Clinamen or Poetic Misprision

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SHELLEY speculated that poets of all ages contributed to one great Poem perpetually in progress. Borges remarks that poets create their precursors. If the dead poets, as Eliot insisted, constituted their successors' particular advance in knowledge, that knowledge is still their successors' creation, made by the living for the needs of the living.

But poets, or at least the strongest among them, do not read necessarily as even the strongest of critics read. Poets are neither ideal nor common readers, neither Arnoldian nor Johnsonian. They tend not to think, as they read: "This is dead, this is living, in the poetry of X." Poets, by the time they have grown strong, do not read the poetry of X, for really strong poets can read only themselves. For them, to be judicious is to be weak, and to compare, exactly and fairly, is to be not elect. Milton's Satan, archetype of the modern poet at his strongest, becomes weak when he reasons and compares, on Mount Niphates, and so commences that process of decline culminating in *Paradise Regained*, ending as the archetype of the modern critic at his weakest.

Let us attempt the experiment (apparently frivolous) of reading *Paradise Lost* as an allegory of the dilemma of the modern poet, at his strongest. Satan is that modern poet, while God is his dead but still embarrassingly potent and present ancestor, or rather, ancestral poet. Adam is the modern poet, potentially strong, but at his weakest moment, when he has yet to find his own voice. God has no Muse, and needs none, since he is dead, his creativity being manifested only in the past time of the poem. Of the living poets in the poem, Satan has Sin, Adam has Eve, and Milton has only his Interior Paramour, an Emanation far within that weeps incessantly for his sin, and that is invoked magnificently four times in the poem. Milton has no name for her, though he invokes her under several, but, as he says, "the meaning, not the Name I call." Satan, a stronger poet even than Milton, has progressed beyond invoking his Muse.

Why call Satan a modern poet? Because he shadows forth gigantically a trouble at the core of Milton and of Pope, a sorrow that purifies by isolation in Collins and Gray, in Smart and in Cowper, emerging fully to stand clear in Wordsworth, who is the exemplary Modern Poet, the Poet proper. The incarnation of the Poetic Character in Satan begins when Milton's story truly begins, with the Incarnation of God's Son and Satan's rejection of *that* incarnation. Modern poetry begins in two declarations of Satan: "We know no time when we were not as now" and "To be weak is miserable, doing or suffering."

Let us adopt Milton's own sequence in the poem. Poetry begins with our awareness, not of a Fall, but that *we are falling*. The poet is our chosen man, and his consciousness of election comes as a curse; again, not "I am a fallen man," but "I am Man, and I am falling" or rather, "I *was* God, I *was* Man (for to a poet they were the same) and I *am* falling, from myself." When this consciousness of self is raised to an absolute pitch, *then* the poet hits the floor of Hell, or rather, comes to the bottom of the abyss, and by his impact there creates Hell. He says, "I seemed to have stopped falling; now I *am fallen*, consequently, I lie here in Hell."

There and then, in this bad, he finds his good; he chooses the heroic, to know damnation and to explore the limits of the possible within it. The alternative is to repent, to accept a God altogether other than the self, wholly external to the possible. This God is cultural history, the dead poets, the embarrassments of a tradition grown too wealthy to need anything more. But we, to understand the strong poet, must go further still than he can go, back into the poise before the consciousness of falling came.

When Satan or the poet looks around him on the floor of fire his falling self had kindled, he sees first a face he only just recognizes, his best friend, Beelzebub, or the talented poet who never quite made it, and now never shall. And, like the truly strong poet he is, Satan is interested in the face of his best friend only to the extent that it reveals to him the condition of his own countenance. Such limited interest mocks neither the poets we know, nor the truly heroic Satan. If Beelzebub is that scarred, if he looks that unlike the true form he left behind on the happy fields of light, then Satan himself is hideously bereft of beauty, doomed, like Walter Pater, to be a Caliban of Letters, trapped in essential poverty, in imaginative need, where once he was all but the wealthiest, and needed next to nothing. But Satan, in the accursed strength of the poet, refuses to brood upon this, and turns instead to his task, which is to rally everything that remains.

This task, comprehensive and profoundly imaginative, includes everything that we could ascribe as motivation for the writing of any poetry that is not strictly devotional in its purposes. For why do men write poems? To rally everything that remains, and not to sanctify nor propound. The heroism of endurance—of Milton's post-lapsarian Adam, and of the Son in *Paradise Regained*—is a theme for Christian poetry, but only barely a heroism for poets. We hear Milton again, celebrating the strong poet's natural virtue, when Samson taunts Harapha: "bring up thy van,/My heels are fetter'd, but my fist is free." The poet's final heroism, in Milton, is a spasm of self-destruction glorious because it pulls down the temple of his enemies. Satan, organizing his chaos, imposing a discipline despite the visible darkness, calling his minions to emulate his refusal to mourn, becomes the hero as poet, finding what must suffice, while knowing that nothing can suffice.

