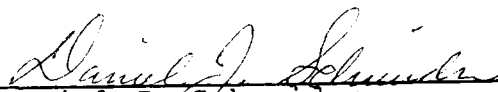
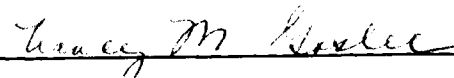
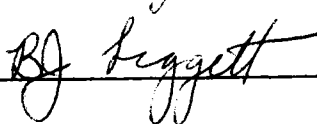


To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by John Micheal Crafton entitled "Kabbalah Rising: A Study of Harold Bloom's Early Criticism." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

  
Daniel J. Schneider  
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and  
recommend its acceptance:

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Graduate Studies and Research

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KABBALAH RISING: A STUDY OF HAROLD BLOOM'S  
EARLY CRITICISM

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

John Micheal Crafton

June 1980

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## ABSTRACT

A majority of Romanticism students have difficulty understanding the practical criticism of Harold Bloom. The reason for this difficulty is that Bloom bases his practical criticism on a very unique theory of criticism. The purpose of this study is to sift from the practical criticism from 1958 to 1971 the theory and explain it both in terms of Bloom's development of his ideas through his criticism and in terms of the isolated idea and its relationship to modern thought. This study will focus on four fundamental ideas of his theory: imagination, Romanticism, influence, and text.

Bloom's notion of text develops from his very early reaction to New Criticism and Structuralism. Against these schools of criticism Bloom develops the notion that a text contains no meaning, unity, or form. Meaning exists only in the dialectical relationship between texts. That is, any sign (e.g., word or poem) means nothing in and of itself; it is only in the process of signification that meaning exists. A sign is a two-faced coin, a real artifact that means nothing without a giver and a taker. Bloom develops his ideas of text and meaning as usage, in part, from the ideas in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations. Thus, Bloom bases his ideas on criticism as being nonreferential,

nonpropositional, and nonverifiable. Language and meaning is as free from restraint as the imagination and usage permit.

Bloom's idea of influence is derived from his understanding of many precursor poets and critics. But his principle sources are Blake, Frye, and Freud. His basic idea is that an ephebe (a poet before his creation) begins to write a particular poem but feels anxiety due to the fear that the father-precursor poets (also called the Covering Cherub) have stated the idea before. So he rewrites his precursor and alleviates his anxiety by purposely misreading the precursor poems, a swerve from the original, a type of fall, that he calls clinamen. The clinamen is one of two revisionary rations he uses; the other is tessera, the notion that the ephebe reads his father poet as somehow incomplete, like a beautiful urn with a fragment missing. The ephebe alleviates his anxiety by providing the fragment and thereby completing the precursor poem.

Bloom's theory of Romanticism is based upon his ideas of influence and text; it is also very similar to other theories of Romanticism (especially those of Northrop Frye and M. H. Abrams). For Bloom, however, the theory of Romanticism is the theory of imagination. Thus, the story of the imagination is the story of Romanticism. This story has several stages, but a few are very important. The first stage is the recognition of limitations and of the world as

fallen and fragmented. A possible next stage, for the intermediate stages may occur in any order, is the attempt to create paradise on earth in nature. A third possible stage is that of Prometheus, the stage of revolution and titanic defiance. A fourth stage is Purgatory. In this stage, the poet recognizes the limitations of either the Promethean or the Beulah stage, the stage of paradise in nature, and attempts to move out of it into another. The poet may move back to Beulah or to the final stage of Apocalypse. This stage is the one in which the poet seems to recreate time and space. The most successful imagination moves through all stages and resides in the last. For Bloom, there has never been a more successful imagination than Blake's.

Bloom's method of interpretation requires a collapsing of the previous four ideas. This method is twofold: explaining and assessing. He describes a work by using other texts and analyzing the process of signification that he perceives and by charting influences. He assesses a work by how powerfully Romantic it is. If it is of the first order, it evokes the sense of apocalyptic humanism; that is, it evokes the sense of the ending of time and space in a way that benefits mankind, for it moves him out of solipsism and fragmentation into a perception of unity.

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## CHAPTER I

### A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS

Patience! Patience! The world is a vast and ghastly intricacy of mechanism, and one has to be very wary, not to get mangled by it.

--D. H. Lawrence, Lady Chatterly's Lover

Standing before Harold Bloom's labyrinthine structure of criticism can indeed be a "vast and ghastly" experience. His criticism has given many students of Romanticism a good deal of anxiety and fright. We all want to experience the "Romantic sublime," but when Bloom's convolutions appear thick and dark, we, like Blake's Thel, run backward into the sunny climes of ignorance. The raison d'etre of this paper is to explain the early criticism of Bloom and attempt to answer the question, why is he so difficult? What is it that causes C. S. Lewis, an eminent scholar, to say, in his review of The Visionary Company, "this is the most difficult book that I have read?"<sup>1</sup>

A secondary purpose of this study is to aid in the understanding of Bloom's later criticism. My study ends with The Ringers in the Tower, Bloom's collected essays published from 1958 to 1970. I have excluded from this

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, "Poetry and Exegesis," rev. of The Visionary Company, by Harold Bloom, Encounter, 20, No. 6 (1963), 74.

study his editorial work on anthologies of poetry and criticism. Bloom devastated the critical market with the publication of three books after 1971: The Anxiety of Influence, The Map of Misreading, and Kabbalah and Criticism. In these books Bloom posits a very contentious theory of poetry, poetic influence, and exegetical method. The validity and usefulness of his theory is still being debated, but with the advent of those books, Bloom was recognized as a brilliant critical mind not to be disregarded. These radical theories did not spring forth ab ovo after 1971; however, they were implicit in his earlier criticism. Indeed the difficulty of his earlier practical criticism is that his very radical theory of criticism was developing before 1971.

This study is needed because no systematic treatment of this period of Bloom's career has been done. I will chart the historical development of four fundamental ideas in his theory: the notions of text, influence, imagination, and Romanticism. Once these ideas are made clear, both in terms of the final product and in terms of their historical development, I will attempt to show how one must reintegrate the four ideas to understand his calculus of criticism, both explanatory and judicial. I will also, at various points in this essay, attempt to place Bloom in the trends of modern criticism and philosophy and end with a note on the worth of his methods. I will not, however, endeavor to judge the

worth or validity of his interpretations of specific poems, for that would assume my being an authority on the literature from Homer to Ashberry.

It is often difficult to write about writings about writings, but my task is made easier by Richard McKeon and, after him, M. H. Abrams, who provide useful paradigms for understanding theories of art criticism. Abrams claims that theories of art can be differentiated primarily by the subject matter of the discussion: poet, poem, audience, or universe (nature).<sup>2</sup> The theories that accompany these concerns are respectively the expressive, objective, pragmatic, and mimetic.<sup>3</sup> The classification is rather broad, but its simplicity is refreshing. Bloom most appropriately fits into the pragmatic category. This classification is rather shocking at first since one would expect him to fit in with many of the Romantics in the expressive mode, but Bloom is fundamentally concerned with the effects of art upon the audience. McKeon also offers a mode of classification based upon subject matter: poet, poem, and effects.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 6-7.

<sup>3</sup>Abrams, Mirror, pp. 8-29.

<sup>4</sup>Richard McKeon, "The Philosophical Bases of Art and Art Criticism," in Critics and Criticism, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 204.

Both McKeon and Abrams refer to effects as the artifact's effect upon the reader (audience). In Bloom's case it is more accurate to say that his criticism reveals the effects his "reading" has upon him. He would claim it philosophically naive to say that there is anything in the poem. Saying that there is something in the poem is as old fashioned as arguing from a pre-Santayanan theory of beauty. Rather, there is only the mind's reading or idea of comprehension that has any effect upon the mind.

McKeon claims that there are three considerations which determine the philosophical structure of art: "kinds of things appropriate to the discussion . . . the mode of classifying such things . . . [and] the determination of the characteristics relevant to the evaluation of such things."<sup>5</sup> And for illustration and historical perspective McKeon offers six different subject matters or means of talking about art by six very famous men who have written about art: Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Tolstoy, Bacon and Kant. Plato and Aristotle "seek general philosophic principles in the nature of things," Bacon and Kant seek them in human understanding, "and Horace and Tolstoy seek them in operations."<sup>6</sup> However, Plato, Kant, and Tolstoy are concerned with the conditions of art rather than the products, and Aristotle, Bacon, and

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<sup>5</sup>McKeon, p. 206.

<sup>6</sup>McKeon, p. 206.

Horace treat the artifact rather than conditions.<sup>7</sup> Thus, we have from McKeon a much more complicated and perhaps more useful rendering of a philosophical paradigm.

Bloom most easily fits into the Kantian category of McKeon's schema, yet this category is as inaccurate as Abrams' pragmatic category. Kant's basis for understanding and for explaining art is a subjective judgement of beauty in nature and art which is predicated not upon external objects but "on the free interplay of imagination and understanding."<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Bloom's criticism is based upon human understanding, his human understanding, of text, based upon a free play of his imagination. He is concerned not only with beauty but also with humanism, irony, argument, myth, sublime, and the influences of other texts which are other poems and any written matter concerning the poem: letters, biographies, and other criticism. Again, his subject matter is poetic effect not of the poem as an artifact but only of a "reading," and his mode of classifying and evaluating poetry is a subjective assessment based upon the degree of apocalyptic humanism he perceives in his reading. That is, he asks how well does the poem help produce a sense of the cessation of time and thus alleviate the malaise of the human condition?

Already I slip into the habit of talking about the poem's causing when there is only comcomitance. The habit

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<sup>7</sup>McKeon, pp. 211-12.

<sup>8</sup>McKeon, p. 237.

has a long tradition and is very hard to break. It must be assumed that when I refer to Bloom's discussion of a poem's expressing or an author's feeling, I am using a figure of speech. Bloom does not really claim to know what an author knows or feels. Nor does he claim to say that a text contains anything other than ink and paper, but rather he uses a metonymy for his reading. For example, in a discussion of Shelley, Bloom is not really discussing Shelley, but he is using the word "Shelley" as a metonym for his subjective understanding of the poem.

The notion of the reading is a unique idea in the context of the history of aesthetics, and it is the single most important cause for the difficulty of placing Bloom's methods in the paradigms offered by Abrams and McKeon. But the paradigms they offer are necessary for an understanding of how Bloom departs from his tradition. The idea of the reading, however, is understandable only after a comprehension of what Bloom means by text, a most fundamental concept for all post-New Critical developments in America and Europe. So I close the introduction with the promise of clarifying the area.

Where words coming out of a mouth are  
                   always upside-  
 Down, and all tongues are sloppily cubical, and

shadows of nothing are,  
Whatever the hour, always something.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Robert Penn Warren, "Inevitable Frontier," in his Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978 (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 61.

## CHAPTER II

### THE MYTH OF TEXT

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,  
And my ears made the blowing hymms they heard  
I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw  
Or heard or felt came not but from myself  
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

--Wallace Stevens, "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon"

In 1975, Bloom stated clearly the solidification of his thinking about literary art up to that point. He said that "texts don't have meanings, except in their relations to other texts," and furthermore the idea that a poem creates presence, creates a unity, creates a form or creates meanings is all illusion.<sup>1</sup> Poems don't have or express or create anything. Rather, meaning is apprehended subjectively in the dialectical relationships between texts.<sup>2</sup> This idea is not stated so boldly in the writing covered by this study; however, it is stated. My purpose in this chapter is, first, to make sense out of the notion of text and then show how this kernel idea develops historically in his practical criticism.

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<sup>1</sup>Harold Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 106,122.

<sup>2</sup>Bloom, Kabbalah, p. 106.

Bloom's first major publication is his book on the mythopoeic poetry of Shelley, Shelley's Mythmaking.<sup>3</sup> Several of his theoretical convictions are evident in the first chapter of that book. One, he roundly attacks the imperatives of formalist critics who denigrate Shelly by calling him a poet of fog; two, he invokes theological existentialism under the aegis of Martin Buber's famous I and Thou, and, three, he asserts that an understanding of myth is necessary to an understanding of highly imaginative poetry. In order to understand Bloom's notion of text, one must collapse these three ideas and add to that Wittgensteinian epistemology. I shall first consider the attack on New Criticism.<sup>4</sup>

The New Critics or contextualists rocked the academic world around 1938 with assertions that seemed to

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<sup>3</sup>Bloom, Shelley's Mythmaking (1959; rpt. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969). All further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically by the abbreviation SM and by page number.

<sup>4</sup>The term New Criticism is quite ambiguous but has simply stuck by the accident of history. For a lively discussion of the term, its problems and alternatives, see B. J. Leggett's "Notes for a Revised History of the New Criticism: An Interview with Cleanth Brooks," Tennessee Studies in Literature, 24 (1979), 1-35. For an understanding of the New Critics, see John Crowe Ransom's The New Criticism (New York: New Directions, 1941), Murry Krieger's The New Apologists for Poetry (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956) and chapters 6-9 of his Poetic Presence and Illusion (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979). For a very careful analysis of New Critical principles by a professional philosopher, see Eliseo Vivas' two volumes: Creation and Discovery (New York: The Noonday Press, 1955), The Artistic Transaction (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1963).

histo-biographical critics to divorce the poem from all considerations of the poet or his culture. Brooks especially has made clear on many occasions that the "intentional fallacy" does not necessarily imply such a divorce.<sup>5</sup> But they did point out that a criticism based upon discerning the poet's intentions is based upon an epistemic impossibility and that a criticism based upon the poem's effects upon the audience tends toward reader psychology rather than aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the formalists began a tradition of considering a poem in terms of its structure or rather form-content, the two being inextricable, and other poetic properties such as irony, wit, paradox, tone, and figurative language.

In about the middle of the 1950's, a group of still newer critics began for several reasons to challenge the propositions of formalism.<sup>7</sup> The reactions to formalism are very diverse, but three of the schools existing today are the structuralists (objective criticism), the Geneva school, and the reader response critics (affective criticism).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn (New York: Harcourt, 1947), pp. 215-51.

<sup>6</sup>René Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York: Harcourt, 1942), p. 80.

<sup>7</sup>Krieger, Poetic Presence, pp. 169-70.

<sup>8</sup>Vincent B. Leitch, "A Primer of Recent Critical Theories," College English, 39 (1977), 138-52.

These groups are the major schools extant, not the only schools. The structuralist critics--this term includes a broad, very diverse group of critics generally lumped into two categories: ideological (Marxist, etc.), and nonideological (Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, etc.)<sup>9</sup>--base their ideas upon the Cours de Linguistique Générale of Ferdinand de Saussure. He, of course, set forth the proposition, among others, that a linguist should study language synchronically (studying present linguistic structures without regard to historical development) as well as diachronically (historical and comparative linguistics). When one does so, one finds that language can be distinguished by langue and parole.<sup>10</sup> This distinction roughly translates into "the collective system of all possible expressions" and "actual utterances of any person or group," respectively. One is probability; the other is occurrence.<sup>11</sup>

Some structuralists married Saussure to a very positivistic epistemology and are now stylisticians. One of the most synthetic minds in the field is that of Lubomir

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<sup>9</sup>Michael Scriven, "Structuralism in Focus," Quinquere, 1 (1978), 134.

<sup>10</sup>Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. Wade Baskins (1959; rpt. London: Peter Owen, 1974).

<sup>11</sup>This dichotomy is quite similar to Chomsky's categories of "competence" and "performance." See John Lyons' Noam Chomsky, Penguin Modern Masters, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Penguin, 1971), pp. 31-32.

