From Figures of Strength to Figures of Weakness:
Enmity and Amity in the Theory of Harold Bloom and Gianni Vattimo

A Proposal for a Doctoral Thesis in Literature

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מדימויים של חוזק אל דימויים של חולשה: חיבה ואיבה בתאוריות של הארולד בלום וג'יאני ואטימו

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I. *Introduction and aims*

The main aim of this dissertation is to examine and analyze the figural languages of strength and weakness in the work of American literary theorist and critic Harold Bloom and Italian hermeneutic philosopher Gianni Vattimo respectively. Bloom associates figures of strength with poetic greatness: his provocative theory holds that the relationship between literary texts and between generations of writers is one of violent Oedipal rivalry and that literary excellence must be measured by each writer's success in overthrowing the authority and influence of predecessors. Vattimo, not focusing primarily on the realm of imaginative literature, offers an inverse path and associates weakness—acceptance, love, gentleness, and gratitude—with cultural and intellectual success.

Bloom distinguishes between two kinds of texts—original and belated—in a relationship generated by the anxiety of the belated poet lest the original or predecessor be so powerful that he cannot be supplemented, let alone bested or overcome. The correspondence of "before" and "after," "old" and "new," is the hierarchical core of Bloom's theory, which conceives of these relationships as analogous to those of the Freudian model between father and son. The young poet, ephebe, or son attempts to "kill" his father in order to stand in his place and assume the precursor's priority and authority. Bloom treats with contempt what he terms "poetic weakness" and "idealization," focusing his attention instead on "strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death" (*AI* 5).

In the same years during which Bloom has analyzed what he regards as the aggression between literary generations, Vattimo has made considerable inroads in a project the inverse of Bloom's yet formulated without reference to it. Perhaps because Bloom is a literary critic and theorist, while Vattimo is primarily a philosopher, their intellectual paths have not crossed (although the difference in their disciplines did not stand in the way of Bloom's productive exchanges with the philosopher Jacques Derrida). As Bloom's theory and criticism are in the service of strength, so Vattimo's theory and specific textual interpretations are in the service of charity and of what he terms *pensiero debole* as increasingly explicit Christian aspirations. Vattimo introduced "weak thought" at the beginning of the 1980s, and it has become a defining concept of Italian (as distinct from French,

German, and Anglophone) postmodernism. Vattimo seeks to weaken all philosophical and interpretive claims, especially past and present postulations about the existence of stable and transcendental foundations for knowledge, and to do so by means of what Richard Rorty (a prime Vattimo interlocutor) would call "redescription" (and that Vattimo himself would call "recuperation"), rather than by means of polemic or even critique.

From the perspective of literary studies, there is a basic imbalance between the claims and readings of Bloom and those of Vattimo. Bloom's focus is entirely on imaginative literature and, above all, on lyric poetry, so that any critic or scholar working in almost any period of English literature will encounter and must contend with him. Conversely, Vattimo has written extensively on aesthetics, mainly in his books *The End of Modernity* (1991), *The Transparent Society* (1992), and *Art's Claim to Truth* (2008), but he has accomplished his project with little illustration and with scant reference to literary studies. To situate Vattimo's approach, for the first time, in poetics will be the practical aim of my dissertation, and I will do so by redescribing the relationships between generations of poets in terms of respect, charity, and affection, rather than of Oedipal rivalry. I will adumbrate a method—"a wholly different practical criticism," as Bloom would put it (*AI* 43)—for grappling with intertextuality. I intend to focus on American writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Emerson, Whitman, and Stevens—whom Bloom understands as engaged in Oedipal relations with British precursors.

The main reason for my choice of Old World/New World works is that Bloom's source of inspiration for his theory of aggression between texts is the enmity that—as I intend to show—lies in the stance of the Christian New Testament (especially the Gospel of John) vis-à-vis the Hebrew Old Testament (especially the book of Exodus). There is little doubt that American authors since the eighteenth century, but especially since the time of Emerson and Whitman, have endeavored to develop distinctly New World characteristics to distinguish themselves from their Old World predecessors. "Seen from a Bloomian perspective," as critic Tawfiq Yousef argues, "American poets entered an endless psychic warfare with a precursor or precursors of their own choice" (884). Although these American authors wrote in a period marked by a rising national identity and an increasingly

independent American culture, Bloom reads their works as, in each instance, a rivalrous response to specific masterpieces by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, or Keats.