This is a heroism that is exactly on the border of solipsism, neither within it, nor beyond it. Satan's later decline in the poem, as arranged by the Idiot Questioner in Milton, is that the hero retreats from this border into solipsism, and so is degraded; ceases, during his soliloquy on Mount Niphates, to be a poet and, by intoning the formula: "Evil be thou my good," becomes a mere rebel, childish inverter of conventional moral categories, another wearisome ancestor of student non-students, the perpetual New Left. For the modern poet, in the gladness of his sorrowing strength, stands always on the farther verge of solipsism, having just emerged from it. His difficult balance, from Wordsworth to Stevens, is to maintain a stance just there, where by his very presence he says: "What I see and hear come not but from myself" and yet also: "I have not but I am and as I am I am." The first, by itself, is perhaps the fine defiance of an overt solipsism, leading back to an equivalent of: "I know no time when I was not as now." Yet the second is the modification that makes for poetry instead of idiocy: "There are no objects outside of me because I see into their life, which is one with my own, and so 'I am that I am,' which is to say, 'I too will be present wherever and whenever I choose to be present.' I am so much in process, that all possible movement is indeed possible, and if at present I explore only my own dens, at least I *explore*." Or, as Satan might have said: "In doing and in suffering, I shall be happy, for even in suffering I shall be strong."

It is sad to observe most modern critics observing Satan, because they never do observe him. The catalog of unseeing could hardly be more distinguished, from Eliot, who speaks of "Milton's curly haired

Byronic hero" (one wants to reply, looking from side-to-side: "Who?") to the astonishing backsliding of Northrop Frye, who invokes, in urbane ridicule, a Wagnerian context (one wants to lament: "A true critic, and of God's party without knowing it"). Fortunately we have had Empson, with his apt rallying-cry: "Back to Shelley!" Whereto I go.

Contemplating Milton's meanness towards Satan, towards his rival poet and dark brother, Shelley spoke of the "pernicious casuistry" set up in the mind of Milton's reader, who would be tempted to weigh Satan's flaws against God's malice towards him, and to excuse Satan because God had been malicious beyond all measure. Shelley's point has been twisted by the C. S. Lewis, or Angelic, School of Milton Criticism, which proceeds to weigh up the flaws and God's wrongs, and finds Satan wanting in the balance. This pernicious casuistry, Shelley would have agreed, would not be less pernicious if we were to find (as we do) Milton's God wanting. It would still be casuistry, and as discourse upon poetry it would still be moralizing, which is to say, pernicious.

Even the strongest poets were at first weak, for they started as prospective Adams, not as retrospective Satans. Blake names one state of being Adam, and calls it the Limit of Contraction, and another state, Satan, and calls it the Limit of Opacity. Adam is given or natural man, beyond which our imaginations will not contract. Satan is the thwarted or restrained desire of natural man, or rather the shadow or Spectre of that desire. Beyond this Spectre, we will not harden against vision, but the Spectre squats in our repressiveness, and we are hardened enough, as we are contracted enough. Enough, our spirits lament, not to live our lives, enough to be frightened out of our creative potential by the Covering Cherub, Blake's emblem (out of Milton, and Ezekiel, and Genesis) for that portion of creativeness in us that has gone over to constriction and hardness. Blake precisely named this renegade part of Man. Before the Fall (which for Blake meant before the Creation, the two events in him being one and the same) the Covering Cherub was the pastoral genius Tharmas, a unifying process making for undivided consciousness; the innocence, pre-reflective, of a state without subjects and objects, yet in no danger of solipsism, for it lacked also a consciousness of self. Tharmas is a poet's (or any man's) power of realization, even as the Covering Cherub is the power that blocks realization.

No poet, not even so single-minded as Milton or Wordsworth, is a Tharmas, this late in history, and no poet is a Covering Cherub, though Coleridge and Hopkins both allowed themselves, at last, to be

dominated by him, as perhaps Eliot did also. Poets this late in tradition are both Adams and Satans. They begin as natural men, affirming that they will contract no further, and they end as thwarted desires, frustrated only that they cannot harden apocalyptically. But, in between, the greatest of them are very strong, and they progress through a natural intensification that marks Adam in his brief prime and a heroic self-realization that marks Satan in his brief and more-than-natural glory. The intensification and the self-realization alike are accomplished only through language, and no poet since Adam and Satan speaks a language free of the one wrought by his precursors. Chomsky remarks that when one speaks a language, one knows a great deal that was never learned. The effort of criticism is to teach a language, for what is never learned but comes as the gift of a language is a poetry already written, an insight I derive from Shelley's remark that every language is the relic of an abandoned cyclic poem. I mean that criticism teaches not a language of criticism (a formalist view still held in common by archetypalists, structuralists, phenomenologists) but a language in which poetry already is written, the language of influence, of the dialectic that governs the relations between poets *as poets*. The poet *in every reader* does not experience the same disjunctiveness from what he reads that the critic in every reader necessarily feels. What gives pleasure to the critic in a reader may give anxiety to the poet in him, an anxiety we have learned, as readers, to neglect, to our own loss and peril. This anxiety, this mode of melancholy, is the anxiety of influence, the dark and daemonic ground upon which we now enter.

