

The Anxiety of Influence

A THEORY OF POETRY

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Apophrades

or THE RETURN OF THE DEAD

No anchorage is.
Sleep is not, death is not;
Who seem to die live.

EMERSON

Empedocles held that our psyche at death returned to the fire whence it came. But our daemon, at once our guilt and our ever-potential divinity, came to us not from the fire but from our precursors. The stolen element had to be returned; the daemon was never stolen but inherited, and at death was passed on to the ephebe, the latecomer who could accept both the crime and the godhood at once.

The genealogy of imagination traces the descent of the daemon, and never of the psyche, but analogues abound between these descents:

It may be that one life is a punishment
For another, as the son's life for the father's.

It may be that one strong poet's work expiates for the work of a precursor. It seems more likely that later visions cleanse themselves at the expense of earlier ones. But the strong dead return, in poems as in our lives, and they do not come back without darkening the living. The wholly

mature strong poet is peculiarly vulnerable to this last phase of his revisionary relationship to the dead. This vulnerability is most evident in poems that quest for a final clarity, that seek to be definitive statements, testaments to what is uniquely the strong poet's gift (or what he wishes us to remember as his unique gift):

I arose, and for a space
The scene of woods and waters seemed to keep,
Though it was now broad day, a gentle trace
Of light diviner than the common sun
Sheds on the common earth, and all the place
Was filled with magic sounds woven into one
Oblivious melody, confusing sense. . . .

Here, at his end, Shelley is open again to the terror of Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode, and yields to his precursor's "light of common day":

—I among the multitude
Was swept—me, sweetest flowers delayed not long;
Me, not the shadow nor the solitude,
Me, not that falling stream's Lethean song;
Me, not the phantom of that early Form
Which moved upon its motion—but among
The thickest billows of that living storm
I plunged, and bared my bosom to the clime
Of that cold light, whose airs too soon deform.

By 1822, when Shelley experienced this last vision, the poet Wordsworth was long dead (though the man Wordsworth survived Shelley by twenty-eight years, until 1850). But strong poets keep returning from the dead, and only through the quasi-willing mediumship of other strong

poets. *How* they return is the decisive matter, for if they return intact, then the return impoverishes the later poets, dooming them to be remembered—if at all—as having ended in poverty, in an imaginative need they could not themselves gratify.

The *apophrades*, the dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead return to inhabit their former houses, come to the strongest poets, but with the very strongest there is a grand and final revisionary movement that purifies even this last influx. Yeats and Stevens, the strongest poets of our century, and Browning and Dickinson, the strongest of the later nineteenth century, can give us vivid instances of this most cunning of revisionary ratios. For all of them achieve a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time almost is overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors*.

In this observation, I want to distinguish the phenomenon from the witty insight of Borges, that artists *create* their precursors, as for instance the Kafka of Borges creates the Browning of Borges. I mean something more drastic and (presumably) absurd, which is the triumph of having so stationed the precursor, in one's own work, that particular passages in *his* work seem to be not presages of one's own advent, but rather to be indebted to one's own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one's greater splendor. The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own. If they return wholly in their own strength, then the triumph is theirs:

The edges of the summit still appal
When we brood on the dead or the beloved;
Nor can imagination do it all

In this last place of light; he dares to live
 Who stops being a bird, yet beats his wings
 Against the immense immeasurable emptiness of things.

Roethke hoped that was late Roethke, but alas it is the Yeats of *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*. Roethke hoped this was late Roethke, but alas it is the Eliot of the *Quartets*:

All journeys, I think, are the same:
 The movement is forward, after a few wavers,
 And for a while we are all alone,
 Busy, obvious with ourselves. . . .

There is late Roethke that is the Stevens of *Transport to Summer*, and late Roethke that is the Whitman of *Lilacs*, but sorrowfully there is very little late Roethke that is late Roethke, for in Roethke the *apophrades* came as devastation, and took away his strength, which nevertheless had been realized, which had become something of his own. Of *apophrades* in its positive, revisionary sense, he gives us no instance; there are no passages in Yeats or Eliot, in Stevens or Whitman, that can strike us as having been written by Roethke. In the exquisite squalors of Tennyson's *The Holy Grail*, as Percival rides out on his ruinous quest, we can experience the hallucination of believing that the Laureate is overly influenced by *The Waste Land*, for Eliot too became a master at reversing the *apophrades*. Or, in our present moment, the achievement of John Ashbery in his powerful poem *Fragment* (in his volume *The Double Dream of Spring*) is to return us to Stevens, somewhat uneasily to discover that at moments Stevens sounds rather too much like Ashbery, an accomplishment I might not have thought possible.

