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TEXTS, STRATEGIES, RULES

by

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Introduction

I want to begin this chapter with a concept, you could call it a guiding belief if you like, which is that critics write for a reason, that they do not merely criticize texts because they exist, but because they serve as a means by which concepts can be expressed, ideas promulgated. Of course, this may not be the only reason a text is criticized, nor the only reason a critic chooses to write. My belief is rather that the act of criticism is also an act of trying to express opinions, and ideas. I want to explore how such a concept can be developed into a theory of criticism. So the perspective from which I shall consider the nature of literary criticism has an implied focus on why critics make certain statements about literary works, rather than whether such statements can be justified (although, of course, that will also be considered).

The critics I have chosen to examine closely for this purpose are William Empson, Roland Barthes and Harold Bloom. The reason I have chosen these critics is that although at first sight their approaches to texts appear entirely disparate, a closer examination indicates similarities which, in turn, lead on to an exploration of why they wrote criticism. I have chosen to closely analyse particular works by these critics, focusing on each critic's particular treatment of his subject rather than undertaking lengthy comparison between their different approaches. I hope that the reader will be led to compare these critics by the critical method I have chosen to adopt. I have arranged the chapters in

chronological order for convenience. While I would not claim that each critic is typical of his generation, it is interesting to see how the concept of creating a new critical vocabulary in order to polemicize is treated over this timespan.

If it is true that "people don't think up a set of assumptions or beliefs; they think up a set of stories, and derive the assumptions and beliefs from the stories . . . "[1] then we may examine any piece of criticism as a story, criticising it in the same way we may criticise a novel, poem, or play. Alternatively, if it is not true, that is, if people do think up beliefs and assumptions and then write stories to convince readers(convert them to these beliefs), then the techniques they use to do this may be interesting and worth examining. I think that Empson, Barthes, and Bloom are each trying to convince readers to accept a particular approach to criticism and, maybe, to life. I think this is inevitable -- we cannot and do not shut our beliefs in a cupboard and throw away the key when we open a book. We start with our beliefs and maybe what distinguishes readers from critics is that the latter hold their beliefs so strongly that they want others to share them.

Another way of looking at this is to view literary criticism not as a single discipline, but as a collection of frameworks of "languages". Within each "language" there are key concepts(for example, that of poetic structure), which are defined variously by different people. Critics disagree simply because they have different beliefs as to the nature of poetry. R. S. Crane argued along these lines, considering a critical language to be simply a set of assumptions regarding those principles and distinctions which are needed in order to engage

[1]Northrop Frye, Interview with Imre Salusinszky in Imre Salusinszky's *Criticism in Society: Interviews with Jacques Derrida, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Frank Kermode, Edward Said, Barbara Johnson, Frank Lentricchia and J. Hillis Miller* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), p. 31.

in criticism.[2] However, this is not a situation Crane admires, for he feels that such assumptions are chosen arbitrarily, and their explanatory powers are assumed.[3] According to Crane, both the New Critics, the Structuralists, and mavericks like Harold Bloom, are to be deplored for having chosen their assumptions for no adequate reason.

However, it can be argued that such critics "chose" their assumptions (one cannot but wonder how much "choice" is involved) because they find in them some explanatory power, which in turn depends upon their finding something to be explained. I do not agree with Crane that a critic chooses his/her "tools" in order to discover what he/she wants to know.[4] I think a critic develops a particular method to support his/her beliefs -- to both justify and promulgate them.

The question I wish to raise is whether critics are trying to understand texts at all when they practice criticism. In this thesis I want to examine the possibility that instead critics are largely concerned with trying to use texts as a means of expressing ideas, not just about texts, but about the world in general. Whether this is a difference in kind or degree depends, I think, on whether understanding the world is considered to be essentially the same activity as understanding a text. This is not a question on which I would like to pass judgment, preferring to focus instead on what it is to understand and read texts, allowing the reader to form his/her own conclusions.

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[2]See R.S. Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry*, The Alexander Lectures, 1951-2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), pp. 13-20.
[3]*Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.
[4]*Ibid.*, p. 31.

To discuss one's reaction to a text in terms of understanding a text, or of having grasped the intention of the author, is to legitimize one's own version of the text, and give "validity" to the associated ideas explicated in the act of criticism (the ideas being "justified" by the acceptance of one's reading of a text). Whereas to consider one's reaction to a text as being one among many possible interpretations of that text is to recognize that one has simply presented one set of ideas (not the only possible set) in relation to a particular work. To presume that "the author is dead" allows one to argue that his/her intentions (ideas) are irrelevant, to talk about the meaning of a text without having to try to sort out which interpretations were intended by the author, to impose one's own interpretation. However, the text to some extent sets its own context, and thus defines the range of possible interpretations. It does this by controlling ambiguity (limiting meaning), reference to understood cultural norms (whether accepting or rejecting these), and so forth. Thus the text sets its own context by its referentiality. This does not mean that we, as readers, cannot supplement the range of possible interpretations. We can define the meaning of a text as both our interpretations and the context the text sets up.

In my examination of *S/Z*, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *Shelley's Mythmaking*, and *Poetry and Repression*, I will focus on guiding concepts or ideas expressed by Barthes, Empson, and Bloom to show how for them criticism is inevitably bound up with the elucidation of a particular set of concepts, ideas, or ideals. In showing this I hope to provide an indication of an approach to criticism with a view to understanding how a particular piece of criticism may be described in terms of polemics rather than the pursuit of understanding.

William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity.*

William Empson was right -- *Seven Types of Ambiguity* could be considered a "heap";[5] but an interesting one. The work is interesting because it can be characterised as tracing the fortunes of two, continually intertwined, types of critical theory. The first deals with the postulated seven types of ambiguity, the second with the concept of ambiguity itself as central to Western thought.

Unlike Barthes, Empson did not engage in the close analysis of a particular text in order to convince the reader that texts can be analysed in terms of ambiguity, and that the concept of ambiguity is central to our culture. Rather, he used a range of texts to illustrate his point and, in so doing implied that if this range of texts, which are considered part of Western culture, can be described in terms of his seven types of ambiguity, then his concept of ambiguity must be valid. He further argued that if it was valid in this way, then the concept must be central to Western culture. Yet it is clear that this need not be the case -- just because something is describable in terms of a concept does not mean that that concept is central to that which is being described.

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[5]William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity: A Study of its Effects in English Verse* (3rd ed. London: Chatto and Windus, 1977), p. viii. From this point all references to this text in this chapter will be enclosed in parentheses after the relevant quotation or reference. All italics are Empson's unless otherwise specified.

Still, like Barthes, maybe Empson was rebelling, but against a concept of culture rather than of society, and the seven types of ambiguity were a means of providing "objective proof" of deeply held beliefs about society -- just as for Barthes the five codes were the means by which he hoped to break free from bourgeois criticism. So it is possible that the concept of ambiguity was the means by which Empson sought to free readers from pre-existing concepts of culture. But to make such an assumption at this point would be to pre-empt any analysis of Empson's work.

One cannot help wondering which came first for Empson, the concept of ambiguity or the analysis of poetry using the concept of ambiguity? One could argue that the concept of ambiguity must have first occurred to him because it was being used by Leavis and Richards well before Empson linked it with his method of analysing poetry. But on the other hand, Empson's use of the concept changes its meaning, so that although logically the concept has to precede any analysis, the concept can be changed by the method or the object of analysis in which it plays a role. If Empson's concept of ambiguity is not the only tool necessary for the analysis of poetry, and Empson indicated in his introduction to the work that this might be the case, then what is the role of Empson's concept of ambiguity in the analysis of poetry? In other words, how important a notion was it for Empson in his attempt to interpret poetry?

I want to examine Empson's beliefs as to the nature of poetry, the reader's relationship with the work of art, how the reader is to know what was intended by the poet -- or whether he considered this concept irrelevant when engaging in an act of criticism. My aim is to understand how these beliefs influenced Empson's criticism. In order to do this I need to examine how Empson characterised human relationships, to ascertain his relationship with

the social mores of the time. I also want to determine whether Empson was attempting to rebel, like Barthes, against some dominant conception of society and culture, or whether he was trying to augment it. This issue appears to be relatively easy to separate from the technique of analysing poetry in terms of ambiguity and although I think that the concept of ambiguity indicates Empson's attitude towards the dominant culture of the time I intend to examine the two issues separately for the moment, although such an analysis in itself holds implications for a consideration of these issues.

I.

There is a tension between the "chaos" of the world and the "control" exercised by man evident in Empson's criticism. Similarly in Hartman's *Criticism in the Wilderness*[6] one can note the tension between the creative nature of criticism and the implications of a creative criticism for the concept of scholarship. Hartman and Empson, unlike Barthes, both have too much sympathy for existing critical modes to reject them outright.

However, it is important for Empson's argument whether the control man may have over interpretation is exercised by author or reader. It is this question which remains confused in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* . It is clear that Empson is unsure both of whether the reader or author determines meaning, and of the ramifications of either view of interpretation. In order to understand how this can be the case an examination of Empson's use of the term ambiguity, and of the relationship between ambiguity, interpretation, and Empson's beliefs regarding the relationship between reader and author would be helpful.

To talk of ambiguity is to beg several questions -- should one view ambiguity as intentional and if so, how can a reader know what the author of a work intended? Or does Empson think such knowledge irrelevant? Does a text have one meaning, or can a reader only know his/her interpretation of a text? From the outset Empson implies that *interpretation is meaning* -- thus he analyses Shakespeare's line, "Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang," in terms not only of meanings Shakespeare may have intended, but also

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[6]Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), *passim.*

in terms of interpretations which enrich the line (see pp. 2-3). By arguing that an interpretation of a text is the meaning of that text, the next logical step is to conclude that it is the reader's interpretation which is the meaning of the text. But does this mean that the meaning is what the reader makes of the text, or what the author makes of it? There are two different senses of the term "making" being used here, and the distinction between them is very closely bound up with assumptions about the role of the author and of the reader of a text. The statement that interpretation is meaning can lend itself to a range of conclusions about the role of author and reader of a text and, as we shall see, throughout *Seven Types of Ambiguity* Empson toys with both notions.

Part of the problem is a confusion between intention and illocution.[7] Empson seems to assume that what the voice of a poem says is what the author believes, making little allowance for the realm of irony (except in the case of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*). But this still does not explain the vacillation between the concept of meaning as that which the author intends versus meaning as that which the reader perceives.[8]

Jensen has some interesting conjectures on this point. I am largely in agreement with the broad outlines of his argument, but think that his contention that the seven types of ambiguity are arranged in decreasing grammatical disorder and increasing emphasis on the psychology of the author unjustified -- as I hope my argument indicates.

What does Empson mean by "meaning"? We must have some understanding of the way in which Empson used the term in order to decide

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[7]Roger Fowler, Review of *William Empson: The Man and His Work,* ed. Roma Gill, *Language and Style,* 10, No. 1 (1977), p. 69.
[8]See James Jensen, "The Construction of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* ", *Modern Language Quarterly,* 27, No. 3 (1966).

whether his vacillation is deliberate. He seemed to insist that meaning is about what it is to be human and that a reader:

> must possess a fair amount of equilibrium or fairly strong defences; . . . must have the power first of reacting to a poem sensitively and definitely . . . and then, having fixed the reaction . . . must be able to turn the microscope on to it with a certain indifference . . . ; must be able to prevent their new feelings of the same sort from interfering with the process of understanding the original ones . . . and have enough detachment not to mind what their sources of satisfaction may turn out to be. (p. 247).

In comparison, according to Harold Bloom it is the poet's defences against previous poets which are important, as are the critic's defences against previous critics. But it is unclear what role a critic's or reader's defences against poetry may play. Whereas for Empson the role of such defences is clear.

For Empson reading is also an act of testing whether one can cope with oneself, for this is the major prerequisite for being able to deal with poetry, and for being a fit member of human society. More generally, he thought that "complexity of logical meaning *ought* to be based on complexity of thought . . . " (p. 49, my italics), a statement which implies that the responsibility for the meaning of a poem rests with the author, who has an obligation to ensure that s/he only uses complex poetical forms if his/her thought is sufficiently complex. How s/he is to decide what constitutes a

sufficient level of complexity is left unclear. A concomitant of the notion that the author is responsible for the meaning of a text is the view "that there is only one real meaning" for any given text, even an allegorical text (pp. 128-29).[9] This belief is confirmed when Empson notes that "*The* meaning of an English sentence is largely decided by the accent . . . " (p. 147, my italics), and that it is one unified ('total') meaning which the author tries to convey. Yet he also thinks that the final range of associations is decided by the reader (see pp. 238-39).

Let us first consider the notion that the meaning of a poem is determined by the author, or that it is what the author wants us to think, for this seems to be the notion with which Empson began *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. At the outset Empson argued that "poetry has powerful means of imposing its own assumptions, and is very independent of the mental habits of the reader . . . " (p. 4). This attitude towards poetry is implied in several discussions of ambiguity in poetry (for example, his discussion of Peacock's *War Song*, which assumes a state of mind in Peacock (see p. 22)), and in discussions of the relevance of physiognomy in conversation -- for he believes that physiognomy supplements verbal statements, confirming the speaker's opinion as stated, providing a supplement for interpretation. The poem is seen as an expression of the author (see p. 49). As a consequence emendations are considered to be unwise, though sometimes revelatory of authorial intention -- thus his conjectures regarding the author of *Promos and Cassandra* 's intentions (see pp. 84-85) when he wrote:

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[9]That that "one real meaning" may be ambiguous, but its ambiguity is controlled by the author, was also noted by Christopher Norris, *William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* (London: The Athlone Press, 1978), pp. 133-34.

> PROMOS. So that the way is by severity
> Such wicked weedes even by the rootes to teare.
> (ii. 3.) (p. 84).

In discussing a type of ambiguity Empson often tried to explain the device from the author's point of view (for example, his discussion of one common linguistic form in Shakespeare's poetry (see p. 90)), and saw certain types of ambiguity as deliberate, that is, as caused by an author. He considered the third type of ambiguity to be deliberate, as his discussion of the pun indicates, with its emphasis on the question of the "consciousness of a particular part of . . . [the device of the pun]." (p. 103). Or, for that matter, his emphasis on the artificial, wrought nature of the pun, especially in the eighteenth century, where it is "always worldly" (p. 108). If the ambiguity is not deliberate, it is at least a reflection of what the author thought, even if s/he was confused as may occur in the fourth type (e.g. pp. 133ff); consider also the fifth type, when the author appears to create the ambiguity accidentally (see p. 155).

More generally, some appreciation of the author's attitude and knowledge was considered to be necessary for an understanding of the work, thus his comments on Ford's sonnet, "it is these associations which explain how that particular word [i.e. gall] came into his mind." (p. 156). It is the author who lays subdued conceits for the reader to discover, and Empson believed "that later English poetry is full of subdued conceits and ambiguities . . . ." (p. 165). The reader does not invent such conceits for the poet (see p. 173), even if the author's opinion is not apparent, as is the case when someone is described as having eyes which " 'were a trifle large.' . . . Not knowing

how *large* the *trifle* may be, the reader has no means of being certain whether he would be charmed or appalled." (p. 176). In all cases the author is usually in control, s/he can create a sense of doubt in the mind of the reader, including doubt as to the opinion of the author, as is the case when the author asks a question to which the answer is both yes and no (see p. 182). And even if an ambiguity is not deliberate, it may reflect the author's state of mind, even if it is "evasive" and the author feels "that he will lose the attitude he is expressing if he looks at it too closely" (p. 190). Conflicts of motive are paralleled in language.[10]

As for the role of the reader in the discovery of ambiguity, Empson put in a claim for him/her early in the piece, and noted that the meaning of a poem is whatever the reader thinks it is, thus his comment on the word "ambiguity" itself, which he notes:

> can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings. (pp. 5-6).

The onus here was placed on the reader by noting that the poem's atmosphere is given by the poet but interpreted by the reader. Because of this Empson felt that the reader needed some machinery to aid in the judgement of the poet's sincerity.[11]

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[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 123-24.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

All of this still seems to favour the notion that the meaning of a poem is to be considered as primarily determined by the author. But Empson often spoke of the meaning of eighteenth century verse as not being intended, let alone determined, by the poet, but still being the poem's meaning, thus he felt he could " . . . applaud them [i.e. the authors of eighteenth century verse] for qualities in their writings which they would have been horrified to discover." (p. 68). This would seem to imply that if the reader can make a case for an interpretation of a poem, then that is the poem's meaning -- that is, the reader determines the meaning of a poem. This was stated even more baldly when Empson discussed ambiguity as though it existed only if noted by the reader, thus, "*You* notice the . . . following lines . . . " (p. 76, my italics). Empson's early discussion on puns confirms this emphasis, when he notes the importance of "questions of consciousness, of the direction of the reader's attention, of the interaction of separated parts of his mind . . . ." (p. 102). So it would seem that it is the reader who ascribes meaning, even if the author disagrees.

When writing in this vein Empson seems to be arguing that the reader ascribes meaning even if this results in a plethora of meanings, as often occurs when reading Shakespeare (see p. 138). Furthermore, in some instances Empson argued that an ambiguity may not be recognised as such by its author, or may simply be irrelevant to the thrust of the work, and yet be considered an ambiguity by the reader (see p. 184), implying that it is the reader who determines whether or not a statement is ambiguous.

Although at first glance this emphasis on the role of the reader in Empson's writing may appear to be like Hartman's (at least, the later Hartman), their attitudes to the reader are quite dissimilar. For Empson the

reader supplements the text, whereas for Hartman s/he determines the text -- for Hartman the text is always a *read* document. In this Hartman is closer to Barthes than to Bloom or Empson.

Simply by discussing the author's sincerity (for example, pp. 29-30) Empson appears to have given the author primacy in the determination of the meaning of a work. He expected the author to be sincere, that is, to express an emotion or state of mind which the reader can recognise as somehow "true" (see pp. 87, 125). It is on the author's sincerity that a reader is considered to be relying when determining the meaning of a poem. But it is to be noted that sincerity is an expectation that not every reader may share, and how is a reader who does not have such an expectation to understand the range of ambiguity intended by the author of a work?

Furthermore, how can modern readers understand the intended ambiguity to be found in a text written in an earlier era? To presume that a dictionary can afford one an insight into the full range of ambiguities of a work is unjustified because a work relies upon a cultural milieu as, I suppose, Empson would have been the first to admit, and this milieu cannot be picked up from a dictionary. In general, Empson's position on the matter was that the reader's aim should be to re-create the author's meaning by re-imagining the poem, for "the process of getting to understand a poet is precisely that of constructing his poems in one's own mind." (p. 62). Yet he leaves unclear whether the result was to be considered the meaning the author or the reader intended. However, he did note "that the English language makes them [i.e. ambiguities] difficult to avoid . . . " (p. 80), leaving one wondering how a reader is to discover whether an ambiguity is deliberate or accidental, and whether such a distinction matters anyway.

In discussing an ambiguity of the third type Empson did not thoroughly examine what roles the reader and the author can be said to play in the determination of meaning, though it is apparent that he considered both to be playing some role. His discussion of the use of the third type of ambiguity as a weapon by such poets as Donne (see p. 124) implied that both the author and the reader must know what the work means, and the way in which ambiguity is being used. More generally, William Empson considered the author's use of ambiguity to stimulate "the reader's judgment by leaving an apparently unresolved duality in his own . . . " (p. 125). And yet he also thought that a reader should not allow him/herself the luxury of a range of possible meanings when it was likely that not all the alternatives were intended, thus something that was "not an Elizabethan idiom . . . " should not be considered relevant in an examination of Shakespeare's poetry (p. 136). On the other hand, Empson considered the sixth type of ambiguity, although deliberate, to have meanings the reader gives it (e.g. pp. 178-80).