Dolezel. He claims that one can know the style of a given text by arriving at the sum of the statistical probabilities of its linguistic items and then by comparing that sum to established "norms" of style either by genre, period, author or any number of other guides.<sup>12</sup> In effect, one can talk of Shakespeare's style in Richard the Second as opposed to his style in Love's Labour's Lost, or one can talk of Shakespeare's style as opposed to Marlowe's and consider all the plays of each author. Robert Scholes is doing similar work in his structuralist poetics in which he attempts to discern what literariness in literature is. He claims that an unliterary text, is present (seems to be a thing), phenomenal (defies scientific description), and concrete as opposed to a literary text which is absent, semiotic, and abstract.<sup>13</sup> He admits to variously different gradations of his six part dichotomy, and he is forced to admit that literature cannot be just books but certain speech acts as well. Hence, he is working within a semiology that, like

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<sup>12</sup>Lubomir Dolezel, "A Framework for the Statistical Analysis of Style" in Statistics and Style, ed. Lubomir Dolezel and Richard W. Bailey (New York: American Elsevier, 1969), pp. 10-14. See also for a definition of style and norms Nils Enkvist's "On Defining Style: An Essay in Applied Linguistics" in Linguistics and Style, ed. John Spencer (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 3-56.

<sup>13</sup>Robert Scholes, "Toward a Semiotics of Literature" in What is Literature?, ed. Paul Hernadi (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 238-42.

Yuri Lotman's, cannot be confined to the printed text.

Stylistics and semiotics (these two theorists must serve as emblems for the groups) are still, according to Bloom, basing their ideas on the belief that we can know what the sign (e.g., word) of a given text signifies.

Roland Barthes in his Elements of Semiology takes into consideration more accurately the problem of signifieds (an awkward term that he employs to represent whatever a signifier signifies). A semiological sign (e.g., word, coat, dish, etc.) is viewed as having form and substance. It can be used for various purposes and thus have a substance. For example, I can use a dish to serve food, and I can write words for my own pleasure. However, more related to literature, the sign has a function of signification which is a process, not a thing. The sign stands as the nexus of signifier and signified.<sup>14</sup> The understanding of the process, the meaning one gets out of what is symbolized by the sign, is contingent upon a number of physical factors approaching infinity.<sup>15</sup> For example, my understanding of the word bourgeoisie is contingent upon my cultural background, the day's weather, my financial situation, my child's health, and so forth. Likewise, my understanding of even a noncontent

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<sup>14</sup>Roland Barthes, Elements of Semiology, trans. Anette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 38-39.

<sup>15</sup>Barthes, pp. 45-47.

word like "of" is contingent upon the sum of external influences and the effects thereof.<sup>16</sup>

Bloom is very closely aligned to a group known as the deconstructionists, a smaller critical circle that combines the notions of structuralism and the reader response critics, and they are led by the impressive mind of Jacques Derrida. The deconstructionists claim that reading in the traditional sense of correct interpretation is impossible. Derrida adopts Saussure's notion of "difference" to explain his understanding of understanding; that is, the active element in meaning is the difference between signs, and the process of acquiring or asserting meaning is that of deferring. Derrida calls this process différance. So, "any attempt to define or interpret the significance of a sign or chain of signs consists in nothing more than the interpreter's putting in its place another sign or chain of signs, 'sign-substitutions,' whose self-effacing traces merely defer laterally, from substitution to substitution, the fixed and present meaning (or the signified 'presence') we vainly pursue."<sup>17</sup> The idea, then, that one can arrive at any conclusion about a

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<sup>16</sup>For a good discussion of noncontent words see Dolores Burton's "Some Uses of a Grammatical Concordance," Computers and the Humanities, 2 (1968), 145-54, for the notion that any word is totally free of content is tenuous.

<sup>17</sup>M. H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel," Critical Inquiry, 3 (1977), 430.

philosophical position, including an aesthetic one, of course, is a fiction. All one can do is write. Hence, one has the right to play any sort of Joycean game in writing about criticism that one wishes. Derrida is fond of x-ing words (e.g., ~~is~~) and using footnotes which seem incongruent to the mainstream of the essay.<sup>18</sup> All of these sorts of games seem to be irrelevant, but of course all of the questioning this play with language elicits further advances the Deconstructionist's fundamental epistemological premise: language is not necessarily referential.

This idea of the nonreferentiality of language goes back at least to Parmenides,<sup>19</sup> but is better articulated by the slightly later and more familiar Plato. He claims that all reality as it is commonly perceived is but shadowy seeming behind which is a final reality (or noeisis as a mental state). The final reality is the ideal Good from which everything flows.<sup>20</sup> The idea is again firmly established in Kant who, focusing more specifically on language,

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<sup>18</sup> Gayatri Chakrovorty Spiva, "Translator's Preface" in Of Grammatology by Jacques Derrida (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), p. xiv.

<sup>19</sup> Bertrand Russell, A History of Western Philosophy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), p. 51. For Parmenides, words perpetually change meaning, yet all meanings are true in that they all emanate from the One.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, The Republic in Plato, trans. Benjamin Jowett, ed. Louis R. Loomis (Rosalyn, New York: Walter J. Black, 1969), pp. 393-94.

claims that our perception of reality is governed by our a priori constitutive modes of perception. These modes are also prelanguage modes, but they develop as language develops. Unlike Plato who considered the poet's language a copy of a copy, Kant claimed that the poet uses language to create a new being, but this new being is but a new way of apprehending phenomenal reality. The philosopher must use agreed upon logical structures to arrive at solutions to problems. Like the poet, the philosopher's language will not reveal ultimate reality, but this language is what is available, and through it one can arrive at solutions universal and relevant to the society of man.<sup>21</sup> This confidence in the notion that men can agree upon, without equivocation, the relationships between signs and things and the relationships between signs forms a foundation for logical positivism. The positivists want to reject all issues of philosophy that cannot be answered logically and that cannot be verified empirically. Ethics and metaphysics become of minor or no importance; however, this trend in thought produced the important books on logic: Russell and Whitehead's The Principia Mathematica and Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.

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<sup>21</sup>Hazard Adams, The Interests of Criticism (New York: Harcourt, 1969), pp. 71-72, 91-93. See also, Richard McKeon, pp. 207-208, and Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," New Literary History, 10 (1978), 143.

It is Wittgenstein, however, who carries the positivists' notions to their logical extremes and sees the poverty of their conceptions. Wittgenstein's logical positivism, like Russell and Whitehead's, is predicated upon a skepticism of the relationship between words and things, but they all posit a relationship between words and images and still maintain a correspondance theory of truth and knowledge; that is, they maintain a connection to a form of referentiality in language. Wittgenstein departs from the logical positivists in his Philosophical Investigations and advances the idea that this positivistic form of referentiality is false. Russell's epistemology, though comforting, is simply wrong.<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein's later idea about language is explained by Justus Hartnack. "In the Tractatus a word is meaningful if, and only if, it is a name. In the Philosophical Investigations, a word is not a name; a word can be used as a name, but it can be used in numerous other ways as well."<sup>23</sup> The various uses of language are but games that have nothing in common but "family resemblances," and, furthermore, there is

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<sup>22</sup>Bertrand Russell, The Problems of Philosophy (1910; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 25-26. Here Russell admits his inability to topple the rationalists' argument, but he appeals to comfort and common sense in order to advocate his view of empiricism.

<sup>23</sup>Justus Hartnack, Wittgenstein and Modern Philosophy, trans. Maurice Araston (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 70.

no single defining concept of language.<sup>24</sup> The ontology of language is language use. One can certainly doubt that one can use language, but to do so is the same as a normal person's doubting that he has two hands. This kind of doubting may be strongly defended, but it is certainly a fruitless and absurd activity.<sup>25</sup> The implication seems to me that while Descartes could not doubt his postulate cogito ergo sum, Wittgenstein claims that one should not doubt the postulate that Descartes' idea is predicated upon, symbolico ergo sum.

The post-New Critics take this view of language and turn it against the New Critics. It is ironic that the New Critics made their mark in the world by denouncing the older critics' flimsy epistemology, and now the New Critics are being shunned for their own naive epistemology. That is, the New Critics act under the belief that the words in a poem name, and one can arrive at definitive interpretations because they do so. One merely discerns what it is they name and conclude by explaining what the various namings are about. The post-New Critics claim that words do not necessarily name, and one can decide that they name something and arrive at a conclusion; however, one is equally

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<sup>24</sup>Hartnack.

<sup>25</sup>Charles Altieri, "Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language: A Challenge to Derridean Literary Theory," Modern Language Notes, 91 (1976), 1416-17.

correct to say that they name something else entirely different. David Lodge points out Paul Valery's distinction between poetry and prose. Valery called poetry an autonomous activity likened to dancing and prose a purposive activity likened to walking. Lodge claims that for modern critics "what Valery said about poetry must be true for all literature, and that the 'crisis of language' which Sartre claimed was peculiar to modern poetry, is in fact common to all writing in the modern period."<sup>26</sup> When we dismiss the possibility of knowing an artist's intentions perfectly (as if the artist himself could perfectly know his intentions) and dismiss the necessity of a word-thing relationship in language, then what are we left with but the theoretical freedom to claim any sort of naming we want? Meaning depends upon language usage, not upon language itself.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, it is easy to see how Bloom can claim that there is in theory no text in the sense that we commonly refer to it, a poem constituting a certain meaning which is a complex of form and content. A text is rather nothing but what we choose it to be, and we may well choose it to be a

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<sup>26</sup>David Lodge, The Modes of Modern Writing (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 59.

<sup>27</sup>Many New Critics, I am sure, do not believe that language is strictly referential; Brooks, at least, has mentioned in the classroom that language is not referential, but the post-New Critics attack a practical use of referentiality, not a philosophical position as such.

pole or a dialectic for which the other pole is a collective understanding of other texts. We may well not! Again, language means, Wittengenstein reminds us, what any two people choose it to mean.

Another major development in philosophy that leads up to Bloom's proposition is in aesthetics. George Santayana most notably marks this development. In his The Sense of Beauty he reacts against a trend in aesthetic theories of the nineteenth century which claims that beauty is an objective property of the art object. He rightly corrects these theories by claiming, as Locke did, that the only objective quality that the art object has is colorless atomic structures. The beauty that the observer perceives in art is "objectified pleasure."<sup>28</sup> Santayana is now outdated in his attempt to define art in terms of beauty, but he is certainly contemporary in claiming that whatever we perceive in art is objectified, subjective response. It is at this point that the reader response critics merge with the structuralists against the New Critics.

If we understand a poem, then, as a linguistic structure, or as a big symbol, as Langer would have us do,<sup>29</sup> then we can

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<sup>28</sup>George Santayana, The Sense of Beauty (1896; rpt. New York: Dover, 1955), p. 33.

<sup>29</sup>Suzanne Langer, Feeling and Form (New York: Scribners, 1953), p. 40.

clearly see that the understanding of the "meaning" of the symbol is governed by all that we have read. It is at this point that Stanley Fish and Normand Holland enter the discussion and exclaim that criticism is only a description of a learned reader's response to the work. Criticism is a recording of the phenomenon of reading. Holland and Fish claim that literature is a process, and that what constitutes literature is not the thing itself but rather a mode of perceiving a text.<sup>30</sup> Holland asserts that separating things into literature and nonliterature is a cartesianism outdated in physics and philosophy.<sup>31</sup> Thus, we come full circle from the affective criticism of Hazlitt and Lamb to the New Critics to structuralism to affective criticism again.

It is easy to see how Bloom's proposition fits into the modern directions of criticism that I have outlined. Yet, for a refreshing change, Bloom is not so radical as the reader response school. But Barthes' idea that the process of signification is dependent upon the total context of the mind is exactly Bloom's point. He simply calls it finding

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<sup>30</sup> Stanley Fish, "How Ordinary is Ordinary Language?" New Literary History, 5 (1973), 52, and Normon N. Holland, "Literature as Transaction," in What is Literature?, ed. Hernadi, pp. 207-208. For a more thorough discussion of affective criticism see Holland's The Dynamics of Literary Response (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968) and 5 Readers Reading (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975).

<sup>31</sup> Holland, "Literature as Transaction," pp. 214-15.

meaning in the dialectic between texts. The sign (poem) has as its signifier other poems that Bloom has read. What is signified, then, is a new organization of those previously read poems. So artists "create" their own precursors and force us to read the precursors differently.<sup>32</sup> Bloom, however, is not willing to allow that everything is literature. He would want to claim that literature is known by the resemblances of one text to another. All écriture is merely troping, but literature can be distinguished by the fact that it strongly resembles other literature. This is a complicated point that I shall come back to, but for now the conclusion is that literature or a poem is the incarnation of other poems, and a text has no meaning in itself but only in the dialectic between texts. I have here been explaining the concept in its purest form, but equally important is the development of this notion from Bloom's notion of myth.

Bloom began his career in 1958 with the article "The Dialectic of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" and with his first major publication in 1959, Shelley's Mythmaking, his Yale dissertation. As I have mentioned, several important tendencies in Bloom's thinking are evident in these publications: dialecticalism, existentialism, religion,

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<sup>32</sup>Bloom, The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 40. All further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically by the abbreviation RT and by page number.

myth, romantic poetry, and visionary poetics. Early on he states his bias that the best poets are dialectical thinkers who create their own myths. He never leaves this idea, but he develops it into the notion that every poetic text is a making of the poetic precursors that the reader discerns with his own dialectic.

In "The Dialectic of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Bloom first comes to grips with a truly strong text, a text that defies paraphrase and reduction. He claims that the Marriage works dialectically to present an argument for dialecticalism, thus setting traps for corporeal understanding (RT, p. 56). So before "explaining" the poem, Bloom says, "I shall attempt to reduce the Marriage to Blake's own overt dialectic" (my italics, RT, p. 56). Thus, he realizes that it is only in the dialectical action, the reader's mind in motion, that the poem can truly mean, but as a critic, especially a young one, he must do what he can to publish. Hence, he begins to recognize the positive existential affirmation of entering into a poem's imaginative action and the impossibility of explaining this phenomenon in traditional Newtonian causality.

He develops his thoughts more clearly in Shelley's Mythmaking. In this volume, he invokes the existential theologian Martin Buber and the anthropologist Henri Frankfort in order to establish clearly an explanation of a

pattern that he sees in most of Shelley's major poems. He sees Shelley's poetry advancing the argument of the dialectic between the imagination and nature in religious terms. (Here is his first attempt to grapple with the relationship between nature and Romanticism.) Though Shelley is clearly not religious in the traditional sense, Bloom sees his attempts to humanize nature as religious (SM, p. 6). More specifically in Buberian terms, Shelley attempts to say Thou to nature instead of It. This attempt is similar to primitive people's attempt to mythologize nature, according to Bloom's understanding of Frankfort (SM, p. 5). Bloom's use of this mythopoeic paradigm allows him to see the argument of the poems as the attempt to speak Thou to nature, to humanize nature, and he implies that the reader can enter into the I-Thou mode of understanding by reading Shelley. Bloom asserts this most clearly when he rails against anti-Shelleyan critics. He says, "if you reject (as many now do) this kind of writing [Shelley's poetry], then you are rejecting a kind of poetry or, at the very least, what our ancestors considered to be poetry. Ultimately the whole question is an affective [my italics] one, and the visionary poet must address his reader as Bunyan does, asking: 'Dost thou love picking meat? Or wouldst thou see/ A man in the clouds, and have him speak to thee?'" (SM, pp. 160-61).