The strangeness added to beauty by the positive *apophrades* is of that kind whose best expositor was Pater.

Perhaps all Romantic style, at its heights, depends upon a successful manifestation of the dead in the garments of the living, as though the dead poets were given a suppler freedom than they had found for themselves. Contrast the Stevens of *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle* with the *Fragment* of John Ashbery, the most legitimate of the sons of Stevens:

Like a dull scholar, I behold, in love,
 An ancient aspect touching a new mind.
 It comes, it blooms, it bears its fruit and dies.
 This trivial trope reveals a way of truth.
 Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.
 Two golden gourds distended on our vines,
 Into the autumn weather, splashed with frost,
 Distorted by hale fatness, turned grotesque.
 We hang like warty squashes, streaked and rayed,
 The laughing sky will see the two of us,
 Washed into rinds by rotting winter rains.

—*Le Monocle*, VIII

Like the blood orange we have a single
 Vocabulary all heart and all skin and can see
 Through the dust of incisions the central perimeter
 Our imaginations orbit. Other words,
 Old ways are but the trappings and appurtenances
 Meant to install change around us like a grotto.
 There is nothing laughable
 In this. To isolate the kernel of
 Our imbalance and at the same time back up carefully
 Its tulip head whole, an imagined good.

—*Fragment*, XIII

An older view of influence would remark that the second of these stanzas "derives" from the first, but an awareness of the revisionary ratio of *apophrades* unveils Ashbery's relative triumph in his involuntary match with the dead. This particular strain, while it matters, is not cen-

tral to Stevens, but is the greatness of Ashbery whenever, with terrible difficulty, he can win free to it. When I read *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle* now, in isolation from other poems by Stevens, I am compelled to hear Ashbery's voice, for this mode has been captured by him, inescapably and perhaps forever. When I read *Fragment*, I tend not to be aware of Stevens, for his presence has been rendered benign. In early Ashbery, amid the promise and splendors of his first volume, *Some Trees*, the massive dominance of Stevens could not be evaded, though a *climamen* away from the master had already been evidenced:

The young man places a bird-house
Against the blue sea. He walks away
And it remains. Now other

Men appear, but they live in boxes.
The sea protects them like a wall.
The gods worship a line-drawing

Of a woman, in the shadow of the sea
Which goes on writing. Are there
Collisions, communications on the shore

Or did all secrets vanish when
The woman left? Is the bird mentioned
In the waves' minutes, or did the land advance?

—*Le Livre est sur la Table*, II

This is the mode of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, and urgently attempts to swerve away from a vision whose severity it cannot bear:

Slowly the ivy on the stones
Becomes the stones. Women become

The cities, children become the fields
And men in waves become the sea.

It is the chord that falsifies.
The sea returns upon the men,

The fields entrap the children, brick
Is a weed and all the flies are caught,

Wingless and withered, but living alive.
The discord merely magnifies.

Deeper within the belly's dark,
Of time, time grows upon the rock.

—*The Man with the Blue Guitar*, XI

The early Ashbery poem implies that there are "collisions, communications" among us, even in confrontation of the sea, a universe of sense that asserts its power over our minds. But the parent-poem, though it will resolve itself in a similar quasi-comfort, harasses the poet and his readers with the intenser realization that "the discord merely magnifies," when our "collisions, communications" sound out against the greater rhythms of the sea. Where the early Ashbery attempted vainly to soften his poetic father, the mature Ashbery of *Fragment* subverts and even captures the precursor even as he appears to accept him more fully. The ephebe may still not be mentioned in the father's minutes, but his own vision has advanced. Stevens hesitated almost always until his last phase, unable firmly to adhere to or reject the High Romantic insistence that the power of the poet's mind could triumph over the universe of death, or the estranged object-world. It is not every day, he says in his *Adagia*, that the world arranges itself in a poem. His nobly desperate disciple, Ashbery, has dared the dialectic of misprision so as to implore the world daily to arrange itself into a poem:

But what could I make of this? Glaze
Of many identical foreclosures wrested from

The operative hand, like a judgment but still
 The atmosphere of seeing? That two people could
 Collide in this dusk means that the time of
 Shapelessly foraging had come undone: the space was
 Magnificent and dry. On flat evenings
 In the months ahead, she would remember that that
 Anomaly had spoken to her, words like disjointed beaches
 Brown under the advancing signs of the air.