Generally Empson seemed to believe that the author of a work creates a range of meanings and sets the boundaries within which the statements s/he makes are to be interpreted, but that the reader may occasionally interpret from outside these boundaries if it results in a more satisfactory (however defined) reading -- though criteria for determining what is to the good of the poem are not forthcoming. This is rather reminiscent of a humanist's approach to the legal system -- it is to be abided with unless it is manifestly unjust (unsatisfactory), upon which it is to be changed -- initially by custom. This indeterminacy as to how meaning is formulated allowed Empson to claim that his seven types of ambiguity provided a machinery for interpreting poetry without forcing him to specify what may be admitted as evidence in the

formulation of an interpretation of a poem. By setting up a "mechanics" of interpretation Empson could claim that his methods were more objective and scientific than those of other critics. And yet, as is clear, despite the "mechanics" there is quite some confusion regarding how one can and should read and interpret poetry.

II.

The central confusion regarding the role of the author and of the reader in the determination of meaning mirrors Empson's indeterminate stance regarding the individual's (and, for that matter, his own) relationship with society. The concept of ambiguity in poetry can be seen as a metaphor for the ambiguity in Empson's own discussions of the relationship between author and reader, between individuals.

In *The Structure of Complex Words* Empson developed an outwardly mechanical, and therefore "objective" method of classifying the import of words by sense (i.e. connotation), appreciative of depreciative pregnancy, mood, feeling, and so on.[12] At first it might appear that the underlying flaw in such a system lies in the belief that a system of classification is required in order to engage in an act of interpretation. But such a system is designed to encourage the reader to believe that s/he has discovered a rational approach to understanding fiction, to understanding the world and him/herself, rather than a subjective approach. Thus the reader is encouraged to share Empson's opinions under the guise of accepting a "rational" approach to poetry, and to life. There is something psychologically comforting in having convinced others to see the world as one does -- it implies both that one is normal (others share your vision), and better than normal (one has vision, others share it).

Similarly, in *Some Versions of Pastoral* Empson developed his notions of a full and normal life, the role of the poet in society, in short, his vision of society, under the guise of developing a rational explanation for the genre of

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[12]See William Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), pp. 15ff.

pastoral in English verse.[13] And in *Milton's God* Empson often appealed to history to justify what could be called a psychologistic approach to Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

It is by piecing together the major points of his arguments in these three books and comparing them with those proffered in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* that some understanding of Empson's view of what it is to be human and to live in society, as well as what structure should underpin society, can be gained. An important clue to Empson's attitude is his characterisation of the relationship between reader, poet, and poem which, as we have already noted, is by no means unambiguous. Empson seemed to assume that a poem exists because its author had something s/he wanted to communicate, that to understand poetry one must understand the motives underlying its creation, that there must be some sort of rapport between the reader and the author of a work, and that the intentions of the author of a work can be found in the play of attitudes manifest in that work.[14] What I hope my analysis has thus far shown is that Empson found in the course of writing *Seven Types of Ambiguity* that "problems as to communication" were not irrelevant, as he had claimed at the outset, but in fact unavoidable, and at the heart of his attempt to formulate a vision of humanity.

Empson declared that "The object of life . . . is not to understand things, but to maintain one's defences and equilibrium and live as well as one can . . . ." (p. 247). For the author, then, the poem is primarily a way of keeping him/herself sane, writing about that which s/he fears in order to

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[13]See Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1935), pp. 11ff, 114-15.
[14]See Norris, *William Empson and the Philosophy of Literary Criticism, op. cit.,* pp. 66, 68-69, 134.

exorcise that fear, or a means of enjoyment and self-expression. Similar reasons can be found for why a reader bothers to read poetry, or to write about it. Thus poetry, which exemplifies human values, also reinforces them.

Perhaps that is also why critics criticise poetry -- in order to maintain sanity (humanity). One develops a system of criticism, say, the machinery of ambiguity, in order to impose humanity on the apparently chaotic range of possible interpretations of poetry. The implication can be found in Empson's choice of subtitle for the work. One can discuss the effects of ambiguity just as one can discuss the effects of a disease, or of a medicine. Occasionally Empson's discussion of ambiguity implied that it was something which enabled one to control the range of meanings to be taken note of when reading poetry, something which limits one's attention to what is "relevant" (see pp. 1, 6) -- that is, to what reinforces a particular vision of humanity. Ambiguity is the medicine for the disease of meaning. This view may be contrasted with that of Geoffrey Hartman and other deconstructionists, who argue against imposing order on texts and instead in favour of free play with texts, in favour of a creative criticism which delights in the range of interpretations available for any given work. For deconstructive critics the limiting of a text's meaning is one of the "problems" of New Criticism, which is seen as stultifying and limiting the role of the critic. Whereas for Empson limiting the range of meaning of a work was a means by which the role of the critic may be defined.[15]

By comparison, two fundamentally different appreciations of how to cope with one's humanity are contrasted in *Poetry and Repression*. Bloom argues that a poet writes in order to cope with and attempt to exorcise the

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[15]In other words, I disagree with Culler who argues that Empson shows that reference to context does not limit the range of possible meanings of a text -- see Jonathon Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 93.

anxiety of influence brought on by the existence of precursor poets. Similarly, he argues that critics write criticism at least partly in order to deal with the anxiety of influence brought on by the existence of precursor critics. The major difference between Bloom and Empson is that for Bloom language is a battlefield, whereas for Empson it is a hospital.

According to Empson the role of the critic is to work out why a poem is good and explain this to the reader, for "the reasons that make a line of verse likely to give pleasure, I believe, are like the reasons for anything else; one can reason about them . . . ." (p. 9). So the critic may apply such maxims as " 'the sound must be an echo to the sense' . . . " (p. 10) and explain these. Generally "he must concentrate on the whole of the poem he is talking about rather than on the particular things he can find to say." (p. 17), pointing out the importance of the atmosphere of the poem, which can be described as the consciousness of what is implied by the meaning (e.g. pp. 117-18). Indeed, Empson's vision of the ideal critic comes to seem more and more like that of a Super-reader, with Johnsonian good sense (see p. 123) and the ability to extract from a poem "what it [i.e. the public] wants; to organise, what he may indeed create, the taste of his period." (p. 245). This is what Empson was trying to do, to create the taste of his period. He also saw the critic as explaining what the poem means to a more ignorant public, it is s/he who can tell the reader what the "correct line" is in relation to a work, and thus in relation to him/herself.

But one is not a critic if one does not also feel the emotions the poem was intended to arouse. The critic "must convince the reader that he knows what he is talking about (that he has had the experience which is in question) . . . " (p. 249). The general argument is that the critic must be capable of

sympathising with the poem, because "unless you are enjoying the poetry you cannot create it, as poetry, in your mind." (p. 248), and therefore, presumably, cannot fairly criticise it. But how this re-creation is to take place, in what ways it must be like the creation of the poem for one to judge whether a reader has accurately, or at least adequately, understood the author, is left unclear. The critic must not only analyse, that is, assume "that something has been conveyed to the reader by the work under consideration and . . . [set] . . . out to explain, in terms of the rest of the reader's experience, why the work has had the effect on him that is assumed." (p. 249). The critic must also appreciate the poem, which involves showing "that he has had the experience . . . in question . . . " (p. 249) and indicating "which of the separate parts of the experience he is talking about, after he has separated them . . . ." (p. 249).

So Empson's criticism can also be seen as an attempt to convince other critics, other readers, to use his methods, to become the type of critic he claims to be, to share his taste, his opinions. And rather than simply attempt to convince the reader that he was right, Empson chose to convince the reader that he was rational, an attribute to be valued in a humanistic society. In writing *Seven Types of Ambiguity* Empson told the story of a sensitive man, conscious of the aims of poets, the inadequacies of readers, the need for a vision of humanity in order to come to grips with the world, to maintain one's sanity, to be human.

Empson's approach to criticism is not value free. Given that the decision to classify an ambiguity as deliberate or accidental may vary from reader to reader, by considering pieces of poetry as exemplifying particular types of ambiguity Empson also makes judgments regarding the quality of the poetry.

These, however, are not displayed as value judgments, but claimed to be the result of an impartial analysis of poetry in terms of his seven types of ambiguity.

So Empson's seven types of ambiguity, far from being an innocuous piece of machinery designed to aid the reader in his/her interpretation of texts, are in fact part of a method of criticism designed to limit the range of meaning of any text, and to encourage the reader to think as Empson did. They are a means of defining the role of the critic, situating him/her in relation to literature. Empson's criticism is not simply an act of keeping oneself "sane" in the face of literature, but making sure others share one's "sanity".

III.

What kind of sanity is it that would categorise ambiguity into seven types -- reminiscent of the seven deadly sins, the four humours, or, for that matter, the ten commandments?[16] Just how does Empson categorise such an amorphous concept as "ambiguity" and what does that tell us about Empson's beliefs regarding reading and the relationship between writers and readers?

In fact, if one examines *Seven Types of Ambiguity* closely it soon becomes apparent that there are more than seven types of ambiguity. The following list of types of ambiguity is my attempt at sorting out how many ambiguities Empson noted and how they are related. Just how the machinery of ambiguity is used to situate the author, the reader, and the critic should become apparent from this analysis.

Let us begin by recalling Empson's definition of the word "ambiguity": "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language." (p. 1). It "can mean an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings." (pp. 5-6). He also noted that there are three possible scales for ambiguity:

(1) that of "logical or grammatical disorder," in which he was interested;

(2) "the degree to which the apprehension of the ambiguity must be conscious"; and

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[16]Geoffrey Hartman, "Monsieur Texte: On Jacques Derrida, his *Glas* ." *Georgia Review* (Winter 1975), p. 782

(3) "the degree of psychological complexity . . . " (p. 48).

It is worth comparing this concept of ambiguity with the Barthesian notion of the plurality of the text. For Barthes the concept of plurality is the opening through which alternative interpretations to those relying on bourgeois notions can be made. In other words, the concept of plurality is seen as allowing for a different vision of society, a different approach to life, not involved with bourgeois concerns. In comparison Empson ties the concept of ambiguity more closely to one's apprehension of the text. Both critics are concerned with the way in which analytical tools can both neglect and coerce opinions (of texts, of society). But Barthes focusses on the way in which analysis influences social mores, whereas Empson is concerned with the way in which analysis influences aesthetic and psychological mores.

A close examination of Empson's descriptions of the seven types of ambiguity and the way in which he uses them is necessary in order to come to some understanding of Empson's conception of the mind. The seven types of ambiguity may be outlined as follows.

The first type of ambiguity occurs when:

> One thing is said to be like another, and they have several different properties in virtue of which they are alike . . . [or when] a word or grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once. (p. 2)

This definition, he admitted, was so broad it covered almost everything. The first type of ambiguity can be "the comparison of two things which does not say in virtue of what they are to be compared" (p. 21). The example Empson gave was of Macbeth using the word "rook" instead of "crow" to evoke an atmosphere of death (see pp. 18-19). Let us, for convenience sake, number the types of ambiguity. This is ambiguity of the kind 1, I.

The first type of ambiguity can also involve "the ornamental use of false antithesis, which places words as if in opposition to one another without saying in virtue of what they are to be opposed" (p. 22). In this instance Peacock's *War Song* is quoted, and Empson points out that the last line of the couplet, "The heroes and the cravens, / The spearmen and the bowmen" makes a distinction which seems irrelevant to the image he is trying to create (type 1, II).

Another way in which the first type of ambiguity may be manifest is "the use of a comparative adjective which does not say what its noun is to be compared with . . . " (p. 23). This is the final instance given of the first type of ambiguity (type 1, III).

This simple type of ambiguity may be intended by the author but often appears to be incomplete or inadequate -- as in the Peacock example. The author has given the reader a broad base from which to speculate regarding intended meanings (1, I) or has created a "hanging" comparison (1, II and 1, III).

The second type of ambiguity "occurs when two or more meanings are resolved into one" (p. 48). This type can be subdivided into instances where these separate meanings, once understood, "remain an intelligible unit in the

mind" (p. 57), and instances where it is enjoyable to work out the separate meanings, and to a certain extent one must do so each time one re-reads the passage containing them (see p. 57). However, since these are essentially similar types of ambiguity I have labelled them 2, I, a and b respectively.

The second type of ambiguity can also involve ambiguity used to give fluidity to verse. Empson gives the following example from Shakespeare's sonnets:

> But heaven in thy creation did decree
> That in thy face sweet love should ever dwell,
> Whate'er thy thoughts or thy heart's workings be,
> Thy looks should nothing thence, but sweetness tell.
> (xciii.) (p. 50)

Empson points out that each phrase can go with either the sentence before or after (type 2, II). This type of ambiguity establishes resolution or union of concepts as another important attribute of the mind.

"An ambiguity of the third type . . . occurs when two ideas, which are connected only by being both relevant in the context, can be given in one word simultaneously. This is often done by reference to derivation . . . " (p. 102). In this manner the reader is forced to be aware of the two meanings of the one word. It is a conscious device.

Puns may be classed as examples of the third type of ambiguity. For example:

> Ye, who appointed stand,
> Do as you have in charge, and briefly touch
> What we propound, and loud that all may hear.
> (*Paradise Lost* , vi. 565.) (p. 103).

Here, Empson argued, one must concentrate on the ingenuity involved and the way in which the words are probably being interpreted by the gunners and by the angels, who have not encountered artillery before (type 3, I).

The third type of ambiguity may also involve a single statement that is made which implies other situations to which it is relevant -- for example, an allegory "which is felt to have many levels of interpretation" (p. 112) (type 3, II). It may also involve a description of two situations, leaving it to the reader to infer the facts of both and how they are mutually illustrative, for example:

> for so work the honey-bees . . .
> They have a king, and officers of sorts; . . .
> Others, like soldiers, armed in their stings,
> Make boot upon the summer's velvet buds;
> Which pillage they with merry march bring home,
> To the tent-royal of their emperor;
> Who, busied in his majesty, surveys
> The singing masons building roofs of gold;
> The civil citizens kneading up the honey;
> (*Henry V.* , I. ii. 320) (p. 112)

This type of ambiguity I will call type 3, III to distinguish it from allegory.

There is yet another instance of the third type of ambiguity. This occurs when one:

> talks about one thing and implies several ways of judging or feeling about it. This tends to be less rational and self-conscious . . . more dramatic and more aware of the complexities of human judgment. (p. 125).

Empson's example is from Pope's *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot:*

> who, high in Drury Lane,
> Lulled by soft zephyrs through the broken pane,
> Rhymes e'er he wakes, and prints before term ends,
> Obliged by hunger, and request of friends.
> (p. 125).

Empson asks whether Pope is sneering at or justifying the rhymer. This type of ambiguity establishes the ability to make connections, to recognise references, as important.

"An ambiguity of the fourth type occurs when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author." (p. 133). The subtlety may be great, as in the third type, but it is not the main focus of consciousness. Empson provides the following example to clarify the distinction:

I never thought that you did painting need,
And therefore to your fair no painting set,
I found (or thought I found) you did exceed,
The barren tender of a Poet's debt:
And therefore have I slept in your report,
That you yourself being extant well might show,
How far a modern quill doth come too short,
Speaking of worth, what worth in you doth grow,
This silence for my sin you did impute,
Which shall be most my glory being dumb,
For I impair not beauty, being mute,
When others would give life, and bring a tomb.
  There lives more life in one of your fair eyes,
  Than both your Poets can in praise devise.
(*Sonnets,* lxxxiii) (p. 133).

The focus, he argues, is on the emotion rather than the subtlety used to express it. This type of ambiguity is regarded as focussing attention one one's ability to recognise a situation in all its complexity (type 4).

The fifth type of ambiguity "occurs when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing, or not holding it all in his mind at once . . . " (p. 155). It is not regarded as subtle, unlike the third type of ambiguity, but rather as a stock literary device, thus:

Our Natures do pursue
Like Rats that ravyn downe their proper Bane
A thirsty evil, and when we drinke we die.
(*Measure for Measure,* I. ii.) (p. 155)

Shakespeare's lines are considered but a refined version of a device which in less accomplished hands "obscures the matter in hand unnecessarily . . . " (p. 160) (type 5).

The sixth type of ambiguity:

> occurs when a statement says nothing, by tautology, by contradiction, or by irrelevant statements; so that the reader is forced to invent statements of his own and they are liable to conflict with one another. (p. 176).

For example, the statement, "Zuleika Dobson was not strictly beautiful" is described as leaving one wondering whether she was really commonplace, or handsome, or unusual in some fashion (see p. 176). This type of ambiguity is considered to have many manifestations, and it gives the reader a limited opportunity to use his/her imagination in order to understand the situation described.

The sixth type of ambiguity can involve quite complex cases, where "the reader is not so much conscious of the contradiction as of the way it fails so as to have meaning" (p. 178) (type 6, I, a), or more simple instances when a "generalization which is added to show the force of the antithesis makes it a false one" (p. 179) (type 6, I, b). Alternatively, it may be a case of an illogical antithesis, forcing a double meaning onto the two key words of the antithesis (p. 180).

An author can also "ask a question whose answer is both yes and no . . . " (p. 182). I have labelled this an ambiguity of type 6, II, a. Empson's example is the Lady of Shallot who, in posing questions "whose answer is both yes and no", acts without being seen to do so:

> But who hath seen her wave her hand?
> Or at the casement seen her stand?
> Or is she known in all the land,
> The Lady of Shallott?
> (p. 182).

The Lady of Shallot is both known and unknown. And it is this uncertain status that adds to the complexity of the situation the poet outlines.

Related to this type of ambiguity is that which occurs by tautology. According to Empson:

> there will be a pun which is used twice, once in each sense, and the massive fog of the complete ambiguity will then arise from a doubt as to which meaning goes with which word. (pp. 182-83).

Empson's example is from Herbert's *Affliction:*

> Yet though thou troublest me, I must be meek;
> In weakness must be stout.

> Well, I will change the service, and go seek
> Some other master out.
> Ah, my dear God, though I am clean forgot,
> Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.
> (p. 183).

Empson's considers the last line to be an ambiguity by tautology, playing off notions of present and future love (pp. 183-84) (type 6, I, b).

Another related type of ambiguity is that which occurs as a result of irrelevant statements. This type of ambiguity is close to both the first and the seventh type of ambiguity:

> It is not merely a statement with various implications . . . which conflict; nor is it an essential contradiction, but a contradiction on matters not central to the writer's interests at the moment, or a contradiction which is thought of as capable of being resolved. Like the first type it may be hunted among similes. (p. 184).

Empson's example is from Pope's *Dunciad:*

> Then rose the seed of Chaos, and of Night,
> To blot out order, and extinguish light,
> Of dull and venal a new world to mould,
> And bring Saturnian days of lead and gold.
> (POPE, *Dunciad.*)

> The Saturnian was the Golden Age; Saturn was lead in astrology. *Gold* is intended to have the two sorts of meaning I have suggested, so that this is a fair example of the sixth type, in a very simple form. Evidently the contradiction is capable of being resolved; it is resolved into a joke. (p. 185).

This more complex type of ambiguity is designed to reflect an evasive state of mind, to show that lack of resolution is as human an activity as resolution of conflict.

The seventh type of ambiguity:

> is the most ambiguous that can be conceived, [and] occurs when the two meanings of the word, the two values of the ambiguity, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, so that the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind. (p. 192).

This can "convey an impression of conscious ornamentation . . . " by having two things exactly the same opposing each other, so one is drawn into a stasis of appreciation (see pp. 192-93). The contradiction may be meant to be resolved in one of two ways: "corresponding to thought and feeling" (type 7, I, a, i), or "corresponding to knowing and knowing one's way about the matter in hand" (type 7, I, a, ii) (p. 196).

Alternatively, this type of ambiguity may involve two statements which are very different, fitted together with ingenuity (type 7, II, a), or two statements which are alike, expressing the need for and difficulty of their separation (type 7, II, b) (see p. 196). The former is usually resolved by an ambiguity of type 7, I, a, i, and the latter by an ambiguity of type 7, I, a, ii.