How do men become poets, or to adopt an older phrasing, how is the poetic character incarnated? When a potential poet first discovers (or is discovered by) the dialectic of influence, first discovers poetry as being both external and internal to himself, he begins a process that will end only when he has no more poetry within him, long after he has the power (or desire) to discover it outside himself again. Though all such discovery is a self-recognition, indeed a Second Birth, and ought, in the pure good of theory, to be accomplished in a perfect solipsism, it is an act never complete in itself. Poetic Influence is the sense—amazing, agonizing, delighting—of *other poets* as felt in the depths of the all-but-perfect solipsist, the potentially strong poet. For the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of *other selves*. The poem is *within* him, yet he experiences the shame and splendor of *being found by* poems—great poems—*outside* him. To lose freedom in this center is never to forgive, and to learn the dread of threatened autonomy forever.

"Every young man's heart," Malraux says, "is a graveyard in which are inscribed the names of a thousand dead artists but whose only actual denizens are a few mighty, often antagonistic, ghosts." "The poet," Malraux adds, "is haunted by a voice with which words must be harmonized." As his main concerns are visual and narrative, Malraux arrives at the formula: "from pastiche to style," which is not adequate for poetic influence, where the movement toward self-realization is closer to the more drastic spirit of Kierkegaard's maxim: "He who does the work gives birth to his own father." We remember how for so many centuries, from the sons of Homer to the sons of Ben Jonson, poetic influence had been described as a filial relationship, and then we come to see that poetic *influence*, rather than *sonship*, is another product of the Enlightenment, another aspect of the Cartesian dualism. The word "influence" had received the sense of "having a power over another" as early as the Scholastic Latin of Aquinas, but not for centuries was it to lose its root meaning of inflow, and its prime meaning of an emanation or force coming in upon mankind from the stars. As first used, to be influenced meant to receive an ethereal fluid flowing in upon one from the stars, a fluid that affected one's character and destiny, and that altered all sublunary things. A power—divine and moral—later simply a secret power—exercised itself in defiance of all that had seemed voluntary in one. In our sense—that of *poetic* influence—the word is very late. In English it is not one of Dryden's critical terms, and is never used in our sense by Pope. Johnson in 1755 defines influence as being either astral or moral, saying of the latter that it is "Ascendant power; power of directing or modifying," but the instances he cites are religious or personal, and not literary. For Coleridge, two generations later, the word has substantially our meaning in the context of literature. But the anxiety had long preceded the usage. Between Ben Jonson and Samuel Johnson filial loyalty between poets had given way to the labyrinthine affections of what Freud's wit first termed the "family romance," and moral power had become a legacy of melancholy. Ben Jonson still sees influence as health. Of *imitation*, he says he means: "to be able to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use. To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him till he grow very he, or so like him as the copy may be mistaken for the original." So Ben Jonson has no anxiety as to imitation, for to him (refreshingly) art is *hard work*. But the shadow fell, and with the post-Enlightenment passion for Genius and the Sublime, there came anxiety too, for art was beyond hard work. Edward Young, with his Longinian esteem for *Genius,* broods on the baneful virtues of the

poetic fathers and anticipates the Keats of the letters and the Emerson of *Self-Reliance* when he laments, of the great precursors: "They *engross* our attention, and so prevent a due inspection of ourselves; they *prejudice* our judgment in favor of their abilities, and so lessen the sense of our own; and they *intimidate* us with this splendor of their renown." And Dr. Samuel Johnson, a sturdier man and with more classical loyalties, nevertheless created a complex critical matrix in which the notions of indolence, solitude, originality, imitation and invention are most strangely mixed. Johnson barked: "The case of Tantalus, in the region of poetick punishment, was somewhat to be pitied, because the fruits that hung about him retired from his hand; but what tenderness can be claimed by those who though perhaps they suffer the pains of Tantalus will never lift their hands for their own relief?" We wince at the Johnsonian bow-wow, and wince the more because we know he means himself as well, for as a poet he was another Tantalus, another victim of the Covering Cherub. In this respect, only Shakespeare and Milton escaped a Johnsonian whipping; even Virgil was condemned as too much a mere imitator of Homer. For, with Johnson, the greatest critic in the language, we have also the first great diagnostician of the malady of poetic influence. Yet the diagnosis belongs to his age. Hume, who admired Waller, thought Waller was saved only because Horace was so distant. We are further on, and see that Horace was not distant enough. Waller is dead. Horace lives. "The burden of government," Johnson brooded, "is increased upon princes by the virtues of their immediate predecessors," and he added: "He that succeeds a celebrated writer, has the same difficulties to encounter." We know the rancid humor of this too well, and any reader of *Advertisements For Myself* may enjoy the frantic dances of Mr. Norman Mailer as he strives to evade his own anxiety that it is, after all, Hemingway all the way. Or, less enjoyably, we can read through Roethke's *The Far Field* or Berryman's *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest,* and discover the field alas is too near to those of Whitman, Eliot, Stevens, Yeats, and the toy, dream, veritable rest are also the comforts of the same poets. Influence, for us, is the anxiety it was to Johnson and Hume, but the pathos lengthens as the dignity diminishes in this story.

