

Eating Their Words: Literary Influence II

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the words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living

—W. H. Auden, 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats'

In an essay entitled 'Literary Influence: A Rule of Thumb?' in the last number of *Arts*, I argued that past or extant literature accounts for a good deal of the meaning of any work of literary art and that legitimate issues and critical instances of literary influence were being threatened by theories that reduce both literature and experience to an indiscriminate or 'hard intertextuality'.¹ It is more generally to what I there call 'soft intertextuality' that I would like to turn in this second essay; specifically, to the ceaseless, often impatient rewriting of past literature that, so characteristic of literary evolution, explains why critical understanding is predicated on a knowledge of literature.

I

'Each new historical era', as George Steiner has said, 'mirrors itself in the picture and active mythology of its past':

It tests its sense of identity, of regress or new achievement, against the past. The echoes by which a society seeks to determine the reach, the logic and authority of its own voice, come from the past. Evidently, the mechanisms at work are complex and rooted in diffuse but vital needs of continuity. A society requires antecedents.²

So with literature: for literature, too, requires antecedents or 'ancestral voices', and literature, too, will invent them where it cannot find them. It is not what a writer may have said or meant that exerts an

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influence, moreover, but what he or she is believed to have said or meant. From the point of view of interpretation, then, the task is to determine how a writer or culture creatively misperceives or *misreads* his or her predecessors, just as it is important in understanding a people to know, not their history alone (if that were possible), but the formative myths of that history.

A term like 'misreading' loses its accuracy and point, however, when we realise that what it describes is ubiquitous and in fact inevitable. A manifold of social, historical, and linguistic contingencies is available to explain the misapprehension of a previous work or writer. What concern us are rather the expressive exigencies or motives that explain the wilful (mis)adaptation of past literature on the part of the poet, for which the term 'revision' is more appropriate: at once a seeing again and differently; a reinterpretation and a re-writing. It is all these things and more for Adrienne Rich, for example, in an essay suggestively entitled 'When We Dead Awaken': 'Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new ... direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival'.³

With varying degrees of violence and varying degrees of self-consciousness, then, the poet revises his or her inheritance as part of a creative quest for what F. R. Leavis aptly terms the 'realization of unlikeness'.⁴ To illustrate this we need only cite an abundance of literary forms which relate directly to a previous work or to previous works of art: forms of *address*, for example (Auden's *Letter to Lord Byron*); of *confrontation* (Blake's *Milton*); of *controversion* (Raleigh's nymph's reply to Marlowe's 'A passionate shepherd to his love'); of *praise* (Keats's 'On First Looking in to Chapman's Homer'); of *attack* (Shelley's *Peter Bell the Third*); of *digression* (Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*); of *continuation* (Kazantzakis's *The Odyssey*); of *extension* (Tennyson's 'Ulysses'); of *modernisation* (Walcott's *Omeros*); of radical *perspective change* (Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*); and so on.

Categories overlap, of course; the degree of familiarity with the original required for understanding and interpretation varies enormously. But *that* they relate is incontestable, and in my brief and inconclusive taxonomy I have limited myself to works whose titles indicate or enforce recognition of some relationship. It soon

becomes apparent in George Steiner's study of *Antigones*—a selection of the innumerable versions 'after Sophocles' of a *mythos* that not even Sophocles would claim to have originated⁵—that any powerful *mythos* will spawn variations over time and space like a herring. Joyce's *Ulysses*, on the other hand, offers examples of all the contingencies or 'revisionary ratios' that I have listed and many more. Rewriting *The Odyssey* more than two and a half thousand years later, Joyce would also re-interpret and rewrite all major European literature *since* Homer. It is brilliant, encyclopædic, and—most important for our purposes—utterly meaningless outside a massive and identifiable body or tradition of literature which (to quote T. S. Eliot) 'has a simultaneous existence and imposes a simultaneous order'.

Most examples of manipulation and revision are more local in their expressive or virtuoso effects. A stanza form or rhyme scheme will be used to invoke a predecessor (Dante's *terza rima*; the Shakespearean sonnet or Spenserian stanza; the heroic couplet that Pope made his own). A figure of speech or thought; a *motif*; an image; even a word only or usually associated with a particular poet—each can be used as a signature, whether in praise or parody or both. Homer's 'wine-dark sea' will survive as long at least as literary culture survives, perhaps as long as Helen and the Trojan horse, Circe and Ulysses. It is true that any one of these local, rhetorical or prosodic effects adopted and adapted from an extensive common fund of traditional practice may find its significance 'effaced' by being 'automatized' (as the Russian formalists would have it).⁶ More often than not, however, it will be a signal and signifying part of the poem as an intentional form; it is precisely by revisionary acts of this kind that a poet's characteristic 'way'—his or her *own* signature—is forged.