This, the last stanza of *Fragment*, returns Ashbery full circle to his early *Le Livre est sur la Table*. There are "collisions, communications on the shore" but these "collide in this dusk." "Did the land advance?" of the early poem is answered partly negatively, by the brown, disjointed beaches, but partly also by "the advancing signs of the air." Elsewhere in *Fragment*, Ashbery writes: "Thus reasoned the ancestor, and everything/Happened as he had foretold, but in a funny kind of way." The strength of the positive *apophrades* gives this quester the hard wisdom of the proverbial poem he rightly calls *Soonest Mended*, which ends by:

. . . learning to accept

The charity of the hard moments as they are doled out,
 For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
 Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
 Making ready to forget, and always coming back
 To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago.

Here Ashbery has achieved one of the mysteries of poetic style, but only through the individuation of misprision.

The mystery of poetic style, the exuberance that is beauty in every strong poet, is akin to the mature ego's delight in its own individuality, which reduces to the mystery of narcissism. This narcissism is what Freud terms

primary and normal, "the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation." The strong poet's love of his poetry, *as itself*, must exclude the reality of all other poetry, except for what cannot be excluded, the initial identification with the poetry of the precursor. Any departure from initial narcissism, according to Freud, leads to development of the ego, or in our terms, every exercise of a revisionary ratio, away from identification, is the process generally called poetic development. If all object-libido indeed has its origin in ego-libido, then we can surmise also that each ephebe's initial experience of being found by a precursor is made possible only through an excess of self-love. *Apophrades*, when managed by the capable imagination, by the strong poet who has persisted in his strength, becomes not so much a return of the dead as a celebration of the return of the early self-exaltation that first made poetry possible.

The strong poet peers in the mirror of his fallen precursor and beholds neither the precursor nor himself but a Gnostic double, the dark otherness or antithesis that both he and the precursor longed to be, yet feared to become. Out of this deepest evasion, the complex imposture of the positive *apophrades* constitutes itself, making possible the last phases of Browning, Yeats, Stevens—all of whom triumphed against old age. *Asolando*, *Last Poems and Plays*, and "The Rock" section of Stevens' *Collected Poems* are all astonishing manifestations of *apophrades*, part of whose intent and effect is to make us read differently—that is, read Wordsworth, Shelley, Blake, Keats, Emerson, and Whitman differently. It is as though the final phase of great modern poets existed neither for last affirmations of a lifetime's beliefs, nor as palinodes, but rather as the ultimate placing and reduction of ancestors. But this takes us to the central problem of *apophrades*: is there still an anxiety of style as distinct from

the anxiety of influence, or are the two anxieties now one? If this book's argument is correct, then the covert subject of most poetry for the last three centuries has been the anxiety of influence, each poet's fear that no proper work remains for him to perform. Clearly, there has been an anxiety of style as long as there have been literary standards. But we have seen the concept of influence (and poets' attendant morale) alter with the post-Enlightenment dualism. Did the anxiety of style change also even as the anxiety of influence began? Was the burden of individuating a style, now intolerable for all new poets, so massive a burden before the anxiety of influence developed? When we open a first volume of verse these days, we listen to hear a distinctive voice, if we can, and if the voice is not already somewhat differentiated from its precursors and its fellows, then we tend to stop listening, no matter what the voice is attempting to *say*. Dr. Samuel Johnson had an acute apprehension of the anxiety of influence, yet he still read any new poet by the test of asking whether any new matter had been disclosed. Loathing Gray, Johnson nevertheless was compelled to the highest praise of Gray on encountering notions that seemed to him original:

The *Church-yard* abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. The four stanzas beginning *Yet even these bones*, are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here, persuades himself that he has always felt them. Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him.

Original *notions* which every reader has *felt*, or is persuaded he has felt; this is more difficult than the fame of

Johnson's passage allows us to see. Was Johnson accurate in finding these stanzas original?

