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“Heideggerian nostalgia,” we shall not think of our “intuitions” as more than platitudes, more than the habitual use of a certain repertoire of terms, more than old tools which as yet have no replacements.

I can crudely sum up the story which historians like Blumenberg tell by saying that once upon a time we felt a need to worship something which lay beyond the visible world. Beginning in the seventeenth century we tried to substitute a love of truth for a love of God, treating the world described by science as a quasi divinity. Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century we tried to substitute a love of ourselves for a love of scientific truth, a worship of our own deep spiritual or poetic nature, treated as one more quasi divinity.

The line of thought common to Blumenberg, Nietzsche, Freud, and Davidson suggests that we try to get to the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat everything — our language, our conscience, our community — as a product of time and chance. To reach this point would be, in Freud’s words, to “treat chance as worthy of determining our fate.” In the next chapter I claim that Freud, Nietzsche, and Bloom do for our conscience what Wittgenstein and Davidson do for our language, namely, exhibit its sheer contingency.

The contingency of selfhood

As I was starting to write on the topic of this chapter, I came across a poem by Philip Larkin which helped me pin down what I wanted to say. Here is the last part of it:

And once you have walked the length of your mind, what
You command is as clear as a lading-list
Anything else must not, for you, be thought
To exist.
And what’s the profit? Only that, in time
We half-identify the blind impress
All our behavings bear, may trace it home.
But to confess,
On that green evening when our death begins,
Just what it was, is hardly satisfying,
Since it applied only to one man once,
And that man dying.

This poem discusses the fear of dying, of extinction, to which Larkin confessed in interviews. But “fear of extinction” is an unhelpful phrase. There is no such thing as fear of inexistence as such, but only fear of some concrete loss. “Death” and “nothingness” are equally resounding, equally empty terms. To say one fears either is as clumsy as Epicurus’s attempt to say why one should not fear them. Epicurus said, “When I am, death is not, and when death is, I am not”; thus exchanging one vacuity for another. For the word “I” is as hollow as the word “death.” To unpack such words, one has to fill in the details about the I in question, specify precisely what it is that will not be, make one’s fear concrete.

Larkin’s poem suggests a way of unpacking what Larkin feared. What he fears will be extinguished is his idiosyncratic lading-list, his individual sense of what was possible and important. That is what made his I different from all the other I’s. To lose that difference is, I take it, what any poet — any maker, anyone who hopes to create something new — fears. Anyone who spends his life trying to formulate a novel answer to the question of what is possible and important fears the extinction of that answer.

But this does not mean simply that one fears that one’s works will be
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lost or ignored. For that fear blends into the fear that, even if they are preserved and noticed, nobody will find anything distinctive in them. The words (or shapes, or theorems, or models of physical nature) marshaled to one’s command may seem merely stock items, rearranged in routine ways. One will not have impressed one’s mark on the language but, rather, will have spent one’s life shoveling about already coined pieces. So one will not really have had an I at all. One’s creations, and one’s self, will just be better or worse instances of familiar types. This is what Harold Bloom calls “the strong poet’s anxiety of influence,” his “horror of finding himself to be only a copy or a replica.”

On this reading of Larkin’s poem, what would it be to have succeeded in tracing home the “blind impress” which all one’s “behavings bear”? Presumably it would be to have figured out what was distinctive about oneself – the difference between one’s own lading-list and other people’s. If one could get this recognition down on paper (or canvas or film) – if one could find distinctive words or forms for one’s own distinctiveness – then one would have demonstrated that one was not a copy or a replica. One would have been as strong as any poet has ever been, which meant having been as strong as any human being could possibly be. For one would know exactly what it is that will die, and thus know what one has succeeded in becoming.

But the end of Larkin’s poem seems to reject this Bloomian reading. There we are told that it is “hardly satisfying” to trace home one’s own distinctiveness. This seems to mean that it is hardly satisfying to have become an individual – in the strong sense in which the genius is the paradigm of individuality. Larkin is affecting to despise his own vocation, on the ground that to succeed in it would merely be to have put down on paper something which “applied only to one man once / And that one dying.”

I say “affecting” because I doubt that any poet could seriously think trivial his own success in tracing home the blind impress borne by all his behavings – all his previous poems. Since the example of the Romantics, since the time when, with Hegel, we began to think of self-consciousness as self-creation, no poet has seriously thought of idiosyncrasy as an objection to his work. But in this poem Larkin is pretending that blind

impresses, those particular contingencies which make each of us “I” rather than a copy or replica of somebody else, do not really matter. He is suggesting that unless one finds something common to all men at all times, not just to one man once, one cannot die satisfied. He is pretending that to be a strong poet is not enough – that he would have attained satisfaction only from being a philosopher, from finding continuities rather than exhibiting a discontinuity.

I think Larkin’s poem owes its interest and its strength to this reminder of the quarrel between poetry and philosophy, the tension between an effort to achieve self-creation by the recognition of contingency and an effort to achieve universality by the transcendence of contingency. The same tension has pervaded philosophy since Hegel’s time, and particularly since Nietzsche. The important philosophers of our own century are those who have tried to follow through on the Romantic poets by

1 Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence (Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 80. See also Bloom’s claim (p. 10) that “every poet begins (however ‘unconsciously’) by rebelling more strongly against the fear of death than all other men and women do.” I assume that Bloom would be willing to extend the reference of “poet” beyond those who write verse, and to use it in the large, generic sense in which I am using it – so that Proust and Nabokov, Newton and Darwin, Hegel and Heidegger, also fall under the term. Such people are also to be thought of as rebelling against “death” – that is, against the failure to have created – more strongly than most of us.