So Bloom claims that an aesthetic experience is to be felt when the mind apprehends Shelley's creation of myth,

which is in a sense a creation of a new reality. Yet at this point Bloom is not fully stating his theory of text, for he says of Shelley's defense of Prometheus in the preface to the poem, "this lacks the subtle dialectic and careful vocabulary of Blake, and is therefore even more available for misreading" (SM, p. 51). He implies here that there is a "correct reading." However, he still reacts against the strict causality inherent in New Criticism. He says of C. D. Locock, the "inadequacy here is only in making his counters too precise, that is, of being less suggestive and tentative than Shelley himself is" (SM, p. 24). And criticism should not abstract and formulate too much either; rather, if the poem says Thou, then "we can at least attempt the critical experiment of saying 'Thou' after it. As for 'Thou' we know of it not because we have read Buber (though he can help us to talk about it), but because we have read poems and stood in relationship to other people" (SM, p. 20). We have stood in relationship to other poems as well, and it is for these reasons that Bloom explains with scores of analogues from other poems and in a very impressionistic and passionate dialogue.

Bloom's next major book, The Visionary Company, is primarily concerned with Romantic tradition and influence,

but he does continue shaping his idea of the text.<sup>33</sup> The book begins with an explication of Collins' "Ode to a Poetical Character" and a chapter on Blake, and then proceeds to explain the better known poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats and a few minor poets, all in terms of how well they stand up to Blake's imaginative achievement. Bloom again uses analogues for explication and passionate rhetoric for glorification of the poetry. The reason for his passionate rhetoric is that he believes what all the Romantic poets believed; "the theory of poetry is the theory of life" (VC, p. 3). That is, our conceptions of order in art are the same as our conceptions of order in the universe. The more we know about art, the more we know about the composition of the mind and the world. He again speaks in terms of affective criticism. About Blake's "Tyger," he says the reader must persist in his reading again and again. If the reader continues, "he is rewarded by an awakened sense of what is possible in poetry" (VC, p. 35). Bloom again claims that the subject of much poetry is poetry. "The Prelude," for example, is "an auto-biographical myth-making" (VC, p. 143). He again claims that discursive, verifiable, logical,

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<sup>33</sup>Bloom, The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry (1961; rpt. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1969). All further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically by the abbreviation VC and by page number.

propositional language is at times inadequate for criticism. Wordsworth's Ode "plays at discursiveness only to mock the the limitations of the discursive," and "we do it wrong . . . to treat it as thought dressed in images" (VC, p. 173). Moreover, "Asia's revelation" in Prometheus Unbound "is to be confronted, but not analyzed" (VC, p. 312). So Bloom asserts that any difficult poem affords the reader the possibility of saying Thou to it.

Bloom states his idea of text more clearly by claiming, again against formalists, that structuralists do "not want to know that all the Romantics knew, that the meaning of any poem can only be another poem" (VC, p. 463). Here he is very close to his completed idea of text. He seems guilty of the intentional fallacy here. How does he know what "all the Romantics knew"? Well, clearly he does not, and later he is more careful. In Blake's Apocalypse, his next book, he does not address the issue directly, but he is continually fascinated by Blake's idea, similar to Shelley's, that where man is not, nature is barren, and that knowledge can never increase without the faculty of the creative imagination.<sup>34</sup> In 1965, in an article on Stevens' Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, Bloom says of Stevens' idea that a fiction must

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<sup>34</sup>Bloom, Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument (1963; rpt. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970). All further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically by the abbreviation BA and by page number.

change, "not only must the poem resist intelligence almost successfully, but it must take on a different form with each fresh reading" (RT, p. 247). And in Yeats he claims that to read a book is to be "a self-conscious brooder, whose dialogue with history [including all poetry and poetic tradition] is a discipline largely for the self."<sup>35</sup> Finally, in the latest article of this study, "A. R. Ammons: 'When You Consider the Radiance,'" he says about a passage from "Saliences":

I think, when I read this passage, of the final lines of Wordsworth's great Ode, of the end of Browning's Love Among the Ruins, of the deep peace Whitman gives as he concludes Crossing Brooklyn Ferry, and of Stevens' closing As You Leave the Room. . . .

. . . . .  
This is not to play at touchstones, in the manner of Arnold or of Blackmur, but only to record my experience as a reader, which is that "Saliences" suggests and is worthy of such company. (RT, p. 280)

Thus, it stands complete. The reader's experience (aesthetic or otherwise) is the interplay or dialectic of the sign (poem) and the signifier (other poems). A meaning of a poem is other poems only in relations with each other. So every new reading of a poem must inevitably produce a new meaning which is essentially a new poem.

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<sup>35</sup>Bloom, Yeats (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 211. All further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically by the abbreviation YT and by page number.

It is now quite apparent that Bloom's idea of text develops from his feeling of the existential desire to confront, to stand in relationship to a visionary poem, or, as he says, to say Thou to a Shelley poem. To stand in relation is to truly understand self-created meaning. The strong (highly imaginative) poet works in "the process of making and defeating myths, of forming a new story and ending an old one" (VC, p. 310). The reader enters into this process if he truly understands the poem, and in the signifi-  
cational process, he creates new readings, essentially poems, and decides whether or not the new poet defeats or is defeated by the old poem or reading. This notion of defeating the old poets leads directly to the idea of poetic influence, the subject of the next chapter.

### CHAPTER III

#### FAMILY STRIFE: ANXIETY AND INFLUENCE

One by one he subdued his father's trees  
By riding them down again and again  
Until he took all the stiffness out of them,  
And not one but hung limp, not one was left  
For him to conquer.

--Robert Frost, "Birches"

In the introductory chapter to Yeats, Bloom outlines, albeit sketchily, his design for studying Yeats. He will see how well Yeats fits into the visionary line of the romantic poetic tradition, and he will investigate the various influences on Yeats. His notion of influence, however, is not the typical one. He states it as follows:

Poetic influence, as I conceive it, is a variety of melancholy or an anxiety-principle. It concerns the poet's sense of his precursors, and of his own achievement in relation to theirs. Have they left him room enough, or has their priority cost him his art? More crucially, where did they go wrong, so as to make it possible for him to go right? In his revisionary sense, in which the poet creates his own precursors by necessarily misinterpreting them, poetic influence forms and malforms new poets, and aids their art at the cost of increasing, finally, their already acute sense of isolation. (YT, p. 5)

Well, it is quite clear that Bloom's idea of influence at the latest stage of this study is opaque at best. He sees the poet in a Freudian vein as operating under two contradictory impulses, at once fearing and loving poetic tradition as the

poet conceives it. (This idea applies equally to critics.<sup>1</sup>) The need to create art in this crowded imaginative space at the cost of those he loves induces a good deal of anxiety because the ephebe (the would be poet or poet before his latest creation is actualized) is forced to twist the sinews of father poets in order to correct or somehow adjust their art. The scenario might well be this: a poet prepares to write, but he feels that Blake asserts the same idea in Milton. So, the ephebe must misunderstand Milton in order to make his statement. Therefore, Bloom's theory is twofold. On the one hand, he is concerned with the influences that bear on a poem, and, on the other, he is concerned with how the poet goes about relieving his anxiety. In this chapter, I will explore the theory of influence in terms of psychology and, of course, chart this developing idea in Bloom's works.

Immediately what comes to mind when many people read Bloom is the question, how can he possibly know who felt what influences when? And is not this theory as superficial as, say, psychohistory, which allows one to attempt to psychoanalyze a dead person from only nonconversive scraps of the person? Or, as the very capable scholar Morse Peckman points out, "as for 'misprision' (the condition in which one misrepresents) . . . it depends upon the notion that one

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<sup>1</sup>Hazard Adams, "Scholarship and the Idea of Criticism: Recent Writings on Yeats," The Georgia Review, 26 (1972), 270.

knows what the correct interpretation is; one must, if one is to perceive a creative misinterpretation."<sup>2</sup> Peckham's is the most characteristic attack on Bloom's idea of influence, and given the belief that language is referential or somehow strictly implicative, it is a good criticism. Yet, if one is to understand and criticize Bloom, which I think one can, one must do so on Bloom's own terms. This activity necessitates understanding what he means by text.

The notion of text has been outlined, but it is good to bring it back out since it is so fundamental to an understanding of what Bloom means by poetic influence. Bloom would respond to Peckham's critique, and I have chosen one among twenty or so such statements by disclaiming the existence of a correct reading in the traditional meaning of the word because there can be no strict, universally agreed upon, word-picture relationship in language, as Wittgenstein has told us. One does with language what one can do. And even Suzanne Langer has stated that as soon as one claims that there is "one" clearly defined meaning for art, one no longer has art, but one has the discursive language of logic or scientific notation.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Bloom claims that his reading is a correct apprehension of the process of

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<sup>2</sup>Morse Peckham, rev. of The Ringers in the Tower, by Harold Bloom, The Browning Newsletter, No. 9 (1972), p. 62.

<sup>3</sup>Langer, Feeling and Form, pp. 29-30.

of signification. Given his premise, this conclusion follows, but then so does anything (a problem I will come back to in the conclusion). So, Bloom gets around the "ideal reader" problem of the contextualists and the affective critics by asserting the seeming paradox: there is never a correct reading, yet one's reading is always correct.

Within the context of all of this seeming phantasmagoria of nonreferentiality, Bloom does want to imply that what he sees in the poem is indicative of the creative processes. That is, if he feels influences and anxiety when he writes criticism and if he hears the echoes of Milton in nearly all Romantic poetry, then he wants to imply that the poet felt the same kind of anxiety and certainly felt the ghost of the strong poet Milton.<sup>4</sup> Again, Bloom is not strictly implying that what he perceives is common to all or is grounded in some kind of "reality," but rather he is saying that he is using language this way, after Wittgenstein; he apprehends one mode of signification out of a large, perhaps infinite number of possible modes; perhaps, then, other readers can do the same. (For many critics, the answer is a resounding no.)

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<sup>4</sup>This premise is the "other minds" problem in Philosophy of Mind, a philosophical can of worms that I shall not open. For a complete discussion, see The Mind/Brain Identity Theory, ed. C. V. Borst (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970).

Now that it is possible to discuss the implications of this theory for readers and writers other than Bloom, I must explain it in terms of critical and psychological theories that pretend to talk about a "reality." Bloom himself cites many influences on his theory: Sophocles, Blake, DeQuincy, Nietzsche, Curtius, Frye, and Borges.<sup>5</sup> Yet since this paper is not a study of his influences (an attitude Bloom would surely disapprove of), I will not explore them all. Rather, I will explore the influences of Blake, Frye and principally Freud. These three are sufficient sources for the development of his theory, and the discussion of them will in turn explain his theory as well.

It is easy to tell that Bloom knew Blake well during the writing of the early Shelley's Mythmaking. Blake is mentioned on at least 111 of the book's 275 pages. He claims that Blake is the principal mythmaker, and he uses Blake's creation for his analogical discussion of Shelley's mythopoeic mode (SM, p. 10). He comes, however, to recognize Blake as the quintessential Romantic in his next book. He says, "Blake died in the evening of Sunday, August 12, 1827, and the firm belief in the autonomy of a poet's imagination died with him" (VC, p. 1). Bloom means here that no canon of

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<sup>5</sup>Bloom cites his debt throughout his texts. His debt to Curtius and DeQuincey are mentioned later, however, in the book he coauthors with Paul de Man et al., Deconstruction and Criticism (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979).

poetry, not even Shelley's or Stevens', provides for Bloom the sense of imaginative power and prophetic vision that Blake's does.

Bloom's idea of influence is shaped by Blake's own struggle with his precursor Milton in the poem Milton. Bloom claims early on that "Blake saved himself by Milton's help, as the poem will make clear" (BA, p. 315). And in Milton, Blake claims, "But I knew not that it was Milton, for man cannot know/ What passes in his members till periods of Space & Time/ Reveal the secrets of Eternity."<sup>6</sup> Bloom comments that as Blake assimilates Milton, he is becoming "aware of an increase in prophetic power" (BA, p. 331). Milton, then, is the story of Blake's handling of his precursor when he wanted to write his own theodicy that he might also "justify the ways of God to Man." Milton had done this, but Blake sees error in it and actually brings Milton into the poem in order that Milton will learn to agree with Blake on the idea of self-annihilation as the proper prelude to apocalypse, a point neglected in Paradise Lost. The adaptation of Milton's work "allows the later poet to advance his personal solution to the problem of evil" (BA, p. 363). This treatment of Blake's famous poem is not

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<sup>6</sup>William Blake, Milton, pl. 21, ll. 8-10, in The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 553.

too different from Bloom's final theory of influence and treatment of all poems, which can in part be attributed to his understanding of Freud.

Freud has given us little information about art directly. For Hazard Adams, Freud's "attitudes toward the poet are finally, I think, as ambivalent as Plato's."<sup>7</sup> Freud's concerns were mainly with the artist's relationship to his work. Trilling tells us that Freud treated the artist as a kind of neurotic who attempts not to affect external reality in the best way, which "is practical, effective, positive; this is the way of the conscious self, of the ego which must be made independent of the super-ego and extend its organization over the id."<sup>8</sup> But rather the poet seeks to affect reality in "the fictional way. Instead of doing something about or to external reality, the individual who uses this way does something to, or about, his affective states."<sup>9</sup> So Freud's artist is seemingly predisposed toward the condition of anxiety.

It is a common experience for anyone writing to fear that what one delivers has already been delivered and, even worse, delivered better. But Bloom adopts Freud's Oedipus

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<sup>7</sup> Adams, The Interests of Criticism, p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> Lionel Trilling, The Liberal Imagination (New York: Scribners, 1976), p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Trilling.

Complex and defense mechanisms to explain the more sensitive writer's melancholy. Melancholia as Freud conceives it is a "grief at some loss, probably of libido."<sup>10</sup> A primary cause for libidinal loss is located in the character of the father. Now the young poet thinks lovingly of his poetic father, but his father is the denier of productivity, who Bloom calls, after Blake, "the Covering Cherub." The Covering Cherub for the Romantics is the collective Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton (RT, p. 10), and for "American poetry in the Romantic tradition" it is "Emerson, who is . . . the starting point, the defining element, the vexatious father, the shadow and the despair, liberating angel and blocking agent, perpetual irritant and solacing glory" (RT, p. 209). Hence, the poetic father is both loved and hated by the ephebe. The Covering Cherub with all its creative productions inhibits the ephebe's libido or creative force, yet the Cherub is also the veritable source of poetic inspiration. The libido in this case is the desire to beget oneself. Bloom states, "The poet, if he could, would be his own precursor, and so rescue the Muse from her degradation" (YT, p. 5). The poet, then, has an incestuous desire for his mother-Muse, according to the Oedipus Complex, yet wants to save her from

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<sup>10</sup> Ernest Jones, The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud, ed. and abridged by Lionel Trilling and Steven Marcus (New York: Basic Books, 1961), p. 182.

degradation and thus is resigned to a form of anxiety producing autosex. He also fears loss of libido, castration from his Oedipal Cherub. Thus, the poet is caught between contradictory, anxiety producing impulses, primarily in three directions: Mother-Muse, Father-Cherub, and Self. In all three cases exists the desire for action (loving the Muse, loving the self, killing the father) and for restraint caused by fear of Muse degradation, love and respect for father, and the abnormality of autosex.<sup>11</sup>

So, after the poet is caught in the middle of this mental malheur de trois, what does he do? Bloom states generally that he malforms the Cherub to create imaginative space. More specifically Bloom advances at his latest stage two forms of "revisionary ratios" (modes of poetic revision). They are the clinamen (after Lucretius) and the tessera (after Jacques Lacan). The clinamen is a poetic swerve away from the precursor "intended to uncover the Cherub" (YT, p. 7). This idea or swerve is any ephebe's change of any precursor's idea. For example, Bloom says that Yeats' "Coole Park and Ballylee" is "one of Yeats' series of revisionary

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<sup>11</sup>Jones, p. 228. According to Jones, Bloom exaggerates the autosex drive, the desire to beget self. However Melanie Klein's theory, built upon Freud's, posits the autosex drive as extremely strong in the Oedipus Complex. Her theory is outlined in Alfred M. Freedman, Harold I. Kaplan, and Benjamin J. Sadock, Modern Synopsis of Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry (Baltimore: The Williams and Wilkins Co., 1972), pp. 145-46.

swerves away from Alastor" (YT, p. 381). Both poems are about the poet's alienation. Yeats presents an "alienation from nature and society . . . as part of a historical process of decline," whereas Shelley's "alienation is due only to the compatibility of imagination and nature" (YT, p. 382). The misreading is, then, that Shelley's poem is incomplete without the notion of historical process. We may surmise, then, that Yeats wanted to write about alienation and nature and imagination, but swerved, "smooth on a bow bend," to include historical process in the accepted poem.

