

IMAGINATION AND INDIVIDUAL TRADITION

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On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street

Become the figures of heaven...

- Wallace Stevens, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome"

The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

- W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"

The riddle of poetic tradition may unfold like this: a poet—like all poets who have come before and after—begins *in medias res* of poetic history. He looks behind him and watches the pantheon fall further and further into darkness. He looks above him and hears the faceless muse muttering glossolalia. He looks at his hands and sees his hands; he looks at his feet, and sees his feet; he runs his hands over his eyes and lips and feels his eyes and lips...that is, *himself*. He wants to plummet into the pantheon; he wants to translate the muse and remember her face. He is, at once, frozen and in vertigo. Caught between history and eternity, the pantheon and the muse, the past and the future, he can either close his eyes and remain in limbo forever or he can continue to frantically look below and above until his vertigo becomes too much to bear, and he runs. Whereas he thinks he is running away, he is in actuality running toward, simultaneously, the pantheon and the muse. He stretches himself beyond himself, until he is no longer himself, until he joins both pantheon and muse. It is then that he feels the pantheon and the muse as one and the same. He is *in* them, they

in him. He *is* them, they *are* him.

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Poetic tradition *is* a riddle. Tradition in a broader sense, by definition, contains an impenetrable paradox. Cultural elements are passed down from generation to generation, usually orally, and are assimilated. This presupposes a degree of conformity and acceptance; at the same time, tradition precludes a degree of invention and creative dissatisfaction. But without invention and dissatisfaction, tradition becomes static, stagnant, and eventually obsolete. Within the context of poetic tradition, we could call this oblivion.

And, of course, history has an alternate view: a tradition only becomes Tradition through invention, through the work of the imagination. In this view, oblivion has no home; nor does the imagination because it can never settle and establish imaginative space. The invention or innovation (we could call it a *tradition-in utero*) is merely the equivalent of a glimmer floating behind the poet's eyes that disappears before it is conceived, before it can even become a trend. The flight and arrival—the expansion and contraction—of the imagination and tradition, respectively, creates poetry. Poet and critic Marianne Boruch, in her essay “The Rage to Reorder,” paraphrases Robert Frost on the subject of poetic development:

...we don't *progress* at all, thank you. It's not a matter of *better*. Instead, the overwhelming patter of the universe is simply this: expansion and contraction. We open and we close; we probably do it endlessly. In

this way, poets accumulate image, tone, language, new ideas about structure to draw on (expand) or leave behind (contract) as seems useful, exciting, inevitable. (116)

It's no revolutionary statement to conclude that Frost is a "traditional" poet. Perhaps what's more interesting is to consider *if* Frost created a tradition. If so, then *how* and *why*? And still further, can we determine with reasonable clarity when *any poet* has simultaneously created something "new," as Pound demands, *while* also maintaining the integrity (or should we say that they are held with the confines of?) tradition? By what criteria do we deem one poem or poet as imaginative, and another as traditional? When does a poem stop becoming a product of tradition and become a product of the imagination? *How* does the poet achieve this?

"One of the facts that might come to light," T. S. Eliot says in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else" (48). Notice how Eliot skims over—as if crossing the Atlantic in half an hour, never to return—these "aspects of [a poet's] work" that see and say, stare and sing like no one else. Namely, the *how*: a poet's style and vision, and how a poet acquires them from his and her predecessors (living, or otherwise): the Levine in Levis, the Berryman in Levine, the Williams in Berryman, the Whitman in Williams, the Keats in Whitman...where should I—anyone—end? Who did Homer—blind, of course—*read*?

We could start with some definitions. Style: a word that derives from *stiletto*,

or knife; something that cuts, scars, penetrates; one's signature, one's singularity, one's personality. We detect style when we see it, hear it. There is not, however, a single definition of style; there are as many styles as there are, say, snowflakes or fingerprints. While I believe this in *concept*, the idea strikes me as partially false, or at least a little funny. As one reads through any current literary periodical of note, he or she look for derivations of style, but this soon becomes a process of trying *not* to notice the seemingly incestuous infestation of sameness.

