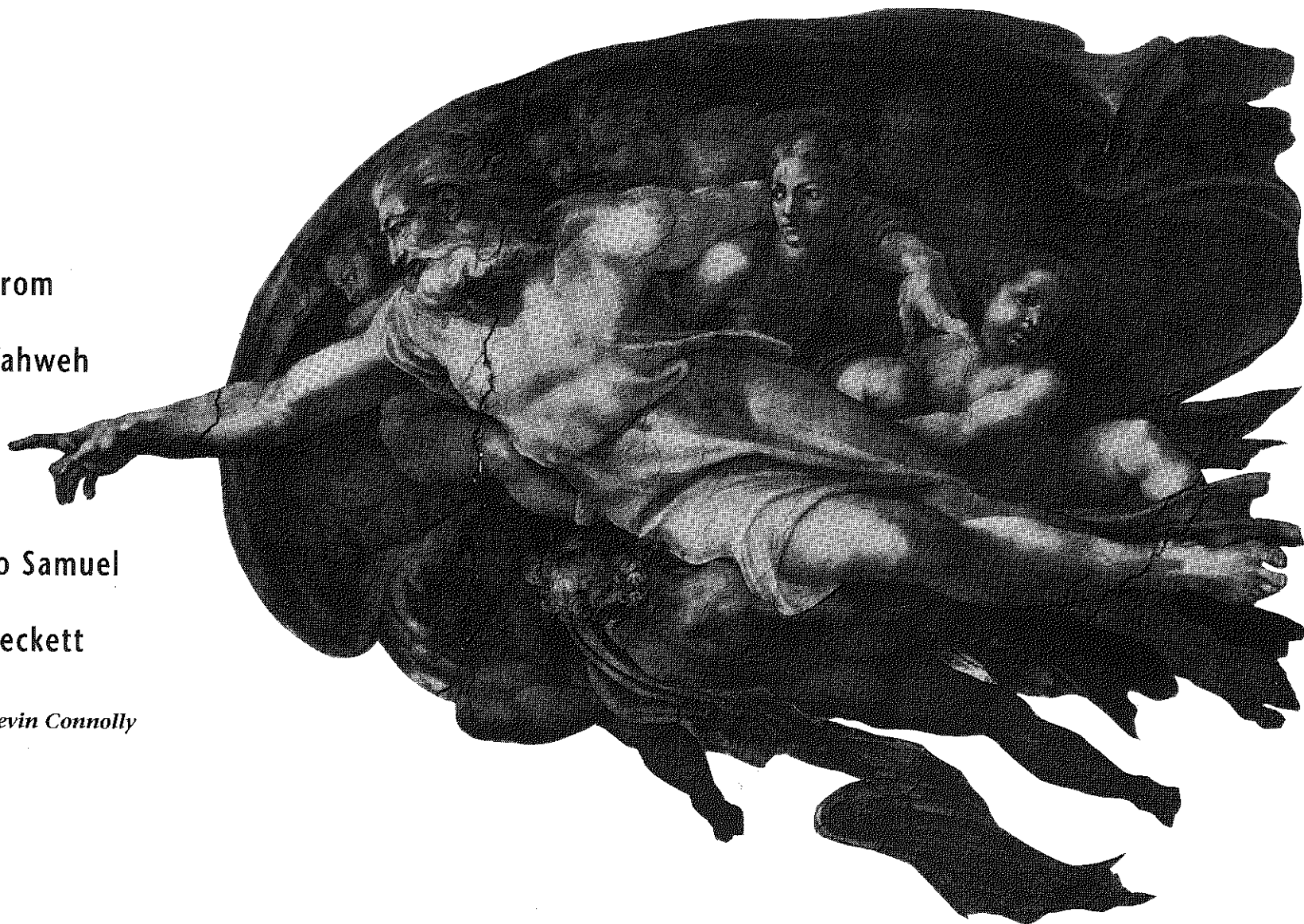


From
Yahweh

to Samuel
Beckett

Kevin Connolly



Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present
by Harold Bloom
Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press,
1989, 204 pp.

This collection of revised lectures, the first book-length publication in five years from the Godfather of what critics have dubbed "the hermeneutical Mafia" — the Yale deconstructionists — is something of a surprise, if not in substance then in scope. Bloom's distance from the centre of American deconstructionism — despite close working relationships with Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman — has been widening almost since the beginning, just as his revisions of Freud's discussions of creation and repression have made him unique among psychoanalytical critics. But there is little in Bloom's past work — which includes *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), and *Poetry and Repression* (1976), all classics in the field of literary psychoanalysis — which prepares one for the breadth of this new book, a study of belief and the High Sublime from the Yahwist chapters of the Hebraic Bible through Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, and finishing with Freud and "his strongest literary heirs," Kafka and Beckett.