The idea of tessera is a revisionary ratio of a more specific nature. Bloom says, "in the tessera, the later poet provides what his imagination tells him would complete the otherwise 'truncated' precursor poem and poet, a 'completion' that is as much misprision as a revisionary swerve is" (RT, p. 294). Furthermore, "the tessera represents any later poet's attempt to persuade himself (and us) that the precursor's Word would be worn out if not redeemed as a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word of the ephebe" (RT, p. 295). One example Bloom gives is the completion of Emerson's "Fate" by E. A. Robinson's "The Children of Night." Robinson's "tessera in regard to Emerson relies on completing the sage's fatalism. From Emerson's categories of power and circumstance, Robinson fashions a more complete single category, in a personal idealism that is a 'philosophy of desperation'"

(RT, p. 307). Presumably, Robinson's misprision is that he felt that Emerson's ideas were not in any sense adequate to stand the test of time. However, Robinson, by perceiving a false need to "complete" Emerson, finds imaginative space in which to malform "Emersonian Self-Reliance and make it his own by emphasizing its Stoic as against its Transcendental or Bacchic aspect" (RT, p. 307).

These two revisionary ratios are really Freudian defense mechanisms. Anna Freud explained that all egos have various methods for protecting themselves from anxiety, in this case signal anxiety, a fear in anticipation of a fear.<sup>12</sup> Freedman, Kaplan and Sadock outline 17 of Anna Freud's defense mechanisms.<sup>13</sup> The last one is Creative Elaboration; the authors explain, "The specific instinctive conflicts that arouse anxiety may be elaborated and disguised in dreams, stories and fantasies that represent the id-ego protagonist in new relationships to each other."<sup>14</sup> This is Bloom's point precisely. The "specific instinctive conflicts" of the artist are his desires for creation under the powerfully inhibiting influence of previous poets. The conflicts are altered, "disguised," and represented in the new poems. The

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<sup>12</sup>Freedman, Kaplan, and Sadock, p. 113.

<sup>13</sup>Freedman, Kaplan, and Sadock, p. 111-12.

<sup>14</sup>Freedman, Kaplan, and Sadock, p. 112.

revisionary swerve or completion is the new relationship between the id (desiring epebe) and ego (container and preserver of the Cherub).

Freud seems to explain Bloom's theory adequately, but the influence which could have brought Blake and Freud together in Bloom's mind is Frye; indeed, Frye may also be the catalyst that brings existentialism, mythopoeia, and poetic influence together. Early in Bloom's career he was quite familiar with Frye's monumental work on Blake, Fearful Symmetry, wherein Frye outlines Blake's massive symbolization of his anxieties, in Bloom's terms. Bloom quotes Frye on Blake's idea of Milton in a chapter of Shelley's Mythmaking in which Bloom discusses the parallel reactions to Milton by both Blake and Shelley. Moreover, Bloom, in his 1962 preface to Blake's Apocalypse says, "To Frye's work I have a more pervasive obligation, for by reading him I learned to read Blake" (BA, p. 10).

In Fearful Symmetry, Bloom, of course, found a manner of critical thinking similar to his own. Myth and archetype are of fundamental importance, as they are in Shelley's Mythmaking. Frye also likes to explain in terms of analogues. In a three page commentary on Visions of the Daughters of Albion, Frye brings into the discussion Morton's Speed the Plough, Ossian's Oithona, Jesus, Hester Prynne, King Arthur the Hesperides, Aeschylus, Spenser, and Bunyan's Holy

War.<sup>15</sup> More important, however, is Frye's elucidation of Blake's Milton. Frye points out that Blake writes in the line of prophetic vision of the Hebrew prophets and employs the idea that the Hebraic prophets "continually recreated" and reshaped the precursor's visions that "they inherited."<sup>16</sup> So here Bloom would have found articulated the connection between the idea of Hebraic reshaping and Blake. That creativity is predicated upon reshaping precursors is Bloom's first law of poetic dynamics.

A much more central passage in Frye is found a few pages later.

As a new birth of imaginative power born at the winter solstice, dying on the dead tree and rising in the spring, Jesus was a rebirth of Orc: as the seventh "Eye" or vision of God, extracting a new visionary form out of the earlier "Jehovah" perception; as the Messiah who reformed the earlier prophecies into the new "Word" of a gospel, he was an incarnation of Los. When Blake imagines himself to be a reincarnation of Milton, then, the imaginative power that is reborn is not a different form, as in ordinary life, but the same form which in the process of transforming itself has purged and clarified its vision. The relation of father to son, for the father never finds that his son is his own perfected self. Jesus, however, owes his divinity to the fact that he was the Son of the same nature as his Father, and the Word or clarified expression of that Father. For Blake, therefore, to imitate Milton is to imitate Jesus, just as for Virgil,

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<sup>15</sup>Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry (1947; rpt. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 239-41.

<sup>16</sup>Frye, Symmetry, p. 318.

to imitate Homer was to imitate "nature." And for Blake imitation is recreation.<sup>17</sup>

Within this passage I find struggling the fetal theory of poetic influence which springs from Bloom's mental womb. The winter solstice is the limit beyond which the poetic character can suffer no more fear of castration, but in a resurgence of creative fertility, he brings about a new spring with the creation of the poem. The Messiah, with whom Blake associates himself, is the archetypal strong poet who reshapes, by swerving or completing, the earlier Word (poems). Bloom himself uses the term "Word" in the passage quoted above on tessera. Thus, the old idea is "purged and clarified" by misreading.<sup>18</sup> Here also is the suggestion that the relationship between old poet and ephebe is akin to a natural father and son relationship.

Moreover, in Frye's commentary on The Book of Urizen, he points out that Los' fall which "chang'd oblique" is possibly a reference to the clinamen or swerve of Lucretius."<sup>19</sup> Los is Blake's fallen form of the eternal prophet, who in Jerusalem is the primary character bringing

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<sup>17</sup>Frye, Symmetry, p. 322.

<sup>18</sup>The "same form" that Frye speaks of is the Lord's Word, but Bloom uses the idea for his archetypal structure and purpose of Romanticism; I will come back to this idea in the next chapter.

<sup>19</sup>Frye, Symmetry, p. 257.

about the apocalypse at the end of the poem. After he is fallen, Los cannot see clearly, read clearly, the unfallen form of eternity. But he forges out, as best he can, new forms in order to prevent total chaos and in order to see eternity again. Similarly, Bloom's ephebe cannot see the eternal vision; he cannot read without anxiety his precursors, but he continually reshapes available forms in order to prevent his own mental chaos and in order to see more clearly.

Bloom also would have read Frye's use of Freudian categories to explain Thel's condition and the Blakean characters Orc, Tharmas, and Urizen.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in The Anatomy of Criticism, Frye talks of the various concealments of myth and archetype as displacements, a Freudian defense mechanism which replaces an original idea with one more acceptable to both the psyche and the public.<sup>21</sup> The idea translated into Bloomian terms is that the original idea is the idea created by a father poet. This idea contributes to psychic pain, and the ephebe then displaces the painful idea. Frye's idea of it is only a concept to explain the result of a poet's wanting to write in a realistic mode to displace the unrealistic, unacceptable, archetype with a more

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<sup>20</sup>Frye, Symmetry, pp. 233, 301.

<sup>21</sup>Freedman, Kaplan, and Sadock, p. 108.

acceptable realistic, symbolic representation of the archetype.<sup>22</sup> I am not rejecting my earlier statement, here. I still believe that Bloom's revisionary rations are Creative Elaborations, but the idea of writing as defense mechanism is certainly in Frye. The idea could have triggered Bloom's mind to create a further elaboration of Frye's idea as Bloom's own defense mechanism for the anxiety caused by his father critic--Frye.

As I have mentioned, it is impossible to explicate all of Bloom's influences, but it is clear that Frye, Freud, and Blake provide sufficient conditions for the creation of Bloom's idea of influence. From Blake he gets the idea of influences of the Covering Cherub, the influences of Milton, and the recreation of the precursors. From Frye, he sees that this idea is informed by the Hebraic tradition and similar to a father and son relationship. Moreover, he possibly discovered there the application of the notion of the clinamen. Frye also led him to Freud perhaps, for Bloom also coaches his theory in psychological terms--anxiety principle and defense mechanisms. This development is very much tied in with Bloom's changing ideas about myth.

In Shelley's Mythmaking, Bloom only hints at his theory. Yet we know he has read Frye, Blake, and, at least indirectly,

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<sup>22</sup>Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 136-38.

Freud. And in Shelley's Mythmaking, he is very much concerned with myth, mythmaking, and existentialism. In Shelley's Mythmaking, Bloom advances the notion that Shelley, and other sensitive Romantics, felt in the increasing mechanics and advances of science and industry the very same existential ennui that Sartre talks about.<sup>23</sup> Shelley, being anti-Christian, could have felt his malaise more acutely than others of the period. The language of science, pure logic, pure discursiveness, would have only aggravated the condition since it is rent of emotional charge. Yet artistic expression, the mythmaking capacity, "recovers the fullness of life," according to Cassirer.<sup>24</sup> One could somehow create a new reality by humanizing nature, the nature coldly regarded by scientific cause and effect. Hence, Shelley, the creative artist, can alleviate his ennui somewhat by saying Thou to nature; the scientist cannot.

Suzanne Langer says that modes of artistic expression "are really just canons of symbolization; and the systematic study of them was first undertaken by Freud."<sup>25</sup> She is, of course, referring to Freud's study of nondiscursive symbols

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<sup>23</sup>William Barret, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 34.

<sup>24</sup>Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1944), p. 26.

<sup>25</sup>Langer, Feeling and Form, p. 241.

in dreams. Trilling states, "It was left to Freud to discover how, in a scientific age, we still feel and think in figurative formations, and to create, what psychoanalysis is, a science of tropes."<sup>26</sup> Thus, the study of Shelley's mythopoeic poetry is a study of his canons of symbolization<sup>27</sup> created as defense mechanisms or avoidance systems of the existential fear of nothingness, or, as R. D. Laing puts it, of "the possibility of becoming no more than a thing in the world of the other, without any life for the self."<sup>28</sup> For Bloom, Shelley's most successful poetry is poetry that says Thou, and the bitter, but perhaps honest, irony implicit in the poetry is that the I-Thou can lapse into I-It causing more anxiety (SM, pp. 94-95). So, in this early work the fundamental cause of anxiety is being cut away from the divinity of a relationship between mind and nature. The gap is compensated for by creating new myths, which "are symbols of faith combined in stories about divine human encounters."<sup>29</sup>

In The Visionary Company Bloom develops more thoroughly the idea that the great Romantics greatly influenced each

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<sup>26</sup>Trilling, The Liberal Imagination, p. 53.

<sup>27</sup>Symbolization is one mode of Creative Elaboration. Freedman, Kaplan, and Sadock, p. 112.

<sup>28</sup>R. D. Laing, The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 47.

<sup>29</sup>Paul Tillich, "Symbols of Faith" in Religion from Tolstoy to Camus, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 387.

other, and again he elaborates on the causes yet in terms of the autonomy of the imagination. However, it is a book that maintains a concern with the similarities among poets. He begins with Collins' "Ode on the Poetical Character" as a "recognition poem," one which presents "a vision as reality and experience as nightmare" (VC, pp. 8-9). This form is displaced, changed only superficially, in "Kubla Khan," and "Hymm to Intellectual Beauty." Moreover, the major lines of influence are freely expressed. All the poets are in the Protestant line of prophesy from Ezekial and The Book of Job. Milton and Spenser resound in all the poets. He uses Blakean categories to explain all the poems even if he admits that Blake is not an influence. So Wordsworth's myth is his attempt to create Beulah. Bloom also uses his own, as opposed to historical, influences to explain a poem. Thus in his discussion of Wordworth's "Ode," we should be reminded of Stevens' "The Rock" and Yeats' "Dialogue of Self and Soul." Coleridge is influenced by Cowper, Milton, and Shakespeare, for his conversational poems. And he was influenced by Wordsworth, German Idealism, and the Bible for his mystery poems. Byron is influenced by Wordsworth through Shelley. The list continues at great length. In sum, Bloom has not so much concerned himself with the kind of influence that he later develops. He is concerned with mythmaking, faith in the autonomy of the imagination, and the similarities of the

Romantics. But as we know, he is also developing here the idea that what one can do as a critic is show family resemblances between a poem and its family.

In Blake's Apocalypse, Bloom is beginning to become aware more strongly of the idea of influence that Blake asserts of Milton. Bloom continues in this volume to explicate Blake's poetry in terms of the Hebraic prophets. He continues his rather traditional idea that the imagination can overcome the object-subject condition of experience (BA, p. 240). And he compares Blake to the other Romantics (BA, p. 241). Aside from what I mention above, there is the hint in Bloom's discussion of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell of the connection between sex and creating imaginative space. "In the first chamber" of the printing house in Hell, Bloom says, "is a phallic Dragon-Man 'clearing away the rubbish from the cave's mouth,' and so cleansing the human sense of touch. Within, other dragons are at work 'hollowing the cave,' widening the body's potential for imaginative knowledge" (BA, p. 89). Moreover, there is the general understanding from Frye that Orc-Fuzon-Luvah is a type of libido representation, a revolutionary character associated with sexual prowess. And he gains an understanding of Urizen as a type of super-ego character of repression, and Los as a type of mediating ego and poet.

In the 1964 article "Keats and the Embarrassments of Poetic Tradition," Bloom comes very close to his theory; he

states, "somewhere in the heart of each new poet there is hidden the dark wish that libraries be burned in some new Alexandrian conflagration, that the imagination might be liberated from the greatness and oppressive power of the dead champions" (RT, p. 131). He then goes on to claim that "something of this [desire for burning] must be involved in the Romantic's loving struggle with their ghostly father, Milton . . . . The strength of the poetical life of Milton seems always to have appalled as much as it delights" (RT, p. 131). Bloom then sizes up how well Keats combats tradition in his major poems, pointing out how Keats advances original ideas to overcome precursors. The struggle culminates in "To Autumn," in which Keats builds a vision of paradise that is for Bloom one of the finest poems in the Romantic canon. He further points out that other poets win freedom from "the embarrassments of poetic tradition, usually through the creation of new myth, as in Blake and Shelley, or in the thematic struggle not to create a myth, as in the earlier work of Wordsworth and Coleridge" (RT, pp. 141-42). However, he does not take his theory any farther than this until 1969.