Poetic Influence, as time has tarnished it, is part of the larger phenomenon of intellectual revisionism. And revisionism, whether in political theory, psychology, theology, law, poetics, has changed its nature in our time. The ancestor of revisionism is heresy, but heresy tended to change received doctrine by an alteration of balances, rather than by what could be called creative correction, the more particular

mark of modern revisionism. Heresy resulted, generally, from a change in emphasis, while revisionism follows received doctrine along to a certain point, and then deviates, insisting that a wrong direction was taken at just that point, and no other. Freud, contemplating his revisionists, murmured: "You have only to think of the strong emotional factors that make it hard for many people to fit themselves in with others or to subordinate themselves," but Freud was too tactful to analyze just those "strong emotional factors." Blake, happily free of such tact, remains the most profound and original theorist of revisionism to appear since the Enlightenment, and an inevitable aid in the development of a new theory of Poetic Influence. To be enslaved by any precursor's system, Blake says, is to be inhibited from creativity by an obsessive reasoning and comparing, presumably of one's own works to the precursor's. Poetic Influence is thus a disease of self-consciousness, but Blake was not released from his share in that anxiety. What plagued him, a litany of evils, came to him most powerfully in his vision of the greatest of his precursors:

> . . . the Male-Females, the Dragon Forms
> Religion hid in war, a Dragon red & hidden Harlot
> All these are seen in Milton's Shadow who is the
> Covering Cherub

We know, as Blake did, that Poetic Influence is gain and loss, inseparably wound in the labyrinth of history. What is the nature of the gain? Blake distinguished between States and Individuals. Individuals passed through States of Being, and remained Individuals, but States were always in process, always shifting. And only States were culpable, Individuals never. Poetic Influence is a passing of Individuals or Particulars through States. Like all revisionism, Poetic Influence is a gift of the spirit that comes to us only through what could be called, dispassionately, the perversity of the spirit, or what Blake more accurately judged the perversity of States.

It does happen that one poet influences another, or more precisely, that one poet's poems influence the poems of the other, through a generosity of the spirit, even a shared generosity. But our easy idealism is out of place here. Where generosity is involved, the poets influenced are minor or weaker; the more generosity, and the more mutual it is, the poorer the poets involved. And here also, the influencing moves by way of misapprehension, though this tends to be indeliberate and almost unconscious. I arrive at this argument's central principle, which is not more true for its outrageousness, but merely true enough:

Poetic Influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.

My own Idiot Questioner, happily curled up in the labyrinth of my own being, protests: "What is the use of such a principle, whether the argument it informs be true or not?" Is it useful to be told that poets are not common readers, and particularly are not critics, in the true sense of critics, common readers raised to the highest power? And what *is* Poetic Influence anyway? Can the study of it really be anything more than the wearisome industry of source-hunting, of allusion-counting, an industry that will soon touch apocalypse anyway when it passes from scholars to computers? Is there not the shibboleth bequeathed us by Eliot, that the good poet steals, while the poor poet betrays an influence, borrows a voice? And are there not all the great Idealists of literary criticism, the deniers of poetic influence, ranging from Emerson with his maxims: "Insist on yourself: never imitate" and "Not possibly will the soul deign to repeat itself" to the recent transformation of Northrop Frye into the Arnold of our day, with his insistence that the Myth of Concern prevents poets from suffering the anxieties of obligation? Against such idealism one cheerfully cites Lichtenberg's grand remark: "Yes, I too like to admire great men, but only those whose works I do not understand." Or again from Lichtenberg, who is one of the sages of Poetic Influence: "To do just the opposite is also a form of imitation, and the definitions of imitation ought by rights to include both." What Lichtenberg implies is that Poetic Influence is itself an oxymoron, and he is right. But then, so is Romantic Love an oxymoron, and Romantic Love is the closest analogue of poetic influence, another splendid perversity of the spirit, though it moves precisely in the opposite direction. The poet confronting his great original must find the fault that is not there, and at the heart of all but the highest imaginative virtue. The lover is beguiled to the heart of loss, but is found, as he finds, within mutual illusion, the poem that is not there. "When two people fall in love," says Kierkegaard, "and begin to feel that they are made for one another, then it is time for them to break off, for by going on they have everything to lose and nothing to gain." When the ephebe, or figure of the youth as virile poet, is found by his Great Original, then

it is time to go on, for he has everything to gain, and his precursor nothing to lose; if the fully written poets are indeed beyond loss.

But there is the state called Satan, and in that hardness poets must appropriate for themselves. For Satan is a pure or absolute consciousness of self compelled to have admitted its intimate alliance with opacity. The state of Satan is therefore a constant consciousness of dualism, of being trapped in the finite, not just in space (in the body) but in clock-time as well. To be pure spirit, yet to know in oneself the limit of opacity; to assert that one goes back before the Creation-Fall, yet be forced to yield to number, weight and measure; this is the situation of the strong poet, the capable imagination, when he confronts the universe of poetry, the words that were and will be, the terrible splendor of cultural heritage. In our time, the situation becomes more desperate even than it was in the Milton-haunted eighteenth century, or the Wordsworth-haunted nineteenth, and our current and future poets have only the consolation that no certain Titanic figure rose beyond Milton and Wordsworth, not even in Yeats or Stevens.

