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Harold Bloom between Tradition and Innovation

Aldo Tagliaferri

Tradition and innovation are necessarily related owing to the fact that symbolic language, which traces the separation between signifier and signified, produces the image of a before and an after of itself. Straddling the signifier, the "signified" is in fact split up into a "before" and an "after" which are both equally fictive and necessary to the working of language. The implications of this condition are that the signifier, constitutive of language and therefore of culture, points toward two possible dimensions of the signified: a signified that has never been transformed into a meaningful entity, which makes it therefore an impossibility; and a signified ever in need of signification, and pointing therefore to a subsequent signifier. If the signifier expresses this double reference [*rinvio*] to absence—on the one hand the inexpressible and on

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[Translated from the Italian by Peter Carravetta]

the other the perennially deferred expression—then the relationship between tradition and innovation is essential to culture insofar as the latter becomes aware of its intrinsically linguistic nature and therefore of the dialectics of presence and absence at work in every cultural act.

Culture is thus most alive when tradition, also, much like innovation, becomes instrumental in making absence partake in the signifier. But we are here talking of one kind of absence only, which is at any rate the absence of what is not yet and which from the beginning has never been. On the other hand, the projecting in the historical past of the illusory coincidence of signified and signifier—which sets Tradition up as an hypostasis of an absolute presence—is what prevents language from elaborating the lack of this coincidence. This projecting, in other words, prevents language from pursuing within the horizon of innovation—of this alternate face or name for absence—the goal of tracking down that same first face. If what is present cannot substitute “what is not yet” for “what is no more,” culture cannot exist, for it would fail to reproduce the dialectical structure of language upon which it is founded.

Perhaps the earliest functional application of this process is to be found in religious thought. The Hebrew eternal deferral of divine manifestation, the eternal awaiting for the Messiah as the coincidence of signified and signifier that can happen only in the future—which, by the way, repropose the timeliness of an evaluation of the relation between the Freud-Lacan conception of language and Hebraism¹—can be seen as a useful model to illustrate this aspect of the innovation/tradition relationship as constitutive of the grounding cultural choice at the base of modern Western art.

Now this is precisely what Harold Bloom attempts in his excellent book *Kabbalah and Criticism*.² Working around the partially rejected idea that language is God, Bloom traces a series of illuminating parallels between the Kabbalistic world of perennial interpretive innovation of the Scripture, and the world of the critic, the constant and conscious swerve with respect to the tradition that dwells in our culture, especially as represented by its most noble artistic exemplars.

Of course, there have been studies that clarified for us how this strand of the Jewish mystical speculation has survived even outside the theological horizon. David Bakan, just to cite one such study, approached Freud as a secular follower of Sabbatian messianism.³ In pursuing this type of secularization, Bloom's essay translates in specifically linguistic or poetic terms the Kabbalistic

theory of the *sefirot*, or of divine emanation. In fact, in much the same way in which the *sefirot*, in emanating from God's infinite center, institute "modalities of language that replace God," or strings of tropes among which no causal relation is given; so poetic texts, relational events *par excellence*, constantly set up exchanges with other poetic texts to which they are not, however, linked by any causal nexus. And much like the trope of divine self-limitation which distances, according to Lauria, God from men—but in a way that permits men to draw nearer to Him—; so "each new strong poet begins with a renewed limit that teaches him, as a poet, his own proper name, making him repudiate and annul as intolerable presence the idea of the precursor." What is defined as strong poetry imposes itself, according to Bloom, thanks to a strong misreading. The strong poet is fully aware of the fact that, whereas Tradition is an optical effect, the misreading is a working necessity. To each poet his "own" precursor is a demiurge that needs be misread, but this, according to Bloom, is in reality "the relationship at work between each text and any reader whatever." Thus, much like the Kabbalist, poets know the past only as their own creation.