In poetry, one cannot teach the penetrating signature; the sensitively wise (living, breathing) mentor merely guides the apprentice toward possibilities. Otherwise, we call it *forced*. Or imitative, derivative, false. Never authentic, imaginative, influential. And perhaps this is what Harold Bloom intends when he writes in *The Anxiety of Influence* that “the later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent-poem that doesn't belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond the precursor” (15). Curiously—but with an evasion similar to Eliot's above—Bloom's book on the development of a “real” poet never mentions style. He does circle over and around style for many pages full shimmering “revisionary ratios” and cavernous theories, so much so that one has to one wonder if Bloom has ever written a “successful” or “influential” poem. I have to think he has at least tried, because he has *style* and he has a *vision* of how poems not only come into the world but remain *in* it, and *beyond* it.

Also absent in Bloom's and Eliot's discussions is the concept of vision: meditated-upon experience; the poet's concentrated gaze looking back and *through* so

as to jettison memory into the present and future; the poet's uncanny but privileged ability to simultaneously *capture* and *alter* experience. *Vision* derives from the Greek *oída*, or *I know* and *idein*, *to see*. It may be that only the poet can adequately address poetic vision...if anyone can. Keats's letters are as good a source as any. He writes to J. H. Reynolds on 3 May 1818 that

In regard to [Wordsworth's] genius alone—we find what he says true as far as we have experienced and we can judge no further but by large experience—for axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses: We read fine _____ things but never feel them to thee full until we have gone the same steps as the Author.—I know this is not plain; you will know exactly my meaning when I say, that now I shall relish Hamlet more than I ever have done.... Until we are sick, we understand not;--in fine, as Byron says, 'Knowledge is Sorrow'; and I go on to say that 'Sorrow is Wisdom'—and further for aught we can know certainty! 'Wisdom is folly'—So you see how I have run away from Wordsworth and Milton; and shall still run away from what was in my head, to observe...." (396)

"To observe," *away* from his precursors, his poetic lineage, his influences. But Keats asserts that he cannot imaginatively observe until *after* he has fully absorbed Milton and Wordsworth, whatever his threshold may be. But Keats describes *how* he arrives at his vision, not what vision, in any poetic sense, is.

In an earlier letter to his brothers George and Tom (21 December 1817), Keats offers the enticing but mercurial maxim of negative capability, “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (370). Keats’s insights, as influential as they are, bring us no closer to a definition of poetic vision. A few sentences later, however, Keats writes “...that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration” (370). These compelling and empowering words approach definition, but only through negation.

Larry Levis attempts to define, or at least discuss, vision in his essay “Some Notes on the Gazer Within,” but he also offers this caveat:

There may be a great deal to say, however, about poetry itself, about the imagination, about vision. And I risk foolishness by talking about such subjects. I know, really, that if I don’t talk about it, someone else will. And I may not agree with what he or she has to say. So I must either talk about the imagination, or be silent. (67)

Notice how quickly and quietly Levis conflates *imagination* with *vision*. Are they the same? Later in the essay, Levis says “It seems to me that any poetry, any realized ‘making,’ comes almost directly from some kind of actual center, some location of energy.... A poet finds what he or she is by touching what is out there, finding the *real*.... The best beginning poets I know are also the most literary: what they demonstrate is a love for poetry rather than a love for *themselves*” (69). According to

Levis, the poet finds himself or herself by momentarily abandoning that self—an exercise in negative capability—in order to be filled by what and who is “out there,” the larger world, the pantheon of poets, the faceless muse. The poet is filled only after he/she “encounter[s], at least on some very honest days, [his/her] own space; it is to discover how much an onlooker and a gazer [the poet] has to be in order to write poems” (Levis 70). According to Levis, a poet shapes his/her vision passive-aggressively; it happens *to* the poet, but only after the poet allows it (however subconsciously) to enter, whatever this *it* is. Then, the poet may feel a little like Keats reading Chapman’s Homer, “like some watcher of the skies/ When a new planet swims into his ken....”