2 “Critics, in their secret hearts, love continuities, but he who lives with continuity alone cannot be a poet” (Bloom, Anxiety of Influence, p. 78). The critic is, in this respect, a species of philosopher – or, more exactly, of what Heidegger and Derrida call “meta-physician.” Metaphysica, Derrida says, is the search for “a centered structure . . . the concept of play as based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude. which is itself beyond the reach of play” (Derrida, Writing and Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 279). Metaphysicians look for continuities – overarching conditions of possibility – which provide the space within which discontinuity occurs. The secret dream of criticism is to have a pigeonhole available into which any future poet can fit; the explicit hope of pre-Kuhnian philosophers of science was to have an account of “the nature of science” which no future scientific revolution could disturb.

The most important difference between Bloom and Paul de Man (not to mention what Bloom calls the “Deconstruction Road Company”) is that de Man thought philosophy had given him a sense of the necessary condition of all possible poetry – past, present, and future. I think that Bloom is right in rejecting de Man’s claim that “every authentic poetic or critical act rehearses the random, meaningless act of death, for which another term is the problematic of language” (Bloom, Agon [Oxford University Press, 1982], p. 29). Bloom will have no truck with philosophic notions like “the problematic of language,” or with abstractions like “the random, meaningless act of death.” He rightly thinks that these hinder criticism, defined as the “art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem” (Anxiety of Influence, p. 96). Like Freud’s pursuit of the hidden roads that go from the child to the adult, or from the parent to the child, such an art owes very little to the search for continuities, even the continuities posited by Freud’s own metapsychology.

3 Bloom says, “If this book’s argument is correct, then the covert subject of most poetry for the last three centuries has been the anxiety of influence, each poet’s fear that no proper work remains for him to perform” (Anxiety of Influence, p. 148). I take it that Bloom would agree that this fear is common to original painters, original physicists, and original philosophers as well. In Chapter 5, I suggest that Hegel’s Phenomenology was the book which began philosophy’s period of belatedness and anxiety, the one which set the task for Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida – the task of being something more than another ride on the same old dialectical seesaw. Hegel’s sense of a pattern in philosophy was Nietzsche’s called a “disadvantage of history for [the original philosopher’s] life,” for it suggested to Kierkegaard as well as to Nietzsche, that now, given Hegelian self-consciousness, there can no longer be such a thing as philosophical creativity.
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breaking with Plato and seeing freedom as the recognition of contingency. These are the philosophers who try to detach Hegel's insistence on historicity from his pantheistic idealism. They accept Nietzsche's identification of the strong poet, the maker, as humanity's hero — rather than the scientist, who is traditionally pictured as a finder. More generally, they have tried to avoid anything that smacks of philosophy as contemplation, as the attempt to see life steadily and see it whole, in order to insist on the sheer contingency of individual existence.

They thus find themselves in the same sort of awkward, but interesting, position as Larkin. Larkin writes a poem about the unsatisfactoriness, compared with what pre-Nietzschean philosophers hoped to do, of doing the only thing that poets can do. Post-Nietzschean philosophers like Wittgenstein and Heidegger write philosophy in order to exhibit the universality and necessity of the individual and contingent. Both philosophers became caught up in the quarrel between philosophy and poetry which Plato began, and both ended by trying to work out honorable terms on which philosophy might surrender to poetry.

I can spell out this comparison by returning to Larkin's poem. Consider Larkin's suggestion that one might get more satisfaction out of finding a "blind impress" which applied not only to "one man once" but, rather, to all human beings. Think of finding such an impress as being the discovery of the universal conditions of human existence, the great continuities — the permanent, ahistorical, context of human life. This is what the priests once claimed to have done. Later the Greek philosophers, still later the empirical scientists, and still later the German idealists, made the same claim. They were going to explain to us the ultimate locus of power, the nature of reality, the conditions of the possibility of experience. They would thereby inform us what we really are, what we are compelled to be by powers not ourselves. They would exhibit the stamp which had been impressed on all of us. This impress would not be blind, because it would not be a matter of chance, a mere contingency. It would be necessary, essential, telic, constitutive of what it is to be a human. It would give us a goal, the only possible goal, namely, the full recognition of that very necessity, the self-consciousness of our essence.

In comparison with this universal impress, so the pre-Nietzschean philosopher's story goes, the particular contingencies of individual lives are unimportant. The mistake of the poets is to waste words on idiosyncrasies, on contingencies — to tell us about accidental appearance rather than essential reality. To admit that mere spatiotemporal location, mere contingent circumstance, mattered would be to reduce us to the level of a dying animal. To understand the context in which we necessarily live, by contrast, would be to give us a mind exactly as long as the universal itself, a lading-list which was a copy of the universe's own list. What counted as existing, as possible, or as important, for us, would be what really is possible, or important. Having copied this list, one could die with satisfaction, having accomplished the only task laid upon humanity, to know the truth, to be in touch with what is "out there." There would be nothing more to do, and thus no possible loss to be feared. Extinction would not matter, for one would have become identical with the truth, and truth, on this traditional view, is imperishable. What was extinguished would be merely idiosyncratic animality. The poets, who are not interested in truth, merely distract us from this paradigmatically human task, and thereby degrade us.