Bloom's concerns are again related to his now well-grounded psychoanalysis of artistic motivation. Bloom sees literature as

a kind of vast romantic relay race, in which all of the runners are intellectual Titans, each equally committed to convincing the audience that he is (deservedly) running the final lap. For each Titan the effort of the previous runner is an unavoidable fact, and yet this effort must be more than merely duplicated, it must be subsumed in a new formulation which not only appears to complete the efforts of the predecessor, but appropriates his achievements. The process is a mixture of anxiety and audacity, a restatement of Freud's Oedipal complex in relation to the long march of literary patriarchy.

For Bloom, poetry has developed concurrently with a series of psychic defences from the castrating power of the poet's precursor — the poet's literary father. "Strong poets" overcome their anxiety of influence by transumption, the deliberate completion through misreading of the great poems of the past. It is this conviction, profoundly Freudian, which prompted Bloom's famous assertion that the meaning of any strong poem is another poem.

It would be easy to underestimate the originality of Bloom's approach, however at odds it may be with other legitimate textual strategies. For Bloom, the English canon, as indeed literature itself, is self-evidently a world unto itself, with little or no political or socio-economic context. Bloom's politics are almost entirely academic. He gives himself *carte blanche* in his

preference of the romantics over the classicists, Milton over Blake, Wordsworth over Shelley, Beckett over Joyce, and so on, but apart from the unnerving certitude he brings to these judgments, there is surprisingly little challenge to canonical authority. Indeed, for Bloom's poetic an unchallenged canon is almost a structural necessity.

Hermeticism firmly entrenched, Bloom sets about clearing his own imaginative space, bringing to the task an awesome range of reading and an intimidating, if not altogether stylish, rhetorical presence. Bloom, it seems, has his own formidable set of critical psychic defences. He rather bitterly refers to the current vanguard of American criticism as the School of Resentment (elsewhere calling them "frustrated social-workers") suggesting that they loathe what they purport to study in Milton, namely his poetic power. Bloom pegs the current penchant for questioning the authority of the author as a trendy intellectual fetish, and likens the whole mess (in the insensitive style of a good patriarch) to a predictable raising and dropping of hem-lengths on women's dresses.

Bloom does well to defend authorship in his new book, which presents his version of the literary greats as minor deities, at least in their own anxiously influenced minds. In the process Bloom adopts something of a priestly or rabbinical function, a peculiar post-structuralist *doppelgänger* for what he refers to as the "secular clergy,"

the professors of literature of his youth. For Bloom's goals here are more ambitious than those of his previous theoretical studies. *Ruin the Sacred Truths* is in many ways Bloom's *Great Code* — in tracing his path of the literary sublime from the Bible to the present, Bloom is also sketching a literary and aesthetic cosmology. In so doing he not only challenges traditional genre distinctions but highlights what he calls "the stubborn resistance of imaginative literature to the categories of sacred and secular."

"I myself do not believe that secularisation is itself a literary process," Bloom states in the opening pages. "If you wish you can insist that all high literature is secular, or, should you desire it so, then all strong poetry is sacred. What I find incoherent is the judgement that some authentic literary art is more sacred or more secular than some other. Poetry and belief wander about, together and apart, in a cosmological emptiness marked by the limits of truth and meaning. Somewhere between



truth and meaning can be found piled up a terrible heap of descriptions of God."

Once again, Bloom must be given full marks for daring. One of my major complaints about *Ruin the Sacred Truths*, however, is that Bloom's originality regularly leaves his readers (or is it students?) out in the cold. With his fondness for complex, apposite terminology and antithetical logic, Bloom has always been difficult; but never, until now, has he seemed indifferent. Sandwiched between periods of original and lucid close-readings of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Kafka, are dense passages of haughty theorising at the highest academic level.

Ruin the Sacred Truths significantly extends Bloom's paradigm on at least two fronts: firstly, it develops a coherent psychological definition of originality, distinguishing it from the urge toward "priority" as developed in his other works; and secondly, it relates that notion of originality to the ongoing metamorphosis of the High Sublime, for Bloom the basis of genuine poetic strength. The scope of Bloom's ap-

plications is also crucial.