Here, Keats and Levis sound similar to Bloom’s revisionary ratios *kenosis* and *askesis*. *Kenosis* (stage three of six in the *Anxiety of Influence*), Bloom explains, is “the humbling or emptying-out of Jesus by himself, when he accepts reduction from divine to human status. The later poet, apparently emptying himself of his own afflatus, his imaginative godhood, seems to humble himself as though he were ceasing to be a poet...” (14-15). *Askesis* (stage five of six) is a

movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude.... The later poet does not, as in *kenosis*, undergo a revisionary movement of emptying, but of curtailing; he yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor.... (15)

Keats, Eliot, Bloom, and Levis hover *over* a definition of poetic vision, but, again, never fully offer a hard-and-fast definition. Perhaps vision, like style, can be defined only in specific contexts, on individual bases. Perhaps, as Levis hints, vision and imagination are the same, and perhaps Wallace Stevens gives us the most solid definition of what the imagination can be: “The imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things; but if this constitutes a certain single characteristic, it is the source not of a certain single value but of as many values as reside in the possibilities of things” (726). It may be, then, that *the* defining characteristic of the imagination (that is, style and vision) is that it cannot be defined in any universal way, or at least in terms that reach some degree of consensus. The imagination not only creates something new (via style and vision) in perpetuity; the imagination itself is something continually new. Tradition, then, is left in the dust kicked up by the imagination’s perpetual flight and arrival, continual expansion and contraction.

Which brings us back to T. S. Eliot, who challenges all of this when he asserts that “[poetic] historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer *traditional*. And it is as at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. *No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone*” (49, my emphasis). Eliot is correct if we understand him within the context of, say, the exchange between the writer and the reader. Shakespeare, for example, is no one without an audience. This, however, is not Eliot’s point. We must know, Eliot asserts, who and what is “out there,” who our

predecessors are, who constitutes the tradition, which is precisely what Levis asserts.

But tradition does not exist without the individual imagination. Perhaps this is why Berryman once barked at Levine that poets must be scholars, but scholars in the workings of the world, not just of literature. To teach poetry writing is, perhaps, the most imaginative task. If it were not, then why would Bloom write something as fatalistic and hopeful as this?

...the later poet, in his own final phase, already burdened by an imaginative solitude that is almost a solipsism, holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet's flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself in the revisionary ratios. But the poem is now *held* open to the precursor, where once it *was* open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work. (15-16)

Control of the imagination, control over tradition, is the matter here: what was merely exposed by the "later" poet is now somehow extended by him or her, not only to the "parent" poet, but to everyone who cares to read it. The individual imagination sharpens that control. On what other criteria could we begin to characterize a poem

by John Berryman as a *Berrymanic* poem unless we first addressed the idiosyncratic prosody and call-and-response idiomatic pyrotechnics of *The Dream Songs*? How else could we describe a Levine poem as anything other than *Levinian*, full of forceful rhythms that give a voice (that is, a vision) to the voiceless? Is there anything in the style and vision of a *Levis* poem derivative of Levine...that is to say of Berryman, Williams, Whitman, Keats, Shakespeare, Homer...?