Indeed, readers of the last issue will recall my suggesting that for the high Romantic though contemporary critic Harold Bloom the central and unifying theme of poetry—and not just of its history, but also of every poem—is an anxiety-driven process of self-definition and 'self-origination' in the face of a single, intimidating precursor. In Bloom's theory, literary influence becomes an heroic *psychomachia* or 'battle for the soul or mind' in which the young poet struggles manfully to disarm and emasculate his poet-precursor

in order to establish his own individuality—an individuality achievable only by those whom Bloom honours as ‘strong’ poets:

Poetic history ... is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves.

My concern is only with strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to death. Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves.⁷

In Bloom’s Freudian, masculinist theory, Œdipal conflict comes to resemble nothing so much as a B-grade gladiator movie of the 1960s.

For the moment, however, it matters little whether the poet seeks self-definition against one or more select precursors or (as in the case of T. S. Eliot) against an abstract, prevailing ‘history’ or Tradition.⁸ It is enough to recognise that, in spite of the tendency of traditions generally to reproduce themselves, modifications and occasionally quite radical ‘sea-changes’ to the literary tradition are constantly effected by willed intervention. From the Classical world until the mid-eighteenth century, this combination of reproduction and modification so central to Western artistic theory and practice went by the name of *imitatio* or textual imitation and represented an act at once of homage and of aspiration. A paradigm and a part at least of all poetic influence, *imitatio* actively articulates the paradox of dependence *and* autonomy used to characterise the work of art at least since Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

That *imitatio* should remain so rarely invoked and considered today is due, in the first instance, to the blind authority that it so frequently conferred upon past literature. A wealth of critical commentary may be cited to prove that Classical and neoClassical theory prescribed a servility in imitation that bordered on self-effacement. Which, incidentally, anticipates the second reason I would offer for its neglect: the context in which it occurred was almost invariably prescriptive rather than descriptive. And yet, for all the fact that the best that was known and thought *and written* in the world was established as an unrelentingly onerous Ideal, authors were still expected to defer to the exigencies of their own time and

place—even to some extent to the exigencies of their own personal vision. Anachronistic though this last criterion must sound, Romantic and post-Romantic artists were not the first to labour under an obligation to ‘make it new’. In the iteration beyond simple repetition, some element of reinterpretation and often improvement of the ‘original’ has always been required.

Imitatio was never an exclusively textual or intertextual phenomenon for the Classical and neoClassical writers, any more than is literary revision generally, of which *imitatio* is a synecdoche. From each emerges a statement about the nature of human experience and human knowledge, both in general and in particular. By imitating the tenth satire of Juvenal in his *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, for example, Samuel Johnson not only arrogated to himself Juvenal’s moral authority, he also stressed the universality of that vanity. The identification with Juvenal *over time* implied by the very act of imitation is then reinforced by a correlative identification *across space* in the geography of the opening lines:

Let Observation with extensive view,
Survey Mankind from China to Peru;
Remark each anxious toil, each eager strife,
And watch the busy scenes of crowded life;

(ll. 1–4)

But Johnson also expresses his own acute and highly personal sense of that vanity in a *cri de cœur* that survives the public form, the obsessive order and regularity, the magisterial tone and patronising attitude. Characterising that personal sense is not easy precisely because formal attributes act also as formal defences, but Johnson’s own frustration and self-contempt are never far away from the remorselessness of his nominally satiric vision of life as hell. Putting it another way, Johnson’s idiosyncratic humanity echoes within the anti-humanity (misanthropy) of the poem’s satire. Ultimately, moreover, it is not ‘fate’ or human fallibility that defeats life in *The Vanity of Human Wishes* so much as death itself; nor, correspondingly, is it a disgust for vice and folly that defeats Johnson so much as a fear of decay and death. The thought an old age even ‘*exempt* from scorn or crime’ (the traditional concern of the satirist) is a source of barely surmountable anxiety:

Year chases year, decay pursues decay,
Still drops some joy from withering life away;
New forms arise, and different views engage,
Superfluous lags the veteran on the stage ...
In life's last scene what prodigies surprise,
Fears of the brave, and follies of the wise!
From Marlborough's eyes the streams of dotage flow,
And Swift expires a driveller, and a show.

(ll. 305–6)

Thus the horror at the heart of Johnson's darkness is not, finally, moral: it is existential and it is deeply personal. And this, of course, in spite of the Juvenalian original.

No doubt that for Johnson, of the two responsibilities inherent in textual imitation—one to the shared general and the other to the idiosyncratic particular—the poet's responsibility to the former or general would have predominated. For Robert Lowell, on the other hand, in a comparatively recent exercise in the form, the emphasis predictably falls on the personal; Lowell insists in his introduction to *Imitations* that the book is 'partly self-sufficient and separate from its sources, and should be read first as a sequence, one voice running through many personalities, contrasts and repetitions'.⁹ Still, it is only 'partly' so, and imitation is again seen as the integration of two priorities—'the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects', in Coleridge's famous formula for creative experience.¹⁰ Only in theory could one possibly be expected to choose between A and B when more often than not only the combination of A and B, however paradoxical or *apparently* contradictory, will keep faith with the complexity of collective and individual experience and aspiration.