If one examines the dozen or so major poetic influencers, before this century's, one discovers quickly who among them ranks as the great Inhibitor, the Sphinx who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles: Milton. The motto to English poetry since Milton was stated by Keats: "Life to him would be Death to me." This deathly vitality in Milton is the state of Satan in him, and is shown us not so much by the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, as by Milton's editorializing relationship to his own Satan, and by his relation to all the stronger poets of the eighteenth century and to most of those in the nineteenth.

Milton is the central problem in any theory and history of poetic influence in English; perhaps more so even than Wordsworth, who is closer to us as he was to Keats, and who confronts us with everything that is most problematic in modern poetry, which is to say in ourselves. What unites this ruminative line—of which Milton is the ancestor; Wordsworth the great revisionist; Keats and Wallace Stevens, among others, the dependent heirs—is an honest acceptance of an actual dualism as opposed to the fierce desire to overcome all dualisms, a desire that dominates the visionary and prophetic line from the relative mildness of Spenser's temperament down through the various fiercenesses of Blake, Shelley, Browning, Whitman, and Yeats.

This is the authentic voice of the ruminative line, the poetry of loss, and the voice also of the strong poet accepting his task, rallying what remains:

> Farewell happy fields
> Where joy for ever dwells: Hail horrors, hail

> Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell
> Receive thy new Possessor: One who brings
> A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time,
> The mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.
> What matter where, if I be still the same . . . ?

To the C. S. Lewis, or Angelic, School, these lines represent moral idiocy, and are to be met with laughter, if we have remembered to start the day with our Good Morning's Hatred of Satan. If, however, we are not so morally sophisticated, we are likely to be very much moved by these lines. Not that Satan is not mistaken; of course he is. There is terrible pathos in his "if I be still the same," since he is not the same, and never will be again. But he knows it. He is adopting an heroic dualism, in this conscious farewell to Joy, a dualism upon which almost all post-Miltonic poetic influence in the language founds itself.

To Milton, all fallen experience had its inevitable foundation in loss, and paradise could be regained only by One Greater Man, and not by any poet whatsoever. Yet Milton's own Great Original, as he confessed to Dryden, was Spenser, who allows his Colin a poet's Paradise in Book VI of *The Faerie Queene.* Milton—as both Johnson and Hazlitt emphasize—was incapable of suffering the anxiety of influence, unlike all of his descendants. Johnson insisted that, of all the borrowers from Homer, Milton was the least indebted, adding: "He was naturally a thinker for himself, confident of his own abilities and disdainful of help or hindrance; he did not refuse admission to the thoughts or images of his predecessors, but he did not seek them." Hazlitt, in a lecture heard by Keats, and an influence upon Keats's subsequent notion of Negative Capability, remarked upon Milton's positive capability for ingesting his precursors: "In reading his works, we feel ourselves under the influence of a mighty intellect, that the nearer it approaches to others, becomes more distinct from them." What, then, we are compelled to inquire, did Milton mean by nominating Spenser as his Great Original? At least this: that in his Second Birth, Milton was re-born into Spenser's romance world, and also that when he replaced what he came to regard as the unitary illusion of Spenserian romance by an acceptance of an actual dualism as the pain of being, he retained his sense of Spenser as the sense of the Other, the dream of Otherness that all poets must dream. In departing from the unitary aspiration of his own youth Milton may be said to father the poetry that we call Post-Enlightenment or Romantic, the poetry that takes as its obsessive theme the power of the mind over

the universe of death, or as Wordsworth phrased it, to what extent the mind is lord and master, outward sense the servant of her will.

No modern poet is unitary, whatever his stated beliefs. They are necessarily miserable dualists, because this misery, this poverty is the starting-point of their art—Stevens speaks appropriately of the "profound poetry of the poor and of the dead." Poetry may or may not work out its own salvation in a man, but it comes only to those in dire imaginative need of it, though it may come then as terror. And this need is learned first through the young poet's or ephebe's experience of another poet, of the Other whose baleful greatness is enhanced by the ephebe's seeing him as a burning brightness against a framing darkness, rather as Blake's Bard of Experience sees the Tyger, or Job the Leviathan and Behemoth, or Ahab the White Whale or Ezekiel the Covering Cherub, for all these are visions of the Creation gone malevolent and entrapping, of a splendor menacing the Promethean Quester every ephebe is about to become.

For Collins, for Cowper, for many a Bard of Sensibility, Milton was the Tyger, the Covering Cherub blocking a new voice from entering the Poet's Paradise. The emblem of this discussion is the Covering Cherub. In Genesis he is God's Angel; in Ezekiel he is the Prince of Tyre; in Blake he is fallen Tharmas, and the Spectre of Milton; in Yeats he is the Spectre of Blake. In this discussion he is a poor demon of many names (as many names as there are strong poets), but I summon him first namelessly, as a final name is not yet devised by men for the anxiety that blocks their creativity. He is that something that makes men victims and not poets, a demon of discursiveness and shady continuities, a pseudo-exegete who makes writings into Scriptures. He cannot strangle the Imagination, for nothing can do that, and he in any case is too weak to strangle anything. The Covering Cherub may masquerade as the Sphinx (as the Spectre of Milton masqueraded, in the nightmares of Sensibility) but the Sphinx (whose works are mighty) must be a female (or at least a female male). The Cherub is male (or at least a male female). The Sphinx riddles and strangles and is self-shattered at last, but the Cherub only covers, he only appears to block the way, he cannot do more than conceal. But the Sphinx *is* in the way, and must be dislodged. The unriddler is in every strong poet when he sets out upon his quest. It is the high irony of poetic vocation that the strong poets can accomplish the greater yet fail the lesser task. They push aside the Sphinx (else they could not be poets, not for more than one volume) but they cannot uncover the Cherub. More ordinary men (and sometimes weaker poets) can uncover enough of the Cherub so as to live (if not quite to choose Per-

fection of the Life) but approach the Sphinx only at the risk of the throttled death.