It was Nietzsche who first explicitly suggested that we drop the whole idea of "knowing the truth." His definition of truth as a "mobile army of metaphors" amounted to saying that the whole idea of "representing reality" by means of language, and thus the idea of finding a single context for all human lives, should be abandoned. His perspectivism amounted to the claim that the universe had no lading-list to be known, no determinate length. He hoped that once we realized that Plato's "true world" was just a fable, we would seek consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself. More exactly, he would have created the only part of himself that mattered by constructing his own mind. To create one's mind is to create one's own language, rather than to let the length of one's mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind.  

But in abandoning the traditional notion of truth, Nietzsche did not abandon the idea of discovering the causes of our being what we are. He did not give up the idea that an individual might track home the blind impress all hisavings bore. He only rejected the idea that this tracking was a process of discovery. In his view, in achieving this sort of self-knowledge we are not coming to know a truth which was out there (or in here) all the time. Rather, he saw self-knowledge as self-creation. The process of coming to know oneself, confronting one's contingency, tracking one's causes home, is identical with the process of inventing a new language — that is, of thinking up some new metaphors. For any literal description of one's individuality, which is to say any use of an inherited language-game for this purpose, will necessarily fail. One will not have traced that idiosyncrasy home but will merely have managed to

4 My account of Nietzsche owes a great deal to Alexander Nehamas's original and penetrating Nietzsche: Life as Literature (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).
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see it as not idiosyncratic after all, as a specimen reiterating a type, a copy or replica of something which has already been identified. To fail as a poet — and thus, for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being — is to accept somebody else's description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations on previously written poems. So the only way to trace home the causes of one's being as one is would be to tell a story about one's causes in a new language.

This may sound paradoxical, because we think of causes as discovered rather than invented. We think of telling a causal story as a paradigm of the literal use of language. Metaphor, linguistic novelty, seems out of place when one turns from simply relishing such novelty to explaining why these novelties, and not others, occurred. But remember the claim made in Chapter 1 that even in the natural sciences we occasionally get genuinely new causal stories, the sort of stories produced by what Kuhn calls "revolutionary science." Even in the sciences, metaphorical redescriptions are the mark of genius and of revolutionary leaps forward. If we follow up this Kuhnian point by thinking, with Davidson, of the literal-metaphorical distinction as the distinction between old language and new language rather than in terms of a distinction between words which latch on to the world and those which do not, the paradox vanishes. If, with Davidson, we drop the notion of language as fitting the world, we can see the point of Bloom's and Nietzsche's claim that the strong maker, the person who uses words as they have never before been used, is best able to appreciate her own contingency. For she can see, more clearly than the continuity-seeking historian, critic, or philosopher, that her language is as contingent as her parents or her historical epoch. She can appreciate the force of the claim that "truth is a mobile army of metaphors" because, by her own sheer strength, she has broken out of one perspective, one metaphoric, into another.

Only poets, Nietzsche suspected, can truly appreciate contingency. The rest of us are doomed to remain philosophers, to insist that there is really only one true lading-list, one true description of the human situation, one universal context of our lives. We are doomed to spend our conscious lives trying to escape from contingency rather than, like the strong poet, acknowledging and appropriating contingency. For Nietzsche, therefore, the line between the strong poet and the rest of the human race has the moral significance which Plato and Christianity attached to the distinction between the human and the animal. For although strong poets are, like all other animals, causal products of natural forces, they are products capable of telling the story of their own production in words never used before. The line between weakness and

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strength is thus the line between using language which is familiar and universal and producing language which, though initially unfamiliar and idiosyncratic, somehow makes tangible the blind impress all one's behaviors bear. With luck — the sort of luck which makes the difference between genius and eccentricity — that language will also strike the next generation as inevitable. Their behaviors will bear that impress.

To put the same point in another way, the Western philosophical tradition thinks of a human life as a triumph just insofar as it breaks out of the world of time, appearance, and idiosyncratic opinion into another world — into the world of enduring truth. Nietzsche, by contrast, thinks the important boundary to cross is not the one separating time from atemporal truth but rather the one which divides the old from the new. He thinks a human life triumphant just as it escapes from inherited descriptions of the contingencies of its existence and finds new descriptions. This is the difference between the will to truth and the will to self-overcoming. It is the difference between thinking of redemption as making contact with something larger and more enduring than oneself and redemption as Nietzsche describes it: "recreating all 'it was' into a 'thu I willed it.'"

The drama of an individual human life, or of the history of humanity as a whole, is not one in which a preexistent goal is triumphantly reached or tragically not reached. Neither a constant external reality nor an unfalling interior source of inspiration forms a background for such dramas. Instead, to see one's life, or the life of one's community, as a dramatic narrative is to see it as a process of Nietzschean self-overcoming. The paradigm of such a narrative is the life of the genius who can say of the relevant portion of the past, "Thus I willed it," because she has found a way to describe that past which the past never knew, and thereby found a self to be which her precursors never knew was possible.