Finally, the original contradiction may be resolved into an indefinite number of contradictions, in which case the reader may extract those meanings which s/he finds useful, and ignore others (type 7, III) (p. 197).

It can be argued that Empson's machinery of ambiguity, however it may be typified (certainly we can distinguish more than just seven types), works to establish the importance of key critical skills -- interpretation (choosing from many possible meanings), synthesis of ideas, recognition of the full complexity of a text or of standard cliched references used by authors. The critic is considered to be in a position to determine whether a section of a text is complex but its meanings are resolved or complex and unresolvable.

While Barthes' criticism acted upon a particular society and focussed upon reading texts in a different way as a means of undermining that society (a focus on how people act), Empson's criticism, like Bloom's, is based on a particular conception of how people think, and his criticism is a means of reinforcing that conception. It is for this reason that Richards' concept of Pure Sound would have been so foreign to Empson, for it indicates a kind of reasoning which Empson did not regard as indicative of a human mind, but instead appealing to the "animal" within.

It is worth comparing Empson's claims to those of Harold Bloom. Harold Bloom openly acknowledges that his work is an attempt to come to

terms with both previous criticism and poetry, and argues that the way to do this is to make the previous work appear belated, and thus dependent upon what one writes, so that one's own criticism in effect becomes the forerunner to both the preceding poetry and criticism under consideration.[17] There is a strong competitive streak in Harold Bloom's attitude towards criticism, with his insistence that each strong critic is trying to prove that s/he was "there" first. This is not apparent in the criticism of William Empson. Empson's troping of such predecessor critics as I. A. Richards emphasises his desire to encourage others to share his understanding of the human mind. The story he tells of poetry is that of guerilla warfare between the reader and language, the reader trying to pin poetry down, but the poem being written or possibly the nature of language being such that evasive action has already been undertaken. And this evasive action is characterised as ambiguity. This story mirrors a larger drama, that of the relationship between man and the world in which he finds himself. For Bloom, Empson and Barthes, writing is a polemical act -- an attempt to promulgate a personal vision. But the degree to which this is consciously recognised in each critic's criticism varies. Barthes is openly polemical, whereas Empson disguises his views under a general discussion of ambiguity in poetry.

Barthes developed his approach to "Sarrasine" in order to counter the emphasis on unity of the text (its "plan") that he found in French criticism,[18] an emphasis on unity which was seen as symptomatic of a bourgeois vision of society. Similarly, Empson's criticism developed as a reaction to those critics who argued that what mattered in poetry was not the meaning, but the Pure

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[17]See Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), *passim,* and also my chapter discussing this work.
[18]Roland Barthes, *S/Z.,* trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathon Cape, 1974), p. 90.

Sound, or the Atmosphere (see p. 8), though this cannot be construed as *prima facie* evidence of a desire to expound a different view of culture or society. Empson, like Barthes, assumed that a text is a construct, and asked: "Why has it been constructed in this fashion?" However, in focussing on the text as construct the problem of knowing whether it was deliberately constructed in the way it is describable as being constructed is pushed to one side. For Barthes, of course, this was a relatively minor problem for he was interested in texts from the point of view of the reader, trying to ascertain the extent to which texts can be seen as reinforcing the readers' complicity with bourgeois society. Furthermore, Barthes' desire to closely examine one text indicates a fundamental difference in approach. For Barthes elucidates his theories using one text and then argues that these theories can and do apply to any text, whereas Empson elucidated his theory of ambiguity using a range of texts and then argued that the concept of ambiguity could be considered central to Western poetry.

In this way Empson could avoid dealing with the problem of how one can determine in what ways a text was constructed (that is, how deliberately it was developed). In doing this Empson blurred the distinction between his version of a text and the notion of an authoritative (author's) version. This enabled him to slide over the question of the extent to which one can know an author's intention from reading a text.

Whilst Empson claimed that the machinery of ambiguity enables the reader to determine what an author meant, in practice Empson never explained how one can know an author's intention. It is not surprising that Empson failed to do this -- it's not possible! This failure does not detract from Empson's aesthetics, from his particular comments about particular poems.

While the machinery of ambiguity may be judged a failure as a means of unifying disparate local observations it does not rob those observations of their strength or relevance.

Roland Barthes' *S/Z*.

One of the central myths of structuralism is that texts, works of art, any object, can be fully described by focussing on form, on structure. Thus in Foucault's work we can find a text focussed on the form of a prison (*Discipline and Punish*), or one on the structures society built to contain insanity (*Madness and Civilisation*). Hindsight is a strong ally, and any structuralist interpretation (especially of cultural institutions) should be carefully examined. It is easy to create a structure where either none or a different structure exists by leaving out "minor" details as unworthy of attention. The same texts or institutions may support many different structures, each of which is only partially explanatory. Structuralism was popular with anti-bourgeois academics and others in the 1960s in part because it provided an opportunity to re-evaluate existing texts and institutions, to reclaim them from bourgeois society.

In *S/Z* Barthes focusses on a machinery of criticism (just as Empson used the machinery of ambiguity) in order to present a mode of interpretation that involves the reader as (co-) producer of texts rather than as passive consumer of them. The machinery of the five codes, like that of the seven types of ambiguity, is used to legitimise personal beliefs. These beliefs may be separated from the codes, whose critical function can be assessed in the same way that I assessed Empson's machinery of ambiguity. In this chapter I will

examine both Barthes' codes and the beliefs he sought to justify in order to understand how he characterised criticism and its function within society.

I.

Barthes' machinery of analysis consists of dividing the text into lexias and categorising these lexias by code. In order to understand how Barthes uses these codes and what they offer as critical tools we must first begin by noting what they are and how they are used. Barthes' five codes are: the hermeneutic code, or Voice of Truth, under which are listed "the various (formal) terms by which the enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed . . . ."[19] (p. 19); the semic code, or the Voice of the Person -- "the signifier par excellence because of its connotation . . . ." (p. 17), indicated without formal grouping so that it is unstable and not linked to a specific character or object (see p. 19); the symbolic code, or Voice of the Symbol, indicating a symbolic area, also structured to ensure multivalence and reversibility (that is, to ensure that one can enter the discourse at any stage) (see also p. 19); the code of actions -- the proairetic code, or the Voice of Empirics -- is a listing of the actions, and "the result of an artifice of reading: whoever reads the text amasses certain data under some generic titles for actions . . . [each] title embodies the sequence . . . " since each sequence can be named and "its basis is therefore more empirical than rational . . . " (p. 19); and finally the cultural codes, or the Voice of Science,[20] which refers "to a science or a body of knowledge . . . ." (p. 20).

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[19]Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Trans. Richard Miller. (London: Jonathon Cape, 1974), p. 19. From this point all references to this text in this chapter will be enclosed in parentheses after the relevant quotation or reference. All italics are Empson's unless otherwise specified.

[20]Ruth Gross argues that this is a mistranslation, and should read "The Voice of Knowledge." See "Rich Text/Poor Text: A Kafkan Confusion," *PMLA* , 95 (1980), p. 169.

Barthes admits that his division of the text into lexias is "arbitrary in the extreme, . . . imply[ing] no methodological responsibility, since . . . [this division] will bear solely on the signifier, whereas the proposed analysis bears solely on the signified." (p. 13). In effect he is admitting that other readings of "Sarrasine" using his method are still possible, although probably to a limited extent. Different people may divide the text in a different fashion, and thus notice the existence of a code in a passage which Barthes has not noted.

There are several questions raised by the invention of such a system of analysis: is there any overlap between the codes, and if so is this good or bad? Making allowances for the extremely close analysis, does Barthes reveal anything about the text which a bourgeois critic or a New Critical explication, say, would not reveal? Or, for that matter, could a New Critical explication reveal anything about the text which Barthes' approach cannot?

The first question that springs to mind is: given the emphasis that Barthes places on the lack of structure within and amongst these codes, would one expect them to be most apparent at what other (classic) critics would refer to as the climaxes of the text -- that is, the points at which questions raised by the plot are answered by some series of events (for example, when Sarrasine discovers La Zambinella is not female)? Would the frequency of appearance of each code be somehow related? In other words, would there be a crescendo of code occurrences leading to a climax of the text's apparent failure to cope with its subject matter? (However, by this appearance the text does in fact cope with itself). And yet would Barthes consider this concept to be too allied with the bourgeois notions of unity? Is this what Barthes would want his codes to display, given his emphasis on the text not as one tale nested within another,

without connection, but as a structure of two related tales related by hermeneutic, semic, and proairetic codes?

In order to examine the first aspect of this issue let us choose a climax, a point at which questions posed by several codes are answered in the story,and note the frequency with which each code is noted during the climax. Consider the section in which it is revealed to Sarrasine by Prince Chigi that La Zambinella is not a woman, but a castrato:

> "She? What she?" asked the old nobleman to whom Sarrasine had been speaking. "La Zambinella." "La Zambinella!" the Roman Prince replied. "Are you joking? Where are you from? Has there ever been a woman on the Roman stage? And don't you know about the creatures who sing female roles in the Papal States? I am the one, monsieur, who gave Zambinella his voice. I paid for everything that scamp ever had, even his singing teacher. Well, he has so little gratitude for the service I rendered him that he has never consented to set foot in my house. And yet, if he makes a fortune, he will owe it all to me."
>
> Prince Chigi may well have gone on talking for some time; Sarrasine was not listening to him. A horrid truth had crept into his soul. It was as though he had been struck by lightning. He stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the false singer. His fiery gaze exerted a sort of magnetic influence on Zambinella, for the *musico* finally turned to look at Sarrasine, and at that moment his heavenly voice faltered. He trembled! An involuntary murmur escaping the audience he had kept hanging on his lips completed his discomfiture; he sat down and cut short his aria.

> Cardinal Cicognara, who had glanced out of the corner of his eye to see what had attracted his protege's attention, then saw the Frenchman: he leaned over to one of his ecclesiastical aides-de-camp and appeared to be asking the sculptor's name. Having obtained the answer he sought, he regarded the artist with great attention and gave an order to an abbe, who quickly disappeared. (p. 250).

According to Barthes this section of the text has seventeen lexias. The hermeneutic code is noted five times, each time in relation to Enigma 6 (Who is La Zambinella?); the symbolic code only once (but twice for one instance: being the "Axis of the sexes" and "castration"); the semic code twice (in relation to stardom); the referential code also twice (reference to the history of music in the Papal states, and to Italianness); and the proairetic code ten times (in reference to "Incident", "Danger", and "Murder") (see pp. 184-90). It might be tempting to assume that there is a direct relationship between a climax and the frequency of occurrence of the hermeneutic and proairetic codes, and an inverse relationship with the frequency of occurrence of the symbolic, semic, and referential codes. But before drawing such a conclusion let us consider another climax.

> Sarrasine sat down before the terrified singer. Two huge tears welled from his dry eyes, rolled down his manly cheeks, and fell to the ground: two tears of rage, two bitter and burning tears.
>
> "No more love! I am dead to all pleasure, to every human emotion."

> So saying he seized a hammer and hurled it at the statue with such extraordinary force that he missed it. He thought he had destroyed this monument to his folly, and then took up his sword and brandished it to kill the singer. Zambinella uttered piercing screams. At that moment, three men entered and at once the sculptor fell, stabbed by three stilleto thrusts.
>
> "On behalf of Cardinal Cicognara," one of them said.
>
> "It is a good deed worthy of a Christian," replied the Frenchman as he died. (pp. 252-53).

A section containing ten lexias, according to Barthes. The hermeneutic code is not noted; the symbolic code is recorded twice ("contagion of castration" and "replication of bodies"); the semic code is also not noted; the referential code is noted once (code of Tears); and the proairetic code twelve times (several times twice for the same lexia. The terms recorded are: will-to-die, statue, threat, murder) (pp. 202-205). Clearly the hypothesis that there is a direct relationship between climax and the frequency of occurrence of the hermeneutic and proairetic codes, and an inverse relationship with the frequency of occurrence of the symbolic, semic, and referential codes, (postulated on the previous page) is false. It is plain that this hypothesis does not adequately characterize for Barthes the nature of the relationships between the five codes.

However, this only leads one to wonder whether Barthes would have felt such a correlation to be necessary. Given that the text is a network of codes, some correlation amongst the frequency of occurrence of the codes is to be expected, because one would expect such a correlation to indicate the climaxes

in the text -- that is, the points in this non-classic reading at which key features of the contract are evident, the points at which the text answers the questions it raises. One would expect a similar level of occurrences of the semic and symbolic codes at these points, for Barthes argues that the text's structure is formed out of the links given by these two codes to the apparently separate nested narratives (that of the narrator at the party, and the tale of Sarrasine and La Zambinella). If there is no relationship between the five codes, the implication is that either the division has at least not been correctly executed, or that maybe there are more or fewer than five codes.

Indeed, I think that there is some overlap between the five codes, in particular between the semic and the symbolic. Examining the classifications made (for example, "femininity"), it seems very hard to make a distinction between the two sets of terms. Consider the terms "the woman and the Snake" and "Mother and Son". Given Barthes' definitions of semic and symbolic, how would one classify these terms? It is not automatically apparent that the first is semic and the second symbolic. The problem becomes even more apparent when one considers the following pairs of terms: "Fragility" and "Weakness", "Composite" and "Castration", "Composite" and "The Reassembled Body". There is little point in continuing in this vein. It is plain that several of the terms classified as semic could equally be classified as symbolic, and vice versa. Furthermore, for no apparent reason some terms are used in both categories, such as "Wealth" (usually semic, but symbolic in lexia 36 (see p. 43); and also the reference to gold, lexia 50 (see p. 48), is classified as symbolic), the supernatural (usually semic, but classified as symbolic in the case of lexia 109 (see p. 69)).

Occasionally Barthes slips, in that he could record the existence of a term but does not, and his reasons for not doing so are unclear. For example, lexia 146 (see p. 87), where he describes the circulation of counterfeit money apparent in the passage, yet does not refer to the seme "Wealth". Also lexia 161 (see p. 94), where he notes that the lexia refers to the cultural code, but does not give it a "REF" citation. There are a few other instances of this failure to note the existence of a code whilst using it: lexia 212 (see p. 109) -- note that it is also a literary code under "REF"; lexia 295 (see p. 134) -- also a reference to the code of singers having protectors; lexia 443 (see p. 175) -- also a reference to the code of dreams, or of the unconscious; lexia 471 (see pp. 186-87) -- a reference to the Oedipal code: the idea of the rejected father; lexia 483 (see p. 190) -- a reference to the literary code of the mysterious, the gothic; and lexia 558 (see p. 214) -- a reference to wealth, but this seme is not noted. Of course, others may disagree. Perhaps this example gives some indication of the limited degree to which one can differ in interpretation (for want of a better word) when using this technique of classifying the text into five codes. A slightly more serious case is lexia 404 (see pp. 161-62), where La Zambinella's basis for declining an offer of love amounts to an equivocation about his sexuality. So I would note: "HER. Enigma 6: equivocation." However, such matters are not crucial to Barthes' work.

Let us consider lexias held to be only symbolic as against those held to be only semic, and note whether a clear distinction can be made between the two:

> (42) *It seemed that he was an enchanted being upon whom depended the happiness, the life, or the fortune of them all.*
> * SEM. Fascination. This signifier could lead to the truth, it

> being the castrato's nature to *enchant*, like a supernatural medium: thus Farinelli, who cured, or at least assuaged, the morbid melancholia of Philip V of Spain by singing to him daily (always the same melody for years on end). (pp. 45-46).

> (71) *Thereupon, she gathered up enough courage to look for a moment at this creature for which the human language had no name, a form without substance, a being without life, or a life without action.* * The neuter, the gender proper to the castrato, is signified by lack of soul (or animation: the inanimate, in the Indo-European languages, is the determinant of the neuter): the private repetition (*without . . .*) is the diagrammatical form of castration, the appearance of life in one lacking life (SYM. The neuter). ** The old man's portrait, which will follow and which is here rhetorically indicated, takes form within a *framework* established by the young woman (*gathered up enough courage to look . . .*), but by means of a dissolve of the original voice, the description will be carried out by the discourse: the body of the old man copies a painted model (SYM. Replication of bodies). (p. 54).

The two statements on their own do not seem vastly different. Both are statements about an individual's reaction to another individual. But not to consider them in context would be unfair to Barthes. The first statement was made describing the (then) mysterious old man, and the way in which he would be perceived by a person unaware of his history and his relationship to the Lantys. He is seen as an enigma. The second statement occurs shortly afterwards, also describing the old man. Again, the standpoint from which he

is perceived is that of an individual unaware of his connection with the Lantys, and bewildered by him. He is still seen as an enigma, but an unpleasant one.

Before coming to any conclusion let us consider another such instance:

> (171) *Astonished at the young artist's progress and intelligence, Bouchardon* * SEM. Genius (genius crowns the artist's vocation, cf. No. 173).
>
> (172) *soon became aware of his pupil's poverty; he helped him, grew fond of him, treated him like his own son.* * Bouchardon replaces not the father but the mother, whose absence (No. 153) has led the child into licentiousness, excess, anomie; like a mother, Bouchardon understands, cares for, helps (SYM. Mother and son). (p. 97).

Here the relationship is more marked. The first lexia refers to an individual (Sarrasine), and the second to one person's relationship with that individual. One would like to generalize and say that usually the semic code indicates a reference to the nature of the individual (as textual construct), and the symbolic code to the relationship the individual has with those around him/her. This would explain why "Antithesis" is placed under the symbolic code and not the semic. But clearly not all the lexias listed as symbolic deal with the relationship of the individual to those around him. Ignoring for the moment the possibility of typographical errors, one is left with the realization that if "initiation" is considered to imply relationship, and thus:

> (213) *The young sculptor's senses were, so to speak, lubricated by the accents of Jomelli's sublime harmony. The*

langourous novelties of these skilfully mingled Italian voices plunged him into a delicious ecstasy. * Although La Zambinella has not yet appeared, structurally Sarrasine's passion has begun, his *seduction* inaugurated by a preliminary ecstasy; a long series of bodily states that will lead Sarrasine from capture to conflagration (ACT. "Seduction": 1: ecstasy). ** REF. Italian music. *** Hitherto, Sarrasine has been sequestered from sex; thus, this evening is the *first time* he knows pleasure and loses his virginity (SYM. Initiation) (p. 109).

then surely the following lexia also implies "initiation"and some relationship with others:

(164) *Whether copying the characters in the pictures that decorated the choir, or improvising, he always left behind him some gross sketches whose licentiousness shocked the younger fathers; evil tongues maintaining that the older Jesuits were amused by them.* * SEM. Licentiousness (kneading is an erotic activity). ** REF. Psychology of ages (the young are strict; the old, permissive). (p. 96).

Furthermore, recalling Barthes' own definition of the two terms, symbolic dealing with a symbolic area (an unfortunately circular definition that does not tell us much), and semic with the signifier, not linked to a particular person or object (see p. 19), it is arguable that such a distinction has not always been carefully made. And so, perhaps, "Licentiousness" has been wrongly classified as semic. But then, even if Barthes' distinctions are in

themselves sound (an issue I would not like to prejudge), his application of them to the text may not always be apt.

But the question is: does one want to make this distinction between semic and symbolic codes; or, more accurately, has such a distinction in fact been made? Given that in some cases it will be particularly difficult to decide whether a reference is to character (in the New Critical sense) alone, or the character in relation to another, a case can be made for uniting the two codes to form one. This notion is not far-fetched, despite the lack of correlation between the two codes. Indeed, this lack of correlation is an argument in favour of conflating the two codes. For although ostensibly dealing with different issues, given that that which separates one code from the other is unclear in Barthes' practice, that such distinctions are not easily made, and that both deal with the "individual", it would seem reasonable to combine the two.

A counterargument is given by Rice and Schofer, who point out that the semic code refers to connotations, and uses metonymy, synecdoche, and metaphor. They consider it to be paradigmatic, depending on a syntagmatic relationship which the reader establishes, and to work by metaphor, using resemblance, causality, inclusion, and opposition.[21] However, the symbolic, when considered as a code, usually refers to both processes, and it is for this reason that the difference between the two codes is not apparent.