For the Sphinx is natural, but the Cherub is closer to the Human. The Sphinx is sexual anxiety, but the Cherub is creative anxiety. The Sphinx is met upon the road back to origins, but the Cherub upon the road forward to possibility, if not to fulfillment. Good poets are powerful striders upon the way back—hence their profound joy as elegists, but only a few have opened themselves to vision. Uncovering the Cherub does not require power so much as it does persistence, remorselessness, constant wakefulness, for the blocking agent who obstructs creativity does not lapse into "stony sleep" as readily as the Sphinx does. Emerson thought that the poet unriddled the Sphinx by perceiving an identity in nature, or else yielded to the Sphinx if he was merely bombarded by diverse particulars he could never hope to integrate. The Sphinx, as Emerson saw, is nature and the riddle of our emergence from nature, which is to say that the Sphinx is what psychoanalysts have called the Primal Scene. But what is the Primal Scene, for a poet *as poet?* It is his Poetic Father's coitus with the Muse. There he was begotten? No—there they failed to beget him. He must be self-begotten, he must engender himself upon the Muse his mother. But the Muse is as pernicious as Sphinx or Covering Cherub, and may identify herself with either, though more usually with the Sphinx. So the strong poet fails to beget himself—he must wait for his Son, who will define him even as he has defined his own Poetic Father. To beget here means to usurp, and is the dialectical labor of the Cherub. Entering here into the center of our contest, we must look clearly at him.

What does the Cherub cover, in Genesis? in Ezekiel? in Blake? Genesis 3:24—"So He drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every which way, to keep the way to the tree of life." The rabbis took the cherubim here to symbolize the terror of God's *presence*; to Rashi they were "Angels of destruction." Ezekiel 28: 14-16 gives us an even fiercer text:

> Thou wast the far-covering [mimshach—"far-extending," according to Rashi] cherub; and I set thee, so that thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of the fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till unrighteousness was found in thee. By the multitude of thy traffic they filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou hast sinned; therefore have I cast thee as profane out of the mountain of God; and I will destroy you, O Covering Cherub, in the midst of the stones of the fire.

Here God denounces the Prince of Tyre, who is a cherub because the cherubim in the tabernacle and in Solomon's Temple spread their wings over the ark, and so protected it, even as the Prince of Tyre once protected Eden, the garden of God. Blake is a still fiercer prophet against the Covering Cherub. To Blake, Voltaire and Rousseau were Vala's Covering Cherubim, Vala being the illusory beauty of the natural world, and the prophets of naturalistic enlightenment being her servitors. In Blake's "brief epic," called *Milton*, the Covering Cherub stands between the achieved Man who is at once Milton, Blake and Los, and the emanation or beloved. In Blake's *Jerusalem* the Cherub stands as blocking agent between Blake-Los and Jesus. The answer to what the Cherub covers is therefore: in Blake, everything that nature itself covers; in Ezekiel, the richness of the earth, but by the Blakean paradox of *appearing to be those riches*; in Genesis, the Eastern Gate, the Way to the Tree of Life.

The Covering Cherub separates then? No—he has no power to do so. Poetic Influence is not a separation but a victimization—it is a destruction of desire. The emblem of Poetic Influence is the Covering Cherub because the Cherub symbolizes what came to be the Cartesian category of *extensiveness*—hence it is described as *mimshach*—"far extending." It is not accidental that Descartes and his fellows and disciples are the ultimate enemies of poetic vision in the Romantic tradition, for the Cartesian *extensiveness* is the root-category of modern (as opposed to Pauline) dualism, to the dumbfoundering abyss between ourselves and the object. Descartes saw objects as localized space; the irony of Romantic vision is that it rebelled against Descartes, but except in Blake did not go far enough—Wordsworth and Freud alike remain Cartesian dualists, for whom the present is a precipitated past, and nature a continuum of localized spaces. These Cartesian reductions of time and space brought upon us the further blight of the negative aspect of poetic influence, of *influenza* in the realm of literature, as the influx of an epidemic of anxiety. Instead of the radiation of an aetherial fluid we received the poetic flowing in of an occult power exercised by humans, rather than stars upon humans; "occult" because invisible and insensible. Cut mind as *intensiveness* off from the outer world as *extensiveness*, and mind will learn—as never before—its own solitude. The solitary brooder moves to deny its sonship and its brotherhood, even as Blake's Urizen, a satire upon Cartesian *Genius,* is the archetype of the Strong Poet afflicted by the anxiety of influence. If there are two disjunctive worlds—one a huge, mathematical machine extended in space, and the other made up of unextended, thinking spirits, then we will start locating our anxieties

back along that continuum extended into the past, and our vision of the Other will become magnified when he is placed in the past.