In this Nietzschean view, the impulse to think, to inquire, to reweave oneself ever more thoroughly, is not wonder but terror. It is, once again, Bloom's "horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica." The wonder in which Aristotle believed philosophy to begin was wonder at finding oneself in a world larger, stronger, nobler than oneself. The fear in which Bloom's poets begin is the fear that one might end one's days in such a world, a world one never made, an inherited world. The hope of such a poet is that what the past tried to do to her she will succeed in doing to the past: to make the past itself, including those very causal processes which blindly impressed all her own behaviors, bear her impress. Success in that enterprise — the enterprise of saying "Thus I willed it" to the past — is success in what Bloom calls "giving birth to oneself."
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Freud’s importance is that he helps us accept, and put to work, this Nietzschean and Blooming sense of what it is to be a full-fledged human being. Bloom has called Freud “inescapable, since more even than Proust his was the mythopoeic mind of our age, as much our theologian and our moral philosopher as he was our psychologist and our prime maker of fictions.” We can begin to understand Freud’s role in our culture by seeing him as the moralist who helped de-divinize the self by tracking conscience home to its origin in the contingencies of our upbringing.6

To see Freud this way is to see him against the background of Kant. The Kantian notion of conscience divinizes the self. Once we give up, as Kant did, on the idea that scientific knowledge of hard facts is our point of contact with a power not ourselves, it is natural to do what Kant did: to turn inward, to find that point of contact in our moral consciousness — in our search for righteousness rather than our search for truth. Righteousness “deep within us” takes the place, for Kant, of empirical truth “out there.” Kant was willing to let the starry heavens above be merely a symbol of the moral law within — an optional metaphor, drawn from the realm of the phenomenal, for the illimitableness, the sublimity, the unconditioned character of the moral self, of that part of us which was not phenomenal, not a product of time and chance, not an effect of natural, spatiotemporal, causes.

This Kantian turn helped set the stage for the Romantic appropriation of the inwardness of the divine, but Kant himself was appalled at the Romantic attempt to make idiosyncratic poetic imagination, rather than what he called the “common moral consciousness,” the center of the self. Ever since Kant’s day, however, romanticism and moralism, the insistence on individual spontaneity and private perfection and the insistence on universally shared social responsibility, have warred with each other. Freud helps us to end this war. He de-universalizes the moral sense, making it as idiosyncratic as the poet’s inventions. He thus lets us see the moral consciousness as historically conditioned, a product as much of time and chance as of political or aesthetic consciousness.

Freud ends his essay on da Vinci with a passage from which I quoted a fragment at the end of Chapter 1. He says:

5 Bloom, Agen, pp. 43–44. See also Harold Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 112: “It is a curiosity . . . of much nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourse about both the nature of the human, and about ideas, that the discourse is remarkably clarified if we substitute ‘poem’ for ‘person,’ or ‘poem’ for ‘idea’ . . . Nietzsche and Freud seem to me to be major instances of this surprising displacement.”


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If one considers chance to be unworthy of determining our fate, it is simply a relapse into the pious view of the Universe which Leonardo himself was on the way to overcoming when he wrote that the sun does not move. . . . We are all too ready to forget that in fact everything to do with our life is chance, from our origin out of the meeting of spermatozoon and ovum onwards. . . . We all still show too little respect for Nature which (in the obscure words of Leonardo which recall Hamlet’s lines) “is full of countless causes (‘ragioni’) that never enter experience.”

Every one of us human beings corresponds to one of the countless experiments in which these “ragioni” of nature force their way into experience.7

The commonsense Freudianism of contemporary culture makes it easy to see our conscience as such an experiment, to identify the bite of conscience with the renewal of guilt over repressed infantile sexual impulses — repressions which are the products of countless contingencies that never enter experience. It is hard nowadays to recapture how startling it must have been when Freud first began to describe conscience as an ego ideal set up by those who are “not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection of . . . childhood.”8 If Freud had made only the large, abstract, quasi-philosophical claim that the voice of conscience is the internalized voice of parents and society, he would not have startled. That claim was suggested by Thrasymachus in Plato’s Republic, and later developed by reductionist writers like Hobbes. What is new in Freud is the details he gives us about the sort of thing which goes into the formation of conscience, his explanations of why certain very concrete situations and persons excite unbearable guilt, intense anxiety, or smoldering rage. Consider, for example, the following description of the latency period:

In addition to the destruction of the Oedipus complex a regressive degradation of the libido takes place, the super-ego becomes exceptionally severe and unkind, and the ego, in obedience to the super-ego, produces strong reaction-formations in the shape of conscientiousness, pity and cleanliness . . . . But here too obsessional neurosis is only overdoing the normal method of getting rid of the Oedipus complex.9

This passage, and others which discuss what Freud calls “the narcissistic origin of compassion,”10 give us a way of thinking of the sense of pity not as an identification with the common human core which we share with all

7 Standard Edition (S.E.), XI, 137. I owe my knowledge of this passage to William Kerrigan.

8 “On Narcissism,” S.E. XIV, 94.

9 S.E. XX, 115.

10 E.g., S.E. XVII, 88.
other members of our species, but as channeled in very specific ways toward very specific sorts of people and very particular vicissitudes. He thus helps us understand how we can take endless pains to help one friend and be entirely oblivious of the greater pain of another, one whom we think we love quite as dearly. He helps explain how someone can be both a tender mother and a merciless concentration-camp guard, or be a just and temperate magistrate and also a chilly, rejecting father. By associating conscientiousness with cleanliness, and by associating both not only with obsessional neurosis but (as he does elsewhere) with the religious impulse and with the urge to construct philosophical systems, he breaks down all the traditional distinctions between the higher and the lower, the essential and the accidental, the central and the peripheral. He leaves us with a self which is a tissue of contingencies rather than an at least potentially well-ordered system of faculties.