To make my argument plain: the term symbol refers to denotation -- something standing for something else. Thus both metaphor and metonymy (that is, the transfer of a descriptive term from one object to a different but

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[21]Donald Rice and Peter Schofer, "*S/Z*: Rhetoric and Open Reading," *L'Esprit Createur*, 22, No. 1 (1982), pp. 25-26.

analogous object; and the substitution for the name of a thing, the name of an attribute of it) are examples of the use of symbol, as is synecdoche.[22] From this point it is easy to argue that the difference between semic and symbolic is not only unclear in the text, but does not yield insights into the structure of the text. Thus one is in fact dealing with one code that has been unevenly divided into the semic and symbolic codes -- this is the symbolic.

But a further question must be asked: are Rice and Schofer correct? Let us reconsider the above example of lexias 213 and 164. The argument would be that lexia 213 displays the use of a metaphor in a paradigmatic fashion, based on a syntagmatic relationship which the reader establishes. So that lexia is based on a set of propositions the reader derives from the text, uses metaphor -- via resemblance and causality (and possibly also opposition). And lexia 164? -- it does not use, synecdoche, nor metonymy; but Barthes' application of the semic term "Licentiousness" does show a use of metaphor. And so, as I noted, the distinction between semic and symbolic is not a clear one. Although such a distinction is possible, what Rice and Schofer have failed to show is that this is the distinction Barthes makes in *S/Z*. I think it is clear that if such a distinction is intended, it is certainly not made consistently. Since the text does not indicate any clear distinction between the semic and symbolic codes, one may as well consider uniting the two codes to form one -- the symbolic code.

However, such an approach would then require one to conflate the resulting code with the proairetic code, since it also deals with the "individual" and his/her relations with others. This leaves one with three codes: the

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[22]I have relied on the Oxford English Dictionary for all the definitions of terms used in this paragraph.

referential, the hermeneutic, and that of the character. The hermeneutic code could, in the old parlance, also be called the thematic approach, for it deals with issues thrown up by the text, questions which the text answers, or at least endeavours to answer. "Character" is clearly a self-conscious use of the term -- an awareness of it in terms of the structure of the work rather than any psychological sense. The referential code could be considered equivalent to the New Critical concept of allusion, or at least potential for allusion.

Of course, one need not agree with or care about my argument that the codes can be condensed of reworked, that there is an overlap between the codes. One could instead note that any overlap between the codes is irrelevant because the text is a network which one wants to enter at any point, and that overlap between the codes is one way of ensuring that at any point no reader is forced to continually follow one path, but instead always has several voices to which s/he may pay attention.

Even if this is so, one can still consider why Barthes wants to avoid more traditional terms, why doesn't he simply complain that critics have tended to talk of texts as though of people, rather than create new critical terms? One argument for the creation of new critical terms is that the terms currently in use -- character, theme, allusion -- are tainted. For years these terms have been used to refer to "real" characters, to undertake psychological examination of motives, and to consider the themes of a work in psychological terms. These words may be seen as beyond redemption. They are beyond redemption because of their association with bourgeois conceptions of reality and of people, conceptions which Barthes wishes to discredit. Thus the use of codes is part of Barthes' attempt to go beyond bourgeois criticism. To use such

terms as character, theme, allusion, is to run the risk of being seen as essentially accepting bourgeois ideology.

Let us consider whether the commentary Barthes has written on "Sarrasine" could also have been arrived at by a "self-conscious" thematic or character-oriented method of criticism, which at the same time does not view the characters as open to psychological interpretation because they are constructs, not beings. I want to sketch such a piece of criticism, not using Barthes' five codes. Here one can only make assertions, for there is no comparable critique of "Sarrasine" as detailed as Barthes'. But I believe that most of what Barthes has written could be covered by an approach which did not use his concepts of the codes, and which did not examine the text in the same degree of detail.

One can envisage the outline of such an essay: the text of "Sarrasine" forms a "dance" created around its central character, Sarrasine. Sarrasine is deceived by La Zambinella and his friends, and by himself. The story is a study of the result of mingled desire and delusion. It is not so much that desire causes delusion, but that each can fire the other to greater heights. However, one aspect of the delusion must be present in order to complete the pyramid which Sarrasine scales -- the belief that one has the ability to see the truth of things. This is the belief of the realist artist, even such an artist as Balzac. Sarrasine falls prey not just to La Zambinella and his friends, but to himself. His creation of the statue of La Zambinella is a statement of his belief that he can see the underlying truth about people, and reveal it through his art. But his art is hollow because La Zambinella is not as Sarrasine conceived him, and also because to be castrated is to be hollow, devoid of sexuality. Sarrasine's desire to destroy the statue is also a desire to destroy any reminder of his old

self-confidence, and also of his own desire, perverted through no fault of his own. The tale also notes the decadence of a society in which people contract for sex in return for a short story, or amass fortunes by prostituting themselves. The story in which the tale of Sarrasine himself is embedded reflects the narrator's position. For the narrator desires Mme de Rochefide as Sarrasine desired La Zambinella. But in this instance the consummation of such desire is not halted by physical inability (one type of emptiness), but by emotional inability (another type of emptiness). It, too, shows how contracts may be tentatively formed -- that between the narrator and Mme de Rochefide paralleling the implicit one made by La Zambinella with Sarrasine -- and broken, or formed without any intention of their being held. It is also about what it is to be "other", to be denied access to a full range of human experience, either due to emotional incapacity (in the case of Sarrasine and Mme de Rochefide) or physical disability (in the case of La Zambinella).

Clearly this is a very rough outline of a possible approach to the story, and there are many others. The point is simply that most of the statements made by Barthes can be made using a thematic or character oriented approach, bearing in mind that one is dealing with an artifice, a construction, not a real episode dealing with real people. Though, to what extent my short piece of criticism was dependent on Barthes' account is undecidable, given that I read his account first.

It is plain that the sort of analysis just outlined does highlight some aspects of the tale which Barthes' analysis does not. The most obvious difference is that this approach encourages one to move back and forth between the story of the narrator and that of Sarrasine, making connections between the two to a greater extent than Barthes does in *S/Z*. It also allows one to examine

in detail the relationship between the themes of the story as presented through the relationship of the characters far more readily than Barthes has done. It could also entail a discussion of the nature of "femininity" as a construct in the work -- another issue skirted by Barthes.

But rather than comment on the advantages of a familiar method, it is worth considering some points which Barthes considers to arise "naturally" from his use of the five codes -- points which would be obscured by using the usual critical technique. One such instance is his comment on lexia 47 (see p. 47), where the Count is shown to be no favourite of the old man. Barthes notes the inversion of the usual sexual stereotypes. For in the Lanty family it is Mme de Lanty who has effective control, and her husband is the person whose authority is uncertain (see p. 47). This role reversal has important ramifications later in the text when dealing with what it is to be a castrato, to be a man, or to be a woman. Another such instance is his comment on the narrator's meditation on "the human coin", noting that it is symbolic of the lack of communication, and would probably be recognized as such by non-Structuralist critics. But Barthes' description of the antithesis involved and how it is broached is, as far as I know, unique to his method, and highlights the disparities and unities of the text. For example, it deals with the relationship between Mme de Rochefide and the old man in a simple fashion, yet noting more than a simple contrast, linking in themes of the text more neatly than the usual approach would allow. Yet another such example is Barthes' comment on the description of the old man as clearly consumptive, pointing out that the body is the source of interest in the old man (see lexia 75, p. 56). This is noted, I believe, at a far earlier stage than a traditional approach would afford, where the emphasis on the second nested narrative and the linear

approach to criticism of the tale would have delayed the making of the connection between the old man and La Zambinella. Finally, lexia 83 (see p. 59), describing the old man's appearance, is worth considering. Barthes notes that the old man is painted, and thus his own double -- therefore tautological, and so sterile. The train of thought links in with the concern with painting, with the nature of the connection between art and reality -- for one of the major questions about La Zambinella is the connection between art and reality (artificial though the distinction may be) as manifest in his person. And yet Barthes only hints at this.

Non-structuralist criticism (such as that practiced by the New Critics) can characterize the five codes as simply an inferior way of looking at texts. This is not to say that the relationship between bourgeois criticism and such criticism as Barthes produces may not be important. J. Hillis Miller argued that in the literary world, as in many other spheres, hosts and parasites are interdependent -- neither can survive without the other -- making the host in effect a parasite, and vice versa.[23] If one agrees with this argument, one could claim that Barthes is dependent upon mainstream (bourgeois) criticism as something against which he can react, and that bourgeois criticism is in turn dependent upon criticism which seeks to subvert it (as Barthes' criticism does). But in what way can bourgeois criticism be dependent upon a subversive criticism which does not subvert? Only in so far as the existence of such criticism verifies the bourgeois nature of bourgeois criticism, and underpins the notion that all criticism is essentially bourgeois -- to do with consumption rather than production. In *S/Z* not only has Barthes not succeeded in his

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[23]See J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," in *Deconstruction and Criticism,* Harold Bloom et al (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 221.

attempt to characterize mainstream (bourgeois) criticism as essentially fascist, but bourgeois criticism can easily characterize his own criticism as limited, a weaker version of itself.

II.

Barthes emphasizes his desire for a criticism that is not *explication de texte* in the traditional sense (see p. 90). He constantly emphasizes his desire to make plain the plurality of the text, thus his comment on literature and painting, "Why not wipe out the difference between them (purely one of substance)? Why not forego the plurality of the 'arts' in order to affirm more powerfully the plurality of 'texts'?" (p. 56). To be concerned to show that a text is plural implies a prevailing counter-view that considers texts in terms of their unity. Indeed, this is the traditional approach to the classic text (as Roland Barthes defines it) in French criticism. So not only is Barthes trying to describe and impose a vision of society (the outline of which will unfold upon a closer examination of his criticism), but he is also trying to disarm traditional French criticism, which implies another vision of society.

Barthes does not claim inadequacy for particular critics (no one is singled out for special mention), instead he is concerned with the inadequacies of criticism in general as he wants us to believe it was practiced -- its emphasis on unity, on seeing society as a whole rather than as a collection of discrete individuals, on maintaining the status quo (in itself a mythical construct), and thus the dominance of the bourgeoisie in French society and letters.[24] His concern is in fact with the bourgeois vision of society, although he takes no pains to outline or define clearly what such a vision may be. As *S/Z* proceeds certain "values" come to be associated with "the bourgeois" -- a desire to maintain the status quo, to consume rather than produce, to be passive rather

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[24]See David Bellos, *Balzac Criticism in France 1859-1900: The Making of a Reputation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), *passim,* for historical background.

than active, and so on. In general, that which Barthes reacts against can be classified as bourgeois -- if only because of his desire to differentiate his stance from any view or opinion associated with the bourgeoisie. The manifestations of this desire should become apparent as this chapter progresses.

His concern with the bourgeois in literature extends to his definitions of readerly and writerly -- for it is the readerly text which he sees as the classic (bourgeois) text (for example, "Sarrasine" and other works by Balzac), whereas the writerly text is characterized as essentially anti-bourgeois because it aims to make the reader a producer, not a consumer, of texts (see p. 4). Thus Barthes' criticism is openly subversive, aiming to undermine the bourgeois concept of consumption (which is seen as fundamental to bourgeois society) by using the consumed product for production. Economically speaking, Barthes is redefining final products for consumption as intermediate products to be used in the process of production. He is shifting the focus on texts away from consumption (a bourgeois activity or attitude) towards production. Yet at the same time he does not openly associate the bourgeois and the desire to consume (although he does provide broad hints, e.g. his discussion of the desire to throw away stories once consumed as part of the "commercial and ideological habits of our society . . . " (p. 15)) -- the reader is left to make the connection, to engage in an act of production.

So for Barthes to reject a consideration of the unity of the text, and therefore *explication de texte,* and to emphasize the structure rather than the plan of "Sarrasine" (see p. 90), is for him to reject a view of the text as a unified whole, a response to situations in life, presenting a desirable attitude towards life to be consumed by the reader; and rather to see it as a construct, a contract. Thus Barthes is trying to tell a different story about texts,

emphasizing their plurality, but also their bourgeois origins -- distancing himself from such texts by declaring himself not bourgeois (often overtly, as in "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*),[25] and at the same time admitting his fascination with things bourgeois by constantly writing about them. To describe the text as created not on the basis of a plot, but on the basis of a structure -- in this case, economic exchange (that is what the text is "about") -- is to betray one's concern not with the economics of bourgeois society, but with its vision of reality.

One of the cornerstones of the bourgeois conception of reality as Barthes characterizes it is that it is linear, that it tells a story, and that therefore in stories all the elements should be orchestrated around a central theme. Thus Barthes begins by attacking this conception of the text, instead positing a vision of the text as plural (see pp. 4-5). Barthes notes that "To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what *plural* constitutes it." (p. 5). It is worth comparing this statement with Empson's definition of ambiguity, "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."[26] At first it would seem that Barthes' statement is text-oriented, implying that the plural exists in the text, and that it only takes an aware reader to appreciate it, whereas Empson seems reader-oriented -- who picks up its "verbal nuances." As we have seen, to accept this as Empson's view of the relationship between a reader and a text is to fail to appreciate how complex a matter the interpretation of texts is for Empson. But Barthes' statement also gives rise to some queries: does plurality lie in the text, or is it something

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[25]Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and translated by Annette Lavers (Frogmore, Hertfordshire: Granada, 1973), pp. 109-59.
[26]William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953), p. 1.

Barthes would have us believe? I am inclined to think that Barthes would have us believe that texts are plural, and that this is the cornerstone of Barthes' myth of the text and, for that matter, the basis of many a structuralist approach to textual criticism. It is the basis of his way of using classic writing (normally associated with a bourgeois view of life) to create a criticism which is anything but bourgeois.

So when Barthes talks of connotation as the trace of "that limited plural on which the classic text is based" (p. 8), one cannot help wondering whether such a text is limited, or whether that is the way in which Barthes would have us consider such a text. To see the classic text as an infinite network (see p. 12), and at the same time to insist that the plural of the classic text is limited is puzzling, and indicates some tension in Barthes' rejection of bourgeois ideology. It could be argued that the way in which Barthes treats this text undermines his argument that classic texts are limited,[27] in that his treatment of "Sarrasine" makes clear just how free of limitations classic texts are. But I think this is a symptom of Barthes' attempt to cope with the classic text, and thus with the bourgeois. On the one hand there is the emphasis on the bourgeois, and even on plurality as an aspect of the bourgeois (thus the connotations of gold described on p. 40), and on the other hand there is the claim that the *"readerly eye"* is a bourgeois constraint on our reading of texts (see pp. 29-30). Cutting across Barthes' notions of plurality and the classic text is the claim that the idea that the text contains insignificant elements is a bourgeois notion, and that texts should be seen as containing no insignificant elements (pp. 4-15).

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[27]See Susan R. Suleiman, "The Question of Readability in Avant-Garde Fiction," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 6, Nos. 1 & 2 (1981/2), pp. 17-35.

Barthes' attitude towards connotation as "the way into . . . that limited plural on which the classic text is based" (p. 8), implies a categorisation of connotation as a tool of bourgeois critics, like, say, William Empson. This attitude allows Barthes to conveniently ignore other critics, having discredited both their beliefs as to a desirable structure for society and their critical tools.

Consider also Barthes' opinion of the nature of the dichotomy of subjectivity / objectivity, seeing both as "an imaginary system" limiting of the plural of the text, considering both to essentially imply that the reader consumes, that reading is a "a parasitical act" (p. 10) -- and then he concludes therefore are both bourgeois notions, the validity of which he denies. Once something has been characterized as bourgeois, having established this as an evil, then it can be put to one side as "false". That which is not "false" must, logically, be true (or at worst indeterminate).

Reading need not be "false". Furthermore, Barthes' emphasis on the need to re-read texts makes plain his desire to engage in an act of reading which is primarily not an act of consumption -- "contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us 'throw away' the story once it has been consumed ('devoured') . . . " (p. 15) -- but of production, for re-reading "multiplies [the text] . . . in its variety and its plurality . . . ." (p. 16).

Barthes has a range of beliefs about the nature of the bourgeois: that it is anti-plural, that it uses certain tools -- e.g. connotation, subjectivity -- but in fact limit the text, and that it uses irony to limit meaning. We are dealing with a conception of the bourgeois as fascist ideology, an ideology which limits interpretation. It is the conception Barthes would have us, his readers, believe.

There are, after all, other possible beliefs about what it is to be bourgeois. It is the idea of the bourgeois as natural and simple which Barthes would deny, and therefore the notion that bourgeois novels are "based on the operation of solidarity . . . ." (p. 23). He notes that:

> The (ideological) goal of [the technique of writing in a readerly fashion] . . . is to naturalize meaning and thus to give credence to the reality of the `story . . . . paradoxically, language, the integral system of meaning, is employed to desystematize secondary meanings . . . . (p. 23).

Yet it is worth noting that in trying to cope with the bourgeois attempt to naturalize what is seen as an unnatural act practised upon language, he has chosen a story which deals with the unnatural to do so.

Roland Barthes sees the structure of "Sarrasine" as being the story "of a contract . . . of a force (the narrative) and the action of this force on the very contract controlling it." (p. 90). The implication of such a statement is that the work is not a story which represents life, but rather a fleshing out of certain bourgeois concerns -- the nature of language, of the body, and of money (and therefore contracts) (see p. 215). It is this attitude as evident in the text that marks it as a classic text (using Barthes' definition of the term). To this extent the text is "representative" of life, or at least of bourgeois attitudes humans can have in relation to issues that concern them. For one to consider "Sarrasine" in the classic fashion would be to consider these concerns to be evident in every Western society (at least) at virtually any stage of its development, and to

consider such concerns to be natural and therefore not requiring further attention. Barthes, in his movement away from what he perceives to be the classic approach to the text, denies that such issues need no further attention, and uses the division of the text into voices as a way of formulating concerns he finds evident in the text. But this division is also a way of limiting the impact of such concerns by considering them to be constructs.

The main reason for Barthes' creation and use of the five codes in dealing with the text is his argument that they do not encourage the critic to see the characters as real, or to see the story as anything more than a structure, woven out of these codes (see p. 21). One logical conclusion of this approach is to consider irrelevant the opinions of the author of the text regarding the concerns of that text. The text is seen as writing itself. However, one could also conclude that the author's opinions are important given such an approach, for it is the author who has manufactured the text.

But how many of these codes were planned by the author, or are clearly part of the plan of the text? The question of intention is side-stepped by Barthes. Even if one cannot consider the intention of the text, one can consider the extent to which the text has a plan. Of course, if one believes that the aim of criticism is to create as many different interpretations of the text as possible, then any allusion which seems plausible is an allusion which is part of the text-plan. But this raises another question -- what is the criterion by which the plausibility of an allusion is tested? If texts are indeterminate and plural, then any allusion is made by the text. If reading is considered from the reader's point of view (what is plausible is what the reader thinks is plausible, not what the author intended), then the problem of what is plausible disappears. But if

texts are seen as products of authors, as Empson sometimes thought of them, then the question of plausibility and how one decides it becomes crucial.

Given that the five codes were designed by Barthes to ensure that readers did not examine the text in the usual bourgeois fashion, and thus find that the text confirms the bourgeois concept of society, the failure of these codes to allow the distinction in types of criticism (bourgeois versus Barthesian) is serious. It indicates that Barthes has not successfully denied the role of the author in the creation of a text, nor the role of the bourgeois society in interpreting it.

III.

What is Barthes' philosophy of the text? There are certain assumptions which Barthes make plain at the outset which are worth examining. The most important of these is that the best texts are not closed (pp. 3-12). So the criticism of Structuralism that it results in discovering that the best stories are highly structured tales, like those of Conan Doyle, would seem to be unfair,[28] firstly because *S/Z* is not an example of Structuralist criticism, and secondly because, as Barthes shows, "Sarrasine" is not a closed text -- it is at least partially open (adopting Barthes' definitions of these terms).