Bloom begins with Homer and a writer he calls J., the Yahwist writer posited by Hebrew scholars, responsible for the most sublime, and confounding stories of the Hebrew Bible. J.'s major achievement is the "personality" of Yahweh, who Bloom insists is much different from the "shrunk-en" forms of God subsequently developed in normative Judaism and Christianity. J.'s Yahweh is a powerful, confounding personality appearing in uncanny stories which Bloom sees as beyond interpretation. "J's stories of Yahweh and the Patriarchs are so familiar to us that we simply cannot read them...we are still part of a tradition that has never been able to assimilate their originality despite many efforts to do so."

It is unclear whether or not Bloom sees this originality as latent in the stories themselves or cumulative, inseparable from the tradition which has failed for centuries to assimilate them. The stories Bloom speaks of — the creation of Adam out of clay and breath, Yahweh's odd mood swings and inconsistent behaviour in the story of the Tower of Babel, his unwarranted attack on Moses in Exodus, his burial of Moses with his own hands in an unmarked grave — not only resist but forbid paraphrase, but Bloom is not altogether successful in convincing us that this is due to the strength of the stories themselves, rather than their historical position of authority in Western literature. One can see how Bloom might have a field day with the patterns of repetition and revision among the Bible's various authors, from the poet of Jeremiah to the poet of Job, to the poet of Jonah, which Bloom reads as a conscious parody of Jeremiah.

Bloom sees the stories of Homer as functioning the same way, although the Homeric gods and Yahweh have little in common as representations. Bloom maintains that the Hebrew Bible has been and will remain difficult for Western thinkers because, despite the familiarity of the Yahwist stories, our modes of thinking have descended from the Greek or Homeric tradition, and the distinctions between the two modes, Hellenic and Hebraic, have never been made clear. In his own attempt, Bloom invokes Nietzsche, who related Greek greatness to a hunger for victory, a spiritual jealousy, while observing that Hebraic metaphors for overcoming tended to settle on suffering and struggle, "the honoring of parental authority to the root of one's soul." It is easy enough to see the fierce Homeric ambition to succeed in the bold Catholic transmutations of Dante and the "rocklike" Protestant ego of Milton, who Bloom seems right in pegging as the most self-assured writer in the English tradition. Similarly, one can see traces of the Hebraic sublime in the strong characters of Shakespeare. Bloom's readings of *Lear*, *Othello*, and especially *Hamlet* are among the finest anywhere, despite Bloom's very specific critical agenda.

Just as the stories of the Yahwist writer J. in Bloom's terminology "overdetermined" all subsequent efforts to absorb them, Shakespeare appears to have overde-

termined all subsequent representations of subjectivity and human consciousness, including Freud's. Bloom has been accused before of mistaking Shakespeare for God, but in his readings of the Shakespearean tragedies he once again uncovers the immense depth and originality of Shakespeare's achievement. As Bloom points out, Shakespeare was the first writer to depict changes in the personalities of his characters arising from their self-conscious analyses of their own utterances.

In Shakespeare, transcendence is a centripetal operation, accomplished ironically in the internal absorption of apparently irreconcilable forces. Lear, in reducing himself to nothing, understands everything, just as Hamlet in surrendering to his own inaction, paradoxically sets in motion the apocalyptic forces which close the play. Shakespearean hero-villians Iago and Edmund anticipate Freud in their destructive lust for authority and their primal Oedipal drive to destroy the patriarch. As Bloom puts it, "Our map or general theory of the mind may be Freud's, but Freud, like all the rest of us, inherits representation of mind, at its most subtle and excellent, from Shakespeare."

Bloom makes a distinction between the Hebraic sublime, with its ironic touches, and the Hellenic sublime, which arises from more ready distinctions between body and soul, mind and spirit. As Bloom sees it, the Hebraic sublime is founded on a radical irony which is "neither the contrast or gap between expectation and fulfilment, nor the saying of one thing and meaning another," rather it is an irony "in which absolutely incommensurate realities collide and cannot be resolved." Bloom traces both in his descent of the great writers to the twentieth century, but it is not until his remarkable interpretation of Kafka that the significance of this distinction becomes clear.

"If I had to construct a scale with literary self-esteem at one end and aesthetic self-flagellation at the other, then Milton would be at the self-celebratory pole and Kafka would be at the extreme of self-punishment." One's instinct here is to agree with Bloom and to add the conflict between Homeric and Hebraic expressions of the sublime to Bloom's imaginary scale. For Bloom spends a great deal of the final chapter in exposing the essential Jewishness of Kafka's thought as inherited through Freud, Kafka's strongest precursor and perhaps the strongest "poetic" voice in twentieth-century literature. Bloom points out that "we now find it difficult to recall that psychoanalysis, after all, is only a speculation, rather than a science, philosophy, or even a religion. Freud is closer to Proust than Einstein, closer even to Kafka than the scientism of Darwin."