Before I give you my answer, Levis gives us one more succinctly. In the quote below, he answers a question Michael White poses in a 1990 interview. White asks, “Who do you see as your precursors? I’m thinking of Harold Bloom’s sense of the word?” Levis responds candidly:

I don’t know if you’re asking me who my precursors are or who, specifically, influenced me. But if it’s the latter, then it’s easier. When I was sixteen, I read all of T. S. Eliot I could, read him constantly, and after him went on to Stevens, Frost, and Auden, and after that came back to Eliot. By then I was seventeen, I think. But I should say that if it hadn’t been for Philip Levine’s workshops, shortly after that, I’m unsure what I would have become. A shoe salesman who has no meaning at all? A drug addict who has his meaning entirely to himself? Both? Well, I include this fact, because facts are important now in an art presently infatuated by (and sometimes nourished by) the psychoanalytic theories of Bloom. But it wasn’t Milton and Wordsworth who changed my life back there at Dust and Wind State

College; it was Levine, his poetry, his teaching, the purity and fire of his genius that did that, and this further effected a change that my reading of Eliot had already begun. (*A Condition of the Spirit* 277)

Implicitly, Levis addresses the imagination and how a poet at once focuses and enlarges it with the assistance of, in the words of Levine, “a living, breathing mentor.” Levis tells us, in essence, that Levine’s workshops taught Levis how to read—that is, *re-read*—Eliot, Stevens, Frost, Auden and, ostensibly, everyone and everything else Levis read from that day forward.

Levis’s implicit response is my explicit answer: in other words, what Keats, Whitman, Williams, Berryman, Levine, and Levis share in common is the imagination. (A list of “precursors” is endless, or at least as thick as *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, and Levis is wise to side-step that part of the question.) Paradoxically enough, what unifies them is exactly what differentiates them: *how they say* (style) *what they see* (vision): the imagination.

In a study of poetic influence, discussing the imagination presents some problems primarily because the imagination is unteachable, perhaps untenable. I am referring to a purer imagination, the Individual Tradition, which is characterized by an achievement of style and vision that takes priority over tradition (poetic history) and redefines it. Bloom discusses this achievement in stage six, *Apophrades*, or “Return of the Dead”:

the dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead return to inhabit their

former houses, come to the strongest poets, but with the very strongest there is a grand and final revisionary movement that purifies even this latest influx.... For all [great poets] achieve a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time almost is overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors*. (141)

Bloom continues,

In this observation, I want to distinguish the phenomenon from the witty insight of Borges, that artists *create* their precursors, as for instance the Kafka of Borges creates the Browning of Borges. I mean something more drastic and (presumably) absurd, which is the triumph of having so stationed the precursor, in one's own work, that particular passages in *his* work seem to be not presages of one's own advent, but rather to be indebted to one's own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one's greater splendor. The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own. (141)

Bloom's words echo T. S. Eliot's pronouncement that there are no new subjects in poems, only new ways of expressing these subjects. Bloom and Levis speak around the same thing, namely the Individual Tradition. (Eliot would contend in his

criticism that there is no such thing as an Individual Tradition, whereas his poetry brilliantly and imaginatively bears witness to its existence, power, and influence.) Precursors and teachers cannot and will not (despite the most benevolent or malevolent intentions) bring about the imagination's individuation. The strong poet, alone, achieves his or her own imagination once they have fully absorbed and then *willfully forgotten* their precursors, their tradition.

This is not to say that a poetry writing teacher cannot catalyze the imagination's individuation. A poet's imagination can be guided, perhaps even opened, by any number of forces; and since the advent of the creative writing workshop at Iowa in the 1930s, that guidance toward the Individual Tradition has been expedited and enhanced in the classroom. Yvor Winters, twenty-two years before he and Wallace Stegner created the nation's second graduate creative writing program at Stanford, wrote that

A poem is the result of a poet moving in a milieu. A poet is born into a certain intellectual and psychic milieu, and this milieu may, to some extent, form the poet. But the poet will also be born with certain peculiar and unchangeable qualities, and these will, in the course of time, modify the milieu with respect to the particular poet. If the poet be of a very plastic nature, he may be greatly changed by his milieu. If he be of a more or less immobile nature, he will absorb into his own mind, and, in the process of absorption, change as becomes necessary, such part of his milieu as is to some extent forced upon him. (*Twentieth*

Century American Poetics, Poets on the Art of Poetry 143)

It is no grand revelation that a poet's life experiences and environment shape the vision (and perhaps style) of that poet. More specifically, as we move into a discussion of influence between Levine (urban) and Levis (rural), the working class milieu in which they found themselves perhaps served as the most influential occurrence in the formation of their poetic visions. For Levine, his experiences in the automobile industry of 1940s Detroit helped him forge his vindictive and compassionate lyrics and elegies for the voiceless. For Levis, the farm his father owned and operated in the San Joaquin Valley created a similar empathy with the migrant workers who tended it and with whom Levis worked side-by-side.