II

'Revision' can thus be construed as a form of *imitatio* with the emphasis redistributed in favour of Coleridge's 'novelty and freshness'. Having said that, however, it would be wrong not to

recognise that, by comparison with the straightforward if delicate balance of past and present attempted in the act of *imitatio*, revision or revisionary manoeuvres are frequently highly sophisticated and highly self-conscious.

Which is not for one moment to suggest they are confined to recent literary theory and practice; Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, offers as sophisticated a re-vision of historical and literary myth as any dreamt of in our philosophy. Coleridge (and I agree with him) was half-inclined to believe that Shakespeare's 'main object' in the play was 'to substantiate the distinct and graceful profiles of the Homeric epic into the flesh and blood of the romantic drama'.¹¹ Coleridge's evidence comes from the characters themselves, who habitually speculate about their own destined metamorphosis into literature and myth:

Troilus ... after all comparisons of truth,
As truth's authentic author to be cited,
'As true as Troilus' shall crown up the verse,
And sanctify the numbers.

Cressida Prophet may you be!
If I be false, or swerve a hair from truth,
When time is old and hath forgot itself,
When waterdrops have worn the stones of Troy,
And blind oblivion swallow'd cities up,
And mighty states characterless are grated
To dusty nothing, yet let memory,
From false to false, among false maids in love,
Upbraid my falsehood when they've said 'as false
As air, as water, wind or sandy earth,
As fox to lamb, as wolf to heifer's calf,
Pard to the hind or stepdame to her son',
'Yea', let them say, to stick the heart of falsehood,
'As false as Cressid'.

(III, iii, 187 ff.)

The play requires a curious triple focus, as we in the present look back on Shakespeare, who in turn makes 'flesh and blood' out of the mythical 'profiles' of characters from the past, who in turn anticipate their own 'future' metamorphosis *out of* 'flesh and blood' and *into* those mythical profiles ('pandar', for example). Yet the same

complexity is entirely characteristic of Shakespeare's incursions into myth and history and presents few inhibitions, if any, to the play as theatre.

The anti-heroic domestication—what Coleridge calls 'substantiation'—of mythical 'profiles' is a practice common enough in Western literature to form, by itself, a sub-genre of the mock-heroic:

Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife,
He would have written sonnets all his life?

—Byron, *Don Juan*, III, 8.

Tennyson's early poem 'Ulysses' has a complexity of its own in this context, for the ageing Ulysses who is the speaker of the poem *resists* this domestication—resists being brought into the world of ordinary mortals; resists his own 'substantiation' and the substantiation of his own heroic myth:

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole
Unequal laws unto a savage race,
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

(ll. 1–5)

Chafing at the bit, he is unable to survive the Viconian transition into the politic, 'modern' world governed by his son Telemachus:

centred in the sphere
Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet adoration to my household gods

(ll. 39–42)

In the same 'modern' world, heroic poetry has itself become either untenable or an antiquarian exercise, yet Tennyson's no less than Ulysses' fascination with the heroic ethos is everywhere apparent in the blank verse of the superannuated hero:

'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds

To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,—
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield

(ll. 57–70).

Thus both Ulysses the character and Tennyson the poet betray a deep nostalgia, though Tennyson shares with the reader a 'modern' self-irony that is unavailable to the Ulysses of the poem and is its own type of heroism.

Three things make 'Ulysses' particularly relevant to this essay. First and foremost, it exemplifies the constant revision characteristic of literary evolution, as works feed off the tradition which they inherit and which they subsequently modify. Second, it expresses a poet's consciousness of his contemporaneity, and of what is possible and what exigent, artistically, in the period to which he or she belongs. (This is central to revisionism and confirms a relationship, however tenuous or oblique it may seem at times, between history itself and literary history.) Finally, Tennyson's 'Ulysses' looks forward to the ethically and spiritually impoverished world typically figured in the literature of this century; a world in which that impoverishment finds expression in arguments for the exhaustion of literary possibilities to which many commentators attribute the formal fragmentation and extreme literary self-consciousness of Modernism and much postmodernism.

III

'The words of a dead man', in the words of the dead man W. H. Auden, 'Are modified in the guts of the living'. The context of my epigraph is an elegy Auden wrote for his 'precursor', W. B. Yeats, which opens thus:

In Memory of W. B. Yeats
(d. Jan. 1939)

I

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
O all the instruments agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed: he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections;
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

Auden's choice of the elegy for reflections on poetry and the expression of his own anxieties and aspirations as a poet is conventional enough. It is less the significant form, therefore, than the metaphor of literary digestion itself in which we are interested, at least insofar as it offers both a descriptive paradigm and a specific example of poetic influence.

As an example of literary influence, Auden's lines allude to *Hamlet*: 'a king may go through the guts of a beggar' (IV. iii). The modification the king undergoes in the guts of a beggar is invoked as an analogy for the modification of a poet's words after his death,

in order to suggest an inevitable vulgarisation. The explicit or manifest 'discovery' of the poem is, if not of poetry's futility, then of its impotence: 'For poetry'—or so we are told later in the poem—'makes nothing happen'.