Still, I must stress that Bloom's endorsement of strength is by no means unique to him. Literary criticism of most schools (the one exception might be deconstruction) tends to be concerned with what Vattimo would call "strong metaphysical traits," such as coherence, wholeness, teleology, and completion. Works of literature are judged as good or bad according to their instantiation of these traits with adequate strength (though also with nuance). Bloom's difference from other critics in this regard is that he candidly practices a militant criticism that perceives and even embraces enmity rather than amity. The rationale behind my desire to pursue applications for *pensiero debole* in literary studies is to clarify that more than one option, in criticism as in life, is available to us. I believe the time has come for scholars in the humanities to develop means to promote fellowship and peace in their own community and their own work, so that the term *humanities* may come to imply both humane theory and humane practices.

II. *Scholarly Background and Methodology*

When examining predecessor/ephebe relationships in literary history, Bloom presents himself as a non- or even an anti-contextualist: he applies the same structure with a vengeance to every "father" and "son" in the history of poetry. For him, the only context of literary production and interpretation is "the interplay of personalities" between ephebe and predecessor (*MM* 71). Enmity, however, always has an etiology and, therefore, a context and a history; hence even Bloom is unable to avoid contextualization. When he discusses, for instance, how St. John, the author of the Fourth Gospel, misreads Exodus, Bloom abandons his scruples against contextuality and intentionality by interweaving into his argument about the enmity between those texts further cultural, theological, and historical interpretations, and he even conveys his personal views on the dialogue between Judaism and Christianity at large. Bloom's theory has not bred many disciples, but those that it has, such as Robert Weisbuch, have altered the theory of enmity in, precisely, a contextualist direction: having observed how Bloom's practice is more than occasionally contextualist, Weisbuch has made Bloom's theory even more so.

In applying the theory of Bloom (and that of W.J. Bate) to Atlantic literary relations in the mid-nineteenth century, Weisbuch acknowledges that "Anglo-American influence is always more than personal and individual" (21).

Part of Vattimo's project of charitable interpretation is his refusal to presuppose, as Bloom does, that strong metaphysical traits, such as coherence, teleology, and closure, are the best criteria for assessing works of art. He invites us, instead, to reconsider "art's claim to truth" from "the perspective of the end of metaphysics" (*ACT* xiii). In his book *Art's Claim to Truth*, Vattimo's main argument is that truth is not something given as a fixed structure to the artist but, rather, that the artwork is "the ontological event itself" (*ACT* 67). In *The End of Modernity*, Vattimo defines a poem as an "inaugural event" whereby truth "happens," rather than a belated event in which truth is asserted or shown (*EM* 66). This "event," however, demands interpretation, because truth or meaning, after the "end of metaphysics," is not only made but also continually remade. The interpreter's responsibility is to redescribe or recontextualize texts (as well as events and lives) in ways that temper the severity of truth. To name this process, Vattimo draws on Heidegger's term *Verwindung* and redefines it as a gentle "twisting" or "distortion" in the service of "healing," as distinguished from *Überwindung*, which means "overcoming" (Vattimo 2006:51). My intent is to deploy *Verwindung* (using this charitable redefinition) as a critical practice that can stand as an alternative to Bloom's hermeneutics of suspicion—to his unyielding search for aggression in the relations between authors and between texts.

Vattimo argues that *Verwindung* "constitutes neither the acceptance of . . . errors nor a critical surpassing which would merely continue [the] past" (*Verwindung* 11). Hence *Verwindung*, as Vattimo understands it, involves no indifference either to injustice ("errors") or to the desire for kinds of generational change. What it does involve is a healing logic that differs radically from Bloom's approach to the relationships between authors, between texts, and between parents and children. Vattimo's approach assigns credit to predecessors as "inspiration" for new creations and procedures. His alternative to paternal domination and overthrow is the predecessor's giving way to the successor's creative will (*Beyond Despair I* 37), in the hope of the ephebe's producing a creation of his own that will neither

negate nor fully follow in the tradition of his predecessor. Vattimo resists the view of the past as "one of authority and domination, of a faculty that imposes itself as an insurmountable limit of freedom" (*Beyond Despair II* 32). He adds that "to live the father-son relationship in terms of conflict . . . is typical only of those raised in a society founded on the relationship of masters and slaves" (*Beyond Despair* 36).