Whether or not one accepts this radical absorption of Freud into the mainstream of Western literature is perhaps secondary to its appropriateness to Bloom's argument. Freud not only provides a compelling and necessary link to Miltonian and Shakespearean representations of consciousness, but also between the cognitive patterns of Yahwist mythology and their strikingly

original transumption in the chilly spiritual void of Kafka's parables.

Bloom traces the Freudian negative, through his concept of *Verdrängung*, which Bloom insists is closer to a "trope of flight" than it is to its current translation as "repression," with its overtones of pushing down or pushing under. Freud's notion of the term involves the flight from forbidden and yet desired images or memories. Bloom aligns Freudian memory, which defines consciousness, with rabbinical memory, a tradition in which all meaning is already present in the Bible and its normative commentaries, and in the oral law represented by successive generations of interpreters. In this context, Freudian *Verdrängung*, with its flight from representation, is not unlike the Hebrew warning against idolatry. "The Second Commandment, in our time," says Bloom, "is called primal repression, which now takes place before there is anything to be repressed."

Bloom sees this repression of representation as central to Kafka, as is the equivocal Freudian notion of freedom, in which there can (with difficulty) be freedom from the past but not from time itself. Bloom maintains that Freud's most profoundly Jewish trait was a consuming passion for interpretation, a passion played out within a closed, internalised cognitive reality. Kafka's Jewishness manifests itself similarly, but in the negative, in his apparent commitment to do everything possible to avoid interpretation. Over the course of about a dozen pages, Bloom constructs a compelling argument that "what most needs and demands interpretation in Kafka's writing is its perversely deliberate evasion of interpretation."

According to Bloom, Kafka, more than any other writer, personifies the modern Jewish rupture from the normative tradition. "Think of the Jewish writer, and you must think of Kafka, who evaded his own

audacity, and believed nothing, and trusted only the covenant of being a writer." In his parables Kafka creates a bizarre obverse of Jewish memory, in which everything demands interpretation but nothing is interpretable. Kafka's cast of characters — the accused Joseph K., the hunger artist, the stalled, metamorphic Gregor Samsa, and others — are suspended between the truth of the past and the meaning of the future, thus evading both the categories of belief (in the estranged normative tradition) and poetry (the promise of something sublime, beyond the human, in the future).

In Kafka we are told that laws exist, but they are inaccessible to the people. There is hope, but only in some unattainable future. Guilt is a self-validating primal force, closely related to what Freud saw as the basis for all culture — a primal remorse for crimes against the father. As Bloom points out, Kafka's guilt is hard to distinguish from Freud's, because it is not Christian guilt, but something closer to ignorance — in the case of *The Trial's* Joseph K., apparently blameless ignorance. Freud felt that just as we are all erotically attached to authority, all authority induces Oedipal guilt. For Bloom, "Joseph K. has no consciousness of having done wrong, but just as Freudian man nurtures the desire to destroy authority or the father, so even Joseph K. has his own unfulfilled wishes against the image of the Law."

Most Kafka scholarship has at least touched upon the Freudian influence, and yet Bloom's remarks come as a revelation perhaps because they are dogged by an enriched version of his concept of literary influence and by his quest to eliminate the distinction between secular and sacred writing. In the end it is perhaps less important that we agree with Bloom's thesis than it is to come to terms with the implications of some of his speculations. Like Kafka, Bloom has been overdetermined by Freud, but has still managed to clear new ground for his own imagination.

In Bloom's mind, strong writers are fated to produce, at best, splendid failures, and the fate of the strong critic cannot be seen as much different. Bloom makes reference to Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime*, a work he admires from a critic he obviously feels some kinship with. He says that Weiskel is working "towards a difficult kind of literary criticism, at once moral or primary and de-idealising or antithetical. This may not be possible to attain; certainly I, for one, have failed to achieve it." One can quarrel with the goal, which smacks of elitism, and indeed with the method, which is regressively patriarchal, probably because of its excessive dependence on Freud. But to dismiss *Ruin the Sacred Truths* on this evidence would be a mistake. As an analysis of male literary influence, and of the relationship between secular and sacred texts within the patriarchal literary tradition, it is an impressive critical achievement in its own right.

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