But does it really make nothing happen? Certainly the 'democracy of death' motif in Hamlet's lines suggests that *neither* poetry *nor* the king has any ultimate authority. Yet the play *Hamlet* has been 'ingested' by the European imagination, and the image implies sustenance for the living as well as the deformation and dissolution of a dead original. The last section of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' takes up the theme again, both explicitly and implicitly: explicitly in the words of the authoritative, public voice that the poet assumes; implicitly, in the echo of Blake's 'The Tiger' in the verse form:

Follow, poet, follow right,
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

— 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', ll. 54–65.

Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps and skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder and what art
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand and what dread feet?

— Blake, 'The Tiger', ll. 1–12

As we saw in the opening lines, Auden has already forged his 'fearful symmetry' between Yeats's dying body and the 'body' of Europe on the brink of war, using the metaphor of the body as microcosm so frequently employed by Blake. (And Blake, it should be remembered, was a favourite of Yeats.) Thus there is a mutual assimilation of the poet and poetry on the one hand, and the 'body politic' on the other; poetry is incorporated or 'transubstantiated'. The power of the creative Imagination—admittedly morally ambiguous, as in Blake's poem—drives and informs society, turning blight into 'the prolific', the dead into the living. As does eating. Words, like dead kings in beggar's bellies, bring forth.

It was by no means the first time that the assimilation and modification of one's literary predecessors—that revisionism, in short—had been cast as a cannibalistic ritual. Ben Jonson's striking 'recipe' for imitation in *Timber* was itself an imitation, for all the fact that it would be no more out of place in a history of table manners than an essay on literary influence. According to Jonson, a poet should imitate

Not, as a Creature, that swallowes, what it takes in, crude, raw, or indigested; but, that feedes with an Appetite, and hath a Stomacke to concoct, devide, and turne all into nourishment.¹²

Three hundred years later T. S. Eliot argued that poets 'need a digestion that can assimilate both Homer and Flaubert' (fetta and camembert?). As far as I can make out from various references in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the motivation or justification for cannibalism (putting aside hunger) was one of two things: either to preserve the dead, ensuring their immortality through a literal reincarnation, or to assimilate the prowess and courage of the antagonist one defeats in battle.¹³ Both are perfectly respectable reasons for imitating if not eating the literary predecessors one admires. There is little doubt that the ultimate motivation for the 'transubstantiation' of influence is a desire for creative incorporation.

Nor is there much doubt that, specific to the Christian tradition, the ultimate model or motif is the Eucharist.

IV

Of revision generally I have said that, while the accent falls either on the preservation of the *status quo* or on challenge and change, both are essential for meaning—in spite of the fact that the word itself stresses the *alterations* or *otherness* through which literature evolves. This assumption is shared by all theories of intertextuality or literary relationship. Though during self-consciously revolutionary periods like the Romantic, an original text or the tradition may be preserved at times by implication only, still the existence if not the integrity of that original object *is* maintained. Accepting that there are as many ways for the poet or the writer to revise the tradition which he or she inherits as there are examples of the kind I mentioned in the first paragraph, three separate forests of relations to traditional practice can be made out amid the myriad of trees: first, significant rejection, in which a recognised text or convention is explicitly and self-consciously refused; second, significant difference, in which the original is present though de-formed; third, significant silence, in which the original is remarkable by its absence.

Though paradoxical, this last can be extended to characterise all three revisionary manoeuvres, insofar as in each case the imaginative presence of an original text is invoked by its material absence. If the reader's *recognition* is a pre-requisite of allusive meaning, then the reader's *expectation*—in the last number I called it 'literary prejudice'—is a prerequisite of revisionary meaning. The revision can only be effected and appreciated in a context of conditioned anticipation. What 'signifies' powerfully in any revised version is the fact or manifestation of revision itself, and this is only possible because of a simultaneous awareness both of what *is* and of what *has been*. As Jacques Derrida has said (after Ferdinand de Saussure) of language, traces of what has been rejected inhere in what has been selected.¹⁴

To this 'bifocal' consciousness—the result of which being 'that meaning is not immediately *present* in a sign'¹⁵—we can with propriety apply Stephen Prickett's suggestive phrase for certain types

of religious experience: 'the paradox of disconfirmation'. Because 'the language of disconfirmation is, it seems, that of complete ambiguity', Prickett invokes an Empsonian principle by way of explanation and corroboration:

The mind can and often does 'carry over' one reading and try to relate it to the other possible alternatives . . . the effect of such overlappings of meanings is to increase the 'charge' of the passage—the sensation of multilayered meaning where the layers are not fully separable but in some sense dependent on one another.¹⁶

Without Prickett's 'carry over', the significance of the revision would be lost. Though difficult to characterise phenomenologically or define rhetorically, the experience of 'disconfirmation' is common enough and the concept even something of a commonplace—as the substantial agreement of such diverse talents as Ferdinand de Saussure, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, Hans Georg Gadamer, and Jacques Derrida suggests.