But we cannot overlook the fact that it was in the workshop, where Levis met Levine, where their experiences with hard, physical labor came to bear a reciprocal influence on their visions.

With reasonable extrapolation, then, we can postulate that the creative writing workshop has become a place for all "self-starting" poets to discuss, among other things, matters of prosody, or craft. Winters writes that a "poet's technique is a portion of the milieu into which he is born (tradition) modified by his peculiar qualities to serve their needs" (143). As Winters suggests, and as the relationship between Levine and Levis illustrates, the workshop also has become a place for poets to have their experiences challenged and validated. In other words—however implied the advice, however subtle the nuance of criticism, however hurtful the truth about

one's work might seem at first—such discussions between poets culminate in the forging of the poet's imagination, both the apprentice and mentor.

Where my thinking swerves from Winters is when he says, “Why one poet is moved by this and another by that, it is impossible to say. It is possible only to remark the fact” (143). True: aesthetics can be as slippery as ice, and just as frozen. But to presume that it is impossible to say that Levine's working class sensibility—and by extension, his imagination, his style, his vision—did not speak to something akin to Levis's experiences in the baked acres of peach and almond trees is to pass over one of the larger, but unspoken, benefits of the creative writing workshop. The work and correspondence of Levine and Levis shows us that—while from separate generations and from as two dissimilar parts of the country as Michigan and California—they were writers from the same “tribe.” They wrote about and for the common person in the language of the common person, as Wordsworth prescribed.

Assuming that Levine and Levis were both “self-starting” poets; assuming they both possessed the drive and talent to become poets; presuming that they would have become poets had they never met...these all make *sense*. Levine and Levis, *after awhile*, came to accept and flourish within their own negative capability, their own imaginations, their own Individual Traditions. But to presume that their relationship had no significant impact on each other's work and lives is putting on blinders when faced with certain realities. In essays, both Levine and Levis have attested to the importance they had for each other in their continual developments as poets. Moreover, their work illustrates this time and time again. They helped each other

claim what Bloom calls their own “imaginative space.” And I agree with Bloom when he says that the goal of strong apprentice poets is “...to clear imaginative space for themselves” (5).

Bloom never defines what he means by imaginative space, but I understand it as a plain of vision made inhabitable by the wielding of style, which the apprentice poet receives from his/her predecessors and mentors. The relatively recent development of the workshop, best exemplified in Levine’s and Levis’s relationship, opens up, and upon, a wider imaginative space for both the apprentice poet and the mentor poet. For example, would it be implausible to suggest that Levis’s reading experiences with Eliot and Rimbaud failed to widen Levine’s vision? Similarly, does it seem any less absurd to assert that Levine’s reading experiences with Dylan Thomas cast Berryman’s friendship with Thomas in a wider and more refined light for Berryman? What of Berryman’s reading experiences with Shakespeare for, say, Levis...or any student of Levis; of Levine’s experiences with perhaps the greatest self-starter our poetry has, Keats; of Keats’s experiences with Shakespeare and Homer? When does the poet’s imagination take precedence over tradition and forge the Individual Tradition?

There are as many answers to these questions as there are poets. The most *moving* response to this inquiry I’ve found (this week) comes from Auden—over and over again—in his elegy for Yeats, his great influence:

By mourning tongues

The death of the poet was kept from his poems...

...he became his admirers...

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities

And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections;

To find his happiness in another kind of wood

And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.

The words of a dead man

Are modified in the guts of the living.