Hardy flatly insists, and he recalls Shelley's vision of rolling time backward, only to dismiss it as the doctrine of Shelley's Ahasuerus: "(Magians who drive the midnight quill/With brain aglow/Can see it so)". Behind this rejection is the mystery of misprision, of deep poetic influence in its final phase, which I have called *Apophrades* or the Return of the Dead. Hovering everywhere in *Winter Words*, though far less explicitly than it hovers in *The Dynasts*, is Shelley's *Hellas*. The peculiar strength and achievement of *Winter Words* is not that we are compelled to remember Shelley when we read in it, but rather that it makes us read much of Shelley as though Hardy were Shelley's ancestor, the dark father whom the revolutionary idealist failed to cast out.

Nearly every poem in *Winter Words* has a poignance unusual even in Hardy, but I am moved most by *He Never Expected Much*, the poet's reflection on his eighty-sixth birthday, where his dialogue with the "World" attains a resolution:

"I do not promise overmuch,  
 Child; overmuch;  
 Just neutral-tinted haps and such,"  
 You said to minds like mine.  
 Wise warning for your credit's sake!  
 Which I for one failed not to take,  
 And hence could stem such strain and ache  
 As each year might assign.

The "neutral-tinted haps," so supremely hard to get into poems, are the staple of Hardy's achievement in verse, and contrast both

to Wordsworth's "sober coloring" and Shelley's "deep autumnal tone." All through *Winter Words* the attentive reader will hear a chastened return of High Romantic Idealism, but muted into Hardy's tonality. Where Yeats malformed both himself and his High Romantic fathers, Blake and Shelley, in the violences of *Last Poems and Plays*, Hardy more effectively subdued the questing temperaments of his fathers, Shelley and Browning, in *Winter Words*. The wrestling with the great dead is subtler in Hardy, and kinder both to himself and to the fathers.

Hardy's Shelley was essentially the darker poet of *Adonais* and *The Triumph of Life*, though I find more quotations from *The Revolt of Islam* scattered through the novels than from any other single work by Shelley, and I suppose *Hellas* and *Prometheus Unbound* were even more direct, technical influences upon *The Dynasts*. But Hardy was one of those young men who went about in the 1860's carrying a volume of Shelley in his pocket. Quite simply, he identified Shelley's voice with poetry itself, and though he could allow his ironic sense to touch other writers, he kept Shelley inviolate, almost as a kind of secular Christ. His misprision of Shelley, his subversion of Shelley's influence, was an unconscious defense, quite unlike the overt struggle against Shelley of Browning and Yeats.

American poets, far more than British, have rebelled overtly against ancestral voices, partly because of Whitman's example, and also because of Emerson's polemic against the very idea of influence, his insistence that going alone must mean refusing even the good models, and so entails reading primarily as an inventor. Our greater emphasis upon originality has produced inversely a more malevolent anxiety of influence, and our poets consequently misinterpret their precursors more radically than do the British. Hardy's was a gentler case of influence-anxiety than that of any other modern strong poet, for reasons allied, I think, to the astonishing ease of Hardy's initial entrance into his poethood. But

Stevens was as astonishing an instance of late incarnation; fifteen years had to intervene between his undergraduate verse and his first real poem, *Blanche McCarthy*, not written until 1915, when he was nearly thirty-six:

Look in the terrible mirror of the sky  
And not in this dead glass, which can reflect  
Only the surfaces—the bending arm,  
The leaning shoulder and the searching eye.

Look in the terrible mirror of the sky.  
Oh, bend against the invisible; and lean  
To symbols of descending night; and search  
The glare of revelations going by!

Look in the terrible mirror of the sky.  
See how the absent moon waits in a glade  
Of your dark self, and how the wings of stars,  
Upward, from unimagined coverts, fly.

Here, at his true origin, Stevens is already an involuntary and desperate Transcendentalist, rejecting "the dead glass" of the object-world or Not-Me, and directing his vision to the sky, "terrible mirror" for reflecting either the Giant of one's imagination or the Dwarf of the self's disintegration. But the High Romantic, Shelleyan emblems of imagination, moon and stars, are obscured by the self's darkness and by an inventive faculty still unable to function. Yet the desire for revelations, for an inwardness that might stand up to the sky, is dominant and would prevail.

*The Rock* would have been Stevens' last book if he had not been persuaded to publish a *Collected Poems*. Less various than *Winter Words*, it goes beyond Hardy with several works of a final sublimity: *Madame La Fleurie*, *To an Old Philosopher in Rome*, *The World as Meditation*, *The Rock* itself, and most of all, *The River of Rivers in Connecticut*. These last visions are all Returns of the Dead, final re-captures of priority from a complex precursor, a composite figure at once English and American, but consistently Ro-

mantic: Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Emerson, Whitman. Whitman is most pervasive, as large a hidden form in Stevens as Shelley was in Hardy. The poet of *The Sleepers* and of the elegy for Lincoln is so stationed in *The Rock's* cadences and gestures that a reading of Whitman now finds him shadowed by Stevens. *Madame La Fleurie*, Stevens' fearful vision of the earth's final form, is Whitman's terrible mother let loose upon the land. The ultimate re-visioning of the inventors of an American Sublime—Emerson and Whitman—is most effective in the wholly solipsistic and new vitalism that rises up as the “unnamed flowing”—of “the river that flows nowhere, like a sea,” a river of the heightened senses with a “propelling force” that would prevent even Charon from crossing it. In Stevens' strange, triumphantly isolated joy at the end, as in Hardy's sublimely grim and solitary refusal to sorrow in sorrow, there is the accent of a strong poet who has completed the dialectic of misprision, as Yeats could not quite complete it. Stevens and Hardy weathered their wrestling with the dead, and either could have said at the end what Stevens said, when he saw himself alone with his book as a heterocosm, a finished version of the self or *The Planet on the Table*:

His self and the sun were one  
And his poems, although makings of his self,  
Were no less makings of the sun.

No less were they makings of the precursor, but the Wars of Eden had been fought, and the hard, partial victory had been won.

## 2

## The dialectics of poetic tradition

Emerson chose three mottos for his most influential essay, “Self-Reliance.” The first, from the *Satires* of Persius: “Do not seek yourself outside yourself.” The second, from Beaumont and Fletcher:

Man is his own star; and the soul that can  
Render an honest and a perfect man,  
Commands all light, all influence, all fate;  
Nothing to him falls early or too late. . . .

The third, one of Emerson's own gnomic verses, is prophetic of much contemporary shamanism:

Cast the bantling on the rocks,  
Suckle him with the she-wolf's teat,  
Wintered with the hawk and fox,  
Power and speed be hands and feet.

Like the fierce, rhapsodic essay they precede, these mottos are addressed to young Americans, men and women, of 1840, who badly needed to be told that they were not latecomers. But we, in fact, *are* latecomers (as indeed they were), and we are better off for consciously knowing it, at least right now. Emerson's single aim was to awaken his auditors to a sense of their own potential *power of making*. To serve his tradition now, we need to counsel a *power of conserving*.