An assumption with which Barthes begins is that a text not only has structure, but that it must also have a plurality of meanings for it to be considered a good text. His argument that the function of the hermeneutic code is to thicken the enigma by outlining it, and that character should be subordinate to plot (see p. 62), is not a necessary correlative of such an approach, nor is it a particularly new notion. What Barthes desires, then, is a text that is structured, with a plurality of meanings at any particular stage, in which plot takes precedence over character (in the more naive sense of the word) -- which makes it sound rather like Empson's vision of poetry. It is an approach with which one may not agree, but it is hardly new, nor a necessary outcome of the kind of criticism in which Barthes engages.

Another assumption Barthes makes is that the function of each text is to "cohere . . . by the infinite paradigm of difference, subjecting it from the outset to a basic typology, to an evaluation." (p. 3). Linking this to the notion

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[28]This simplification of structuralism is put forward by Philip Thody in his *Roland Barthes: A Conservative Estimate* (London and Basingstoke: The MacMillan Press, 1977), pp. 119-20.

that the reader writes the text (p. 10), one cannot help but conclude that Barthes accepts that each reader brings his/her own particular ideology (systems of beliefs) to a text, and that this is not a bad thing or is, perhaps, inescapable.

But the notion that one should begin by re-reading the text is strange (see pp. 15-16). It is true that when one re-reads the result is that one is more aware of the clues placed in the text by the author which hint at the outcome of the tale, of the structure of the text -- aspects of the text masked by the desire to know the outcome during the first reading. Much of the structure of the text, its clues, etc., one cannot hope to recognize during a first reading, no matter how one tries to read carefully. It is true that on re-reading a text one is more aware of its plurality (as opposed to the classic notion of unity). But this does lead to a view of the text as a Rubik's cube, a puzzle to be played with, to be solved.

There are a whole range of assumptions Barthes makes about the nature of words, or of the world, which colour his criticism. For example, Barthes argues that beauty is only describable by analogy or tautology (see pp. 33-34), but that ugliness is directly describable. But the old man is not described as ugly, but as arousing certain reactions (e.g. cold, p. 42), as being old, like a lunatic, like a machine, or a sleep-walker (see pp. 49-50), or as consumptive, like a ship of death (see p. 56). Clearly to then argue that the old man is the named (because ugly) unnameable (because "supernatural") relies on the notion that beauty is the unnamed (because beautiful) unnameable (because if perfect, then also "supernatural"). Naming and namelessness are the basis on which Barthes defines metaphysical conceptions of beauty and ugliness (see pp. 33-34).

A similar dichotomy can be found in his equating power and (male) potency. He claims that because women wield power in "Sarrasine" they must be castrators (see p. 36). It is interesting to consider the story in the light of the dichotomy of castrating/castrated paralleling that of active/passive, potent and impotent. Of course, one could criticise this dichotomy as being a syllogism with one term not drawn from the universe of the text: only passive characters are not castrators (this being based on his own beliefs), the women in "Sarrasine" are not passive, therefore they are castrators. The use of syllogisms, with one premise drawn from Barthes' own set of beliefs, in order to draw conclusions about the text is a common practice in *S/Z*.

Similarly, in his discussion of the letter "Z" (see pp. 106-107) it becomes apparent that Barthes has a set of associations with the letter which he then uses to draw associations within the text. For "Z" can also be associated with peace and sleep (thus the cartoon representation of a man snoring). It is the letter of castration, in that it is the first letter of the name "Zambinella", only in this story. Drawing upon one's own associations is to be expected given Barthes' belief in criticising texts from the reader's point of view. However, this leaves Barthes open to criticism for not making a broader range of references and picking premisses for his syllogisms. Barthes avoids defining in what ways the text can define the reader's interpretation of it, yet his own criticism contains an implicit acknowledgement that this is how texts (or maybe authors) operate on readers.

A consideration of some of the assumptions Barthes makes about the nature of texts may prove more fruitful. One of these assumptions is that structure is not design, and that all elements of a text signify (see p. 51, and it is implied on p. 182). Everything signifies something. But how calculating is

this text, any text, any reader? Does every word always have so much meaning? The text or, for that matter, the reader, may not require that every word be so charged with meaning, or that every word refer to all possible interpretations of it.

At times Barthes does seem to imply that the existence of the author is crucial at least to the production of the text. He describes how the voices of the text are interwoven by hand (see p. 160). By whose hand? Surely this is an implicit acknowledgement of the importance of the author in the production of the text. And if the author is so crucial to the production of the text, as discussions about the relationship between the text and reality also imply, then surely the author must have some role in the use of the text as a factor of production. Barthes tacitly acknowledges this, which is why in his program for modern literature he must consider how the author may be removed from the text. Although not strictly relevant to this discussion, his attitude towards the concept of authorial presence is interesting. He argues that if the author sees "his life as a *bio-graphy* (in the etymological sense of the word)" (p. 211), then he will not make himself the sole authority in relation to the text (see pp. 211-12). This argument is simply illogical. It is based on the belief that if one is aware of one's presence in a text, one can ensure one's absence. As many modern novels have shown, for example, *Ulysses*, this is by no means an easy task, and probably impossible -- for any style is a signature, a mark of presence; even a description of an experiment implies the existence of its author, and betrays it despite the use of the passive and other such devices.

Classic texts often contain evidence of being constructs, as though deliberately placed in the text by the author to remind the reader that s/he is only "reading a story". Barthes' implied conclusion that authors of classic

texts wish to be fascist in relation to the determination of meaning (for otherwise they would not dictate the forms of the text's meaning to the reader) does not appear to be true. It may be the case that an author cannot avoid dictating the forms of the text's meaning, even if s/he is aware of the possibilities of such a "dictatorship".

Let us focus a little more clearly on Barthes' conception of texts, of language, and so forth. He argues that the function of the sentence "is to justify the culture of the narrative" (p. 127). And that:

> writing is *active*, for it acts for the reader: it proceeds not from an author but from a *public scribe*, a notary institutionally responsible not for flattering his client's tastes but rather for registering at his dictation the summary of his interests, the operations by which, within an economy of disclosure, he manages this merchandise: the narrative. (p. 152).

There seems to be some disparity between these two opinions, for the former implies that the text need have nothing to do with any culture other than that which it creates (and therefore also implies that the function of the sentence is also to justify the culture of the narrative), whereas the latter implies that the text must somehow reflect the culture of the reader -- his interests, and so forth. Later, Barthes notes that ultimately the narrative has no object, and concerns only itself (see p. 213), implying that although the narrative may have something to do with the culture of the reader, it ultimately does not. But how can this be the case? What is it for a narrative to deal with the concerns of its

readers but ultimately be unrelated to them? And in what ways can a narrative concern only itself? Indeed, could such a narrative exist? I doubt it, for then it would be unreadable, having no reference which the reader could understand (apart, perhaps, from the notion of "narrative"). The implication of this approach is that the ideal narrative would have nothing to do with any reader -- it would not need to be readable, would not require a reader. But then, why bother writing, or, more correctly, why bother being written?

Alternatively, if the dividing line between that which is suggested by a text and that which is suggested by a reader is irrelevant (an argument noted earlier), then what does it mean for a narrative to concern only itself? Does it mean that any reader's concerns, be they bourgeois or otherwise, are to be automatically ignored? If so, then this is locking the gate to ensure that no interpretation is possible. If not, then does it mean that any reader's concerns may be read into an unconcerned narrative?

If this is the case there can be no "privileged" or "superior" criticism -- neither bourgeois nor otherwise. Then Barthes cannot discredit bourgeois criticism (it is as valid as his criticism), but only show that another type of criticism (that focussed on reading as an act of production) is equally or even more interesting. But even this begs the question, can reading be productive if texts are unrelated to the culture of their readers (in this case a culture of production rather than consumption)? Presumably this is possible, but then the text, any text, becomes merely an excuse for production or consumption -- not intrinsically different from any other excuse for production or consumption.

Barthes' concept of realism is also interesting and worth examining. He believes that realism in fiction is the copying of a depicted copy of the real,

thus placing reality at yet a further remove from experience (see p. 55). But from such a transformation reality itself is made. He then notes that a real body is the replication of the notion of the human body set up by the arts (in particular, the visual arts), and this replication can only be interrupted by leaving nature and moving towards certain ideals. What is interesting is how such notions affect his concept of reading, of the text.

For Barthes then argues that a realistic reading is one which allows meanings to move around, and that the figure is not the sum of meanings, but an additional one (see p. 61). Certainly the notion of the figure as the sum of meanings seems reasonable, but the argument that a realistic reading is one which allows meanings to move around is based, implicitly, on the notion that ideal meanings or concepts permeate the text, and that it is on this level that the text can approach or broach reality. This almost Platonic conception of text-formation lies uneasily with Barthes' own rebellion against bourgeois writing and criticism. It seems that there is some confusion in Barthes' conception of the relationship between the text, the author, and an undefined reality. This confusion occurs because of his desire on the one hand to condemn the bourgeois conception of the real, and on the other to accept that it has a place in any and all texts -- be it as the origin or the far point (as a prospective code -- see p. 167).

The extent of this confusion is plain in Barthes' description of the scene in which the narrator and Mme de Rochefide discuss the painting of the Adonis. To note that "this is the only homogeneous area, within which no one tells a lie" (p. 74) is to beg the question: what is it for a text to lie? Given the belief that the discourse, which is the network of the five codes, is the text, then does the discourse lie in this instance? For we are being misled as to the

nature of the model of the painting. But this is something Barthes does not note. It seems that his approach cannot provide answers to such questions. Indeed, it cannot even raise them. A text can only be considered to lie if there is a referent not within the text which is referred to as the truth. If this is not the case, the text simply states -- the concept of lying is irrelevant.

IV.

There are some aspects of "Sarrasine" which Barthes' approach does highlight, just as there are some aspects it glosses over. Barthes' explication of the mechanics of antithesis is masterly, explaining clearly how each term is compared, contrasted, re-examined, before juxtaposition. An interesting point he also makes is that the story deals with juxtaposition rather than resolution (see pp. 26-28). Certainly for the body of most short stories this would seem to be the case.

Another aspect of the work which is well brought out by this method is that of "symbolic chains". For example, Paris is empty and cold, its emptiness implying castration -- so Paris corresponds symbolically to the physical impossibility of procreating (see p. 40). Of course, one can disagree with the conclusion drawn, but the method draws the conclusion quickly and neatly. On the other hand, Barthes can occasionally slip and draw a conclusion which does not seem to be warranted. For example, when the narrator and Mme de Rochefide are alone in the room with the painting of Adonis, Barthes notes that the light in the room is that of the moon (see p. 70). Yet the text states that it is lamplight. I can find no justification for Barthes' drawing the conclusion that it is moonlight. The light is like that of the moon, that is plain, but it is not moonlight. Barthes has momentarily confused signifier and signified. Yet Barthes' method of criticism does highlight the fact that form (which includes "symbolic chains") can affect what can happen in a tale (the noting of the structural pattern of the tale).

This method of criticism also explains Sarrasine's deception very nicely, carefully noting the syllogisms involved, which premisses are false, and so

forth (for example, p. 148). But this seems to be a product less of the method and more of the mind behind it. One does not need Barthes' five codes in order to explore Sarrasine's self-deception in terms of syllogisms. And the method does have its failings, many of which we have already noted. One of the most important aspects of "Sarrasine" which is pushed to one side because of the strong emphasis on the five codes is the nature of femininity and how it relates to La Zambinella (or La Zambinella to it, for that matter). This is only skirted by Barthes, who never comes to grips with the comparison, tending to place all females as castrators, all males as passive, and La Zambinella as having qualities of both. This, I believe, does not do justice to the text, for it glosses over the differences between the characters for the sake of highlighting the one theme considered to be important -- that of castration. Yet again Barthes' ideology takes control of his criticism.

Furthermore, Barthes' use of the word "classic" to indicate whatever fiction that is realist in style is problematic because he assumes that the classic text (as he describes it) is not aware of its fictive nature, whereas it is plain from most such texts that the author (or maybe the text, to use Barthes' terminology) is aware of the fictive nature of the text[29] -- thus the text of *Jane Eyre* addresses the reader, making one aware that one is engaged in the act of reading a fiction. This use of the term "the classic" is deliberate on Barthes' part, a distancing effect, it is a step in the chain of reasoning developed to show that bourgeois notions are necessarily fascist (as noted earlier).

The upshot of these assumptions is that they colour Barthes' criticism, more so than the five codes he invented. For, as we can see, these terms can

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[29]Christopher Norris, "Roland Barthes: The View from Here," *Critical Quarterly*, 20, No. 1, (1978), p. 31.

be dispensed with, resulting in the criticism of a self-conscious critic, using terms such as theme, symbol, character, etc. It is Barthes' "philosophy" (ideology, system of beliefs) rather than the terms themselves that make his criticism of interest, and different from the New Criticism, for example. As we have already noted, Barthes' criticism displays a greater emphasis on historical background, on the origins of a work. Thus, in criticising "Sarrasine" Barthes focuses on the myth of the realist artist as understanding reality, and the concept of the bourgeois as natural. Whereas New Criticism tends to focus on a psychological analysis of character -- although in both instances this emphasis is ostensibly denied. In Barthes' criticism this denial is achieved by a focus on the machinery of the five codes, and in New Critical analysis by the emphasis on practical criticism.

Like Empson, Barthes uses the five codes to justify his criticism -- to claim that it is rational, logical, and thus right -- to hide his assumptions, and to present conclusions based on these assumptions as conclusions arrived at as the result of a particular (methodical) means of analysis. In other words, the insights into the text are more the result of Barthes' mind than his division of the text into lexias, which are then classified with reference to one or more of the five codes.

But bourgeois criticism triumphs over Barthes' approach. Barthes attempts to formulate a criticism beyond the bourgeois end up looking very similar to bourgeois criticism -- both its emphasis on close reading and on the values the reader holds whilst reading a text. Like Empson, Barthes is concerned with making value judgments. But these judgments are not made in relation to a particular work, as in Empson's case (that is, to distinguish good from bad poetry), but in relation to a particular society. Again, like

Empson, these are not displayed as value judgments, but as the result of an impartial analysis using the five codes as analytical tools. At the same time, Barthes intersperses *S/Z* with comments as to his beliefs about the nature of the world, reinforcing the "results" obtained by his tools. But despite these judgments the resulting criticism is also consumer based, consuming the text in order to produce a justification of a particular ideology. And despite Barthes' claim that his five codes open the text, in fact they are used to close it, to limit its range of meaning so that the text, too, may constitute a weapon in the "battle" against bourgeois criticism, being an example of the "fascist" nature of the bourgeoisie. In claiming to free texts, Roland Barthes becomes their dictator.

A Comparison of Harold Bloom's *Shelley's Mythmaking* and *Poetry and Repression*

In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* Empson attempts to unify his shifting focus on reader, author, and text by using the machinery of ambiguity. In a similar fashion Bloom uses Freudianism in *Poetry and Repression* and the concept of relationship in *Shelley's Mythmaking* as the basis for developing a philosophy of textuality (the phenomenon of reading and writing).

All three critics recognise that authors, critics, all work within literary language -- but it is how they come to terms with it that differs dramatically. Barthes, rebelling against the bourgeois context of the classic text, attempts to re-produce it and fails. Empson's approach is subtler, trying to alter the way in which readers think about texts and their relationship with them. Whereas Bloom concludes that all the poet can do is re-write other poetry -- "a strong poem is a fresh start, such a start is a starting again,"[30]. Furthermore, "poems themselves are *acts of reading*." (*P&R,* p. 26). A poem deals with both itself and its precursor poems, striving midst interpretations to answer earlier interpretations, only to be dealt with by later interpretations (*P&R,* p. 26).

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[30]Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 3. From this point all page references to the pieces of Bloom's criticism under consideration will follow quotations or references in brackets. To distinguish between references to either work *Poetry and Repression* will be referred to as *P&R* and *Shelley's Mythmaking* will be referred to as *SM*. All italics in quotations will be Bloom's unless otherwise noted.

At first glance *Shelley's Mythmaking* and *Poetry and Repression* appear to be fundamentally different responses to the question of how a poem is to be read. One could argue that in *Shelley's Mythmaking* Harold Bloom maintains that a poem is to be read in the light of the relationship it reveals between the poet and the world. The condition of relationship is contrasted with that of experience, each being two fundamentally different ways of situating oneself in the world. Whereas in *Poetry and Repression* the emphasis is not on the relationship between the poet and the world, but on how a poet tries to revise the world by repressing his/her precursors. It is also worth focussing on the differences in Bloom's criticism between the two works -- there is a shift in emphasis from being a poet to becoming a poet, from myth to process. At the same time both works display a fundamental similarity, relying on an aesthetics grounded in mythology (Freudianism, Gnosticism) on which to base observations regarding Romantic poetry.

Both texts may be seen as redemptive of unfashionable philosophies (using the term loosely). Freudianism has been discredited by much of the psychiatric community and yet Freudian myths (e.g. the Oedipus complex, the "formation" of a person's psyche by some definitive, often traumatic, childhood event) are remarkably persistent. Bloom's emphasis on Gnosticism in *Shelley's Mythmaking* occurred at a time when New Criticism was in the ascendent -- Bloom's use of Buber was hardly "mainstream". In this chapter I will explore Bloom's use of both mythological systems to define the relationship between reader and text, critic and text, and poet and text.

It is within these mythological frameworks that Bloom's major concerns are situated: the quest for originality (involving repression of precursors) and the aesthetic redemption of the experience of relationship (as opposed to the

experience of experience -- the fallen state). It is through the interaction of myth and critical concerns that Bloom's criticism yields its greatest insights into the workings of Romantic (and, in particular, Shelley's) poetry. But this is also the source of Bloom's failings as a critic.

I.

Context and text, experience and myth, reading and misreading -- these juxtapositions are central to Bloom's criticism. A poem is misread despite the fact that we are born into a universe of words whose context has already been given:

> Any poet (meaning even Homer, if we could know enough about his precursors) is in the position of being "after the Event," in terms of literary language. His art is necessarily an *aftering*, and so at best he strives for a selection, through repression, out of the traces of the language of poetry; that is, he represses some of the traces, and remembers others. This remembering is a misprision, or creative misreading, but no matter how strong a misprision, it cannot achieve an autonomy of meaning, or a meaning *fully* present, that is, free from all literary context. Even the strongest poet must take up his stance *within* literary language. If he stands *outside* it, then he cannot begin to write poetry. (*P&R*, p. 4).

The battle is not just carried on amongst poets, but also amongst critics. Canonization, the creation of a pantheon of hero-texts, is seen as a necessary misreading of texts. "As the poem itself begins to be misread . . . its meanings do change drastically between the time that it first wrestles its way into strength, and the later time that follows its canonization." (*P&R*, p. 28).

Yet curiously enough the focus is on the misreading, not the process leading to it. How a text's meaning comes to change is not clearly dealt with by Bloom. The focus instead is on the relationship between the meanings and the universe which the poem would forge. All poetry is belated in that it must use created meanings, "no matter how strong a misprision, it cannot achieve an autonomy of meaning, . . . that is, free from all literary context." (*P&R,* p. 4). Although a poet can envy a predecessor's relative freedom to create meanings, "creative envy . . . [can become] the ecstasy, the Sublime . . . ." (*P&R,* p. 5). Furthermore, although all poetry relies on created meanings, "belated poems suffer an increasing overdetermination in *language,* but an increasing *under-determination in meaning."* (*P&R,* p. 134). That is, the more history behind the language, the less meaning (however defined). In strong poems we are forced to "invent if we are to read well . . . " (*P&R,* p. 140) -- it is this which allows the reader to misread, to invent meanings, to engage in the necessity of misreading.