Significant Difference

A phrase like 'once below a time' from Dylan Thomas's poem *Fern Hill* offers as straightforward an example as possible of that form of revisionary manoeuvre I have called 'significant difference':

And *once below a time* I lordly had the trees and leaves
Trail with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the windfall light.

(ll. 7–9; my italics)

Even by itself, devoid of any significance by association or analogy, the phrase 'once below a time' denotes and conjures the child's qualified sense of timelessness and freedom, before and beneath that 'tragic' state of full and fallen consciousness of which time is a condition. But qualified that sense of timelessness most certainly is; heavily. 'A time' awaits—an *event*; a rite of passage—hovering *above* the child like a Damoclean sword.

When reading this passage, however, one is also inevitably and immediately aware of the fairy-tale phrase retained in a new construction obviously designed to disconfirm expectation. 'Once

upon a time' inheres in, or is 'carried over' into its revised version. Thus the breathless, lyric beauty and timelessness of the child's experience is charged with the peculiar ambiguity of fantasy, the really unreal. For Thomas to have written 'upon', however, would have meant the child's assuming too much power *over* time (with its suggestion of 'on top of'), translating the experience out of the mutable world in which, to quote Wordsworth, 'we find our happiness/Or not at all'. Strictly speaking, then, the meaning can be located in neither the phrase used nor the phrase invoked, but in the co-operation of the two—or (more fashionably) in the 'space' *between* the two, or *intertext*.

Significant Rejection

An 'explicit protest', on the other hand, will convey its self-conscious challenge either in its title, like some of the examples cited earlier, or by invoking its antagonist in a direct and unmistakable allusion. The references to *Paradise Lost* in Wordsworth's 'Prospectus to *The Recluse*', for example, leave us in no doubt whatever that his projected work aspires to being a disconfirmation and revision of Milton's epic, an aspiration carried by the attitude Wordsworth strikes in, and by means of, a grandiose blank verse that is quite strictly arrogant—arrogating to himself, amongst other things, Milton's prophetic responsibility:

On Man, on Nature, and on human Life
Thinking in solitude, from time to time
I find sweet passions traversing my soul
Like music: unto these, where'er I may
I would give utterance in numerous verse.
Of Truth, of Grandeur, Beauty, Love, and Hope;
Of joy in various commonalty spread;
Of th' individual mind that keeps its own
Inviolat retirement, and consists
With being limitless, the one great Life,
I sing; fit audience let me find though few.

Fit audience find though few! Thus prayd the Bard
Holiest of Men. Urania I shall need
Thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such

Descend to earth, or dwell in highest heaven.
 For I must tread on Shadowy ground, must [sink?]
 Deep, and ascend aloft, and [take in] worlds
 To which the Heaven of heavens is but a veil.
 All strength, all terror, single, or in bands
 That ever was put forth by personal Form
 Jehovah, with his thunder, and the choir
 Of shouting Angels, and th' empyreal thrones
 I pass them unalarm'd. The darkest pit
 Of the profoundest hell, night, chaos, death
 Nor aught of blinder vacancy scoop'd out
 By help of dreams, can breed such fear and awe
 As fall upon me often when I look
 Into my soul, into the soul of man
 My haunt, and the main region of my song.

—Wordsworth, 'The Prospectus to *The Recluse*', MS 1

The tone of the final lines of the passage modulates from an unWordsworthian (which is to say affected) insouciance—as Wordsworth, 'unalarm'd', passes the lower reaches of Milton's fictional universe—to a proud 'phenomenalism' that derives its dignity and reach largely from its supervision upon Milton's Judeo-Christian precedent.

Wordsworth would find himself subject to innumerable challenges of his own, of varying degrees of seriousness and talent. One by Shelley warrants a more than passing reference. What upset the second generation of Romantic poets—Byron, Shelley, and to some extent Keats—was the contrast between Wordsworth's earlier beliefs and poetic experiments of the 1790s and his later political conservatism, which they interpreted as a form of apostasy or betrayal. Shelley made his formal complaint in the sonnet 'To Wordsworth':

POET of Nature, thou hast wept to know
 That things depart which never may return:
 Childhood and youth, friendship and love's first glow,
 Have fled like sweet dreams, leaving thee to mourn.
 These common woes I feel. One loss is mine
 Which thou too feel'st, yet I alone deplore.
 Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
 On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
 Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood

Above the blind and battling multitude:
In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty, —
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be.

In one sense the poem is more forgiving than the poet. By picking up the elegiac note of, as well as specific phrases from, Wordsworth's greatest lyrics, Shelley not only regrets and criticises Wordsworth for turning his back on his youthful ideals, but he also unwittingly suggests that Wordsworth's loss of those ideals was somehow inevitable—as inevitable as the loss of childhood vision in Wordsworth's *Ode. Intimations of Immortality*:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn whereso'er I may,
By night or day,
The things that I have seen I now can see no more.