My approach in this dissertation will be "contextualist," though not in the usual sense advocated by the Cambridge school of historiography. According to them, the use of context is to liberate a historical text from what they call "presentism." Their idea is to understand any given text as it would have been understood in its time by its original readership. My aim will be openly tendentious, and my use of context limited to those elements that will aid in redescribing the relationship between generations of poets in peaceful, rather than aggressive, terms. My goal is not to offer an account of literary history that must be accepted by all—my doing so would, then, be nothing more than another exercise, like Bloom's, of the will to power—but rather to suggest a way in which we can free the discourse about poetry from the assumption that every human act is an act of aggressive self-assertion. I will examine the historico-political and the socio-religious contexts of nineteenth-century American and British poetry just insofar as they enable me to pursue exemplary "charitable readings" of poetic relationships that Bloom has described in terms of an *agon* with progenitors.

III. *Chapter Outline*

The first two chapters of my dissertation will chart a theoretical course toward the practical criticism that I propose to undertake in the later chapters.

Chapter 1

There exists a large introductory corpus on Bloom's earlier critical theory (most notably, David's Fite's book *Harold Bloom: The Rhetoric of Romantic Vision,* published in 1985). Hence my plan for this chapter is to offer a reading of Bloom's theory of "poetic strength" and of his effort "to deidealise our accepted accounts of how one poet helps to form another" (*AI* 5) strictly in the context of Nietzsche's writings on the "will to power." My endeavor will be to understand the rationale of Bloom's focus on enmity and to show how it becomes more explicit as his career

shifts, after 1990, from literary criticism to the criticism of religious texts. I will argue (based on research conducted for my MA thesis "Missing Links: Between Harold Bloom's Theory of Anxiety and His Criticism of Religious Texts") that his "revisionary ratios" were developed to explain how the authors of the New Testament turned the Hebrew Bible into no more than an Old—which is to say, outmoded—Testament. While developing this point, I will assess the extent to which Bloom blurs the distinction between religion and literature, theology and literary theory, just as, in chapter 2, I intend to assess the role of religion in Vattimo's hermeneutics of "weak thought."

Chapter 2

As my first chapter will focus on the relationship of Bloom's advocacy of "strong poets" to Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power," my second will look into the relationship between Vattimo's idea of "weak thought" to the metaphysical nihilism of Nietzsche. That each theorist is so dependent on his reading of Nietzsche is, perhaps, less important than that each concentrates on a different aspect of Nietzschean thinking and that these different emphases yield very different approaches to hermeneutics, Scripture, and religion. What Vattimo takes from Nietzsche differs so radically from what Bloom takes that Vattimo can argue on its basis that "postmodern nihilism constitutes the actual truth of Christianity" (*FR* 47). Vattimo reformulates the Christian message through an analysis of *kenosis*, a term derived from the Greek *ekenosea* in Philippians 2:7, where the Second Person of the Trinity is said to have "emptied himself" of divinity and become a man. Vattimo regards the idea of transcendent divinity as Aristotelian rather than Christian (Vercellone 337), arguing that the Incarnation, as an expression of *caritas* and humility, is incompatible with the idea of divine transcendence. Thus, postmodernism may be understood to share the "desacralizing thrust of Christianity" (*CTWF* 48). According to Vattimo, Nietzsche's dictum that "God is dead" carries the same philosophical meaning as the kenotic doctrine of the birth of God as man.

While Vattimo uses the concept of *kenosis* in the service of charity, Bloom chooses *kenosis* as the name for his third revisionary ratio, which is the stage in which the ephebe humbles himself, as if ceasing to be a poet, but the emptying is

conducted in relation to a precursor's poem-of-ebbing in such a way that the precursor is emptied out as well (as if the Son's *kenosis* emptied out the Father in the life of the Trinity). *Kenosis* is, for Bloom, a martial tactic aimed at debilitating the enemy, whereas for Vattimo weakness is an end in itself. From Vattimo's perspective, the attempt to overcome individuals, situations, or texts (*Überwindung*) results only in enslavement to them, whereas accommodation, distortion, and healing (*Verwindung*) put the burden of mastery behind us.

Chapter 3

The first of the three case studies in my dissertation will concern the relationship of Ralph Waldo Emerson with the British writers, in particular Wordsworth, with whom Bloom claims that Emerson was engaged in Oedipal struggle. The basic aim of this chapter is to establish that Bloom's readings of Emerson's works in relation to those of Wordsworth are fundamentally celebrations of enmity and that Bloom could equally well have found in Emerson's relationship to Wordsworth an instance of amity between two poets and their peoples.