Yet even these bones from insult to protect
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around she strews,
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who to dumb Forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being, e'er resigned,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
Ev'n from the tomb the voice of nature cries,
Ev'n in our ashes live their wonted fires.

Swift, Pope's *Odyssey*, Milton's Belial, Lucretius, Ovid, and Petrarch are all among Gray's precursors here, for as an immensely learned poet, Gray rarely wrote without deliberately relating himself to nearly every possible literary ancestor. Johnson was an immensely learned critic; why did he praise these stanzas for an originality they do not possess? A possible answer is that Johnson's own deepest anxieties are openly expressed in this passage, and to find a contemporary saying what one feels even more deeply than he does, and yet what one is inhibited from expressing oneself, is to be persuaded of more originality than exists. Gray's stanzas cry out for just that minimal and figurative immortality that the anxiety of influence denies us. Whenever the rugged Johnsonian sensibility finds fresh matter in literature, it is a safe assumption that John-

sonian repression is also involved in such finding. But, as Johnson is so universal a reader, he illustrates a tendency in many other readers, which is to be found most decisively by the notions we evade in our own minds. Johnson, who hated Gray's style, understood that in Gray's poetry the anxiety of style and the anxiety of influence had become indistinguishable, yet he forgave Gray for the one passage where Gray universalized the anxiety of self-preservation into a more general pathos. Writing on his poor friend, Collins, Johnson has Gray in mind when he observes: "He affected the obsolete when it was not worthy of revival; and he puts his words out of the common order, seeming to think, with some later candidates for fame, that not to write prose is certainly to write poetry." Johnson seems to have so compounded the burden of originality and the problem of style, that he could denounce style he judged vicious, and mean by the denunciation that no fresh matter was offered. So, despite seeming our opposite, when we neglect content and search for individuality of tone in a new poet, Johnson is very much our ancestor. By the 1740's, at the latest, the anxiety of style and the comparatively recent anxiety of influence had begun a process of merging that seems to have culminated during our last few decades.

We can see the same merger gradually manifesting itself in the pastoral elegy and its descendants, for in a poet's lament for his precursor, or more frequently for another poet of his own generation, the poet's own deepest anxieties tend to be uncovered. Moschus, lamenting Bion, begins by declaring that poetry is dead because "he is dead, the beautiful singer":

Ye nightingales that lament among the thick
leaves of the trees, tell ye to the Sicilian waters
of Arethusa the tidings that Bion the herdsman is

dead, and that with Bion song too has died, and perished hath
the Dorian minstrelsy.

Begin, ye Sicilian Muses, begin the dirge.

Well before *The Lament for Bion* is over, Moschus has made the necessarily happy discovery that all song has not died with Bion:

. . . but I sing thee the dirge of an Ausonian sorrow,
I that am no stranger to the pastoral song, but heir of
the Doric Muse which thou didst teach thy pupils. This
was thy gift to me; to others didst thou leave thy wealth, to
me thy minstrelsy.

Begin, ye Sicilian Muses, begin the dirge.

The great pastoral elegies, indeed all major elegies for poets, do not express grief but center upon their composers' own creative anxieties. They offer therefore as consolation their own ambitions (*Lycidas*, *Thyrsis*), or if they are beyond ambition (*Adonais*, Whitman's *Lilacs*, Swinburne's *Ave Atque Vale*) then they offer oblivion. For the largest irony of the revisionary ratio of *apophrades* is that the later poets, confronting the imminence of death, work to subvert the immortality of their precursors, as though any one poet's afterlife could be metaphorically prolonged at the expense of another's. Even Shelley, in the sublimely suicidal *Adonais*, a poem frighteningly transcending mere disinterestedness, subtly divests Keats of the heroic naturalism that is Keats's unique gift. *Adonais* becomes part of a Power that works to transform a nature considered "dull" and "dense" by the Orphic Shelley. Keats's delight in the natural Intelligences that are Atoms of Perception, that know and see and therefore *are* God, becomes instead an impatience with the unwilling dross that would check the Spirit's flight. Shelley, in his attitude towards precursors and contemporaries, was by far the most generous

strong poet of the post-Enlightenment, but even in him the final phase of the dialectic of misprision had to work itself out.