Until 1969, Bloom was saying that "poets influence poets in ways more profound than verbal echoings" (RT, p. 131). Yet, in "Auden: Christianity Art," he states his theory in exactly the same terms as the earlier quoted section from Yeats. Finally in 1970 in "Bacchus and Merlin: The Dialectic

of Romantic Poetry in America," he introduces the idea of tessera, clinamen being brought out in Yeats.

There is much criticism of Bloom's idea of influence. Most of it is couched in terms of the intentional fallacy, as in Peckham's article already mentioned. Moreover, he is attacked for not having enough "proof" for his idea,<sup>30</sup> or that his unproven theories are not applied often enough.<sup>31</sup> Of course, some praise it for its profound insights. Alvin N. Rosenfeld claims, "No poet would consent to such a theory of his art, yet almost all poets of any consequence have known the truth of Bloom's insight and left behind abundant testimony to confirm it."<sup>32</sup> The two most challenging criticisms, however, are found on Bloom's idea of Freud and Blake.

Joseph Wittreich says that Bloom's idea of Blake's relationship to Milton is wrong, for "Milton, who initially seemed a burden to the poet, became his liberator," and the liberator for all the Romantics as well.<sup>33</sup> Bloom, as I have pointed out, claims that Milton, like Emerson, is both

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<sup>30</sup>Donald T. Torchiana, rev. of Yeats, by Harold Bloom, Modern Philology 70 (1972), 172.

<sup>31</sup>Martin Lebowitz, "A Variety of Melancholy," rev of The Ringers in the Tower, by Harold Bloom, Nation, Sept. 27, 1971, p. 279.

<sup>32</sup>Alvin H. Rosenfeld, "The Poetics of Influence," rev. of The Anxiety of Influence, by Harold Bloom, The Southern Review, NS 11 (1975), 446.

<sup>33</sup>Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr., Angel of Apocalypse (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1975), p. 219.

liberator and restrictor. If it were not for the ratios of revision, the poets would not have achieved the imaginative vistas that they have. Wittreich is simply misreading Bloom. Furthermore, in a similar vein, Sharon Barrett, says that Bloom has his Freud wrong because "it is not longing but repression of the longing that makes for anxiety."<sup>34</sup> Yet Bloom is using the idea of the defense mechanism as a protector from anxiety and not the cause for it. The cause for the anxiety is in a sense a type of repression since the poet is caught in the balance between the contradictory impulses to act and to restrain, so the process of writing a poem is a process of repression. Barrett is, however, overlooking the fact that Freud gives us more than one source of anxiety and more than one defense mechanism.

What I have pointed out, then, is that Bloom's ideas are built on the ideas of Frye, Blake, and Sigmund and Anna Freud. If one denounces all of the above company as mere fantasizers, then Bloom's theory goes down with it, but before doing that one should come to an understanding of Bloom's concept of Romanticism and imagination.

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<sup>34</sup> Sharon Bassett, "Tristes Critiques: Harold Bloom and the Sorrows of Secular Criticism," Literature and Psychology, 27 (1977), 111.

## CHAPTER IV

### ROMANTICISM AND IMAGINATION

As he thereon stood gazing, he might see  
The blessed Angels to and fro descend  
From, highest heaven in gladsome companee,  
And with great joy into that Citty wend  
As commonly as frend does with his friend.

--Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene

Bloom's ideas about Romanticism overlap a great deal with other theories of Romanticism, as one would hope they should; however, what distinguishes his theory is quite important. First, his theory of the imagination, which is not fully stated in his early period, is identical with his theory of Romanticism. This case is not one of strict identity, yet the products of Romantics and anti-Romantics can be described in terms of imagination. Here we have a conflation of philosophy and art that Brooks and Wimsatt claim was a popular temptation for Coleridge and the Germans.<sup>1</sup> So Bloom is very much absorbed in the idea that the way of showing is the way of knowing. However, this idea sounds very much like Croce or Vivas, both of whom base their ideas on a much more referential epistemology than Bloom, for

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<sup>1</sup>William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, Literary Criticism: A Short History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 403.

Bloom's theory is built upon his idea of text and influence. He knows a poem is strongly Romantic if it is composed of other strongly Romantic poems as he perceives them in his process of signification. His joint idea of imagination and Romanticism can be stated in the broadest terms as follows: the Romantic imagination is a form of prophesy in the Hebraic line which answers unasked the question of where man is going and where he can go both by mythic statement and by example of the created myth,<sup>2</sup> the statement being that only faith in the autonomy of the imagination will save mankind from the doom of rationalism, antihumanism, exploitation and extreme solipsism. Thus we can see that his definition includes both a historical basis and an existential one. The more synchronic approach will be considered first. The concentration on the development of Bloom's idea will not be treated here because the crucial changes in Bloom's thinking on this matter are those of text, myth, and influence already explained.

Brooks and Wimsatt point out that the general hope of the Romantics comes from the German Romantic philosophers after Kant--Schiller, the Schegels, Schelling, Goethe, and several other minor figures. This hope was basically the

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<sup>2</sup>Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 18-19. Frye agrees that mythic statement is the highest form of presented knowledge.

desire to unify the external world of materiality and scientific observables with subjective internal schemes, desires, and morals. The cold external world rent away from humanity by Descartes would then be reconciled and made more beautiful.<sup>3</sup> René Wellek likewise claims that the "romantic ambition" is the "reconciliation of art and nature, language and reality, subject and object, self and the world, consciousness and unconsciousness," and this ambition "is the central creed of the great romantic poets in England, Germany, and France."<sup>4</sup> Abrams also notes the myriad influences upon and forms of the Romantic imagination. He, of course, explains the influence of the Germans, but he also stresses the influence of the esoteric philosophy of the Cabbalah and Hermetic lore converging with the prophecy and design of the Bible to produce the general scheme of the Romantic imagination which was a reconciliation of the disintegrated One, the divine man from esoteric sources, and the singularity of the precreated universe of God from the Bible, back into a whole again. The divine man, or a transcendental God, is renewed by a marriage between the self and the external world. Yet for the later Romantics,

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<sup>3</sup>Wimsatt, pp. 367-70.

<sup>4</sup>Rene Wellek, "Romanticism Re-examined" in his Concepts of Criticism, ed. Stephen G. Nichols, Jr. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), p. 220.

especially the English, the renewed oneness to be achieved is better than the preceeding Oneness.<sup>5</sup> Schiller and Coleridge change the idea of the world as a Plotinian emanation to one of an evolution.<sup>6</sup> So it is clear that for the Romantics the function of the imagination is to unify, to renew the world to a place without strife--a prelapsarian state or a new and improved prelapsarian state. Bloom says that Blake's vision of Eden and the method for its attainment is his theory of the imagination (VC, p. 25). This state is radical renewal of this world (BA, p. 131). Furthermore, for the Romantics, Shelley in particular, saying is creating; the poet's power is likened unto the power of God, including the implications of both creation and destruction (SM, p. 1, VC, p. 296).

Bloom does not go so far as to say exactly what the imagination is. He cannot totally adopt the view set forth by Coleridge:

The IMAGINATION, then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in

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<sup>5</sup>M. H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), pp. 32-35, 154-63.

<sup>6</sup>Abrams, Natural, p. 185.

in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation.<sup>7</sup>

However, there are some affinities here with Bloom. He is ready to concede that the imagination is involved in both perceiving and creating, the difference being in kind and not degree. He would claim that strongly imaginative perception works toward the "unfolding of nature."<sup>8</sup> Coleridge's distinction is that the primary works by passively unfolding nature. Bloom, I think, as Blake does, has no interests with the concept of the primary (VC, p. 145). The reader must, like the poet, actively work with a dead text, an artifact with no essential meaning, discern influence, and understand through active work the process of signification. Yet the poet is the more active, of course. Of Fancy, the faculty which manipulates entities, Bloom would say that it is the trap of nature, seeing with the eye instead of through the eye. He would not have Fancy as a separate faculty of the mind as Coleridge does, but rather a "brain state" or condition of mind that has fallen into an I-It experiential view of the world as differentiated and discreet entities of

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<sup>7</sup>Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, I, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), p. 202.

<sup>8</sup>James Volant Baker, The Sacred River: Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination (New York: Greenwood Press, 1957), p. 122.

nature.<sup>9</sup> This discursive method of perceiving and manipulating is empirical and false and will result in furthering the state of solipsism and cutting the self off from the universe. So, for Bloom, Langer does not solve the problem by dividing language into discursive and nondiscursive.<sup>10</sup> All language is nondiscursive potentially, and thus discursive language is not another kind but rather an inferior degree of language which is also the means of knowing--a function of the imagination. Nondiscursive language is a product of a mature imagination which humanizes nature in order to avoid the state of Blake's Ulro or the death-in-life of solipsism (SM, p. 7).

So Bloom is not so bold as to tell us exactly what the imagination is, only how it behaves. He hints that it is a condition moved by the soul, but he will not be so orthodox as that. We must be content to believe that the imagination in all its degrees is a condition of mind either dualistic or materialistic. What we have though are the artifact, the product of the imaginative mind, and the effects in the signification process for which the text or artifact is commitant. The action that the mind takes upon itself

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Rorty in "Mind-Body identity, privacy and categories," in The Mind/Brain Identity Theory, ed. C. V. Borst (New York: St. Martin's Press), pp. 187-213, explains the "brain state" concept very lucidly and carefully.

<sup>10</sup> Langer, Feeling and Form, pp. 29-31.

through the text is the ontological base of Wittgenstein's investigations, and, I think, it is of Bloom's as well.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the question becomes what is the action? What are its constituent elements? The answers are the details of the story of the imagination which is also the subject of almost all Romantic poetry.

The story of Romanticism and the quest of the Romantic imagination is to reveal the power of the imagination. The more imagination the story reveals, the more important it is.<sup>12</sup> Its purpose is to explain all, to be prophetic. Abrams claims that for the romantic mind, history, theology, and philosophy are all subsumed into epistemology,<sup>13</sup> which is revealed in the fictive works of the Romantics. Thus the works reveal the struggle between the imagination and its influences which may also be called reality,<sup>14</sup> but influence includes not only traditional notions of reality, but also the reality-principle as well. This struggle is part of what might be called the Romantic monomyth, which is a

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<sup>11</sup>Altieri, "Wittgenstein on Consciousness," p. 1409.

<sup>12</sup>Frye augments this notion by claiming that the more imaginative the character the more important he is. Scripture, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup>Abrams, Natural, p. 189.

<sup>14</sup>Frye adopts Stevens' terminology that Reality is "whatever the imagination works with that is not itself." Frye, Scripture, p. 36.

displacement and reconstruction of Christian theology or, for Abrams, of a secularized form of devotional experience.<sup>15</sup> For Frye, the myth is the displacement of a typical quest plot, in its most successful form, of three main stages: the perilous journey, the struggle, and the exaltation or reconciliation. Frye goes on to name these the agon, pathos, and anagnorisis.<sup>16</sup> Bloom calls this structure in Romantic poetry the internalized quest-romance, internalized by the reader through the work, by the work through other works. Before "internalized by the High Romantics," the quest-romance was a move "from nature to redeemed nature, the sanction of redemption being the gift of some external spiritual authority" (RT, p. 16). Bloom implies what Abrams points out--that by the time of Wordsworth's Great Decade, the idea of a God-renewed nature becomes of lesser importance, and the struggle for renewal becomes a man moved experience.<sup>17</sup> The "Romantic quest is from nature to the imagination's freedom (sometimes a reluctant freedom), and the imagination's freedom is frequently purgatorial, redemptive in direction, but destructive of the social self" (RT, p. 16). So Bloom gives the quest its two major poles: nature and

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<sup>15</sup>Abrams, Natural, p. 65.

<sup>16</sup>Frye, Anatomy, p. 187.

<sup>17</sup>Abrams, Natural, pp. 90-91.

imaginative freedom. Between the poles are numerous stages, but the most basic are Beulah, Prometheus, Purgatory, and Apocalypse, the last being the condition necessary for imagination's freedom. The elements and the pattern of the quest are important enough for Bloom to be given here individual consideration, for they are transitions or stages that the imagination must surpass in order to arrive at the quest's goal.

Initially there must be the recognition of the universe as fallen. This awareness is generally brought about by the encounter with limitations. Bloom says Shelley recognizes "that the limitations of this existence mark the human condition as fallen" (SM, p. 252). These limitations imply a "gap between human desire and any of its objects" (SM, p. 44). Two general reactions to this gap, according to Peckham, are social alienation and metaphysical isolation, "two different modes of the same perception."<sup>18</sup> Bloom, of course, recognizes this mode of perception as the initial stage of the Romantic vocation, rather than Peckham's claim that "they are the distinguishing sins of the Romantic."<sup>19</sup> Abrams claims that the Romantic recognizes the world as one

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<sup>18</sup>Morse Peckham, "The Dilemma of a Century: The Four Stages of Romanticism" in Romanticism: The Culture of the Nineteenth Century, ed. Morse Peckham (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 19.

<sup>19</sup>Peckham, "The Dilemma of a Century."

of lost unity and attempts to regain unity; he considers, then, all isolation and separation to be evil.<sup>20</sup> Bloom continues the idea that the world is fallen and thus somewhat evil, but it is also the condition of that world which causes the poet's desire to find a love object or the desire to create Romantic poetry and the poet's quest toward imaginative freedom. This idea is very similar to the felix culpa notion that Milton articulates in Paradise Lost.<sup>21</sup>

One possible next stage--for all intermediate stages may occur in any order--for the imaginative poet is to attempt to create Beulah. Bloom adopts Blake's term for the paradise of Eden, a state of creative repose, not the final state of paradise, or Apocalypse, which Blake calls Eden--the terms are confusing. Eden, according to Blake, is a state of intellectual struggle, mental strife. Bloom considers Wordsworth the primary poet of Beulah; he states this in his early book (SM, pp. 15-16), but he more clearly establishes the idea in The Visionary Company. He says that Wordsworth wants to marry nature to his imagination and resolve the gap between the two (VC, p. 132).<sup>22</sup> Wordsworth's theory of imagination then, becomes "a theory of description" (VC, p. 133); his myth of nature is that through nature man

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<sup>20</sup>Abrams, Natural, p. 182.

<sup>21</sup>Abrams, Natural, pp. 184-85.

<sup>22</sup>Abrams supports Bloom here, and he calls Wordsworth's desire "the new plan for poetry." Abrams, Natural, pp. 26-27.

can seek imaginative salvation (VC, p. 140). But in Beulah, Bloom warns, progression cannot occur; one must pass into the Promethean stage and on to Eden. For Beulah borders both Eden and Ulro (the hell of solipsism), and when one tries to stay forever in Beulah, one easily finds himself in Ulro. According to Bloom, the ephebe in Blake's manuscript poem "The Crystal Cabinet" tries to grasp the essence or seek Apocalypse in Beulah and finds himself thrown out into Ulro. Likewise, Bloom claims that when Wordsworth becomes disillusioned with nature as recorded in Elegiac Stanzas, Wordsworth, too, loses all hope of discovering Apocalypse (VC, p. 184).<sup>23</sup> So one must in exercising organic energy as opposed to creative energy (RT, pp. 21-22) move like Oothoon in Visions of the Daughters of Albion instead of Thel into the stage of Titanic defiance--the stage of Prometheus.