(ll. 1–9)

Shelley is at every point using Wordsworth's own poetry against Wordsworth himself. The sonnet 'To Wordsworth' is a clever composite of words and expressions from that poetry. A serious parody of the simple dignity of the best of Wordsworth's public sonnets, 'To Wordsworth' alludes often to those sonnets—as well as to the 'Lucy' poems, the *Ode. Intimations of Immortality*, *Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Painting of Peele Castle in a Storm* and, beyond, to Milton and to Shakespeare. It is worth looking at more of these echoes, if only to observe how intimately Shelley knew his Wordsworth (thus, incidentally, proving the love for Wordsworth that he implicitly claims and earning the right to deplore Wordsworth's betrayal).

Like Wordsworth in *Elegiac Stanzas*, for example, Shelley, too, mourns (*deplores*) the loss of a 'brother', of *fraternité*, in conditions of ideological turbulence figured as a storm at sea:

Then, Beaumont, Friend! who would have been the Friend,
If he had lived, of Him whom I deplore,
This Work of thine I blame not, but commend;
This sea in anger, and the dismal shore.

Oh 'tis a passionate Work!—yet wise and well;
Well chosen is the spirit that is here;
That Hulk which labours in the deadly swell,
This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear!

And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,
I love to see the look with which it braves,
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,
The light'ning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.

Farewell, farewell the Heart that lives alone,
Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
Such happiness, wherever it be known,
Is to be pitied; for tis surely blind.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here.—
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn

— *Elegiac Stanzas*, ll. 41–60.

Let us now trace Shelley's images of the star and boat to two vital sources. The first—'London, 1802'—is one of those public sonnets of Wordsworth's that I mentioned, significantly addressed to Milton:

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,

In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

If a single 'source' were required for Shelley's sonnet, this would be it, and Shelley's own would be a tendentious re-writing designed to hoist Wordsworth on his own petard. But in Shelley's

Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
Thou hast like to a rock-built refuge stood

there is also a no less significant echo of the 'star' and 'bark' of Shakespeare's sonnet 116, a poem about fidelity to Love; to an ideal (and by intriguing accident, addressed by one male to another, superior and beloved):

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments: love is not love
Which alters where it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
Oh no! *it is an ever-fixèd mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark
Whose worth's unknown although his height be taken*

(ll. 1–8)

What, then, does it amount to? Wordsworth, back to Milton, thence to Shakespeare: here were the ever-fixèd marks of the canon of English literature—the stars of its constellation—at least as Shelley and many other poets of the Romantic period conceived it. Or, rather, that is the promise here being held out to Wordsworth, as is the threat that he may have sacrificed that ascendancy along with his independence.

Next to the elaborate and self-defensive asides of modern poetry, and to the self-generated subtleties and obliquities of modern theory, a direct challenge such as the challenge to Milton amongst the Romantics has a refreshing lack of equivocation and (*pace* Bloom) anxiety. There is a candour about their revisionary drive—a candour too, or perhaps especially, in the very different type of impudence

and iconoclasm that we find in (say) Byron and Blake. (Most of Blake's work challenges one inherited code or conventional wisdom after another, from his famous characterisation of Milton as 'of the devil's party without knowing it' in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to the 'disrespectful deformations' of the later prophetic books.) And there was respect inherent in the unashamed ambitiousness of their individual efforts: 'The Prospectus', *Milton*, *Prometheus Unbound*, the *Hyperion* poems, *Don Juan*.

The direct revisionary challenge is frequently carried out with the impudence characteristic of Blake and Byron. There is the impudence of Donne, for example, flying in the face of convention generally: of Petrarchanism, as of related neoPlatonic pretensions. The impudence of the mock-heroic and the satiric found its greatest expression in Pope. In the face of aspiration and of the affectation of heroism and idealism, what an impudent author often flew was an extremely *literary* awareness. Little wonder, then, that the reputation of the parodic, mock-heroic, and satirical; of the sceptical and even the cynical has risen in a period of extreme literary self-consciousness like the present one. Little wonder, also, that in the reshuffling of the hierarchy effected by theory after and including Russian Formalism, that an ingenious, impudent, and independent writer like Sterne should have undergone a renaissance. (Though in the previous century Sterne was more highly esteemed by the European, specifically Russian writers than he was by their English counterparts so it was hardly a case of his being exhumed by the Formalists.)¹⁷

I raise what might be called the 'anti-genres' as unequivocal examples of the perennial impulse to revise and to disconfirm, even to subvert conventions or traditions. One caveat and one qualification are in order, however. The first is that 'anti-genres' very quickly become genres in their own right. In this sense, tradition is augmented rather than threatened, as Eliot claimed it should be. The qualification is that the issue seems strictly not to be one of literary *history* at all—of influence over time, that is—for often the two, nominally opposed genres are born into the same brood, just as Homer was thought to have written the mock-heroic *Margites*. The two genres or conventions here are cognate and co-terminous, and may represent rather two 'contrary states of the human soul' than an attempt to revise an extant tradition in or across time.