Freud shows us why we deplore cruelty in some cases and relish it in others. He shows us why our ability to love is restricted to some very particular shapes and sizes and colors of people, things, or ideas. He shows us why our sense of guilt is aroused by certain very specific, and in theory quite minor, events, and not by others which, on any familiar moral theory, would seem much larger. Further, he gives each of us the equipment to construct our own private vocabulary of moral deliberation. For terms like "infantile" or "sadistic" or "obsessional" or "paranoid," unlike the names of vices and virtues which we inherit from the Greeks and the Christians, have very specific and very different resonances for each individual who uses them: They bring to our minds resemblances and differences between ourselves and very particular people (our parents, for example) and between the present situation and very particular situations of our past. They enable us to sketch a narrative of our own development, our idiosyncratic moral struggle, which is far more finely textured, far more custom-tailored to our individual case, than the moral vocabulary which the philosophical tradition offered us.

One can sum up this point by saying that Freud makes moral deliberation just as finely grained, just as detailed and as multiform as prudential calculation has always been. He thereby helps break down the distinction between moral guilt and practical inadvisability, thereby blurring the prudence-morality distinction. By contrast, Plato's and Kant's moral philosophies center around this distinction — as does "moral philosophy" in the sense in which it is typically understood by contemporary analytic philosophers. Kant splits us into two parts, one called "reason," which is identical in us all, and another (empirical sensation and desire), which is a matter of blind, contingent, idiosyncratic impressions. In contrast, Freud treats rationality as a mechanism which adjusts contingencies to other contingencies. But his mechanization of reason is not just more abstract philosophical reductionism, not just more "inverted Platonism." Rather than discuss rationality in the abstract, simplicistic, and reductionist way in which Hobbes and Hume discuss it (a way which retains Plato's original dualisms for the sake of inverting them), Freud spends his time exhibiting the extraordinary sophistication, subtlety, and wit of our unconscious strategies. He thereby makes it possible for us to see science and poetry, genius and psychosis — and, most importantly, morality and prudence — not as products of distinct faculties but as alternative modes of adaptation.

Freud thus helps us take seriously the possibility that there is no central faculty, no central self, called "reason" — and thus to take Nietzschean pragmatism and perspectivalism seriously. Freudian moral psychology gives us a vocabulary for self-description which is radically different from Plato's, and also radically different from that side of Nietzsche which Heidegger rightly condemned as one more example of inverted Platonism — the romantic attempt to exalt the flesh over the spirit, the head over the heart, a mythical faculty called "will" over an equally mythical one called "reason."

The Platonic and Kantian idea of rationality centers around the idea that we need to bring particular actions under general principles if we are to be moral. Freud suggests that we need to return to the particular — to see particular present situations and options as similar to or different from particular past actions or events. He thinks that only if we catch hold of some crucial idiosyncratic contingencies in our past shall we be able to make something worthwhile out of ourselves, to create present selves whom we can respect. He taught us to interpret what we are doing, or thinking of doing, in terms of, for example, our past reaction to particular authority-figures, or in terms of constellations of behavior which were forced upon us in infancy. He suggested that we praise ourselves by weaving idiosyncratic narratives — case histories, as it were — of our success in self-creation, our ability to break free from an idiosyncratic past. He suggests that we condemn ourselves for failure to break free of that past rather than for failure to live up to universal standards.

Another way of putting this point is that Freud gave up Plato's attempt to bring together the public and the private, the parts of the state and the parts of the soul, the search for social justice and the search for individual

11 For doubts about this assumption within recent analytic philosophy, see the writings of J. B. Schneewind and Annette Baier. See also Jeffrey Stout, Ethos After Babel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988).
perfection. Freud gave equal respect to the appeals of moralism and romanticism, but refused either to grant one of these priority over the other or to attempt a synthesis of them. He distinguished sharply between a private ethic of self-creation and a public ethic of mutual accommodation. He persuades us that there is no bridge between them provided by universally shared beliefs or desires — beliefs or desires which belong to us qua human and which unite us to our fellow humans simply as human.

In Freud's account, our conscious private goals are as idiosyncratic as the unconscious obsessions and phobias from which they have branched off. Despite the efforts of such writers as Fromm and Marcuse, Freudian moral psychology cannot be used to define social goals, goals for humanity as opposed to goals for individuals. There is no way to force Freud into a Platonic mold by treating him as a moral philosopher who supplies universal criteria for goodness or rightness or true happiness. His only utility lies in his ability to turn us away from the universal to the concrete, from the attempt to find necessary truths, ineliminable beliefs, to the idiosyncratic contingencies of our individual pasts, to the blind impress all our behaviors bear. He has provided us with a moral psychology which is compatible with Nietzsche's and Bloom's attempt to see the strong poet as the archetypal human being.

But though Freud's moral psychology is compatible with this attempt, it does not entail it. For those who share this sense of the poet as paradigmatic, Freud will seem liberating and inspiring. But suppose that, like Kant, one instead sees the unselfish, unselfconscious, unimaginative, decent, honest, dutiful person as paradigmatic. These are the people in praise of whom Kant wrote — people who, unlike Plato's philosopher, have no special acuity of mind or intellectual curiosity and who, unlike the Christian saint, are not aflame to sacrifice themselves for love of the crucified Jesus.