The poet may venture from awareness of his alienation from nature to Beulah (the state of paradise within nature) then to Promethean (the state of titanic defiance) or from Promethean to Beulah or never Promethean or never Beulah. As does Blake, Bloom allows the possibilities of various routes regarding these two stages. "Generally, Prometheus is the poet-as-hero in the first stage of his quest, marked

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<sup>23</sup> Bloom does not mean that all naturalistic humanists lose their faith as Wordsworth did; Keats and Stevens maintained theirs (RT, p. 243). Abrams also calls Keats a naturalistic humanist. Abrams, p. 67.

by a deep involvement in political, social, and literary revolution, and a direct, even satirical attack on the institutional orthodoxies of European and English society, including historically oriented Christians and the neoclassic literary and intellectual tradition, particularly in its Enlightenment stage" (RT, p. 22). Abrams claims that Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, and Blake were titanic defiers during the advent of the French Revolution but turned inward as it looked as if it were turning from revolution to reaction, from liberator to oppressor.<sup>24</sup> Bloom agrees that the truly imaginative poet emerges after a disengagement with revolutionary concerns of politics or society. Furthermore, "in the Prometheus stage, the quest is allied to the libido's struggle against repressiveness, and nature is an ally, though always a wounded and sometimes withdrawn one" (RT, p. 22). So the Promethean refuses to live in the I-It or subject-object world and reacts against the exploits of politicians upon people and industrialization upon nature (SM, p. 84). Of course, faltering Prometheanism can become a poetic subject as well and provide an imaginative artifact. For example, Thel falters in The Book of Thel (BA, p. 32), and Byron uses the theme in the third and fourth cantos of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.

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<sup>24</sup>Abrams, Natural, pp. 337-47.

The Promethean stage is a progression for the imagination because it enhances sexual fulfillment (VC, p. 55) and prepares the stage for the poet's recognition of himself as poet. The problem with this stage and the reason for its inadequacy is that it is cyclic. Bloom adopts Frye's term for it--The Orc Cycle. In this cycle Orc always becomes Urizen, or, in broader terms, revolutionaries always become reactionaries. It is, as Abrams points out, the grim story of the ouroboros; man's end is his own beginning which commences his end again.<sup>25</sup> The idea is repeated in Shelley's Mythmaking in that the movement from I-It to I-Thou implies the fall back to I-It. Buber claims the movement is unavoidable in our imperfect world. The "Orc cycle," then, "is the withering of desire into restraint," (BA, p. 289) which plagues many characters in Romantic poetry; for example, Napoleon's story is treated in terms of the Orc cycle (RT, p. 81). So to be truly imaginative, the poet must break through this stage.

The purgatorial stage is the common theme of crisis or recognition. Frye counted this as the last stage and indeed it is the beginning of the exaltation or Apocalypse. In Milton, Milton has to return to earth and throw off the rags of Selfhood to be finally an agent of Apocalypse and enter

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<sup>25</sup>Abrams, Natural, p. 181.

Eden, the land of the never ceasing dialectic of "mental strife." This purgation may result only in the desire for Beulah; it may not necessarily lead to Apocalypse. Yet "the crisis comes into existence," McGann says, "because all creation is constantly threatened by the Reasoning Spectre-- by a discursive or intellectual reductiveness which wants to turn the ephemeral triumphs of man into permanent victories, or what Blake calls Moral Law."<sup>26</sup> Thus, the influences of nature as seductress and reason as reductress are the forces that the poet-as-hero must struggle to escape or overcome. If he escapes his influences, the poet probably will settle for the naturalistic humanism of Wordsworth, Keats, and Stevens. If he confronts and overcomes them, the poet may achieve the apocalyptic humanism of a Blake or a Shelley. The possessiveness of the Promethean and his concern with Self make him vulnerable to nature and reason. The strong poet, then, must cast off selfishness so that the motivation for creating is not to possess but rather to create only for the betterment of life, for when one creates only to capture something, one is open to being captured in the process. So the Promethean is not truly a humanist, and one of Bloom's fundamental points is that one who is not truly a humanist

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<sup>26</sup>Jerome J. McGann, "Romanticism and the Embarrassments of Critical Tradition," Modern Philology 70 (1973), 244.

cannot be truly imaginative, a point I shall come back to (YT, p. 441).

After this purgatorial stage in the Romantic quest, the next stage is Apocalypse. This stage is the most difficult, I think, to understand truly. Bloom calls the poet of this final stage the Real Man, after Blake. He is Blake's Los instead of Orc, Wordsworth's the Man rather than the Child, Shelley's Prometheus unbound rather than bound, and Keats' Apollo rather than Hyperion (RT, p. 21). The Real Man successfully overcomes the influences of nature, the reasoning Spectre, and the Covering Cherub of poetic influence. It is the fruition of the purgation of Selfhood (VC, p. 249). Nature then is not an ally as she is in the Prometheus stage, but rather she "is the immediate though not the ultimate antagonist" (RT, p. 22). The imagination is the first ally of the Real Man. This idea is adopted from Blake, who claims that nothing can be comprehended with the five senses but the same dull round of what is already known,<sup>27</sup> and that what is now proven was once only imagined.<sup>28</sup> The imagination of the Poetic Character is, in this sense, the creator of the universe. By contrast, the mass of men lose sight of this knowledge and worship nature or the ratio of things perceived.

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<sup>27</sup>Blake, "THERE is NO Natural Religion [a]" in Erdman, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup>Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell in Erdman, p. 36.

They also worship, by implication, the gap between the self and the world.

Romantic art, in this highest stage, becomes redemptive. Peckham also asserts that Romanticism is redemptive, "for in the act of creating the work of art, the artist both repeats and embodies, and also makes possible for himself and others the act of seeing through and past, of dissolving, all purely human or role-playing perceptions which mask the world, as the rational part of the mind does, so that the value immanent in the self reaches out and touches the value immanent in the world."<sup>29</sup> Bloom would agree with a good deal of this statement. The Real Man forces "the conversion of the state of experience into a higher state of imaginative perception" (SM, p. 117). The poet must purge everything "from his own consciousness . . . that is not imaginative," for "if the infinite and the eternal are not to be participated in by the poet's vision here and now, then they are never to exist at all" (BA, pp. 303,301).<sup>30</sup> Yet Bloom would take exception to Peckham's idea of dissolving away all that which is "purely human," for the Real Man must be a humanist because, as explained above, antihumanism spoils

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<sup>29</sup>Peckham, "The Dilemma of a Century," p. 20.

<sup>30</sup>This is Bloom's comment on "The Auguries of Innocence," but one must remember that Bloom says that "Blake's myth is possibly the most formidable and organized" in which "the Old Blake undoubtedly took considerable comfort" (SM, pp. 117-18).

the imagination. Thus when Milton, at the end of Milton, becomes a Real Man, he does what all Real Men do; they show "the courage to cast out what is not human in them and so become Man, and to become Man is to have become God" (BA, p. 363). Furthermore, Bloom would not agree to the "fitting and fitted" of Peckham's two values meeting, which sounds like Milton's angelic intercourse. Rather, the value of the self is the value of creation, and as man creates the world, the world takes on value. Abrams, who agrees that Wordsworth, Shelley, Blake and Coleridge sought faith in the imagination's achieving apocalypse after they lost faith in the French Revolution,<sup>31</sup> makes Bloom's seeming mysticism (though Bloom hates mysticism) much clearer by saying that apocalypse, which for Abrams is simply the replacement of the old world with a newly created one,<sup>32</sup> was attainable for "Blake, by a triumph of imagination." He broke "out of the cycle of his present existence into the enduring vision of an integral an entirely human world which is alone adequate to the reach of his desire."<sup>33</sup> Bloom must clarify here that the final world which Blake perceives is not final or a world in the traditional sense. According to Bloom, Eden for Blake, and Bloom implies for all Romantics, should not be a conclusion or a

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<sup>31</sup>Abrams, Natural, pp. 337-47.

<sup>32</sup>Abrams, Natural, p. 41.

<sup>33</sup>Abrams, Natural, p. 195.

synthesis; it is rather a mode of perception which is an "exuberant becoming" of continual creative strife (VC, p. 66). Thus the fulfillment of the poet-as-hero "is never the poem itself but the poem beyond that is made possible by the apocalypse of imagination" (RT, p. 19). It is, then, a condition of signification of the highest order, a process of imaginative progression, not of artifact.

Within this very general paradigm of the process of the successful imagination, a potential plot in one sense, there are many subthemes which are generally the various ways in which the imagination can go wrong. There is the mad song theme (e.g., Blake's "Mad Song" and Collins' "Ode to a Poetical Character") which is due to the imagination's inability to conquer time and space of the mundane world, the inability to completely recreate the universe (VC, p. 19). Another theme is the inability to recognize the self as poet-as-hero and consequently to give in to nature, as does Rousseau in Shelley's "Triumph of Life." There is also the faltering Prometheus, the failure to enter the Promethean stage, perhaps due to the misguided desire to stay too long in Beulah. A "major minor" theme Bloom outlines is the antithetical quest of Yeats. Bloom calls this Yeats' clinamen from Blake and Shelley, and it is antihumanist in nature, and, according to Bloom, antihumanism damages Yeats' imagination and thus his poetry. Also within this paradigm

are four very important topics: prophecy, morality, reason, and love.

Romantic love is for the most part given high regard by most romantic critics. Abrams asserts that if the Romantics viewed separation as evil, then certainly love as an integrator is evil's opposite good.<sup>34</sup> This idea is similar to Aristophanes parable in Plato's Symposium; love is the force which attempts to synthesize man and woman back into the primeval man. The neo-Platonists adopted this idea, and for them love works toward the integration of the External man, the Adam Kadmon of the Cabbalah, for example.<sup>35</sup> Frye claims that the quest-romance in dream terms "is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality."<sup>36</sup> And the same in ritual terms "is the victory of fertility over the wasteland."<sup>37</sup> For Bloom, Romantic love does seek fertility over a wasteland, though not in nature but rather through it or with it. He further points out that in High Romantic love "the libido turns

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<sup>34</sup>Abrams, Natural, p. 41.

<sup>35</sup>Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1974), pp. 174-76.

<sup>36</sup>Frye, Anatomy, p. 193.

<sup>37</sup>Frye, Anatomy.

inward into the self" (RT, p. 19). Bloom claims that Frye is adopting Freud's idea, in which love mediates between love of object and love of ego. But High Romantic love must be totally selfless and unpossessive (RT, p. 23). Freud's idea of love, which Frye assimilates is the love that is characteristic of the Promethean stage, the stage of the futile cycle (RT, p. 27). The Romantic does not love in the clarity of libido-object; he usually doesn't know what he loves, yet he loves obsessively (YT, p. 159).

Bloom maintains a very unique concept of the Romantic idea of reason. Peckham represents the traditional notion of the Romantic as proemotion and antireason.<sup>38</sup> Bloom differs from this rather traditional notion, and to point out this difference clearly he quotes Schlegel, who he says saw Romantic poetry "as 'the expression of a secret longing for chaos which is perpetually striving for new and marvelous births, which lies hidden in the very womb of orderly creation,'" yet "contra Schlegel . . . Romantic poetry from Blake down to Yeats to Wallace Stevens has no quarrel with 'orderly creation' and makes no case against reason" (RT, p. 323). The Romantics battle against "inadequate accounts" of reason, which is the lower condition of the imaginative capability, a condition similar to Coleridge's Fancy. He

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<sup>38</sup>Peckham, "The Dilemma of a Century," p. 29.

adopts Blake's notion that reason is necessary for the Real Man as the outward circumference of the imagination which is continually expanding.<sup>39</sup> In other words, there must be a waster or consumer so the winner or producer does not drown in his own sea of productivity. The Romantics battle in all of their stages against the limiters who either set the circumference as if it could not be moved again or merely assume that it is so; Bloom again adopts Blake's terminology and calls these limiters the "idiot Questioner" or "the reasoning Spectre" (RT, p. 324-25). Bloom claims against the Spectre that the Real Man must operate at the highest form of imagination. The fallacy of the Spectre is his inability to see beyond circularity and futility. The imagination, however, "is redemptive because it can operate like a later reason, because it can take a momentary apprehension of release and build that apprehension into a faith, because again it can follow the Romantic path of moving from the privileged moment on to a declaration of the mind's autonomy, to a casting out of remorse and a freedom from outward conceptions of the self" (RT, p. 334). So the Romantics, Bloom claims, operate with a "later reason," after Stevens, which builds upon imaginative moments; it moves the circumference continually never to restrict the imagination's work.

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<sup>39</sup> Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, in Erdman, p. 39.

The two final points to be considered in Bloom's synchronic analysis of Romanticism--and my list is certainly not exhaustive--are prophesy and humanism. These have been touched upon, but they are essential enough to be brought back to the fore. The Real Man or High Romantic is in the line of Hebraic prophecy from Ezekial and Isaiah,<sup>40</sup> and as Hazard Adams points out, "for Bloom . . . the model is prophecy in the Blakean mold."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, it has been noted, the Real Man must be humanistic, for antihumanism impairs the imagination. Bloom claims that the poetry of Yeats' middle and later periods is flawed due to his "mere irrationalism, and a dangerous antihumanism" (RT, p. 331). The prophecy of the Real Man is humanistic; he speaks unasked (SM, p. 66) and tells the listener to "turn now" and close the gap between subject and object, to move out of I-It into I-Thou (SM, p. 77). So the humanism is not the Renaissance humanism of Milton, the crying out for a revival of religious and classical knowledge. It is rather, a more modern, simplified notion of directing one's actions toward the benefit of humanity. Its main impetus is to heal the cartesian split between mind and other, to humanize the universe, to close all gaps.

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<sup>40</sup> Blake mentions Isaiah and Ezekeial as precursor prophets in The Marriage. Erdman, pp. 38-39.

<sup>41</sup> Adams, "Scholarship and the Idea of Criticism," p. 268.

There are principally two kinds of this humanism: apocalyptic and naturalistic. The apocalyptic humanism is advocated by Blake and sometimes Shelley and Wordsworth; the naturalistic humanism is advocated by Keats, Stevens, Freud and sometimes Wordsworth. (Wordsworth's humanism "is blended of elements that dominate the other two" (RT, p. 13).) The naturalist creates through nature; he advances the idea that man can see into nature analogues of the divinity and thus better his condition. The apocalyptic humanist does not have a need for nature; he stresses man's ability to recreate all anew, to create a city of art in which forgiveness and selflessness are the primary traits of all its denizens. Both forms of humanism stress the autonomy of the imagination as the primary force for humanizing the universe. The prophet, then, perceives the social and natural world as betraying the imagination and warns the world through his message that if it doesn't "turn now" and use the powers of capable imagination, the people will end up in the solipsistic hell of an Ulro, or Coleridge's Ne Plus Ultra, yet if the people act in the other direction and begin the efforts of humanizing the world, they can build Jerusalem now.

Bloom traces this line of prophetic humanism back to Saint John, the poet of Revelation. John represents a fusion of the quest-romance of the Odyssey and the prophetic orations of Ezekiel (RT, p. 3). Thus pointing out John as

the first Romantic, Bloom recognizes that Romantics flourished on the continent before infecting England, but this is not his concern. The first Romantics in England are Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, "when we seek ancestors of the Romantics among the greatest poets of the English Renaissance we tend to slight the poet of Faustus" (RT, p. 8). Yet Marlowe's influence comes through Shakespeare, "who subsumed his precursors more fully than even Milton could subsume Spenser" (RT, p. 8). Thus, the romance qualities and religious efforts of the great Renaissance poets form the Covering Cherub which the High Romantics attempt to seduce, both overpower them and love them.