Bloom insists that poetic strength requires a "double distortion, a distortion of the precursors and so of tradition, and a self-distortion in compensation." (*P&R,* p. 130). He argues that "There is no growth in poetic strength without a radical act of interpretation that is always a distortion or misprision . . . ." (*P&R,* p. 130). A fixation on a precursor or several precursors affords the poet's ego cause for repression, thus allowing the poet to feel the anxiety of influence. It is this anxiety, "this strange idea of identity-and-opposition" (*P&R,* p. 144), that causes the poet to attempt strong poetry, poetry to transcend that of the precursor(s). However, usually the poetry that is produced simply shows how the precursor has created the poet (see *P&R,* pp. 144-45).

Furthermore, even if the later poet triumphs over his/her precursors, s/he still cannot avoid the basic principle of misprision (i.e. of revision) -- "*No later poet can be the fulfillment of any earlier poet.* He can be the reversal of the precursor, or the deformation of the precursor, but whatever he is, *to revise is not to fulfill.*" (*P&R,* p. 88).[31]

So to our original trilogy of juxtapositions -- context and text, experience and myth, reading and misreading -- we can add a fourth, vision and revision. Originality is redefined as a secondary, redefinitional event. Fulfillment, transcendence of the precursor, vision can rarely be achieved by the text-bound poet. Each poet's defences against precursor poets do not liberate but instead bind the poet. The quest for vision falls into revision and repression.

A poet, according to Bloom, requires a poetic father against which to defend himself. The degree of repression of a poetic father, which is the major form of defence, can be judged between different poems "by a comparison of estrangement, distortion, and malforming, in tropes and images." (*P&R,* p. 233):

> in poetic texts, the poet's (or his surrogate's) psychic defenses are best understood as tropes, for they trope or turn against anterior defenses, against previous or outworn postures of the spirit. (*P&R,* p. 124).

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[31]Compare this statement to the general tenor of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), *passim.*

Presumably the images distorted are those of the father-poet. One trope is related to another systematically by its function as defence, "defense against everything that threatens survival, and a defense whose aptest name is 'meaning'." (*P & R*, p. 240). Repression "is . . . a ratio of representation . . . because in poetic repression *you forget something in order to present something else.*" (*P&R*, p. 240). Whereas in the case of sublimation, a ratio of limitation, *"you remember something (concentrate it) in order to avoid presenting that something, and you choose to present something else in its place."* (*P&R*, p. 240).

Repression is a term with which we have become familiar due to Freud. But the concept of repression with which Bloom works is not strictly Freudian. Indeed, it cannot be because, as Bloom notes, "On a strict Freudian view, a good poem is a sublimation, and not a repression." (*P&R*, p. 25). Bloom fixes the origin of a poem in repression, using this fixation to formulate his understanding of discourse. That he makes the basis of poetic creation the Freudian (pre-Freudian, really) Oedipal myth is interesting. The notion of renewal via death of the father figure is not new to literature, from Pre-Christian tales of the death of Winter and the renewal of man in Spring, the myth of the phoenix, to the *The Tin Drum*. The concept of usurpation of the father figure as a source of renewal and creativity is one of literature's strongest myths. Like a strong poem, myths built upon it cannot be considered a fulfillment of the earlier myth, only a revision.

For Bloom a good poem is a repression and not a sublimation (see *P&R*, p. 25). But although a poem's subject may be repression of its precursor(s), "To say that a poem's true subject is its repression of the precursor poem is not to say that the later poem reduces to the process of that repression." (*P&R*, p.

25). Despite Bloom's interest in the genesis of a poem via repression he accepts that there is more to a poem than repression of a precursor. Thus he goes on to note that creative "freedom" (in which he does not believe, but acknowledges that poets often do) must be repressed by an "initial fixation of influence" in order to become a poet (*P&R,* p. 27). In order to become a poet one must therefore remember to forget, that is, to repress. But this has its price, which differs for each poet.

The poetic equivalent of repression is "the Sublime or the Counter-Sublime of a belated *daemonization* . . . " (presumably of the precursor) (*P&R,* p. 26). The result is a set of schemes of transformation. Let us briefly examine Bloom's schematic terminology -- the key items and concepts in his theory of reading and making.

A poem starts with *clinamen,* "a swerve or step inside" (*P&R,* p. 18), and then moves to *tessera,* "an antithetical completion that necessarily fails to complete, and so is less than a full externalization" (*P&R,* p. 18). From this point strong modern poets pass into a *kenosis,* a:

> 'humbling' or emptying out . . . . *Kenosis* subsumes the trope of metonymy, the imagistic reduction from a prior fullness to a later emptiness, and the three parallel Freudian defenses of regression, undoing, and isolating, all of them repetitive and compulsive movements of the psyche. (*P&R,* p. 18).

Daemonization is seen as marking the climax or sublime crisis point of a strong poem, subsuming repression and accumulating the Freudian notion of Unconscious. "As trope, poetic repression tends to appear as an exaggerated representation . . . " (*P&R,* p. 18). However,

> The dialectics of revisionism compel the strong poem into a final movement against ratios, one that sets space against time, space as a metaphor of limitation and time as a restituting metalepsis or transumption, a trope that murders all previous tropes. (*P&R,* p. 19).

This is *askesis,* which "subsumes metaphor, the defense of sublimation, and the dualistic imagery of inside consciousness against outside nature . . . ." (*P&R,* p. 19). Then there is a final breaking-of-the-vessels of Romantic figuration, in which a substitution takes place. Bloom has named this movement *apophrades:*

> Defensively, this poetic final movement is frequently a balance between introjection (or identification) and projection (or casting-out the forbidden). Imagistically, the balance is between earliness and belatedness, and there are very few strong poems that do not attempt, somehow, to conclude by introjecting an earliness and projecting the affliction of belatedness. The trope involved is the unsettling one anciently called metalepsis or transumption, the only trop-reversing trope, since it substitutes one word for another in early figurations . . . .

> Metalepsis . . . becomes a total, final act of taking up a poetic stance in relation to anteriority, particularly to the anteriority of poetic language, which means primarily the loved-and-feared poems of the precursors. Properly accomplished, this stance figuratively produces the illusion of having fathered one's own fathers, . . . the . . . illusion [of] poetic immortality. (*P&R,* p. 20).

It could be argued that Bloom has followed a similar pattern in his own critical development, swerving from Frye and Abrams,[32] but I would not like to guess his current stage of development. Still, it is clear that Bloom's criticism in *Poetry and Repression* is based on the concept of self-definition.[33] At any point in the process of self-definition the poet may fail in the attempt to become his/her precursor, instead remaining a weak poet, becoming a forgotten poet. Bloom argues that it is this fear of failure that consciously or unconsciously drives poets to rebel against their poetic fathers, to attempt strong poetry. Bloom's terminology, his map of misreading, is grounded in a mythology of renewal via death, of rebellion as a secret acknowledgement of authority.

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[32]For notes on Bloom's precursors see McFarland, *op. cit.,* pp. 424, 431, and also Frank Lentricchia, rev. of *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens,* by Harold Bloom, *Modern Language Quarterly,* 38, No. 1 (1977), p. 110, and Ulrich Horstman, "The Over-Reader: Harold Bloom's Neo-Darwinian Revisionism," *Poetics,* 12, No. 2/3 (1983), p. 140.

[33]Charles Molesworth, "Promethean Narcissism," rev. of *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* and *The Breaking of the Vessels,* by Harold Bloom, *Partisan Review,* 51, No. 1 (1984), p. 156.

II.

In *Poetry and Repression* Bloom claims the aim of the poet is to become the precursor of his/her precursor, whereas in *Shelley's Mythmaking* the poem is seen as the vehicle for the poet's achieving a state of relationship with the universe and/or exploring that state. Relationship is defined as a redemptive experience, whereas experience is seen as a mode of existence without aesthetic values, and therefore an existence which denies redemption. In *Poetry and Repression* Bloom writes of poets as trying to create new ways of seeing by "dating" and "predating" (and, for that matter, being the predator of) earlier visions, whereas in the earlier work Bloom is more concerned with the poet's creation of a vision of society, with relatively little reference to pre-existing visions.

The ostensible crux of Bloom's approach to poetry in *Shelley's Mythmaking* is his concept of mythopoeia (and therefore of mythopoeic poetry). Bloom distinguishes between mythological, mythographic, and mythopoeic poetry. Mythographic poetry "is aware not only of the existence of different mythologies but also of the element of parallelism between mythologies." (*SM*, p. 5). Mythological poetry "is unicultural, or at least unitraditional. Exactly where mythological poetry becomes mythopoeic it is impossible to say . . . ." (*SM*, p. 5). Bloom then goes on to divide mythopoeic aspects of poetry into three parts. The most creative kind of mythological poetry is where the poet uses "a given mythology but extends its range of significance without violating it in spirit, or even very much in letter." (*SM*, p. 5). Primitive mythopoeic poetry "embodies that direct perception of a Thou in natural objects or phenomena . . . ." (*SM*, p. 5). It often owes

nothing to past mythology. But there is a third variety of mythopoeic poetry with its roots in primitive mythopoeic poetry, where the poet formulates his own abstractions rather than using those that already exist in myths. Bloom claims that this is the kind of mythopoeia to be found in Shelley's major works (see *SM*, pp. 5-6).

There is more to the concept of mythopoeia than is apparent from this brief outline. Bloom relies heavily on Martin Buber's conception of one's relationship with the world, formulated in relation to the Old Testament and other Jewish theological writings. Buber distinguishes between two "primary words," *I-Thou* and *I-It* (*SM*, p. 1). Buber explains succinctly:

> When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds.[34]

Bloom concludes that there are two I's: one of relationship, and the other of Itness or experience. In the first instance, the relationship to the *Thou* is direct.[35] "The world of our ancestors, or of contemporary primitives, is one of relation and not of experience." (*SM*, p. 2). It involves perceiving time as "qualitative and concrete, not quantitative and abstract."[36] The *Thou* is known only to the extent that it desires to reveal itself (*SM*, p. 4). In a mythopoeic

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[34]Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: Clark; New York: Scribner; 1937), pp. 4-5; in *SM*, p. 1.
[35]*Ibid.*, p. 1; *SM*, p. 2.
[36]Henri Frankfort et al, *Before Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1949), p. 32; in *SM*, p. 4.

poem "there is *no* consciousness of an inanimate world, personification can have no place, for there is no It to be worked upon, no phenomena to be experienced." (*SM*, p. 73). The primal act of mythopoeia is the "passing from the first primary word [I-It] to the second [I-Thou] . . . " (*SM*, p. 88). Bloom believes that it is:

> the will of a human or any sentient being to stand in relation to all that is sentient and to what is the ground of all that is sentient, as an I confronting a Thou rather than an I experiencing an It. (*SM*, p. 89).

Bloom claims that it makes sense to consider Shelley's poetry in the light of Buber's concept of the relationship between man and the world because it makes clear that Shelley was not a confused philosopher who had conflicting philosophical and psychological ideas, but a more consistent thinker. He feels that "Judged in the context of mythopoeia . . . what seems to be a welter of conflicting philosophical and psychological notions may be seen to emerge into a clearer and more consistent outline." (*SM*, p. 90).

Relationship is a precarious state which cannot simply be willed into existence, "Will and grace are needed . . . " (*SM*, p. 95), that is, one must also be in a fit state to be in a relationship with the world, rather than to experience it as something merely external to oneself. But relationship is more than a special way of experiencing nature. It is of a higher order, and something that the individual initiates. Therefore if one can experience relationship, which "is *not* to be found in nature, and is of an order of reality

higher than the order of nature." (*SM*, p. 115), one can experience a particular vision of society, and achieve a superior state of being. And yet the pursuit of this experience in the hope of changing one's perception to relationship, to this state of being permanently, in the hope of perceiving oneself in relation to the world as part of an organic whole, is hopeless because one lives in the natural world. One cannot sustain one's existence by thinking entirely in terms of relationship because we are all members of the natural world and therefore cannot always be available to be confronted in relationship as a Thou (see *SM*, p. 3).

The state of Innocence, to use one of Blake's terms (which Bloom often does, but more of this later) is the state of relationship, of having no objects and not being an object, of encountering not an object, but a being. To be an object of love -- that is, to take rather than give love -- is not to be in relationship, but merely to experience. Consider the Sensitive Plant in Shelley's poem of that name -- "Because it does not stand in relation, it becomes an *object* of love, and in that reduction from relationship to experience is presaged its destruction." (*SM*, p. 158). So although one aspires to the state of relationship it is difficult to achieve and maintain. Indeed, being members of a world of experience, the natural world, we cannot hope to maintain this state of being. Thus the ideal vision of society is not permanently attainable according to Bloom in *Shelley's Mythmaking* . It is something which can be used to guide the world as it exists to a superior state. It is in this sense that Bloom's ideal vision of society may be described as utopian. However, his vision of society itself, the state of experience, is not utopian. Neither Barthes nor Empson treat their own visions of society as utopian constructs which cannot be attained. Both outline a program for

permanent change, whereas Bloom can (by his own admission) only outline a means of temporarily changing one's perspective -- and that means is called "relationship".

Relationship is important for the poet because it is the state in which he can create. Being in a state of relationship and being inspired are but different facets of the same state -- "The all but inaccessible Power, the secret Strength of things, available momentarily to the poet in his perceptive trance, is . . . the Thou of mythic relationship." (*SM*, p. 36). And when one is in relationship things appear "infinite" -- one encounters an object or person not as something to be experienced, like a piece of chicken that one buys merely to eat or savour, but as "a 'single whole,' " as something that requires more than superficial attention (*SM*, p. 163). It is an encounter involving the whole of the self.

"But love (the sensible love of the emotions) does not unify; it unites in act, but it does not unite in essence." (*SM*, p. 219). This is the countermyth. When one denies the possibility of relationship by denying the possibility of unification one falls back into the world of experience. The precarious nature of any attainment of this type of society, of thinking, is in strong contrast with Barthes' and Empson's attempts to permanently alter modes of thought, ways of thinking and seeing.

The mode of operation of Bloom's concept of mythopoeia is for the poet "to strive to do away with It's [sic], with objects of experience, with experiencing and being experienced itself." (*SM*, pp. 184-85). So, in a sense, the poet can be said to be trying to alter reality, the fact of experience, by the attempt to be in a state of relationship (even though this attempt is doomed to

failure). It could be argued that in *Poetry and Repression* the poet is not trying to alter reality, but the fact that language is given, that the universe in which he wishes to posit his thoughts has already been created, and that he must position his poem in relation to the other poems that have already formed its structure. The implication is that change to the nature of discourse is possible, but usually only minute change, subject to misprision, and necessarily bound by the nature of the existing state of affairs.

To return to *Shelley's Mythmaking*, if being in relationship with other objects is so difficult to achieve, so precarious, and bound to fail, why not simply be in relationship with oneself? After all, this would seem to be a far easier state to achieve. But "Communion of an I with an I is selfhood-communion, destructive of all relationship . . . abominated by the gods and by God." (*SM*, p. 211). Bloom claims that this is the opinion of the Greeks and the Jews. Presumably their opinion has weight because together they created most of the myths on which Western man still relies. He also claims that Shelley was aware that love of the self, and therefore greed, was something to which poetry was and is opposed, "an opposition analogous to Blake's cosmic war of Imagination against Selfhood . . . ." (*SM*, pp. 229-30).

Because the poet is in a unique position to mediate between the world of relationship and that of experience, his poetry must be able to be comprehended in terms of both worlds. This may often lead to an apparent confusion of metaphors due to the presence of two levels of apprehension expressed by one metaphor, but these "dichotomies . . . are resolved . . . into a clear relation . . . " between the levels of apprehension (*SM*, p. 23). Yet because all images are bound, finite, they belong to the

universe of It. Redemptive experience is both accessible and inaccessible, "Implicit in the myths of Shelley's major poems [for example] is a realization that the limitations of this existence mark the human condition as fallen." (*SM*, p. 252).

III.

Relationship and vision, experience and repression -- the difference between the two texts is that the way in which the universe is characterised has altered. By the time Bloom came to write *Poetry and Repression* he no longer considered the universe to be something with which one can enter into relationship, but rather a heritage which one fights to dominate (it is also a fight to define oneself). In *Poetry and Repression* the concept of relationship has become irrelevant. Indeed, it receives only passing mention. There is a brief note that a poem "is not even so much a relationship between entities, as it is a relationship between relationships, or a Peircean Idea of Thirdness . . . ." (*P&R,* p. 99). That is all. And this note is made only in order to make another point -- that one cannot speak of finished or unfinished poems because one cannot reify "poems from relationships into entities" (*P&R,* p. 99), cannot speak of finished or unfinished relationships, only of strong or weak relationships, and thus of strong or weak poems. Bloom thinks that "a modern poem is a triad, which is why it begins in a dialectical alternation of presence and absence, and why it ends in a transumptive interplay of earliness and lateness." (*P&R,* p. 99). Another mention of relationship is made in an explanation of the state of the *ephebe,* who if s/he recognises that older poems influence and motivate him/her and turns from this, could then surrender him/herself to knowledge, but at the price of being foreign to all relation, including influence. By contemplation of these poems' deepest meaning (which would be a misprision) the *ephebe* will reach "the state of the Sublime" (*P&R,* p. 286).

The major difference in attitude between *Poetry and Repression* and *Shelley's Mythmaking* is the degree and nature of belief in the likelihood of failure. Bloom would seem to be saying in *Poetry and Repression* that once one agrees to enter the universe of discourse as a poet one is doomed to suffer the anxiety of influence, to be weaker than a precursor (with rare exceptions). In other words, few alternate visions are likely to become accepted. Whereas although in *Shelley's Mythmaking* Innocence is something the world will inevitably shatter, it "is not a world where any of us can long abide" (*SM*, p. 153), and no amount of hunting for relationship can force it to become one's state of existence, "each Thou we attempt to grasp becomes only another veil of itness . . . " (*SM*, p. 126) -- a relationship of *I-Thou* rather than *I-It* with the world can be achieved sporadically, and is a repeatable experience. For Bloom also insists that it is possible after the collapse from relationship into the world of experience to move back into the world of relationship, which he sees as another important aspect of Shelley's mythopoeic poetry (see *SM*, pp. 3, 122). Indeed, it is necessary for the individual to move back into relationship. Although he claims that Shelley recognises that the Thou of the beloved, the Thou in relation to which the lover attempts to take up his stand, "becomes for him an It also. The relational event quickly runs its course . . . " (*SM*, p. 184). So one is forced continually to shuttle between the state of relationship (or Innocence) and that of Itness (or Experience).[37] But in the short term, at least, defeat is the culmination of the myth, thus " 'The Triumph of Life' . . . commemorates the triumph of the 'It' of experience." (*SM*, p. 275).

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[37] As Buber also noted, see footnote 5.

Defeat is the culmination of Bloom's own myth of the way in which poets write poetry in *Poetry and Repression.* Being a weak poet means that one is perpetually dominated by one's poetic father(s), and one perpetually fails to attain a different vision of society. The best most poets can hope to do is win a little space for themselves in which they can alter language and appear "original."

Thus in both texts we have a criticism of failure. In *Poetry and Repression* it is possible, rarely, to avoid failure -- by misreading, troping oneself into lateness. In *Shelley's Mythmaking* failure can be avoided only temporarily. In both texts poets struggle against the world, against existing visions, and in both texts reality is, practically, unchangeable. It is this negative approach to his own polemics that most distinguishes Bloom from Empson and Barthes. For the latter still believe in the possibility of change as progress, in the achievability of a better state which is outlined in their own criticism; whereas Bloom believes in change simply as an expression of rebellion, not of success.