Now to this analogy between the relationships that exist among the *sefirot*, and those that exist among tradition, misreading, swerve and the production of the new *sefirot-poetry*, we must bring to bear, as was pointed out at the beginning, the analogy with the drama of language. The signifier is a misreading of the signified, but the only possibility of bringing the signifier close to the signified must go through the indeterminate misreading of the signifier itself. Only by starting from this awareness is it possible to deploy betrayal, taking advantage of both the strengths and the weaknesses of the symbolic in order to trace back the substitutions by means of the substitutions themselves. This instrumental deployment of substitutions, this overcoming of substitutions by means of substitution itself, is the artifice of artistic restitution itself.

In terms of linguistic theory, tradition, defined by Bloom as aggression of the precursor, is the domain of the signifier, the gratuitousness of symbolic substitutions. In psychoanalytic terms, it belongs to that complex of admiration and dislike, emulation and rivalry, eternalizing and killing, that goes by the name of Oedipus complex.

In the precursor, in the *strong* poet who typically *begins* a tradition, there is thus an overlapping of the oedipal as unrelated symbolic signifier—which spurs an indeterminate redeeming by means of a string of metaphoric deferrals—and the oedipal as a

father image and as a reaction against this image. In the cultural act as repetition of the drama of language, what is of utmost importance is that the oedipal bears upon itself the coincidence between the opacity of the removal and the swerve of symbolic language with respect to reality.

To go back to the thematic of the Kabbalah, God's first name, like the name of the father, is substituted for the unsayable nothingness of Narcissus, and it is then indeterminately forced by art to give back, by means of the word, silence, meaning, the unsayable "taken."

Put differently, what Bloom defines as the dialectic of tradition and innovation can be read as the dialectic between Narcissus and Oedipus. Self-preservation in Narcissus occurs by means of defense mechanisms that need Oedipus, even though at the same time they fight him off. Likewise, the same mechanism can be seen at work in the new poet who in order to stake his claim needs precursors but must also fight them. The counter-action of the effect upon the cause of which Bloom speaks can best be understood if interpreted in terms of this dialectic between the highest instances of the psyche: Narcissus is in fact an effect of the oedipal complex insofar as he becomes Narcissus II (secondary narcissism), but he is at the same time the cause insofar as he is Narcissus I (primary narcissism). We are still talking about the "signified," the illustrious absentee, straddling the signifier by virtue of the imaginary.

The "belated" literary Narcissus II depends upon, according to Bloom, "the invention of language," the primary oedipal showing of God. Now God is invested with the responsibility for original distancing from meaning, the anxiety of representation, the fault of substitutive arbitrariness. Yet its counter-action upon language—which manifests itself with explicit force in Beckett's *The Unnameable*⁴—can be fully grasped only as an attempt to recover absolute meaning (=nothingness), that is, Narcissus I, or God lost in the word.

The effect that recoils upon the cause is the end that corrects its own means, the Narcissus attempting to come to grips with itself and to heal the wound while straddling the Oedipus. This is the true motor of art, and probably of the whole culture of "belatedness," the entire culture of criticism within which we live.

If the dialectic relationship between innovation (difference) and tradition (identity) within the very same innovative poetic act entails the copresence of repetition (mimesis, imitation) and swerve (misreading, critical reading), it is because Narcissus transforms itself into Oedipus to thus preserve itself: silence becomes

word so that it can give itself back in restitution. And since the means for this travesty is itself a swerve, a misreading, a betrayal, the new poet places himself—with regard to the preceding poet—in the same relationship in which language places itself with regard to the unsayable: it must betray it in order to conserve it.

Creative innovation is then a swerve upon a swerve, a misreading of a misreading, the betrayal of a betrayal. And tradition is the preceding betrayal in need of the ongoing betrayal so that it may continue the indeterminate process of redeeming the unsayable. We can say therefore that our culture has taken the form of Freud's interminable analysis.