It was for the sake of such persons that Kant distinguished practical from pure reason, and rational religion from enthusiasm. It was for their sake that he invented the idea of a single imperative under which morality could be subsumed. For, he thought, the glory of such people is that they recognize themselves as under an unconditional obligation — an obligation which can be carried out without recourse to prudential calculation, imaginative projection, or metaphoric redescription. So Kant developed not only a novel and imaginative moral psychology but a sweeping metaphoric redescription of every facet of life and culture, precisely in order to make the intellectual world safe for such people. In his words, he denied knowledge in order to make room for faith, the

faith of such people that in doing their duty they are doing all they need do, that they are paradigmatic human beings.

It has often seemed necessary to choose between Kant and Nietzsche, to make up one's mind — at least to that extent — about the point of being human. But Freud gives us a way of looking at human beings which helps us evade the choice. After reading Freud we shall see neither Bloom's strong poet nor Kant's dutiful fulfiller of universal obligations as paradigmatic. For Freud himself eschewed the very idea of a paradigm human being. He does not see humanity as a natural kind with an intrinsic nature, an intrinsic set of powers to be developed or left undeveloped. By breaking with both Kant's residual Platonism and Nietzsche's inverted Platonism, he lets us see both Nietzsche's superman and Kant's common moral consciousness as exemplifying two out of many forms of adaptation, two out of many strategies for coping with the contingencies of one's upbringing, of coming to terms with a blind impress. There is much to be said for both. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Decent people are often rather dull. Great wits are sure to madness near allied. Freud stands in awe before the poet, but describes him as infantile. He is bored by the merely moral man, but describes him as mature. He does not enthuse over either, nor does he ask us to choose between them. He does not think we have a faculty which can make such choices.

He does not see a need to erect a theory of human nature which will safeguard the interests of the one or the other. He sees both sorts of person as doing the best they can with the materials at their disposal, and neither as "more truly human" than the other. To abjure the notion of the "truly human" is to abjure the attempt to divinize the self as a replacement for a divinized world, the Kantian attempt I sketched at the end of Chapter 1. It is to get rid of the last citadel of necessity, the last attempt to see us as all confronting the same imperatives, the same unconditional claims. What ties Nietzsche and Freud together is this attempt — the attempt to see a blind impress as not unworthy of programming our lives or our poems.

But there is a difference between Nietzsche and Freud which my description of Freud's view of the moral man as decent but dull does not capture. Freud shows us that if we look inside the bien-pensant conformist, if we get him on the couch, we will find that he was only dull on the surface. For Freud, nobody is dull through and through, for there is no such thing as a dull unconscious. What makes Freud more useful and more plausible than Nietzsche is that he does not relegate the vast majority of humanity to the status of dying animals. For Freud's account of unconscious fantasy shows us how to see every human life as a poem — or, more exactly, every human life not so racked by pain as to be unable
to learn a language nor so immersed in toil as to have no leisure in which to generate a self-description. He sees every such life as an attempt to clothe itself in its own metaphors. As Philip Rieff puts it, “Freud democratized genius by giving everyone a creative unconscious.” The same point is made by Lionel Trilling, who said Freud “showed us that poetry is indigenous to the very constitution of the mind; he saw the mind as being, in the greater part of its tendency, exactly a poetry-making faculty.” Leo Bersani broadens Rieff’s and Trilling’s point when he says, “Psychoanalytic theory has made the notion of fantasy so richly problematic that we should no longer be able to take for granted the distinction between art and life.”

To say with Trilling that the mind is a poetry-making faculty may seem to return us to philosophy, and to the idea of an intrinsic human nature. Specifically, it may seem to return us to a Romantic theory of human nature in which “Imagination” plays the role which the Greeks assigned to “Reason.” But it does not. “Imagination” was, for the Romantics, a link with something not ourselves, a proof that we were here as from another world. It was a faculty of expression. But what Freud takes to be shared by all of us relatively leisureed language-users—all of us who have the equipment and the time for fantasy—is a faculty for creating metaphors.

In the Davidsonian account of metaphor, which I summarized in Chapter 1, when a metaphor is created it does not express something which previously existed, although, of course, it is caused by something that previously existed. For Freud, this cause is not the recollection of another world but rather some particular obsession-generating cathexis of some particular person or object or word early in life. By seeing every human being as consciously or unconsciously acting out an idiosyncratic fantasy, we can see the distinctively human, as opposed to animal, portion of each human life as the use for symbolic purposes of every particular person, object, situation, event, and word encountered in later life.

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12 On the need for such a qualification, see Elaine Scarry’s remarkable The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World (Oxford University Press, 1985). In this book Scarry contrasts mute pain, the sort of pain which the torturer hopes to create in his victim by depriving him of language and thereby of a connection with human institutions, with the ability to share in such institutions which is given by the possession of language and leisure. Scarry points out that what the torturer really enjoys is humiliating his victim rather than making him scream in agony. The scream is merely one more humiliation. I develop this latter point in connection with Nabokov’s and Orwell’s treatments of cruelty in Chapters 7 and 8.


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THE CONTINGENCY OF SELFHOOD

This process amounts to redescribing them, thereby saying of them all, “Thus I willed it.”