Another point about the 'anti-genre' is that it has too often encouraged the arithmetical tendencies of more 'scientific' critical practitioners. Because in the abstract there is what appears to be a mutual exclusiveness about two opposed genres like the heroic and the mock-heroic, a methodology using counters and counting, positive and negative signs, codes and decoding appears justified. Indeed some critics, like Michael Riffaterre, will only allow significance to a *difference* that amounts to a 'total inversion': 'replacement of plus by minus—without the reader's being allowed to grow confused and forget the positive original'.¹⁸

Riffaterre seems to have in mind the rhetorical device of *antiphrasis* writ large, citing the example of Rimbaud's *contreblason* of Venus rising from a bath tub of fetid water with a tattoo across her *derrière* and an anal ulcer. Nothing, it would appear, could be more diametrically opposed to the standard myth of the goddess of love rising from the ocean—to Botticelli's modest neoPlatonic virgin, for example. The truth is, however, that Venus has had a dual, indeed a multiple nature from the beginning. (How could Love ever have offered a mathematical simplicity?) While admittedly a long way from Rimbaud's disease-ridden whore, Shakespeare's Venus in his *Venus and Adonis*, for example, is sweaty and overwhelming in spite of white lilies and snow, ivory and alabaster, and all the other, often ironic imagistic variations on purity. There are no 'total inversions' in literature, though negations might be as systematically deployed as in Shakespeare's sonnet, 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun'. Donne's 'The Sun Rising' is both more complex and less mechanical than simply an 'inverted' *aubade*; Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* than an 'inverted' novel or memoir; Beckett's plays than 'inverted' drama. Literature will no more be constrained into such tidy oppositions as 'plus' and 'minus' than will people.

Significant Silence

Finally, what do I mean by significant silence? In his introductory survey on *Studying Literature*, G. A. Wilkes chooses to circumvent the contemporary theoretical controversy about 'meaning' by directing the attention of the student to 'what is the case' so as to ensure the exclusion from critical consideration of 'what is not the case'.¹⁹

Wittgenstein uses a similar manoeuvre in his study of linguistic ‘meaning’ in the *Philosophical Investigations*.²⁰ Yet an important part of ‘what is the case’ with regard to an individual work is, as I said earlier, what is *not* the case—inherently or intentionally rather than arbitrarily, I should add. ‘Is what I am really saying what I am not saying?’, asks Pierre Macherey.

Macherey continues by suggesting that, on the other hand, ‘perhaps the work is not hiding what it does not say’; perhaps it ‘is simply missing’ (or, better still, ‘simply not there’). *Touché*. And yet while operating here as a salutary corrective to any tendency to overinterpretation, Macherey’s literal-mindedness is not always justified. Indeed, the textual phenomenon of most interest for our purposes—‘What it *refuses* to say’—Macherey dismisses as a ‘careless notation’.²¹ To this we can only protest that a poet’s maintaining silence, and therefore refusing to sanction or satisfy the reader’s conditioned expectations or ‘prejudices’, is often very expressive. Wordsworth, for example, wrote a poem called *Michael*, and in order to raise certain expectations, subtitled it ‘a Pastoral’—the pastoral having concerned itself since Theocritus with rural life in pointed contradistinction to life in the city and, within rural life, with the loves of shepherds and shepherdesses. To these bare requirements—or, at least, to these requirements phrased in this way—Wordsworth’s poem conforms. It is about the ethical superiority of country over city, about a shepherd, and about love: love of the land and love within a family.

The pastoral world was also a Golden or idealised world, however, conventionally written ‘out of the court’ and rendered in a highly stylised and highly artificial way. This Wordsworth’s *Michael* certainly is not. It refuses. It is, by comparison, bare of artifice, and self-consciously so:

If from the public way you turn your steps
Up the tumultuous brook of Green-head Gill,
You will suppose that with an upright path
Your feet must struggle; in such bold ascent
The pastoral Mountains front you, face to face.
But, courage! for beside that boisterous Brook
The mountains have all opened out themselves,
And made a hidden valley of their own.

No habitation there is seen; but such
As journey thither find themselves alone
With a few sheep, with rocks and stones, and kites
That overhead are sailing in the sky.
It is in truth an utter solitude

(ll. 1–13)

The ascent, one notes, is difficult—‘with an upright path/Your feet must struggle’—which is as it should be, given that the arduous journey we are invited to undertake is a literary one. Wordsworth invites the reader to abandon ‘the public way’ of the pastoral tradition, described by Dr Johnson in his *Life of Milton* as ‘easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting’.²² In *Wordsworth’s* pastoral, on the other hand, the simplicity and coarseness of his rustic characters invites rather respect than contempt; there is no time for piping or debate, nor is there any dissociation between the active and contemplative life. And yet, though starker and more ‘realistic’ than traditional pastoral, a world of Spartan discipline and privation, it proves, for all that, to be a version of paradise, if only in the tragic turn taken by the narrative. For to complete the inventory of the poem’s refusals, *Michael* is the parable of the prodigal son without the son’s return and a fall with no intimation of a redemption. Meaning, in other words, lies as much in what Wordsworth does *not* write, and in the way in which he does not write it, as in what he writes and the way in which he writes.