The mythopoeic poet, as described in *Shelley's Mythmaking,* is a religious poet, "who formulates his religion by the actual writing of his poems, the making of his myths . . . ." (*SM*, p. 67). In the case of Shelley, Bloom argues that his myth-making was in opposition to the myth-making of the Judaeo-Christian religion. So mythopoeia is seen as an attempt to supplant religion by the creation of a different vision of life through the creation of myth. It sets out to compete "with religion and philosophy as a discipline apprehending reality." (*SM*, p. 174). And this religion demands the existence of the pole of Itness as well as that of relationship, thus without the former verse and, presumably, life are inferior, for we are the creatures of the world

of experience. Although "the mode of operation of mythopoeia . . . [is] to strive to do away with It's [sic], with objects of experience, with experiencing and being experienced . . . " (*SM*, pp. 184-85), mythopoeia cannot operate without a tacit acknowledgement that we experience the world rather than are in relation to it. An important aspect of the existence of this dialectic between It and Thou, between which the poet continually moves, is that "you do not enter into relationship with a dialectic, but instead you are merely subject to it." (*SM*, p. 122).

Bloom's concern with the process of the creation of myth, which involves telling a story about origins and consequences, can be related to a desire to be considered a seer, one who sees the true nature of things. In *Shelley's Mythmaking* Bloom wishes to convince the reader of his vision. It is not reality that he wishes to alter, but rather the reader's perception of reality.

By comparison, in *Poetry and Repression* the poet is not a maker, but an explorer. The most extreme stance that a poet can take is not the stance of creator, but the prospective stance, although "No strong poet, of necessity, is wholly liminal in his vision . . . ." (*P&R*, p. 112). The origin of poetry according to Vico is "in the complex defensive trope . . . called 'divination' " (*P&R*, p. 3). And Bloom develops this notion in the light of his conception of the poem as self-exploration. Vico has argued that one can "only know what we ourselves have made . . . " (*P&R*, p. 5), and thus to know oneself one must have made oneself. "To *know* is to have become belated; not to know . . . is to become early again, however self-deceivingly." (*P&R*, pp. 159-60). So poetic images, tropes, defences, "are all forms of a ratio between human ignorance making things out of itself, and human self-identification moving to transform us into the things we have

made." (*P&R,* p. 8). Given Bloom's notion "that the origin of any defense is its stance towards death . . . ." (*P&R,* p. 10), derived from Freud and Vico combined, then "death is the most proper or literal of meanings, and literal meaning partakes of death." (*P&R,* p. 10). Yet poetry also contains the germ of self-preservation against the truth -- the imagination (see *P&R,* p. 25).

The concepts both of relationship and repression which are used as the guiding themes of the two Bloom works being discussed can be seen as two sides of the same desire -- the desire to create a new vision of society by eradicating an old one, characterising any remnants thereof as weak, unworthy of attention. In this sense, then, Bloom's criticism is similar to that of Barthes and Empson, for both desire to create new visions of society; not by repression but rather by replacement. Barthes desires to replace a bourgeois vision of society -- not so much to eradicate it as to supercede it, and Empson to replace certain mental habits with others. However, according to Bloom it is one's perception of society that may change, society itself is untouchable, and any replacement of one vision with another is not possible without repression. It is this belief that is the foundation for his theories in *Poetry and Repression.*

IV.

Repression of the precursor, desire to experience relationship, are not automatic events but acts of the will. Underlying such a treatment of poetry is a belief that a poem has an author. This can be compared with the belief held by many that the opinion of the author is irrelevant, the work must stand on its own. It is, in effect, without an author.[38] Thus one's focus is on the text, the text as already read. For Bloom to consider what Shelley did, whether he read Coleridge before he wrote a poem (see *SM*, p. 11) implies a belief that Shelley's opinions of his poetry are relevant. Yet at a later stage Bloom says of "Prometheus Unbound," "Whatever Shelley the man may have believed about evil . . . is of slight importance to my study compared with what Shelley's poem believes and communicates." (*SM*, p. 95). Bloom later distinguishes between "Shelley the man" and "Shelley the poet," arguing that this was a distinction which Shelley himself recognised (the man or the poet?) and that only the opinions of the latter, who was not "afflicted by the limiting prejudices of the revolutionary intelligentsia of his own age . . . " (*SM*, p. 102), are relevant to the interpretation of Shelley's poetry. Yet how we are to distinguish between the two is not clear. And often the distinction is not apparent in Bloom's writing, for he sometimes assumes the two are one. For example, to say that "Shelley [believed] only in myth itself" (*SM*, p. 124) begs the question -- the man or the poet? This confusion is especially apparent when he discusses his interpretation of a section of "The Sensitive Plant," commenting "I am aware that Shelley may not consciously have intended such a meaning, but I cannot see that Shelley's intention is of any primary

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[38]See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Trans. Richard Miller, London: Jonathon Cape, 1974), pp. 1-15.

importance in this." (*SM*, p. 158). Is it "Shelley the man" whose intentions are irrelevant or "Shelley the poet"? Or is it that both are irrelevant, and that the author is irrelevant in the interpretation of his work? And yet three pages later he talks of the poem in terms of Shelley's "confrontation of . . . [the] world as a Thou." (*SM*, p. 161). Does this mean that Shelley (the poet? the man?) is the protagonist of the poem, and therefore his opinions and intentions are relevant?

Sometimes the events that have occurred to Shelley (the man) are considered important, for example, Bloom thinks that "Biographical fact is necessary for a complete approach to the 'Epipsychidion' . . . " (*SM*, p. 205), a poem which was developed from Shelley's experiences. And yet on the following page he again distinguishes between "Shelley the man" and "Shelley the poet," arguing that Shelley's prose cannot be used in explication of his poetry (except his *Defense of Poetry,* which Bloom finds "more a visionary poem about poetry than . . . a reasoned argument" (*SM*, p. 206), though why this is the case is never explained). But then it is unclear how one is to treat a biographical poem like "Epipsychidion." The confusion is compounded when two pages later Bloom talks of the poem as "a private and not a public performance." (*SM*, p. 208). Private for the man, presumably, not the poet. But only a few pages ago we were told that "Shelley the man" was irrelevant. Later, when dealing with "The Triumph of Life," Bloom breaks his own "rule" of not considering other prose writings by Shelley to use his *Proposals for an Association, etc.* (1812) and a letter to Peacock to discover Shelley's (presumably "the man's") opinion as a means of elucidating his attitude towards Rousseau (see *SM*, pp. 252-53).

A further degree of confusion is added by the distinction between "Shelley the poet" and "Shelley the philosopher," the latter being more closely associated with "Shelley the man." The confusion seems to imply that the type of vision a poet, philosopher, and person (as if these were mutually exclusive!) have is different. But Bloom still continues to claim that Shelley's poetry is inherently philosophical in so far as it is mythopoeic, for "the mode of operation of mythopoeia . . . [is] to strive to do away with It's [sic], with objects of experience . . . " (*SM*, pp. 184-85). That is, it is a philosophical stance regarding one's relation to the world.

Furthermore, Bloom also makes it unclear whether he thinks Shelley is the protagonist of his own poems. He thinks of the wind as being a Thou for Shelley (presumably the protagonist) in the "Ode to the West Wind" (see *SM*, p. 87), or of Shelley as the protagonist led by Rousseau in "The Triumph of Life," as Dante was led by Virgil (see *SM*, pp. 255, 260). But within the poems themselves there is no clear indication or even hint that this is the case (an exception being "Epipsychidion").

The degree to which a consideration of the opinion of Shelley "the man" or "the poet" (and how to separate the two is, as already noted, also unclear) is relevant to the poetry is unclear. One is left wondering what Bloom means whenever he refers to Shelley. And when he notes that in Shelley's myth "once on the page a poem is an It." (*SM*, p. 200), one wonders where Shelley said or wrote this (or something like it), and whether it is a reference to "Shelley the poet" or "Shelley the philosopher," and in either case how could it change the elucidation of the poem? Such questions are barely acknowledged, let alone answered.

In *Poetry and Repression,* too, the implication is that the author is important. Indeed, the author is usually considered to be the protagonist of the poem, unless this is clearly not the case. Then, however, the protagonist is seen as a poet, and thus the state of the poet who wrote the poem is explored. Thus Bloom calls Tennyson's Mariana a "poetess" without any proof from within the poem that this is the case (*P&R,* p. 151). If the protagonist clearly cannot be considered to be a poet, then he/she is seen as representing an aspect of Romantic poetry. Thus Tennyson's Percivale is seen as the High Romantic quester, whose journey is necessarily one in search of self, just as "Spenser's Colin Clout . . . and the equivocal heroism of Satan questing onwards through Chaos to reach Eden . . . " (*P&R,* pp. 168-69) can also be said to be in search of self. Indeed, this is seen as the paradigm of all journeys of discovery undertaken by poets.

The author's aims are also considered important. Thus Bloom talks of Blake's desire "to keep origin and aim, source and purpose, as far apart as possible." (*P&R,* p. 44). Or comments on *Tintern Abbey* as being "a very different poem than the one he [i.e. Wordsworth] set out to write." (*P&R,* p. 56), And also notes that Browning "could never bear . . . a sense of *purposelessness* " (*P&R,* p. 192), and yet it is this sense of purposelessness that shadows his poetry (see *P&R,* pp. 192-93). He considers the poet's beliefs and desires to be important, thus he finds it worth mentioning that Wordsworth and Coleridge both "longed for a composite, originary sense that combined rather than opposed seeing and hearing." (*P&R,* p. 57). Yeats' relation to Gnosticism is also examined in some detail (see *P&R,* pp. 206ff). He also uses details of the poet's life to explicate his poems -- so he considers Wordsworth's relationship with Dorothy when discussing *Tintern Abbey*

(*P&R,* pp. 77-78). This interest also extends to what the poet read. Thus Shelley is considered to be a weak poet until "he read deeply in Wordsworth and Coleridge, particularly Wordsworth . . . " (*P&R,* p. 105), for only then did he find his poetic "father." These are but a few examples that clearly indicate that Bloom's belief in the existence of the author as a member of society, existing in a cultural milieu, and the importance of the author's ideas in the explication of his poetry. The illogical division between "x-the-man," "X-the-poet," and "x-the-philosopher" that was to be found in *Shelley's Mythmaking* has been dropped.

But when a poet does not clearly fit into Bloom's concept of the poet, he then decides that he really does conform to the pattern, but hides it well. Browning, known by all his friends to be jovial, without "the slightest *personal* consciousness of an anxiety of influence . . . " (*P&R,* p. 177), is considered none the less to have the "disease," for how else could he have written as he did? It is Bloom's refusal to consider that his theory might be wrong, the way in which it is made to account for all poets in all circumstances, that makes one suspicious of it. Consider the idea mentioned earlier that all poets suffer from repression and when they deny this they are simply engaging in yet a further act of repression -- "representing . . . [their] own anxieties about anteriority, and [their] . . . rhetoric belies the fact of a belated poet's deepest fear, which is that increasingly we do become all too much alike." (*P&R,* p. 278).

It seems so easy to give poets poetic fathers. So, taking just the High Romantic poets, Wordsworth is seen as struggling with Milton (e.g. *P&R,* pp. 65-66, 78, 80-82), Shelley with Wordsworth (e.g. *P&R,* pp. 98, 107-11), Tennyson with Keats (e.g. *P&R,* pp. 147-49), and Keats with

Wordsworth (e.g. *P&R,* pp. 124ff). He seems to have little difficulty mapping the poems in terms of his revisionary ratios,[39] the one exception being Keats' *Hyperion.* But this is held to be an unsatisfactory poem because too much is attempted in it. Oddly enough, Bloom notes that is is only a fragment and has only two ratios -- "a *kenosis* and a *daemonization,* in uneasy alternation" (*P&R,* p. 123). If Bloom cannot find the complete pattern, then he finds part of it. And in this instance he does not even attempt to explain why attempting too much in a poem should result in too little (i.e. in what he considers to be a fragment).

It is not that Bloom's system is inconsistent, it is that it is too consistent. It appears to cover all possibilities, account for all poems that are explorations of self. Thus Eliot's *The Waste Land,* which is not a Romantic poem as far as Bloom is concerned, can still be said to contain the six revisionary ratios: *clinamen,* or swerve from Donne and the Metaphysical poets, as well as Dante, Shakespeare, and a host of other Enlightenment poets; and its concommitant, *tessera,* or "completion" of these other poets as they would have written had they lived in modern times; then *kenosis,* the sense of emptiness contrasted with the prior fullness of tradition; *daemonization,* which recurs in images, such as that of the buried corpse, the office clerk, the woman at her dressing table, the women in the pub, and so on; *askesis,* clear in the desert scenes and description of Phlebas the Phoenician; and finally *apophrades,* where the balance of age and youth in the last section of the poem is set off against notions of earliness and lateness, with which the poem began. Although the poem does not contain all these ratios in the neat, ordered form that they occur in Romantic poetry, they can still all be found. And if not all

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[39]E.g. *Tintern Abbey, P&R,* pp. 223; *The Triumph of Life, P&R,* pp. 99-100.

the ratios can be found, then clearly the poem is but a "fragment."[40] Clearly Bloom's "system" is hard to disprove because it is so flexible it can be applied to any poem. Yet Bloom rejects Enlightenment and Neo-Classical poetry as unsuitable for the treatment he provides Romantic poets,[41] preferring not to trace the history of influence in canonical non-Romantic poetry.

The whole issue of authors and authority is closely tied with the concepts of repression and redemption. The author's authority is tied to his/her strength (repressive capacity) and the mechanics of the revisionary ratios is just one way to map a poet's path to strength in a particular poem. The confusion in *Shelley's Mythmaking* regarding the roles of the author (man, poet, philosopher) is replaced by a system of revisionary ratios. I have been discussing Bloom's poetics of failure in this chapter with little reliance on the proof he evidences by finding ratios in poems. One does not need to talk about revisionary ratios in order to trace the influences of previous poems on a poet -- they have been discussed without any such machinery by critics for quite a long time. The purpose of the revisionary ratios is, like Barthes' five codes or Empson's seven types of ambiguity, to provide an "objective" piece of machinery to "prove" one's beliefs. Similarly, in Shelley's *Mythmaking* Bloom's attempts to show Shelley had a consistent philosophy is part of his attempt to "prove" his beliefs.

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[40]It could also be argues that Bloom's theory is inadequate because it does not deal with Byron or Whitman -- Jerome McGann, "Formalism, Savagery, and Care; or the Function of Criticism One Again," *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (1975/6), pp. 612-13. Although I disagree with his statement that for Byron poetry was only a hobby.
[41]Paul D. Sheats, Rev. of *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*, by Harold Bloom, and *Romanticism and Behaviour: Collected Essays, II*, by Morse Peckham, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 27 (1978), p. 144.

V.

What is the role of criticism in Bloom's work? Are there strong and weak critics? Can a critic be in relationship to a poem? It is worth noting that neither Barthes nor Empson place such reliance upon a particular critic or philosopher in their works. Bloom seems to use a particular person's writings as a means of gaining legitimacy for his own in much the same way as Empson uses the machinery of the seven types of ambiguity and its supposed objectivity or, for that matter, the way Barthes uses his five codes, in order to "legitimise" an approach to texts and critics, an attitude to life. However, in the quest for legitimacy Bloom chooses the arguments of people not in the mainstream of literary discourse (i.e. Freud and Buber). It seems Bloom picks his predecessor critics so that they will be easy to trope. For it is worth noting the role of choice, crucial to whether or not a poet can trope his/her predecessors, is never discussed in *Poetry and Repression* or *Shelley's Mythmaking*. Yet it is clear that choice is important -- a weaker predecessor is easier to trope than a stronger, and is a means of making yourself appear a strong poet or critic.

As for the use of a predecessor as a tool for one's own work -- that, too, would appear to allow both the poet or critic to claim antecedents and superiority. Bloom's use of Freud in *Poetry and Repression* and of Buber in *Shelley's Mythmaking* is conspicuous. In both works Bloom attempts to use their writings in the formulation of his own theories. An examination of the way in which he formulates his theories should shed some light on his reasons for grounding his arguments in this way. Throughout *Shelley's Mythmaking* Bloom relies heavily on Blake's ideas, seeing him as an example of the

archetypal poet-prophet and therefore as suitable for comparison with Shelley, an unrecognised poet-prophet -- or at least that's what Bloom seems to be claiming when considering the opinions of other critics. Indeed, Bloom sees Blake as a precursor of Shelley in his turn to the Titans (*SM*, p. 60), and his use of the image of the chariot -- an image that figured so much in Shelley's later mythopoeic poems "The Triumph of Life" and "Prometheus Unbound" (*SM*, p. 76). He interprets Shelley's poetry in Blakean terms, considering "The dialectic of 'Prometheus' [to be] . . . very close to that of Blake's Orc cycle . . . " (*SM*, p. 93), noting that Jupiter is to Prometheus as Urizen is to Albion (*SM*, p. 98), and that "Asia stands in relationship to Prometheus much as Blake's Jerusalem stands to his Albion . . . " (*SM*, p. 105). He also points out that both turned away from this cycle, "Blake . . . in his most mature work, . . . and . . . Shelley . . . in *his* final work." (*SM*, p. 93). He sees both poets as thinking that we must move out of a better into a worse state in order to attain upper paradise, where "the Thou will not fade into an It" (*SM*, p. 117). But the two poets can be distinguished. Bloom claims that Shelley abandoned this myth in "The Triumph of Life," whereas "Blake's myth . . . provided its maker with a faith which could not be defeated." (*SM*, p. 117).

This is not to say that Bloom considers Blake and Shelley to have exactly the same myth, and "the *tone* of [Blake's] discourse has little in common with Shelley's presentation . . . " (*SM*, p. 135), just that Bloom considers Blake to be the most useful poet to consider in relation to Shelley. This is because Bloom deems both poets to have been apocalyptic humanists, for "each ultimately presents a religion parallel to but in competition with Christianity, and completely counter to any naturalistic doctrine." (*SM*, p. 220). It is the failure to recognise this that has led to the denigration of their visions of a

possible world. It is due to this similarity that Bloom feels free to use Blakean concepts to describe Shelley's poetry: thus his description of Rousseau as part of "the state of Generation" (*SM*, p. 255), his description of Asia in "Prometheus Unbound" as returning to Beulah in Act III (see *SM*, pp. 128-30), and his insistence that Beulah is the land described in "The Witch of Atlas" (see *SM*, p. 218).

Unlike Empson, Bloom is not interested in practical criticism, or in criticism of the metre, etc. of poetry. He is more interested in the thought expressed by the poetry, rather than the mechanics. His major device for the explication of a poem in *Shelley's Mythmaking* is usually another poem. He proceeds by finding a poem which he believes to be in some fashion like the poem he wants to consider, and then elucidates the similarities and differences between the two poems. Thus he compares Shelley's "Mont Blanc" with Coleridge's "Hymn before Sunrise" because both were set in the vale of Chamouni (*SM*, pp. 12-13). Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is compared with one of the Psalms -- the "Song of Deborah" -- because both are hymns of victory, though of a very different kind (*SM*, pp. 69-71). "The Sensitive Plant" is compared with Spenser's "Muiopotmos: or the Fate of the Butterflie" and Blake's "Book of Thel" because the other two poems both "have seemed to me [i.e. Bloom] appropriate and useful." (*SM*, p. 148). But one cannot help but wonder what Bloom means by "useful." It would seem that from such comparisons, and there are many more,[42] that Bloom hopes to show the way in which Shelley creates his own myth, his religion. For the definition of religion that Bloom seems to use is that one should hold a cardinal belief, in

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[42]For example, Spenser's "Garden of Adonis" and the garden of "The Witch of Atlas" (*SM*, pp. 178ff); "Epipsychidion" and Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (*SM*, pp. 205ff); "The Triumph of Life" and the Bible (*SM*, pp. 232ff).

this case the value of relationship, as well as several subsidiary beliefs -- in Shelley's case the virtues of " 'Love, Hope, and Self-esteem' " (*SM*, p. 101), through which one may achieve the desired state of relationship.