Seen from this angle, the intellectual (the person who uses words or visual or musical forms for this purpose) is just a special case—just somebody who does with marks and noises what other people do with their spouses and children, their fellow workers, the tools of their trade, the cash accounts of their businesses, the possessions they accumulate in their homes, the music they listen to, the sports they play or watch, or the trees they pass on their way to work. Anything from the sound of a word through the color of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can, as Freud showed us, serve to dramatize and crystallize a human being’s sense of self-identity. For any such thing can play the role in an individual life which philosophers have thought could, or at least should, be played only by things which were universal, common to us all. It can symbolize the blind impress all our behaviors bear. Any seemingly random constellation of such things can set the tone of a life. Any such constellation can set up an unconditional commandment to whose service a life may be devoted—a commandment no less unconditional because it may be intelligible to, at most, only one person.

Another way of making this point is to say that the social process of literalizing a metaphor is duplicated in the fantasy life of an individual. We call something “fantasy” rather than “poetry” or “philosophy” when it revolves around metaphors which do not catch on with other people—that is, around ways of speaking or acting which the rest of us cannot find a use for. But Freud shows us how something which seems pointless or ridiculous or vile to society can become the crucial element in the individual’s sense of who she is, her own way of tracing home the blind impress all her behaviors bear. Conversely, when some private obsession produces a metaphor which we can find a use for, we speak of genius rather than of eccentricity or perversity. The difference between genius and fantasy is not the difference between impresses which lock on to something universal, some antecedent reality out there in the world or deep within the self, and those which do not. Rather, it is the difference between idiosyncrasies which just happen to catch on with other people—happen because of the contingencies of some historical situation, some particular need which a given community happens to have at a given time.

To sum up, poetic, artistic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need. Strong poetry, commonsense morality, revolutionary morality, normal science, revolutionary science, and the sort of fantasy which is intelligible to only one person, are all, from a Freudian point of
view, different ways of dealing with blind impresses — or, more precisely, ways of dealing with different blind impresses: impresses which may be unique to an individual or common to the members of some historically conditioned community. None of these strategies is privileged over others in the sense of expressing human nature better. No such strategy is more or less human than any other, any more than the pen is more truly a tool than the butcher’s knife, or the hybridized orchid less a flower than the wild rose.

To appreciate Freud’s point would be to overcome what William James called “a certain blindness in human beings.” James’s example of this blindness was his own reaction, during a trip through the Appalachian Mountains, to a clearing in which the forest had been hacked down and replaced with a muddy garden, a log cabin, and some pigeons. As James says, “The forest had been destroyed; and what had ‘improved’ it out of existence was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of Nature’s beauty.” But, James continues, when a farmer comes out of the cabin and tells him that “we ain’t happy here unless we’re getting one of those coves under cultivation,” he realizes that

I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation. Because to me the clearings spoke of naught but denudation, I thought that to those whose sturdy arms and obedient axes had made them they could tell no other story. But when they looked on the hideous stumps, what they thought of was personal victory. . . . In short, the clearing which to me was a mere ugly picture on the retina, was to them a symbol redolent with moral memories and sang a very paean of duty, struggle and success.16

I had been as blind to the peculiar ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge.

I take Freud to have spelled out James’s point in more detail, helping us overcome particularly intractable cases of blindness by letting us see the “peculiar ideality” of events which exemplify, for example, sexual perversion, extreme cruelty, ludicrous obsession, and manic delusion. He let us see each of these as the private poem of the pervert, the sadist, or the lunatic: each as richly textured and “redolent of moral memories” as our own life. He lets us see what moral philosophy describes as extreme, inhuman, and unnatural, as continuous with our own activity. But, and

this is the crucial point, he does not do so in the traditional philosophical, reductionist way. He does not tell us that art is really sublimation or philosophical system-building merely paranoia, or religion merely a confused memory of the fierce father. He is not saying that human life is merely a continuous rechanneling of libidinal energy. He is not interested in invoking a reality-appearance distinction, in saying that anything is “merely” or “really” something quite different. He just wants to give us one more redescriptions of things to be filed alongside all the others, one more vocabulary, one more set of metaphors which he thinks has a chance of being used and thereby literalized.

Insofar as one can attribute philosophical views to Freud, one can say that he is as much a pragmatist as James and as much a perspectivalist as Nietzsche — or, one might also say, as much a modernist as Proust.17 For it somehow became possible, toward the end of the nineteenth century, to take the activity of redescription more lightly than it had ever been taken before. It became possible to juggle several descriptions of the same event without asking which one was right — to see redescription as a tool rather than a claim to have discovered essence. It thereby became possible to see a new vocabulary not as something which was supposed to replace all other vocabularies, something which claimed to represent reality, but simply as one more vocabulary, one more human project, one person’s chosen metaphor. It is unlikely that Freud’s metaphors could have been picked up, used, and literalized at any earlier period. But, conversely, it is unlikely that without Freud’s metaphors we should have been able to assimilate Nietzsche’s, James’s, Wittgenstein’s, or Heidegger’s as easily as we have, or to have read Proust with the relish we did. All the figures of this period play into each other’s hands. They feed each other lines. Their metaphors rejoice in one another’s company. This is the sort of phenomenon it is tempting to describe in terms of the march of the World-Spirit toward clearer self-consciousness, or as the length of man’s mind gradually coming to match that of the universe. But any such description would betray the spirit of playfulness and irony which links the figures I have been describing.