The precursor, bearer of his father's image, does not stand at the beginning, at the origin, but rather at a midway point. On this and that side of this midpoint where we find Oedipus, we have the two princes of the narcissistic dynasty, Narcissus I and Narcissus II. Within the adventure of the Jewish people, the Kabbalistic interpretation of Scripture—the culture of belatedness—constitutes a recovery of the Narcissus after the oedipal alienation and therefore coincides with what most closely characterizes artistic language: both bend substitutive language (which is oedipal-symbolic) in order to produce an instrument which brings back the Hegelian "living" that this same language has "removed," that "living" which the Hebrew Kabbalists conceived as the high point of existence and nothingness at the same time. In psychoanalytic terms this high point of existence and nothingness, this ineffable absolute that bears in its bosom its own weakness, is precisely Narcissus I. The slyness of the ayin (of nothingness) to survive its own impotence is language in which something is substituted for the unsayable. The series of the *sefirot* corresponds to the chain of signifiers each of which attempts to redeem the preceding one while at the same time it attempts to catch up on its own falling away, exactly as we see in the series of Beckett's characters. The variety of the *sefirot* is after all rigorously interpreted by the author of *Malone Dies*: "les formes sont variées où l'immuable se soulage d'être sans forme" [the forms are many in which the unchanging seeks relief from its formlessness].

Purposely plain yet such that they can be spontaneously cited, Beckett's utterances raise immediately the problem of locating those traits that turn the *sefirot* into an artwork. In this way the *sefirot* is able to produce a new form of the unchanging necessary to that shifting of signifiers we call our culture. To this end, we may notice how the relationship between tradition and innovation contained in language is found again within the artwork but only to the extent in which it is a conscious cultural artwork, that is, insofar as

it is a "critical" work, a work *on* language. Thus if we recall for a moment what was said before concerning the split effect of meaning into an imaginary "before" and an imaginary "after" with respect to the signifier, it will be useful at this point to suppose the following: each artistic text is such insofar as it is able to evoke two other texts, or subtexts, complementary to it. Of these, the first is deceptively associated with the "betrayed" signified and would include the "not yet said"; the second subtext, again deceptively associated with the signified to be "freed," would include "what must be said." The artist's task, then, much like that of the critic, is to ensure that the subtext which precedes the text coincides with the one that follows it, in other words, that Narcissus I be identical with Narcissus II, and that the unsayable be finally said by the new signifier. A truly impossible task, and the true task of our culture.

If we can in fact acknowledge in the artwork the rebounding effect of the signifier on to something other than itself, and therefore to an unreachable signified, we can also acknowledge in the latter a nonexistent model that is located simultaneously in a time "before" the work—contents betrayed by form—and in a time "after" the work—which translates into the necessity of comprehending it by means of an endless reading, that is, through criticism, or with a subsequent artwork, that is, through innovation—. If in each artwork there's both a Narcissus and an Oedipus, and if each artistic text hints at another unexpressed, unexpressable text, then the tension between tradition and innovation is already contained within the artwork as such. The tension is there originally insofar as it is a repetition of, and an interminable remedy for, the oppositional fracture between signifier and signified that's intrinsic to the language within which it comes to be and which moreover it deploys and attempts to redeem. Tradition is then the set of signifiers that constitutes the preceding failure and to which reference must be made in order to be different. Innovation, on the other hand, is the resumption of the attempt to conjoin, even if through symbolic language, the signifier with the signified. But at this point we must ask ourselves whether innovation does *not* really overtake tradition in a forward movement to a greater degree than it does in a backward movement, because already in the mythic origin of language there is the innate image of a signifier left unsaid, an indelible image since meaning cannot be expressed. This phantasm, this absence, turns out to be the model deployed by innovation, whereas tradition hypostasizes the expressed signifiers. Tradition is made up of texts with which to

model subsequent texts, but what compels text number 2 to differ from text 1—so as to be different—is still that unexpressable subtext that fed, together with the one actually expressed, the tension in text number 1. Thus what is at the base of the mechanism that relates tradition to innovation, the innovative opposition (one thinks here of Pound's "make it new"), is the resumption of the project to recover the signifier carried out by means of a selection, or swerve, of new signifiers, on the basis of the discarding of old signifiers with respect to the signified. All of which leads one to consider the preceding inadequacy, worked out on the basis of an unknown, to be actually supplying the indispensable pointers for the necessary subsequent attempt, in other words, that the inadequacy of the text of any given work is nevertheless the necessary instrument to indicate in any determinate manner the absence of the unsayable. And this is precisely what constitutes the ambivalent lure of tradition.