Certainly Emerson shaped his work in the image of the New World, with an obvious emphasis on self-reliance and on freedom from an often oppressive past. According to most commentators, then, Emerson's tendency was to look toward the future—a tendency that, in Bloom's worldview, would cast him as an Oedipal weakling. Bloom argues that "Emerson's rhetorical stance has not been read in the strength required" (*WS* 8) and himself reads Emerson as obsessed with overcoming the originality and apparently insuperable authority of the first-generation British Romantics. Emerson's struggle produced "the American Sublime," which, as Bloom defines it in his book *Agon*, is an unconsciously purposeful forgetting of anterior texts (236), whereby "the precursor's text exists by the precise figuration of its absence" (237). This strategy is pursued through evasions "performed in order to present something other than the something that is being evaded" (*PR* 242). I will limit my analysis of Emerson's British Romantic precursors to Wordsworth, whom Bloom discusses extensively in relation to the American project, and in particular to what Bloom contends is "the single poem that haunts all of the Transcendentalists," Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of

Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," which indeed Emerson characterizes as the "best modern essay" (W 8:346).

Emerson regarded the "Intimations of Immortality" ode as an essay because, Bloom argues, "Wordsworth's giant form blocked the New England seer from achieving a full voice in verse," whereas in prose he was able to compete. Emerson was "a great poet in prose" even if only "a very good one in verse" (*AI* 482). Since an extended and consistent analysis of Wordsworth's influence on Emerson's poetry (as opposed to his prose) is lacking in Bloom's criticism, my first aim in this chapter is to collect Bloom's various (and often contradictory) remarks on the topic and assemble a reading that makes coherent sense of them. Bloom wants to argue, it appears, that Emerson was able to overcome the influence of Wordsworth on his verse only by developing, in both verse and prose, "an antithetical notion of the individual" (165) that embodies "the American Will-to-Power" (*WS* 10). In Emerson's verse, Bloom sees this development wherever it celebrates American national freedom, fate, and power, which Bloom interprets as assertions of enmity with the Old World. Emerson's attention is focused not (as Wordsworth's is) on an introspective self that may be cultivated anywhere at any time, but, rather, on a particularistic "American Adam" whose foundational practice is not introspection but self-reliance. Bloom contends that "Emerson had an immense 'poverty' or imaginative need for what he called 'Self-reliance'" and that "necessarily he directed his passion for self dependence against his authentic precursors," who (and Wordsworth, above all) "induced a repressive anxiety that prevented him from centering his literary ambitions upon verse" (*WS* 1). Hence Bloom associates Emersonian self-reliance, "the influx of newness" as he repeatedly depicts it, with an imaginative strength that is the product of a repression forced on him by precursors.

Accordingly, this chapter will look closely for evidence of Oedipal rivalry between Wordsworth's Romantic self and Emerson's American Adam—an agon in which, according to Bloom, Emerson aggressively substitutes freedom, fate, and power for British Romantic Nature. The key texts will be Emerson's poems "The River" (1827) and "Merlin" (1846), read in relation to Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" (1798) and "Intimations of Immortality" (1807). After assessing the evidence for

Bloom's thesis of enmity, my own detailed examination of the selected works, undertaken from Vattimo's Nietzschean standpoint rather than Bloom's, will focus on figures in Emerson's poetry that suggest the British Romantics' presence rather than (as Bloom insists) their exclusion. I expect my conclusion will be that Emerson, so far from being in competition with Wordsworth, wished to extend Wordsworth's project, with grateful acknowledgment, to the New World. Emerson hoped and labored, in other words, to construct an American Romanticism.

Chapter 4

My second case study will be of Whitman's relationship, first, to Emerson and, then, to the British Romantics, against all of whom Bloom insists that Emerson aggressively struggled. Although, given the novelty of both its form and content, Whitman's poetry is generally regarded as an exceptionally original expression of American culture, Bloom regards it as derivative of Emerson's "American sublime" and, according to Bloom, Whitman wrote with the intent of becoming a kind of American Shelley, who would displace his Old World original and take up his stance as America's one "apotropaic champion against European culture" (*AI* 77). In treating the case of Whitman, I will concentrate on the same pair of poems as Bloom does, Whitman's "Song of Myself" (1855, 1892) and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (1820), but will argue that the original context of the precursor's poem is not emptied out, as Bloom claims, by the ephebe. Whitman acknowledges and yields presence in his own poem to Shelley's, yet the "self" of Whitman's poem is not repressed in order to do so. Rather, Whitman's "self" declares its amity with Shelley's, for the good reason that the two are looking for the same thing, though in their different times, places, and circumstances. What Bloom misses, primarily, is Whitman's own contextualism, in light of which it is possible and even normative for an ephebe to admire, echo, and expand upon a precursor's achievements, meanwhile feeling no anxiety about his own originality or autonomy. The ephebe is alive and present; the precursor's time is past, and his place elsewhere. Hence the real anxiety of the ephebe is over how to preserve and enhance the admired precursor's accomplishments in distinctly novel circumstances and, indeed, in a New World. To signal his intent and its concomitant affect, Whitman in his poem brings nature as represented in Shelley's