V

Hand in hand with the desire to cultivate what I earlier called simply a ‘way’ peculiarly one’s own, usually goes a desire to have it one’s own way, making those we think of as major poets often less than generous readers. Coleridge, it is true, refused to ‘introduce an act of Uniformity against Poets’, while he sought to clear a space for ‘the divine Chit chat of Cowper’ alongside that occupied by ‘the solemn Lordliness of Milton’s grandeur’.²³ Coleridge’s tastes were uncharacteristically catholic, however, and even he had his proscriptions (Pope, for example). Respect for other poets amongst the poets is often grudging, therefore, and invariably has a competitive edge. Obsessed with and jealous of their reputation or fame, they

quarrel with the style of other poets out of anxiety for their own. This, however, they can only achieve *via* an appropriation of the past which, while it may help to overcome an ‘anxiety of originality’ or creating *ex nihilo*, will always carry with it the pressure to conform to ancestral expectations. Thus is the need to develop an individual style also and simultaneously a need to fight free of the impinging and inhibiting styles, myths, and conventions upon which the poet may well be dependent.

When not the expression of a quest for reputation or fame, disconfirmation and revision are inspired most often by a dissatisfaction or disgust with the development of ‘art’ and the artificial. As an act of deference to ‘reality’ or to ‘nature’, fresh vision requires re-vision:

The history of the subsequent literary idea of nature can be seen in terms of a series of . . . disconfirmations, each of which opened the way to a ‘rediscovery’ of, or ‘return’ to, nature in reaction to a growth of artifice or convention that inhibited spontaneous ‘natural’ perception²⁴

To wash the idea ‘in the remotest cleanliness of heaven’, as Wallace Stevens put it. Which brings me back to where I started in my first essay and to Dr Johnson’s ideal of a literature ‘uncontaminated by literary prejudice’: an original expression of an original apprehension of an original reality. Ironically but inevitably, the *fact* of the ubiquitous literariness of literature has brought us to literature’s persistent aspiration beyond itself towards an impossible anti- or ultra-literary ideal. Less apparent but no less important than the sheer naivety and impossibility of this ideal, however, is its doubtful value. A literary literature, one that speaks most freely in and through other conventions and other literature, offers the model of a cultural and personal meaning and value that is vitally dependent upon differential relations across time and place. Neither man nor book is an island.

Notes

- 1 *Arts* 17 (1994–5): 7–22. For the distinction between ‘soft’ and ‘hard intertextuality’, see pp.9–10.
- 2 *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture* (1971), London, 1974, p.13.

- 3 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', in her *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978*, London, 1980, pp.33–49 (p.35).
- 4 In his *The Great Tradition: George Eliot; Henry James; Joseph Conrad* (1948), Harmondsworth, 1972, p.19.
- 5 *Antigones*, Oxford, 1984.
- 6 See, for example, Jurij Tyjanov, 'On Literary Evolution', *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, eds Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, Michigan, 1978, pp.66–78 (p.69).
- 7 *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, New York, 1973, p.5.
- 8 I discuss T. S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' at greater length in 'Literary Influence: A Rule of Thumb?', pp.12–13, and *passim*.
- 9 *Imitations*, London, 1962, p.xi.
- 10 *Biographia Literaria*, eds James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols, Princeton, N.J., 1983, II, pp.16–17.
- 11 See his *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor, in 2 vols, London, 1960, I, p.100.
- 12 In an extract from *Timber; Or, Discoveries* in *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*, compiled and ed. James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, 3rd edn, New York, 1951, pp.257–267 (p.265).
- 13 See, for example, Part I, Vol. I, p.106f.; Part V, Vol. II, p.156—*The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd edn, London and Basingstoke, 1911; 1912.
- 14 See his interview with Julia Kristeva, 'Semiology and Grammatology', in his *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, 1981, pp.15–36 (pp.26 and ff.).
- 15 To quote Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford, 1983, p.28.
- 16 In his *Words and 'The Word': Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation*, Cambridge, 1986, p.164.
- 17 For an example of both, see Viktor Shklovskij's essay 'Pushkin and Sterne: Eugene Onegin' in *Twentieth-Century Russian Literary Criticism*, ed. Victor Erlich, New Haven and London, 1975, pp.63–80.
- 18 See his *Text Production*, trans. Terese Lyons, New York, 1983, pp.96 and *circa*.
- 19 *Studying Literature*, Sydney, 1985, pp.6 ff.
- 20 See, for example, §§448–9 of *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. Anscombe, 3rd edn, Oxford, 1967, pp.131^e–132^e; but also, *passim*.
- 21 *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall, London, Henley, Boston, 1978, pp.85–9.
- 22 *Lives of the English Poets*, 2 vols, London and New York, 1952, I, pp.63–134 (p.112).
- 23 In a letter to John Thelwall, 17 December 1796; *Collected Letters*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols, Oxford, 1956–71, I, p.164.
- 24 To quote Stephen Prickett, *Words and 'The Word'*, p.177.