Bloom does recognize the historical forces acting upon the Romantic movement in England other than previous poets. In a prologue to The Visionary Company written in 1969, Bloom outlines many of the historical influences that shaped the movement. There Bloom offers little that is new; he mentions the apocalyptic fervor that accompanied the advances of the French and American Revolutions, and the Industrial Revolution.<sup>43</sup> He, however, makes a more unique

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<sup>42</sup>Sidney is mentioned only briefly. Evidently Bloom does not see him as an accomplished enough mythopoeic poet to be a great influence on the High Romantics.

<sup>43</sup>For a full discussion of the historical effects of the various other revolutions upon Romanticism, see E. J. Hobsbawm, The Age of Revolution 1789-1848 (New York: World Publishing Co., 1962), especially chapters 12-13.

point about the religious directions that influenced the movement and still influence us today:

There is no more important point to be made about English Romantic poetry than this one, or indeed about English poetry in general, particularly since it has been deliberately obscured by most modern criticism. Though it is a displaced Protestantism, or a Protestantism astonishingly transformed by different kinds of humanism or naturalism, the poetry of the English Romantics is a kind of religious poetry, and the religion is the Protestant line, though Calvin or Luther would have been horrified to contemplate it. Indeed, the entire continuity of English poetry that T. S. Eliot and his followers attacked is a radical Protestant or displaced Protestant tradition. It is not accident that the poets deprecated by the New Criticism were Puritans, or Protestant individualists, or men of that sort breaking away from Christianity and attempting to formulate personal religions in their poetry. This Protestant grouping begins with aspects of Spenser and Milton, passes through the major Romantics and Victorians, and is clearly represented by Hardy and Lawrence in our century. It is also no accident that the poets brought into favor by the New Criticism were Catholics or High Church Anglicans--Donne, Herbert, Dryden, Pope, Dr. Johnson, Hopkins in the Victorian period, Eliot and Auden in our own time. Not that literary critics have been engaged in a cultural-religious conspiracy, but there are at least two main traditions of English poetry, and what distinguishes them are not only aesthetic considerations but conscious differences in religion and politics. One line, and it is the central one, is Protestant, radical, and Miltonic-Romantic; the other is Catholic, conservative, and by its claims, classical. (VC, p. xvii)

Bloom conceives, then, that the religious influence is the greatest shaper, aside from the precursor poets, of the Romantic movement. He goes on to offer as analogue that French culture has forever been divided since 1789 between

"those who have accepted the French revolution and its consequences and those who have sought to deny and resist them" (VC, p. xvii). Similarly, he claims, English culture has been divided by the Puritan revolution. The Romantics, like the Puritans, want to explode orthodoxy and hierarchy and father forth a democratic individualism. They are levelers. However, they do not level by knocking down the towers of the city only to have shacks, but rather by elevating all shacks to the height of towers. All men may be equally uplifted to the highest possible mode of existence by faith in the autonomy of the imagination (VC, pp. xiii-xix). This is all oversimplification and manifesto-like rhetoric, for many Puritans could be just as exclusive and orthodox as any Cardinal. And the Puritan's attempt to demolish popery by vandalizing Cathedrals and the art inside them is clearly an effort to knock down the towers, certainly a culturally regressive movement. Bloom recognizes the historical oversimplification, yet he claims that it is only the High Romantics with whom he is concerned. "The spirit of Hazlitt, of Blake, of the younger Wordsworth, of Shelley and Keats, is a direct descendant of the Spenserian and Miltonic spirit, the autonomous soul seeking its own salvation outside of and beyond the hierarchy of grace . . . a protest against ecclesiastical authority . . . an affirmation of both civil and religious freedom" (VC, pp. xvii-xix).

Bloom has little else to tell us in his early work about the history of the Romantic movement except to chart the lines of Romantic tradition. The lines of influence or traditions are, like his view of history, fairly accurate, but oversimplified, and one is tempted after reading Kabbalah and Criticism wherein he claims that all historical and/or literary tradition forming is personal, subjective, and largely troping, to assert that his analysis of the period and the lines of influence are trope as well, loosely based in fact (what the pluralist would call fact) yet oversimplified for rhetorical purposes.

As mentioned above, Romanticism begins with Saint John, who represents a fusion of Homer and Ezekiel. John is then absorbed in Spenser and Milton and passes through to Blake and Wordsworth.<sup>44</sup> Blake is the apotheosis of the apocalyptic humanism, and he passes his influence down to Shelley. Shelley's influence in England goes through Browning to Pater to the Decadents and finally to Yeats. Wordsworth's line influences Coleridge in the apocalyptic aspect; his naturalistic line influences Keats, Beddoes, Clare, Darly, Tennyson, and Lawrence. Byron is influenced by the Promethean stages of Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley, but Byron does not

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<sup>44</sup>Abrams, Natural, pp. 37-38.

successfully overcome that stage.<sup>45</sup> Bloom is not so careless as to say that these poets did not all touch each other, but the lines mentioned are the ones, I think, he would call the strongest and the most anxiety producing. In American tradition, Romanticism begins to kick with Bryant and Poe, but it is not born until Emerson (RT, p. 304). He has the Blake-Wordsworth spirit as his precursor, yet he surpasses them. He differs from Wordsworth because he could not have Wordsworth's faith in immortality (RT, p. 297), and he differs from Blake because Emerson lacked Blake's patience (RT, p. 301). Emerson develops a dialectic between poetic incarnation, a yielding to daimonic possession, and a merging with Ananke, a mastering of the daimon (RT, pp. 269,305). The first pole Bloom calls Bacchus and the second Merlin. The two terms are taken from the titles of two Emerson poems which represent each pole of this dialectic. The first represents a period of challenge, high transcendentalism, and apocalyptic humanism, and the second a period of acquiescence, searching for "what will suffice," and naturalistic humanism. Thus Emerson is the Wordsworth of American Romantic poetry. The poets in the line of Emerson are Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson, Tushman,

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<sup>45</sup> These lines of influence are stated throughout Bloom's work; more particularly, see all of The Visionary Company, Yeats chapters 2-5, and Ringers in the Tower chapters 2,9-14.

Cummings, Hart Crane, Roethke, Frost, Robinson, Aiken, Stevens, Jeffers, Ammons, Ashberry, and W. S. Merlin (RT, pp. 295,299,302). These ephebes of Emerson, then, incorporate his dialectic, yet they might stress one aspect over the other. For example, Frost and Robinson stress the resigned aspect of Emerson (RT, p. 272). Bloom's working out of this dialectic in other poems is exceedingly difficult to follow because the two poles are so vague and inclusive. But these poles are little more than conformity and rebellion, and it would not be difficult to find these themes in any poem.

In this chapter I have attempted to isolate for analysis Bloom's major points about Romanticism from both a synchronic and diachronic approach. Yet he is not yet squirming on a pin, for the number of subthemes, characters, poetic swerves, lines of influence, and dialectics are not just as many as there are poems to be studied. One poem may embody several of these characteristics. What I have hoped to establish is the broad scheme within which the various subthemes can be understood as deviations from the major points, for I believe a comprehension of this scheme is necessary for an understanding of his method of interpretation.

## CHAPTER V

### CLEARING THE LABYRINTH

For God's sake let us sit upon the ground  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings!  
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,  
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed.

--Shakespeare, King Richard the Second

This essay has concerned itself with explaining four major aspects of Bloom's theory of criticism as developed by 1971: text, influence, imagination, and Romanticism. Several crucially important minor points of his theory are myth, language, and humanism. Bloom's ideas of and conflation of myth and language are also fundamental to an understanding of his conception of text, and an understanding of influence depends upon an understanding of text. Moreover, Bloom's notion of humanism is fundamental to an understanding of his method of assessing the quality of the imagination. This idea leads up to the problem of how Bloom goes about the job of interpreting, of telling the sad stories of the death of precursor kings.

Criticism is a twofold operation, at least. The critic must either explain the text, the traditional notion of exegesis derived from scriptorium work, or he must assess the text; thus, a critic may be either explanatory or judicial or both; Bloom is both. And the methods he employs

are those explained above; that is, he describes (explains implies finality) a text based upon his notion of a text as a signification process and his notion of the influences that he perceives in the process, and he assesses a text by how good a piece of Romanticism it is, by how powerful and humanistic the imagination represented is. I will attempt, in this latter chapter, to describe clearly his methods.

Implicit in Chapter II of this essay is Bloom's answer to the perennial question, what is literature? I think this question is fundamental for understanding any critic. However, the question is less problematic for post-modernist critics since the assimilation of Wittgenstein's approaches to language. Yet this same problem has, of course, troubled aesthetics for a very long time: art is imitation; art is beauty; art is expression; art is communication; art is significant form; art is symbolized emotion; art is ad infinitum ad nauseum.<sup>1</sup> The complexities involved in these theories are formidable, to say the least. Marvin Weitz assimilates Wittgenstein's notion of games as open categories or open concepts and ends all of this questioning over what

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<sup>1</sup>See chapter 3 of Tolstoy's What is Art?, trans. Almyer Maude (Indianapolis: Bobbes-Merrill, 1960) for a thorough account of the diversity of art theories leading up to his theory.

art is.<sup>2</sup> Thus, for many critics, after Weitz, art--literary art as well--can no longer be defined by any one single category, but rather it is defineable by many concepts all held together by their "family resemblances." So Weitz can conclude that some art is beauty, expression, etc., but it is all art. And we recognize a work of art by its properties which resemble properties of other works that have been called art. Thus the concept of art can grow as new forms are added to it (e.g., conceptual art, earth art), and two pieces of art that have no single similar property can both be classified as art.

This idea makes a good deal of sense, but it has presented problems for critics, especially those who would enjoy writing a definitive statement of what art is. Some critics want to take Weitz's view and go as far as, say, Barthes and claim that detergents and faces can be dealt with in the same systematic way as literature; literature is a sign system similar to nonliterary sign systems.<sup>3</sup> Bloom would react, I think, as Holland does to this extremism by saying "liberal as I am in these matters, I find it a stretch to call detergents, wrestling matches, or the face

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<sup>2</sup>Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 15 (1956), 27-35. This is the classic argument for the open concept of art.

<sup>3</sup>David Lodge explains Barthes' criticism in his The Modes of Modern Writing, pp. 68-70.

of Garbo literature."<sup>4</sup> Bloom claims an open concept for literature as well as for Romantic literature. He claims his visionary company to be defined by the works of the central characters in the canon of Romanticism (Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats); they are axiomatically Romantic, as Lodge might say.<sup>5</sup> And furthermore other poets and poems that bear "family resemblances" to the visionary company can well be included in the open category as Romantics (e.g., Stevens, Yeats, Tennyson, Browning, and even some Eliot). He dubs a particular poem to be Romantic by his method of descriptive interpretation.

Answering the question what is literature does not strictly imply the answer to the question, where is literature? One normally thinks of Cleanth Brooks on this issue. He asks us to decide whether or not the poem is in the mind of the reader, on the printed page, or in the author's consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Bloom, we know by now, wants to break apart form and claim the existence of the artifact to be on the page, but the meaning, value, and all other responses to

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<sup>4</sup>Norman Holland, "Literature as Transaction," p. 287.

<sup>5</sup>Lodge, p. 7. For Lodge, a unit is an axiomatic member of a class because it can be nothing else.

<sup>6</sup>Cleanth Brooks, as quoted in B. J. Leggett, "Notes Toward a Revised History of New Criticism: An Interview with Cleanth Brooks," pp. 3-4.

live in the dialectic between texts. To disclaim the existence of the artifact would be to disclaim all of objective reality, an assuredly problematic proposition. And to claim, with Wellek, Wimsatt, Warren, and Scholes, that the poem is a verbal structure existing on the page is a pernicious lie, for "no mode of criticism has dehumanized poetry more than structuralism" (VC, p. 464). The business of criticism, Bloom says, sounding a bit like a New Critic, is "to describe it [a poem] in its own terms" (VC, p. 207). Historical criticism is misleading (VC, p. 207), and one should avoid committing the intentional fallacy (SM, p. 98). But what a poem's "own terms" are, we must remember, are other poems (VC, p. 463). Hence his interpretative method departs from New Criticism.

To attempt to explain a work of art is a fallacy, a hangover from nineteenth century objectivist aesthetic theorists who thought that what is of value in art is an objective property of art. He attacks R. P. Blackmur, "a critic of the rhetorical school of I. A. Richards," for too much value judgement and not enough description (RT, p. 197). Bloom is here influenced very much by Frye's attack on value judgements in his infamous "Polemical Introduction" to his Anatomy, but Bloom's emphasis on describing comes again from Wittgenstein. Altieri cogently articulates Wittgenstein's distinction by stating that "explanations . . .

are concerned with giving reasons why things are the way they are, and they depend upon specific needs and established ways of treating things from certain systematic perspectives. but, as we have seen, reasons depend ultimately on grounds which are not reasonable, grounds which simply are."<sup>7</sup> So when Bloom describes a poem, for example, Shelley's "Sensitive Plant," by pointing out how it contains Blake's The Book of Thel and Spenser's "Muipotmos" or how one poem swerves or completes another one; he is not, as Topf might say, "exemplifying the common kinds of construction in criticism . . . which purport to discover influences and sources, criticism's version of the scientist's cause and effect," but rather he is merely describing with the trope of clinamen and tessera the phenomenon that he encounters.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, Bloom's method of interpretation is a method of description which he accomplishes by the use of analogues, for which he has been equally praised and damned. One of the most popular attacks is that he attempts "to use Blake's categories as a touchstone for all the rest" of Romantic poetry.<sup>9</sup> While "touchstone" is not quite the right word

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<sup>7</sup>Charles Altieri, "Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language," p. 1421.

<sup>8</sup>Mel A. Topf, "Specialization in Literary Criticism," College English, 39 (1977), 155.

<sup>9</sup>J. W. R. Purser, rev. of The Visionary Company, by Harold Bloom, Review of English Studies, 14 (1963), 108.

since, as he says, for example, of Clare, that "it does not lessen him to say that much of his poetry is a postscript to Wordsworth's" (VC, p. 445), it is correct to say that he tries to fit other poems into a Blakean mold or any precursor's mold, but the poem's not fitting does not strictly imply that it is a failed poem. The criticism is understandable, though, for every book of Bloom's will inevitably contain Beulah, Eden, Ulro, and Generation. Blake's canon, for Bloom, is the most successful myth, the most inclusive body of ideas and forms; it swallows up the others. Thus, it follows that any other poem can be explained by a poem from Blake's canon. It is unnecessary, furthermore, for Bloom to describe a poem only by an earlier poem. He will use Blake to describe Collins, or Shelley to describe Wordsworth, and he even describes Blake's Zoa Tharmas as a "figure of capable imagination," after Stevens (VC, p. 82).