The Covering Cherub then is a demon of continuity; his baleful charm imprisons the present in the past, and reduces a world of differences into a grayness of uniformity. The identity of past and present is at one with the essential identity of all objects. This is Milton's "universe of death" and with it poetry cannot live, for poetry must leap, it must locate itself in a discontinuous universe, and it must make that universe (as Blake did) if it cannot find one. Discontinuity is freedom, a revolt against homogeneity. Prophets and advanced analysts alike proclaim discontinuity; here Shelley and the phenomenologists are in agreement: "To predict, to really foretell, is still a gift of those who own the future in the full unrestricted sense of the word, the sense of what is coming toward us, and not of what is the result of the past." That is J. H. Van den Berg in his *Metabletica*. In Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*, which Yeats rightly considered the most profound discourse upon poetry in the language, the prophetic voice trumpets the same freedom: "Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present."

"He proves God by exhaustion" is Samuel Beckett's own note on a crucial passage in his poem, *Whoroscope*, a dramatic monologue spoken by Descartes:

> No matter, let it pass.
> I'm a bold boy I know
> So I'm not my son
> (even if I were a concierge)
> nor Joachim my father's
> but the chip of a perfect block that's neither old nor new,
> the lonely petal of a great high bright rose.

Any poet would want to claim at least as much for himself, despite Descartes. The triumph of Descartes came in a literal vision, not necessarily friendly to imaginations other than his own. The protests against Cartesian reductiveness never cease, in constant involuntary tribute to him. Beckett's fine handful of poems in English are too subtle to protest overtly, but they are strong prayers for discontinuity:

> what would I do without this world faceless incurious
> where to be lasts but an instant where every instant
> spills in the void the ignorance of having been
> without this wave where in the end

body and shadow together are engulfed
what would I do without this silence where the murmurs die

Yet there is no overt Cartesian prejudice against poets, no analogue to the Platonic polemic against their authority. Descartes, in his *Private Thoughts*, could even write: "It might seem strange that opinions of weight are found in the works of poets rather than philosophers. The reason is that poets wrote through enthusiasm and imagination; there are in us seeds of knowledge, as of fire in a flint; philosophers extract them by way of reason, but poets strike them out by imagination, and then they shine more bright." The Cartesian myth or abyss of consciousness nevertheless took the fire from the flint, and trapped poets in what Blake grimly called a "cloven fiction," with the alternatives, both anti-poetic, of Idealism and Materialism. Philosophy, in cleansing itself, has rinsed away this great dualism, but the whole of the giant line from Milton down to Yeats and Stevens had only their own tradition, Poetic Influence, to tell them that "both Idealism and Materialism are answers to an improper question." Yeats and Stevens, as much as Descartes (or Wordsworth), labored to see with the mind and not with the bodily eye alone; Blake, the one genuine anti-Cartesian, found that too a cloven Fiction, and satirized the Cartesian Dioptrics by opposing his Vortex to that of the Mechanist. That the Mechanism had its desperate nobility we grant now; Descartes wished to save the phenomena by his myth of *extensiveness*. A body took definite shape, moved within a fixed area, and was divided within that area; and thus maintained an integrity in its strictly limited becoming. This established the world or manifold of sensation *given* to the poets, and from it the Wordsworthian vision could begin, rising from this confinement to the enforced ecstacy of the further reduction Wordsworth chose to call Imagination. The manifold of sensation in *Tintern Abbey* initially is further isolated, and then dissolved into a fluid continuum, with the edges of things, the fixities and definites, fading out into a "higher" apprehension. Blake's protest against Wordsworthianism, the more effective for its praise of Wordsworth's poetry, is founded on his horror of this enforced illusion, this ecstasy that is a reduction. In the Cartesian theory of vortices all motion had to be circular (there being no vacuum for matter to move through) and all matter had to be capable of further reduction (there were thus no atoms). These, to Blake, were the circlings of the Mills of Satan, grinding on vainly in their impossible task of reducing the Minute Particulars, the Atoms of Vision that will not further divide. In the Blakean theory of vortices, circular motion is a self-contradiction; when the poet stands at the apex of his own

Vortex the Cartesian-Newtonian circles resolve into the flat plain of Vision, and the Particulars stand forth, each as itself, and not another thing. For Blake does not wish to save the phenomena, anymore than he joins the long program of those who seek "to save the appearances," in the sense that Owen Barfield (taking the phrase from Milton) has traced. Blake is the theorist of the saving or revisionary aspect of Poetic Influence, of the impulse that attempts to cast out the Covering Cherub into the midst of the stones of the fire.