poetry (as a site of retrospection) into dialogue and amity with American Transcendentalist figurations of nature (as a living force). And rather than resentment or competition, I will argue, Whitman brings the reader to sense acceptance, understanding, and an urge for continuity across discontinuous contexts.

Chapter 5

My case study of Stevens's poetry will focus on the canon that Bloom suggests in *The Anxiety of Influence, Wallace Stevens: The Poems of our Climate*, and *The Anatomy of Influence*. Bloom's argument in those works is that the influence of British precursors was filtered to Stevens through Emerson and Whitman, American precursors whom Stevens as ephebe did not acknowledge. I will discuss in particular Bloom's analysis of Stevens's "Auroras of Autumn" (1947), a "crisis poem" (*WS* 256) whose origin Bloom finds in two poems by Shelley—"Ode to the West Wind" (again) and "Mont Blanc." According to Bloom, Stevens in his poem reenacts, along distinctly Shelleyan lines, "the Romantic confrontations between the power of the mind and the object-world or universe of death" (254) but then implies, however unconsciously, that Shelley's poetry itself is "only another illusion" (*WS* 270). Bloom argues that the figure of the flashing lights, the auroras, represents Stevens's inability to use his imagination effectively on account of the repression that Shelley's example occasions in him as a poet. Bloom's attention focuses on the line, "Farewell to an idea…," that introduces cantos II-IV and concerns how an idea in art moves from precursor to ephebe. He finds this poem an ideal ground on which to prove his case for Oedipal rivalry, as on his reading "Farewell" signifies leaving the ancestral (in this case, the British Romantic) tradition behind. In response, I will argue that what matters finally in the poem is that the ephebe's "farewell" in canto 4 is accepted by the "father" (as the poem names him): "He says yes / To no; and in saying yes he says farewell." The precursor respects his descendant's right to difference and, out of love, clears space for him. Even then, moreover, "The cancellings, / The negations are never final." The return of the prodigal ephebe is forever welcome.

Conclusion

My intention, in concluding, is to expand upon and justify my stated preference for the "weak thought" and *Verwindung* of Vattimo over Bloom's valorization of *Überwindung* and poetic strength. My preference is conditioned by my concerns about (a) what literary works—the diffident or the peremptory—will be regarded as canonical and therefore taught; (b) how they will be taught, and how described by critics; (c) what values will be transmitted in conformity with *a* and *b*; and, above all, (d) how scholars in the humanities might be persuaded to question the presupposition (which, overall, we share) that any explanation of human values, criteria, practices, and behaviors as effects of any cause other than the "will to power" is a noxious or risible idealization. Analytic philosophers moved, more than a half-century ago, to rid their discipline of such presumptions by applying to the interpretation of others' words what they refer to as the "principle of charity." In an essay on Vattimo, Jeffrey M. Perl reviews the early history of this term:

> When the philosophers' "principle of charity" was formulated, at the time Vattimo began his publishing career, the formulators—Neil Wilson and [W. V.] Quine—meant only that we should assume that a partner in conversation is using a comprehensible language rather than speaking nonsense. [Donald] Davidson and others then proposed applying the principle of charity "quite generally to prefer theories of interpretation that minimize disagreement." "My point," Davidson emphasized, "has always been that understanding can be secured only by interpreting in a way that makes for the right sort of agreement." (Perl 336-37)

Vattimo, as Perl observes, goes further than the Analytic philosophers in this direction: indeed he "has extended the principle of charity toward its outmost Catholic frontier: we must help to save our neighbour's soul" (336). Without an extension of this sort, I will argue, the work of the humanities amounts, at its best, to war reportage and, at its nadir, to fantasies of aggression where evidence of *caritas*, humility, and gratitude is available in plain sight.

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