The inability or unwillingness to grasp the basic premises of Bloom's theory has resulted in two kinds of seemingly devastating criticism. For example, James Allen asserts, "such technical matters as poetic forms, sound pattering, metrics, diction, and phrasing are virtually no part of Bloom's concern."<sup>10</sup> For Torchiana, Bloom's unwillingness to consider historical, social, and biographical

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<sup>10</sup>James L. Allen, Jr., "Recent Yeatsiana," Journal of Modern Literature, 2 (1971), 149.

influences thoroughly enough results in his "inability to read Yeats' poetry at the level of comprehension assumed of an Irish schoolboy."<sup>11</sup> Yet Bloom clearly states in his introduction that the failure to understand influences (in his particular meaning of the term) and the Romantic tradition "compels us to a new kind of critical study of Romantic influence" (YT, p. 7). And one critic, Anne Wordsworth, recognized his premises, and clarified the issue by pointing out that when Bloom "criticizes the much-praised 'Second Coming' for, amongst other things, its Gnostic quasi-determinism, it is squarely in the context of his theory of poetic influence."<sup>12</sup> To summarize, Bloom's method of interpretation is based upon his Wittgensteinian notion of language and his Freudian-Blakean notion of influence. He acts with language in a particular way and describes this experience in terms of analogues and relationships between poems. The method is outside of his premises not propositional, not verifiable, but this unscientific approach does not necessarily imply its uselessness. It provides brilliant insights, but as for telling us which among poems is better, he has a different method.

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<sup>11</sup>Torchiana, p. 170

<sup>12</sup>Ann Wordsworth, "Wrestling with the Dead," rev. of Yeats, by Harold Bloom, Spectator, 25 July 1970, p. 74.

Bloom's judicial criticism is based on his notion of Romantic Imagination and humanism. Outside of these categories judicial criticism is based on taste alone. He says, for example, that "Don Juan is, to my taste, not a poem of the eminence of Milton and Jerusalem, of The Prelude or Prometheus Unbound or the two Hyperions. But it is not a poem of their kind, nor ought to be judged against them" (VC, p. 272). Yet earlier in the book Bloom states that "Byron never left the world, nor could he ever abandon any of the existing conceptions of it. His is therefore the most social of Romantic imaginations and so the least Romantic" (VC, p. 3). Now many critics would perceive an inconsistency here. On the one page, Byron cannot be judged, yet on the other page, he can? It does seem inconsistent, but given Bloom's theory it is quite consistent (though consistency is probably not a major concern of Bloom's anyway). One cannot rank poets and poems absolutely except by taste. Yet Bloom categorizes poets as strong or weak, greater or lesser Romantics. One determines the strong from the weak by two criteria primarily: the degree of faith the poet has in the autonomy of the imagination, and the degree of humanism perceivable from the poem.

As Hazard Adams clarifies, Bloom "considers always the poem as a vehicle for moral knowledge--but knowledge

separable from and beyond the poem."<sup>13</sup> The extractable idea is imbedded in the notion of the "same form" mentioned earlier by Frye on Blake, yet there the idea was the nature of God progressively revealed. For Bloom the extractable same idea is the notion of apocalyptic or naturalistic humanism--both expressing a faith in the power of the imagination to better man's condition and heal the wounds of the scientific revolution, the breaking apart of entity from entity. Bloom has from his early career been a very moralistic critic. He claims the mythopoeic poems in his first book, Shelley's Mythmaking, to be the best of the canon because of their mythmaking qualities yet the general mythic structure behind it all is Buber's I-It and I-Thou conception, an indeed moralistic bias. Buber, as Bloom interprets him, clearly places a high value on the humanizing I-Thou aspect of his theory. A connection to several particular Thou's may lead to a "glimpse through to the eternal Thou" (SM, p. 3). He praises Shelley for his humanism; however, in his later book on Yeats, he can say of the satire in "The Phases of the Moon" that much of what Yeats "condemns must include the larger part of our supposed values. His vision of the sentimental Hell to which a liberal and Christian humanist leads is a barbaric one, but

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<sup>13</sup> Adams, "Scholarship and the Idea of Criticism," p. 275.

it has the force and persuasion of genuine passion" (YT, p. 256). So Yeats here is insincere, barbaric, and attacking all that we hold dear. Thus what Bloom perceives as a wrong-headed moral idea denudes the poem of any real power it might have. The moral content inexorably blocks Bloom's vision and ability to see the poem qua poem.

Bloom is not the only moralistic critic writing today, and for a clarifying analogue we might look to John Gardner. Gardner says, "I do think the argument for the best kind of fiction, one of the bases of true morality, needs to be mentioned from time to time, because it seems to me that true art has an effect upon society."<sup>14</sup> And of the Yeatsian goal mentioned above Bloom says, "Phase 1 is a supernatural state but, if we are to credit Yeats, it is the goal to which the ideals of our debased culture are leading us, a Limbo or abyss of mass servitude and insipidity" (YT, p. 236). Hence, I think we can inductively leap to the idea that for Bloom, also, art affects society, and he follows Frye who says "criticism will always have two aspects, one turned toward the structure of literature and one turned toward the other cultural phenomena that form the social environment of

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<sup>14</sup>John Gardner, "Moral Fiction," The Hudson Review, 29 (1976/77), 275.

literature."<sup>15</sup> Gardner also states that art can be "a simulation of real experience [which] is morally educational."<sup>16</sup> And Bloom claims that the poetry of A. R. Ammons "does for me what Stevens did earlier, and the High Romantics before that: it helps me live my life" (RT, p. 261). For Bloom art is instructional and therapeutic. So in one way Bloom attempts to be for Romantic poetry what Gardner is for modern fiction, the high priest of secular humanism. A strong poem that is antihumanistic shall never be dreamt of in Bloom's philosophy.

As mentioned above, one reason that humanism is required for a strong poet is that a strong imagination is necessary for its creation, and antihumanism harms the imagination, stops its growth as it were. Imagination is the other criterion for assessing strong and weak poets. The strongest poet has the greatest imagination, which implies the greatest faith in the autonomy of the imagination and the greater amount of humanism. Blake is the strongest poet in English literary history because his myth was the most complete and the most successful. As mentioned above, Bloom says that when Blake died, "the firm belief in the autonomy of the

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<sup>15</sup>Northrop Frye, The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup>Gardner, p. 504.

poet's imagination died with him" (VC, p. 1). Wordsworth, on the other hand, is obviously a strong poet in anybody's criteria, but Bloom says that we know when he becomes a weak poet because we know when he loses faith in the imagination, in his "myth of nature," in the Elegiac Stanzas (VC, p. 184). Wordsworth's Excursion is a poem after Wordsworth's loss, and thus he calls it a "poor incontrovertably major poem" (YT, p. 10).

There are particularly two kinds of imaginations for Bloom: the Wordsworthian variety, which attempts to marry mind and nature; and the Blakean variety, which destroys, overcomes nature and replaces her with the Human Form Divine. Keats and Stevens are Wordsworthian Romantics; they are obviously strong poets, but they still do not attain the position of strongest due to their alliance with nature. Yeats is a Blakean poet who fails, but not totally, according to Bloom, in his middle and late periods due to a lack of humanism that Blake never lost.<sup>17</sup> However, literature attains strength as it incarnates any of the principles of Romantic imagination outlined in the previous chapter. Thus, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a "flawed novel," but it is

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<sup>17</sup>Wellek argues the contrary view that any concept of Romanticism based on "such an exceptional and lonely figure as Blake . . . a survival from another century" is wrong-headed. Rene Wellek, "Romanticism Re-examined," in his Concepts, p. 218.

strong because "it contains one of the most vivid versions we have of the Romantic mythology of the self, one that resembles Blake's The Book of Urizen, Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, and Byron's Manfred" (RT, p. 122). The stages of Romanticism referred to are, of course, the Promethean and the Purgatorial. So rather than outline any more examples, I end with "what will suffice," only a few examples to support the general principles of Bloom's method of description and assessment within his view of Romantic tradition.

As Frye, paraphrasing Coleridge, states, "all literary critics are either Iliad critics or Odyssey critics"; that is, critics are either concerned with tragedy, realism, and irony, or they are concerned with comedy and romance. Bloom, like Frye, is a determined Odyssey critic. One objection levied against him is that he is narrow minded in allowing, as did A. W. Schlegel, the notion that all poetry is Romantic poetry.<sup>18</sup> But Bloom firmly believes in the Romantic tradition and practices what he exalts. He is safe from the attack of Susan Sontag who says that "to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world."<sup>19</sup> He wants to synthesize tradition; he wants to show power and

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<sup>18</sup>Cited in René Wellek, "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History," in his Concepts, p. 135.

<sup>19</sup>Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), p. 7.

strength in the work he chooses to explore. His "critical style must be seen as the perfect function of this thought," Jerome McGann says, because "his engagement with the poetry offers a series of impassioned exegeses in which he seems always to be encountering the poetic act anew."<sup>20</sup> Thus, one leaves a Bloomian discussion of a poem not "with a sense that the work has been exhausted by analysis but renewed in its mysterious power."<sup>21</sup> Finally, Bloom avoids Blake's epithet, "criticism is imitation."<sup>22</sup> Some criticism is merely the critic's apeing the art, attempting to provide a somehow better work than the art; it attempts to replace the work. With the formalists Brooks, Wimsatt, Warren, Olsen, and Blackmur, to mention only a few, one senses at times that the critic is convinced that his work is definitive, and the critic has said all that need be said, yet we know it is only a function of their rhetoric and not of their philosophy. However, as Morse Peckham points out, "unlike most critics, he [Bloom] thinks that they [the poets] are more intelligent and interesting than he is."<sup>23</sup> He wants to seek always a new method for viewing the poetry that he likes.

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<sup>20</sup> McGann, p. 245.

<sup>21</sup> McGann, p. 245.

<sup>22</sup> Blake, "Annotations to the Words of Sir Joshua Reynolds." Erdman, p. 632.

<sup>23</sup> Morse Peckham, rev. of The Ringers in the Tower, p. 60.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE DECOMPOSITE GOD

This is the mythology of modern death  
And these, in their mufflings, monsters of elegy,  
Of their own marvel made, of pity made,

Compounded and compounded, life by life,  
These are death's own supremest images,  
The pure perfections of parental space.

--Wallace Stevens, "The Owl and the Sarcophagus"

I offered a tentative conclusion at the end of the last chapter; here, I shall expand the ideas and be more judicial in tone, for after explaining an explainer, one is compelled to assess an assessor. Bloom is very much a Romantic, so much so that I think the reason he is so fond of mythopoeia is that he is a mythmaker himself. He, like the rest of his Visionary Company, attempts to create in order to avoid death-in-life. The death Bloom often cites in the death of libidinal energy caused by the crippling anxiety produced by Oedipal father poets. Thus Bloom adopts Freud's equally mythic topography of the mind. So "death's supremest images" are begotten in "parental space"; works of art are produced as a means of repeating the act of creation, perhaps God's, and in so doing one adopts the role of the immortal for a moment and squelches the anxiety caused by the fear of death.

Bloom reiterates Frye's dictum that as the criticism of Blake develops, so will the theory of criticism develop.<sup>1</sup> A major influence on Bloom's ideas of text, influence, Romanticism, imagination, myth, and humanism is Blake's work. As noted, Bloom was greatly influenced by Blake much before he wrote his book on Blake's argument. Like Blake, Bloom must "create a system or be enslaved by another man's," hence his fanciful mythology of the lines of poetic tradition and of the ways in which they influence each other. Bloom's mythology is a system of tropes. As mentioned above, he is not guilty of the intentional fallacy when he says Yeats did not understand Wordsworth directly. He is only troping. He is performing with language to describe his confrontation with Yeats, his aesthetic experience. Yet he does not seem consistent. In Blake's Apocalypse he claims he is studying only Blake's mythopoeic argument, so when one reads of line eight in the lyric preface to Milton, "the dark Satanic mills have nothing to do with industrialism," one must attach to the end of the sentence "within my subject," for Bloom will not do it for us (BA, p. 305). Bloom does not want to be victim of the intentional fallacy, but he is forever discussing how Shelley reacts, or Byron feels, or Blake admonishes. One must infer from the total frame of his

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<sup>1</sup>Northrop Frye, The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970), p. 175.

argument that he is not referring to the historical person but to a Bloomian mental construct, another trope. In order to maintain that Bloom's criticism "makes sense," we must allow that what appears an inconsistency is a trope. Thus, when I refer to his discussion of, for example, Shelley's attitude, I am referring to a metonymy within his language-game for describing the sensations that occur during the reading of Shelley's poetry.

All of this troping may well be nearer to the truth of what is actually happening when we "interpret" literature, but remembering what Wittgenstein tells us, we can make language as simple or problematic as we decide to.<sup>2</sup> My question then is why base a practical criticism on such problematic premises? To claim that we can only describe poetic meaning in terms of other poems sounds very near the Laputan's desire to converse by using things instead of words. Although Swift is attacking Baconian positivism, Bloom seems to be creating similar sorts of difficulties. After all, if one can talk about the poet's faith in his imagination yet agree that one cannot know the poet's mind, can one not talk of contextually determined meaning, form, and unity while agreeing that the text contains nothing?

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<sup>2</sup>Charles Altieri, "Wittgenstein on Consciousness and Language," p. 1406. Wittgenstein, Altieri argues, claims that when conditions are made unnecessarily problematic, it is a result of the language user's foolishness.

Obviously one can, and Bloom knows this. But he uses such antinomian rhetoric to shock his readers out of any faith in the old illusion that the text contains anything or that poems are created in isolation from poetic tradition. He reminds us well.

Bloom's methods seem twofold: either criticism as preaching, or criticism as performing. When he expounds upon the antihumanistic evils of "Leda and the Swan" or "The Second Coming" he seems to be preaching to us all about what we should value for the progress of civilization. The poems become only chapters and verses in his collective Romantic Bible, which he uses as points of departure for his polemics. When he is not so concerned with values and humanity, he seems to be playing. He will tell us about "somewhere Freud has a splendid sentence," and "somewhere else Freud remarks" (RT, p. 23). Here he is either teasing or being lazy. He tells us that "The Second Coming" "turns upon Yeats' deliberate misinterpretation of apocalyptic poems like Blake's The Book of Urizen, Europe, and 'The Mental Traveler,' and of Shelley's Prometheus Unbound and 'The Witch of Atlas'" (YT, p. 324). This is quite a fanciful statement. If we take "deliberate misinterpretation" in the traditional sense, we imagine Yeats sitting before copies of all the above mentioned poems and ensuring that he does not understand them. The folly of this scenario forces the reader to understand Bloom's

difficult meaning of "deliberate misinterpretation" and make sense of the statement as trope. But given all of that, how helpful is Bloom being? Are we to understand immediately his notion of what it is in those five poems that Bloom understands and that Bloom sees as Yeats' understanding? Well, it is at least difficult; here Bloom is performing; he is entertaining, not making the literature more accessible.

Bloom's favorite genre is commentary. He enjoys an aphoristic style, and turning out profundities about a poem, himself, western civilization, the history of ideas, and the course of modern culture. He is nonacademic, glib, and at times cryptic. I come to the conclusion at the end of this essay that Brooks does. Any let-us-do method is fine enough, but its worth will be based upon how much fruit the method bears.<sup>3</sup> Crane and Abrams have told us decades ago that poetry can and should be viewed from many perspectives, and Bloom's method is one equally legitimate plane of the critical prism. But Bloom is limited. In Bloom one will find brilliant insights, praise for Romanticism, and entertainment. But he often does not provide a carefully constructed reading of a poem. The thorough reading with watertight logic is the activity of Urizen, not for Bloom. He wants to be Los, the

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<sup>3</sup>Cleanth Brooks, as quoted in B. J. Leggett, "Notes for a Revised History of the New Criticism: An Interview with Cleanth Brooks," p. 29.

mythic representative of Blake, a poet who could shift the order of his plates of poems to point out and free us from the dependence man has on logical, narrative progression. Bloom wants to be that eternal prophet, inspiring us, vexing us, and forcing us to think.

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