The unfaithfulness of the student toward his teacher does nothing more than to repeat the unfaithfulness of the word with respect to the thing, the very murdering of the thing by the word. But it is all, of course, a ritualistic repetition, an attempt to expiate a guilt through sacrifice. The *new* is repetition and expiation for the killing of the Father. The fundamental paradox in the tradition/innovation relation is therefore the following: that the *new*, or the absence that has the value of the signified and the function of the renewal, resides in the bosom of the old but not because it has already been obtained, overtaken, or forgotten, but because it is instead never overcome, because it is new from the start, and new once again because unattainable. Thus the way forward and the way backward coincide. We are of course referring to the Narcissus of the artwork, the interdicted meaning [*significato sbarrato*, lit. barred meaning].

Must we then infer that there is no artistic evolution? Quite the contrary; artistic evolution is necessary, and this constitutes its strength as well as its weakness. The existence of an evolutionary process conceived as an endless shifting [*slittamento*] of signifiers is exactly what we have been talking about. This artistic evolution is intrinsically marked by the condition of a progressive drawing near which is at the same time a progressive moving away. This is to be understood literally, but not in the sense that the two movements compensate each other by producing a closure of the horizon, but rather in the sense that they render the experience more compelling.

As error, Tradition is born when the text (the Canon, Scrip-

ture) is no longer considered a more or less glorious failure of the project to represent the unrepresentable. Rather, Tradition is born when it is considered an imitable but not repeatable realization of the perfect conjunction of signifier and signified. This dislocation of the phantasm of the unsayable upon what has already been said once and for all is the movement of the oedipal opacity that allows the father to win. Whether we are talking about the Church, School, Tradition, or bygone Cultures, it is the substitutive word of truth that confines to the historical past all possibility to innovate. What is worthy of mention, at any rate, is that in the dialectic interaction of tradition and innovation, past and future seem to be interchangeable. Bloom points this out quite appropriately when he says that the *sefirot* do not constitute a progressive moving away from God any more than they constitute a progressive drawing near Him.

Innovation evokes the signified as if it had been betrayed or forgotten. Tradition evokes the signifier as if it were still attuned to the times. Innovation works within the ambivalence of the past participle; tradition works instead within the ambivalence of the present participle. In fact, the past participle—"signified"—presupposes the present participle—"signifier"⁵—which means it is more present than the latter. But at the same time its presence is absence. That absence in it is what is most prominently present, is what constitutes the fascination with and the mystery of the language of art.

This reference to what is not in the text—which is a way of being of the text—becomes explicit in texts that, being artistic and critical at the same time, constitute, also, a certain way for the text to exist as an anti-text. Major works of art possess this ability to refer in an indeterminate way to what they are not. In this sense they are capable of generating a tradition of betrayals, and of letting themselves be usurped by other works (necessarily critical, in a more or less intentional manner) that attempt to finish the impossible task. What these works *are not*, and so significantly *say by saying they are not*, is what the word covers up with its own shadow, the dark side of representation, their Narcissus.

1. On this issue, see the proceedings from *La psychanalyse est-elle une histoire juive? Colloque de Montpellier, 1980* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

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2. Harold Bloom, *La Kabbalà e la tradizione critica*, Italian trans. by Mario Diacono (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981).
 3. David Bakan, *Sigmund Freud and the Jewish Mystical Tradition*, 1958; Italian trans.: *Freud e la tradizione mistica ebraica* (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1977).
 4. "It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I'll fix their gibberish for them." Olympia Press edition of the trilogy (Paris, 1959), p 451; Italian trans., *L'innominabile* (Milan: Mondadori, 1970), p 46.
 5. [Actually it should be "signifying," as in the corresponding forms in French and Italian. *Tr.*]