Bloom does not simply refer to other poets or to Shelley in *Shelley's Mythmaking* in order to explicate his poetry. There is a strong emphasis on previous critical debate in relation to the poems, often introduced before Bloom begins his own explication -- during which he usually indicates in which ways he is similar to, has borrowed from, or is different from earlier critics. For example, on p. 65 of *Shelley's Mythmaking* he begins his consideration of the "Ode to the West Wind" with the judgment of another critic, Oliver Elton. There are numerous instances of his referring to other critics. Often they are used to highlight the superiority of his reading to theirs -- thus his comments on Leavis' reading of the "Ode to the West Wind" (*SM*, pp. 78ff), or his attack on what he sees as Fogle's dualism (*SM*, pp. 91-92), his denigration of any attempt to read Shelley's poetry allegorically -- thus his attitude towards Grabo (*SM*, pp. 104-5, 119); his dislike of any interpretation that uses Platonism (e.g. *SM*, p. 130); and especially of any allegorizing of one of Shelley's poems in terms of another (e.g. *SM*, pp. 267ff).

He writes of several critics' allegorical interpretations of "The Triumph of Life" -- "No necessity can be demonstrated in any of this allegorizing, and each critic can very persuasively demolish the allegorizer who has come before him . . . ." (*SM*, p. 242). But in *Poetry and Repression* Bloom does not even mention the evils of allegorization. All canonical readings are swept aside because they are "weak." Whether his reading of the Romantic poets involves allegorization does not seem to concern him. Yet, as Norris has noted, a

peculiar aspect of deconstructive readings is their tendency to allegorize.[43] Allegorization is a central concern because if Bloom cannot distinguish his theories from allegorization he could be characterised as simply telling another story about various poetical works. Although in the earlier work Bloom is by no means a deconstructionist in the same sense that he is today, this tendency to allegorize could arguably be found in *Shelley's Mythmaking*.

Bloom also carefully uses other critics in order to indicate that he has a full understanding of a poem's sources and mechanics. This is especially apparent in his comments on "The Triumph of Life" near the beginning of the chapter of the same name, where he traces the influences of other poets on "The Triumph of Life" via other critics (see *SM*, p. 222). Other critics are also mentioned if he feels they have been important in the formation of his own opinions. It is for this reason that he gives the details of Bradley's explication of lines 239-43 of "The Triumph of Life" (*SM*, p. 259).

Of course, Bloom does also find occasion to agree with earlier critics. He finds Pottle helpful, for example, on the concept of relationship in reference to the "Ode to the West Wind" -- though Pottle does not use Bloom's terminology (*SM*, p. 73). Fogle is considered to provide useful ideas only occasionally, thus Fogle's comments on the "Life of Life" lyric in Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" are taken seriously (*SM*, p. 125). For that matter, so are Frye's comments on the "Book of Thel" 's "fragility" (*SM*, p. 156), or Bradley's on "The Triumph of Life" (*SM*, p. 250). On other occasions Bloom is particularly against a given approach because he feels its assumptions do not allow a fair treatment of the poetry, that is, a treatment which

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[43]Christopher Norris, "Openness," rev. of *After the New Criticism*, by Frank Lentricchia, *Essays in Criticism*, 32 (1982), pp. 90-91.

appreciates the vision the poet tried to attain and the way in which he/she failed to do so. Thus his complaint of the New Critics that "If you [i.e. the New Critics and others] reject . . . this kind of writing [i.e. Romantic], then you are rejecting a kind of *poetry* or, at the very least, what our ancestors considered to be poetry." (*SM*, p. 160). The implication is that a rejection of a kind of poetry due to one's prejudices shows one to be a poor critic.

Another of Bloom's main complaints against other critics in *Shelley's Mythmaking* is that they tend to misread poetry by importing their own philosophy (isn't this an act of strong reading?) -- a complaint closely associated with that of allegorization. He complains of one critic's coming "to the poem with far too many philosophical notions" (*SM*, p. 28) without questioning the necessity of finding them in the first place. Of Grabo's consistent findings of "Neoplatonism" in "The Witch of Atlas" and "Epipsychidion" when "What counts . . . is the gesture the words make . . . ." (*SM*, p. 203, see also p. 206). This is reminiscent of a similar, earlier complaint about the importation of Platonism into readings of poetry (see *SM*, p. 164). At one stage he comments that this kind of allegorizing is arbitrary (see *SM*, p. 186).

Yet it is also clear that Bloom does not consider that *he* imparts his own philosophy when reading poetry. Bloom spends much effort trying to convince readers of his beliefs regarding the nature of poetry, both by argument and implied belittling (after all, the term "strong reader" is value laden given the usual associations people have with the words "strong" and "weak") of those who do not share his opinions. Bloom wants to take us into his philosophical universe, wants us to think as he does -- but tries to achieve this not by pointing out the problems of current criticism, but largely by

erasing it, repressing it. Of course, other modes of criticism do have to be referred to, sometimes they cannot be ignored. In such instances Bloom distinguishes his approach from that of other critics.

Bloom is trying to dissociate his criticism from simple ways of disparaging it, such as arguing that he imparts his own philosophy to his reading of a text (although it should be plain by now that this is just what he does), thus his emphasis is on the distinction between his method of criticism and allegorization. It is as though allegorization were a drug which at all costs must be prohibited, kept out of the land of criticism; otherwise critics become hooked, spending their time constantly allegorizing rather than explicating a poem.

Tied to this is the complaint that critics often create an independent vision from that presented by the poem, which they then insist is that of the poem. He says, for example, of Knight, that he "illustrates the danger of criticism of visionary poetry passing over into independent vision." (*SM*, p. 196). He also complains of Baker's desire to find a pattern linking all of Shelley's "epipsyche" figures, finding it "not a critical desire." (*SM*, pp. 236-37). And he is rather cutting towards those critics whose interpretations do not mesh with the "facts" of the poem -- as he sees them, in the light of his interpretation. Such an approach implies that there is at least one correct reading of a poem, the right reading being that which shows Shelley not to have been an inconsistent thinker, for "Judged in the context of mythopoeia . . . what seems to be a welter of conflicting philosophical and psychological notions may be seen to emerge into a clearer and more consistent outline." (*SM*, p. 90).

Be that as it may, I remain unconvinced that Bloom's reading of the Romantic poets necessarily is the most complex of those readings available (accepting the first of his two criteria for the moment), or even that it costs most of the poem's strength. Turning to Wasserman's reading of *Prometheus Unbound* one finds an approach more complex than Bloom's by situating the "action" of the poem in one mind.[44] Furthermore, one need not accept the later Bloom's premise that poetry revolves around one person's will-to-power because that need not be the only motivation to write poetry.[45]

It could equally be argued against Bloom that in reading Shelley in terms of Buber's two primary words in *Shelley's Mythmaking* he is both allegorizing and introducing concepts foreign to Shelley's poetry. Shelley's poetry never explicitly mentions the word "Thou" as Bloom uses it, nor the concept of Itness. Bloom is allegorizing, bringing his own philosophical concepts to the poem, much as any critic does. This does not necessarily mean that his approach is invalid. It may be the case, as I believe it is, that one cannot help but bring one's own philosophy, and therefore a tendency to allegorize, to the reading of any poetry. Why should Bloom think this is so evil? Indeed, by the time he came to write *Poetry and Repression* he no longer considered it evil, he no longer considered the issue worthy of attention.

In *Poetry and Repression* Bloom's approach is both similar and different. He is not particularly interested in the opinions of other literary critics. Hartman and de Man are but briefly mentioned (e.g. Hartman, *P&R*, pp. 26, 57-58, 70-72; de Man, *P&R*, pp. 79, 112). Betty Miller is referred to

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[44]Earl Wasserman, *Shelley's* Prometheus Unbound: *A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), *passim*.
[45]M. H. Abrams, "How to Do Things With Texts," Partisan Review, 46, No. 4 (1979), p. 586.

when discussing the failed quest in Romantic poetry (*P&R,* p. 191). Most of his references are to people who have studied the nature of the self, and one's perceptions of oneself. There is a strong emphasis on Freud and Vico (noted earlier) as well as Nietzsche (e.g. *P&R,* pp. 52, 192-93), Rorty (e.g. *P&R,* p. 21), Auerbach and Price (e.g. *P&R,* pp. 23-24), Wolheim (e.g. *P&R,* pp. 131-32), Kierkegaard (e.g. *P&R,* pp. 242-43), Burke (e.g. *P&R,* p. 253), Valery (e.g. *P&R,* pp. 279ff), and Schopenhauer (e.g. *P&R,* pp. 284-86), to name a few. This is in keeping with the change in approach, the greater interest in the concept of "the self," and in particular the poet's conception of himself in relation to poetry, and more importantly the emphasis on the poem as a form of self-exploration (often not recognised as such by the poem). Bloom is no longer interested in situating his criticism in relation to existing criticism. In this book he is trying to go beyond canonical criticism to create a new criticism designed with the Romantic poem in mind.

Bloom's reliance on Freud, Vico, and certain Gnostic notions is similar to his earlier reliance on Blake and Buber. He focusses on the concept of misprision (see *P&R,* pp. 11-13) and on Gnosis as "a kind of 'knowledge' . . . [which] is itself the form that salvation takes, because the 'knower' is made Divine in such a 'knowing' . . . " (*P&R,* pp. 213-14). He claims that a Gnostic approach is more suitable than a Platonist or Aristotelian one. The latter he considers to have been developed in relation to Classical and Enlightenment poetry, whereas "the major traditions of post-Enlightenment poetry have tended more to the Gnostic stance of misprision" (*P&R,* pp. 13-14), although this in itself is not a reason for preferring this approach as a mode of criticism for post-Enlightenment poetry. In fact, Bloom prefers a kabbalistic approach, which he thinks blends both the Gnostic and the

Platonic-Aristotelian, with its emphasis on reading as translation, clear from its acceptance of the necessity of error (see *P&R,* pp. 14-16), but also its dialectic of limitation and representation (see *P&R,* pp 118-120), both of which are developed in relation to poetry.

It is largely from Freud that Bloom has taken his concept of defence. He accepts Freud's (and Vico's) insistence that its origin is a "stance towards death" (*P&R,* p. 10). But Freud differs from a strong poet in that what he calls "repression" Bloom considers to be "the imagination of a Counter-Sublime" in greater poets (*P&R,* p. 24). Freud's idea of the unconscious is accepted, but Bloom denies "the usefulness of the Unconscious, as opposed to repression, as a literary term." (*P&R,* p. 24). Bloom also plays with Freud's setting of memory "in the context of anxiety, repression, and defense." (*P&R,* p. 53), though it is not clear whether he sees it as wholly inhering within the boundaries formed by these three, or whether it also crosses them, reaching into other areas of the psyche. He differs from Freud in seeing a strong poem as "a triumph of repression, and *not* of sublimation . . . " (*P&R,* p. 135), but accepts Freud's placing of repression as unique, "the most elaborate of the defenses . . . " (*P&R,* p. 143) -- used in formulating the notion of anxiety of influence. And yet Bloom also points out that the Freudian notion of repression "is an astonishing array of possibly incompatible theories . . . ." (*P&R,* p. 232).

It would be easy to argue that Freud is Bloom's poetic father, but that Bloom has hardly progressed beyond *clinamen* and *tessera* -- that is, beyond swerving from the ideas of his "father" and setting up an antithetical completion which he fails to complete.

The focus of attention regarding other critics in *Poetry and Repression* has shifted from direct comments about their approach to poetry (as in *Shelley's Mythmaking)* to more general statements about the role of criticism, for example:

> A poem is a triad . . . an idea of thirdness [which] . . . involves us in working out the relation of its own text to a composite precursor-text, and of both of these to each of us, who as a reader constitutes a third text. (*P&R,* p. 225).

We are also seen as part of the universe of discourse, though to what repressions we as readers may be subject, and what defences we may create, is not Bloom's concern. One cannot help wondering whether this should be the case. For Bloom:

> The function of criticism at the present time . . . is to find a middle way between the paths of demystification of meaning, and of recollection or restoration of meaning, or between limitation and representation. But the only aesthetic path between limitation and representation is substitution, and so all that criticism can hope to teach . . . is a series of stronger modes of substitution . . . . The vessels or fixed forms break in every act of reading or of writing, but *how* they break is to a considerable extent in the power of each reader and of each writer. Yet there are patterns in the breaking that resist the power, however strong, of any reader and of every writer. These patterns -- evident as sequences

> of images, or of tropes, or of psychic defenses -- are as definite as those of any dance, and as varied as there are various dances. But poets do not invent the dances they dance . . . . The stronger poet not only performs the dance more skillfully than the weaker poet, but he modifies it as well, and yet it does remain the same dance. I am afraid there does tend to be one fairly definite dance pattern in post-Enlightenment poetry . . . . (*P&R,* p. 270).

So for Bloom the task of the critic is to elucidate the patterns of the dance, and consider how skilfully the poet has danced the dance. The critic both elucidates and evaluates. But might not this activity of the critic be complicated by his/her own tendency to misread both other poets and critics? And given that the critic might also be subject to repression, might not Bloom's explication of the nature of criticism be an elaborate defence against a precursor, or against the power of words? But given that this is so, then my writing, too, is a defence against repression, and we are all subject to repression and therefore we all create defences. In this web there is, then, no truth, only less or more interesting hypotheses about the nature of creativity, of society, and therefore of our source(s) of repression. Popper once remarked that the hallmark of a scientific theory is that it can be proved false. Bloom's theory is not scientific. If you disagree with him then that is simply one of your defences, the result of repression.

This notion that there is a correct reading of the poem is implied throughout *Poetry and Repression.* But the criteria for recognising such a "correct" reading have changed. The questions to ask when faced with several readings of a poem are: "Which of the . . . readings/misreadings would cost

us too much of the poem's strength? Or to say it in more Nietzschean terms, of these . . . errors, these . . . composite tropes, which is the most necessary error?" (*P&R,* p. 80). In practice this seems to be saying that the correct reading is: a. the one which allows the poem the greatest complexity; and b. always mine (i.e. Bloom's). Bluntly, Bloom's theory appears irrefutable because to deny it and replace Bloom's terminology with another would be doomed to failure -- the enterprise could be characterised as that of a critic swerving from his/her critical father (Bloom), but whose criticism is weaker than that of the father critic because Bloom's revisionary ratios account for the reactions one may have to his criticism. One the other hand, to accept Bloom's terminology is to show oneself to be a weak critic. In fact, to escape Bloom's system one simply has to treat it as an artefact, not a means of defining and divining the truth about poetry, and play with it as one wishes. To attempt to battle with Bloom's criticism is only to fall into the trap he has set and prove oneself to be a weak critic for not coping with his all-encompassing theory as outlined in *Poetry and Repression*. To deal with Bloom one must remain independent of his theory.

Discussing Bloom's criticism and his attitude towards other critics is difficult because Bloom's criticism must be considered as not only situated within a critical milieu but also within a (chosen) philosophical milieu (a milieu which can include poets, philosophers, psychologists -- a rather loose concept of philosophy). Bloom's use of non-critical writers to legitimise his criticism and positioning of his writings within a critical milieu in order to increase the apparent strength of his own criticism has its beginning early in his critical development. Its culmination in his later writings with their focus on strength and weakness, reading and misreading, threatens to suppress alternative critical

approaches. Philosophy, psychology, poetry, become weapons in a battle for the right to interpret.

Bloom's emphasis on key concepts -- redemption and the fallen state, originality and repression -- sets his criticism apart from Barthes and Empson. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* William Empson views poetry as a way of creating a new vision of society by creating new mental habits, whereas for Bloom poetry is a way of coming to some understanding of one's inability to attain an ideal society. Although Empson acknowledges the role of the influence of precursors in his writing (consider his attitude towards Richards in the introduction to *Seven Types of Ambiguity*), he does not give it the central position Bloom gave in *Poetry and Repression.* Empson's emphasis appears to be on the mechanics of poetry, the way in which poets write in order to imply a range of meanings, and via this emphasis he concentrates on the mechanics of thought, whereas Bloom's lies on the state a poet must have in order to write poetry -- either relationship with the world (in *Shelley's Mythmaking*), or jealousy and desire to rebel against a poetic father (in *Poetry and Repression*), thus Bloom's emphasis is on the mechanics of emotion or of desire.

Conclusion

On one level Empson's, Barthes', and Bloom's criticism can be viewed as exemplifying three different approaches to determining the role of the author and reader in specifying the meaning(s) of a text. Each approach can be categorised as inadequate because the problem is irresolvable. As a reader or critic I can only know my own interpretation of the texts I read, and have only limited information available (my reading, my interpretation, of others' criticism, their interpretation of texts) to help me determine to what extent my reading was influenced by authorial intention.

While all three authors claim to be trying to resolve the problem of how a text's meanings are determined, in fact each uses this problem in his own way to posit an alternative critical vocabulary. Empson's seven types of ambiguity, Barthes' five codes, Bloom's revisionary ratios, are created to provide "objective" proof of particular readings of texts. As such, each critical vocabulary can easily be re-drafted in terms of existing critical vocabularies (such as that used by the New Critics and their critical descendants). In fact, it is the philosophical underpinnings of these new vocabularies that makes them interesting. And while the vocabularies may initially assist a reader to break free from viewing texts under existing critical constraints, in themselves they do not have sufficient independence from existing critical techniques nor sufficient

internal coherence to become serious contenders for the role of a critic's main vocabulary.

What each critic brings to his criticism is a belief that texts are central to people's lives -- to maintain sanity (Empson), to defy bourgeois ideology (Barthes), to be in relationship with the world, or to face one's repression by history (people, texts) and to place oneself in a historical context (Bloom). The central myth, then, is that texts matter. In a society where many children rarely read, where television is most people's major source of entertainment and information about the world, it's a myth that's hard to maintain. Ironically, it is only in closed cultures (e.g. China) where textual attempts to subvert society matter. In more open, bourgeois societies such attempts at subversion are assimilated and even seen as confirming bourgeois values.

Each critic starts with the premiss that texts matter and then goes on to argue for a particular set of beliefs about people and society, using works of literature (Empson, Barthes), and sometimes also philosophical writings and psychoanalytic techniques (Bloom) to justify these beliefs. Literature, in conjunction with criticism and philosophy and psychology, is seen as a means of redeeming ourselves form this everyday world. The experience of reading is seen as opening the reader's mind, and the experience of re-reading through criticism as a re-opening through which new beliefs may be inserted in the reader's mind -- a polemical opportunity.

If my language appears sexual, it's intentional. The passive reader, open to new beliefs; the active critic, promulgating new ideas, new ways of thinking about the world. It is, of course, another myth. The myths of redemption via relationship, repression and rebellion as secret acknowledgements of (and

therefore legitimisation of) authority, the myth of bourgeois ideology as fascistically denying texts their plurality, the myth of ambiguity -- these myths are in fact tools used to legitimise the critic's role as disseminator.

If, instead, we view these myths as tools used to gain authority and power over readers, then we come to a different conclusion regarding the role of the critic. The critic may be seen as a person whose aim is to win as many hearts and minds as possible, seeking immortality in much the same way as authors are said to seek immortality (by writing). Inevitably people want others to share their beliefs -- for this both legitimises the beliefs and confirms that we have power over others.

That's why each critic's discussion of author s and authority is so crucial to their work. If an author totally lacks authority then so does a critic, for a critic is a kind of author. On the other hand, if an author has complete authority then there is no room for criticism. Empson defines the author's realm rather loosely, whilst Barthes purports to do away with authors altogether (yet lets them in by the back door -- authors may, after all, be readers of their own texts). Structuralism, while denying the concept of the author as fully determining a text's meaning, relies on the authority of authorship to promulgate its own ideology. Of the critics I have discussed it is only Bloom who explicitly addresses this issue in *Poetry and Repression*. There Bloom accepts that authors have authority and, for that matter, so do critics. It is a matter of whose reading will become accepted, who will have the greatest authority.

Perhaps the real issue is how authority is to be obtained -- by seduction or by more brutal methods. Empson's every man his own critic, or the early

Bloom's escapist fantasy or authority through redemptive experience? Bloom's battle cry or Barthes' bliss?

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