British and American poetry, at least since Milton, has been a severely displaced Protestantism, and the overtly devotional poetry of the last three hundred years has been therefore mostly a failure. The Protestant God, insofar as He was a Person, yielded His paternal role for poets to the blocking figure of the Precursor. God the Father, for Collins, is John Milton, and Blake's early rebellion against Nobodaddy is made complete by the satiric attack upon *Paradise Lost* that is at the centre of *The Book of Urizen* and that hovers, much more uneasily, all through the cosmology of *The Four Zoas*. Poetry whose hidden subject is the anxiety of influence is naturally of a Protestant temper, for the Protestant God always seems to isolate His children in the terrible double bind of two great injunctions: "Be like Me" and "Do not presume to be too like Me."

The fear of godhood is pragmatically a fear of poetic strength, for what the ephebe enters upon, when he begins his life cycle as a poet, is in every sense a process of divination. The young poet, Stevens remarked, is a god, but he added that the old poet is a tramp. If godhood consisted only in knowing accurately what is going to happen next, then every contemporary Sludge would be a poet. But what the strong poet truly knows is only that *he* is going to happen next, that he is going to write a poem in which his radiance will be manifest. When a poet beholds his end, however, he needs some more rugged evidence that his past poems are not what skeletons think about, and he searches for evidences of election that will fulfill his precursors' prophecies by fundamentally re-creating those prophecies in his own unmistakable idiom. This is the curious magic of the positive *apophrades*.

Yeats, whose ghostly intensities of the final phase are mixed with a disinterested enthusiasm for violence, violence largely for its own sake, succeeded brilliantly in making the dead return in his idiom:

Beneath, the billows having vainly striven
Indignant and impetuous, roared to feel
The swift and steady motion of the keel.

But she in the calm depths her way could take,
Where in bright bowers immortal forms abide
Beneath the weltering of the restless tide.

And she unwound the woven imagery
Of second childhood's swaddling bands, and took
The coffin, its last cradle, from its niche,
And threw it with contempt into a ditch.

We feel, in reading *The Witch of Atlas*, that Shelley has read too deeply in Yeats, and is doomed never to get the tonal complexities of the Byzantium poems out of his mind. We encounter the same phenomenon here:

Insect lover of the sun,
Joy of thy dominion!
Sailor of the atmosphere;
Swimmer through the waves of air;
Voyager of light and noon;
Epicurean of June;
Wait, I prithee, till I come
Within earshot of thy hum,—
All without is martyrdom.

All without is martyrdom—certainly this ought to be Dickinson, but it is Emerson's *The Humble-Bee* (a poem

for which Dickinson admitted some fondness). Examples abound; the hugely idiosyncratic Milton shows the influence, in places, of Wordsworth; Wordsworth and Keats both have a tinge of Stevens; the Shelley of *The Cenci* derives from Browning; Whitman appears at times too enraptured by Hart Crane. It is important only that we learn to distinguish this phenomenon from its aesthetic opposite, the embarrassment, say, of reading *The Scholar-Gipsy* and *Thyrsis*, and finding the odes of Keats crowding out poor Arnold. Keats can seem a touch over-affected by Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites, even by Pater, but never does he seem the heir of Matthew Arnold.

"Let the dead poets make way for others. Then we might even come to see that it is our veneration for what has already been created . . . that petrifies us. . . ." Mad Artaud carried the anxiety of influence into a region where influence and its counter-movement, misprision, could not be distinguished. If latecomer poets are to avoid following him there, they need to know that the dead poets will not consent to make way for others. But, it is more important that new poets possess a richer knowing. The precursors flood us, and our imaginations can die by drowning in them, but no imaginative life is possible if such inundation is wholly evaded. In Wordsworth's dream of the Arab, the vision of a drowning world brings no initial terror, but a prior vision of dessication immediately does. Ferenczi in his apocalypse, *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, explains all myths of deluge as a reversal:

The first and foremost danger encountered by organisms which were all originally water-inhabiting was not that of inundation but of dessication. The raising of Mount Ararat out of the waters of the flood would thus be not only a deliverance, as told in the Bible, but at the same time the orig-

inal catastrophe which may have only later on been recast from the standpoint of land-dwellers.

Artaud, desperately seeking to raise his Ararat, is at least a poignant figure; the rabblement of his disciples remind us only that we but live, as Yeats said, where motley is worn. Our poets who are capable still of unfolding in their strength live where their precursors have lived for three centuries now, under the shadow of the Covering Cherub.