French visionaries, because so close to the spell of Descartes, to the Cartesian Siren, have worked in a different spirit, in the high and serious humor, the apocalyptic irony, that culminates in the work of Jarry and his disciples. The study of Poetic Influence is necessarily a branch of 'Pataphysics, and gladly confesses its indebtedness to ". . . *the* Science, of Imaginary Solutions." As Blake's Los, under the influence of Urizen, the master Cartesian, comes crashing down in our Creation-Fall, he *swerves*, and this parody of the Lucretian *clinamen*, this change from destiny to slight caprice, is, with final irony, *all* the individuality of Urizenic creation, of Cartesian vision as such. The *clinamen* or swerve, which is the Urizenic equivalent of the hapless errors of re-creation made by the Platonic demiurge, is necessarily the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, for what divides each poet from his Poetic Father (and so saves, by division) is an instance of creative revisionism. We must understand that the *clinamen* stems always from a 'Pataphysical sense of the arbitrary. The poet so stations his precursor, so swerves his context, that the visionary objects, with their higher intensity, fade into the continuum. The poet has, in regard to the precursor's heterocosm, a shuddering sense of the arbitrary, of the equality, or equal haphazardness, of all objects. This sense is *not reductive*, for it is the continuum, the stationing context, that is reseen, and shaped into the visionary; it is brought up to the intensity of the crucial objects, which then "fade" into it, in a manner opposite to the Wordsworthian "fade into the light of common day." 'Pataphysics proves to be truly accurate; in the world of poets all regularities are indeed "regular exceptions"; the *recurrence* of vision is itself a law governing exceptions. If every act of vision determines a particular law, then the basis for the splendidly horrible paradox of poetic influence is securely founded; the new poet *himself* determines the precursor's *particular* law. If a creative interpretation is thus necessarily a misinterpretation, we must accept this apparent absurdity. It is absurdity of the highest mode, the apocalyptic absurdity of Jarry, or of Blake's entire enterprise.

Let us make then the dialectical leap: most so-called "accurate" interpretations of poetry are worse than mistakes; perhaps there are only more or less creative or interesting mis-readings, for is not every reading necessarily a *clinamen*? Should we not therefore, in this spirit, attempt to renew the study of poetry by returning yet again to fundamentals? No poem has sources, and no poem merely alludes to another. Poems are written by men, and not by anonymous Splendors. The stronger the man, the larger his resentments, and the more brazen his *clinamen*. But at what price, as readers, are we to forfeit our own *clinamen*?

I propose, not another new poetics, but a wholly different practical criticism. Let us give up the fated but failed enterprise of seeking to "understand" any single poem as an entity in itself. Let us pursue instead the quest of learning to read any poem as its poet's deliberate misinterpretation, *as a poet*, of a precursor poem or of poetry in general. Know each poem by its *clinamen* and you will "know" that poem in a way that will not purchase knowledge by the loss of the poem's power. I say this in the spirit of Pater's rejection of Coleridge's famous organic analogue. Pater felt that Coleridge (however involuntarily) slighted the poet's pain and suffering in achieving his poem, sorrows at least partly dependent upon the anxiety of influence, and sorrows not separate from the poem's meaning.

Borges, commenting on Pascal's Sublime and terrifying sense of his Fearful Sphere, contrasts Pascal to Bruno, who in 1584 could still react with exultation to the Copernican Revolution. By seventy years later, senescence sets in—Donne, Milton, Glanvill see decay where Bruno saw only joy in the advance of thought. As Borges sums it, "In that dispirited century, the absolute space which had inspired the hexameters of Lucretius, the absolute space which had meant liberation to Bruno, became a labyrinth and an abyss for Pascal." Borges does not lament the change, for Pascal too achieves the Sublime. But strong *poets*, unlike Pascal, do not exist to accept griefs; they cannot rest with purchasing the Sublime at so high a price. Like Lucretius himself, they opt for *clinamen* as freedom. Here is Lucretius:

> When the atoms are travelling straight down through empty space by their own weight, at quite indeterminate times and places they *swerve* ever so little from their course, just so much that you can call it a change of direction. If it were not for this swerve, everything would fall downwards like rain-drops through the abyss of space. No collision would take place and no impact of atom on atom would be created. Thus nature would never have created anything. . . .

But the fact that the mind itself has no internal necessity to determine its every act and compel it to suffer in helpless passivity—this is due to the slight swerve of the atoms at no determinate time or place.

Contemplating the *clinamen* of Lucretius, we can see the final irony of Poetic Influence, and come full circle to end where we began. This *clinamen* between the strong poet and the Poetic Father is made by the whole being of the later poet, and the true history of modern poetry would be the accurate recording of these revisionary swerves. To the pure 'Pataphysician, the swerve is marvelously gratuitous; Jarry, after all, was capable of considering the Passion as an Uphill Bicycle Race. The student of Poetic Influence is compelled to be an impure 'Pataphysician; he must understand that the *clinamen* always must be considered as though it were simultaneously intentional and involuntary, the Spiritual Form of each poet *and* the gratuitous gesture each poet makes as his falling body hits the floor of the abyss. Poetic Influence is the passing of Individuals through States, in Blake's language, but the passing is done ill when it is not a swerving. The strong poet indeed says: "I seem to have stopped falling; now I *am fallen*, consequently, I lie here in Hell," but he is thinking, as he says this, "As I fell, *I swerved*, consequently I lie here in a Hell improved by my own making."

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