This playfulness is the product of their shared ability to appreciate the power of redescribing, the power of language to make new and different things possible and important — an appreciation which becomes possible only when one’s aim becomes an expanding repertoire of alternative


17 See Bloom, *Ages*, p. 23: “. . . by ‘a literary culture’ I do mean Western society now, since it has no authentic religion and no authentic philosophy, and will never acquire them again, and because psychoanalysis, its pragmatic religion and philosophy, is just a fragment of literary culture, so that in time we will speak alternatively of Freudianism or Proustianism.” I discuss Proust’s role as moral exemplar in Chapter 5.
CONTEMPORARY

DESCRIPTIONS RATHER THAN THE ONE RIGHT DESCRIPTION. SUCH A SHIFT IN AIM IS POSSIBLE ONLY TO THE EXTENT THAT BOTH THE WORLD AND THE SELF HAVE BEEN DE-DIVINIZED. TO SAY THAT BOTH ARE DE-DIVINIZED IS TO SAY THAT ONE NO LONGER THINKS OF EITHER AS SPEAKING TO US, AS HAVING A LANGUAGE OF ITS OWN, AS A RIVAL POET. NEITHER ARE QUASI PERSONS, NEITHER WANTS TO BE EXPRESSED OR REPRESENTED IN A CERTAIN WAY.

BOTH, HOWEVER, HAVE POWER OVER US — FOR EXAMPLE, THE POWER TO KILL US. THE WORLD CAN BLINDLY AND INarticulately CRUSH US; MUTE DESPAIR, INTENSE PAIN, CAN CAUSE US TO BLOT OURSELVES OUT. BUT THAT SORT OF POWER IS NOT THE SORT WE CAN APPROPRIATE BY ADOPTING AND THEN TRANSFORMING ITS LANGUAGE, THEREBY BECOMING IDENTICAL WITH THE THREATENING POWER AND SUBSUMING IT UNDER OUR OWN MORE POWERFUL SELVES. THIS LATTER STRATEGY IS APPROPRIATE ONLY FOR COPING WITH OTHER PERSONS — FOR EXAMPLE, WITH PARENTS, GODS, AND POETIC PRECURSORS. FOR OUR RELATION TO THE WORLD, TO BRUTE POWER AND TO NAKED PAIN, IS NOT THE SORT OF RELATION WE HAVE TO PERSONS FACED WITH THE NONHUMAN, THE NONLINGUISTIC, WE NO LONGER HAVE AN ABILITY TO OVERCOME CONTINGENCY AND PAIN BY APPROPRIATION AND TRANSFORMATION, BUT ONLY THE ABILITY TO RECOGNIZE CONTINGENCY AND PAIN. THE FINAL VICTORY OF POETRY IN ITS ANCIENT QUARREL WITH PHILOSOPHY — THE FINAL VICTORY OF METAPHORS OF SELF-CREATION OVER METAPHORS OF DISCOVERY — WOULD CONSIST IN OUR BECOMING RECONCILED TO THE THOUGHT THAT THIS IS THE ONLY SORT OF POWER OVER THE WORLD WHICH WE CAN HOPE TO HAVE. FOR THAT WOULD BE THE FINAL ABJURATION OF THE NOTION THAT TRUTH, AND NOT JUST POWER AND PAIN, IS TO BE FOUND "OUT THERE."

IT IS TEMPTING TO SUGGEST THAT IN A CULTURE IN WHICH POETRY HAD PUBLICLY AND EXPLICITLY TRIUMPHED OVER PHILOSOPHY, A CULTURE IN WHICH RECOGNITION OF CONTINGENCY RATHER THAN OF NECESSITY WAS THE ACCEPTED DEFINITION OF FREEDOM, LARKIN'S POEM WOULD FALL FLAT. THERE WOULD BE NO PATHOS IN FINITUDE. BUT THERE PROBABLY CANNOT BE SUCH A CULTURE. SUCH PATHOS IS PROBABLY INELIMINABLE. IT IS AS HARD TO IMAGINE A CULTURE DOMINATED BY EXUBERANT NIETZSCHEAN PLAYFULNESS AS TO IMAGINE THE REIGN OF THE PHILOSOPHER-KINGS, OR THE WITHERING AWAY OF THE STATE. IT IS EQUALLY HARD TO IMAGINE A HUMAN LIFE WHICH FELT ITSELF COMPLETE, A HUMAN BEING WHO DIES HAPPY BECAUSE ALL THAT HE OR SHE EVER WANTED HAS BEEN ATTAINED.

THIS IS TRUE EVEN FOR BLOOM'S STRONG POET. EVEN IF WE DROP THE PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAL OF SEEING OURSELVES STEADILY AND WHOLE AGAINST A PERMANENT BACKDROP OF "LITERAL" UNCHANGEABLE FACT, AND SUBSTITUTE THE IDEAL OF SEEING OURSELVES IN OUR OWN TERMS, OF REDEMPTION THROUGH SAYING TO THEPast, "THUS I WILLED IT," IT WILL REMAIN TRUE THAT THIS WILLING WILL ALWAYS BE A PROJECT RATHER THAN A RESULT, A PROJECT WHICH LIFE DOES NOT LAST LONG ENOUGH TO COMPLETE.

THE CONTINGENCY OF SELFHOOD

THE STRONG POET'S FEAR OF DEATH AS THE FEAR OF INCOMPLETION IS A FUNCTION OF THE FACT THAT NO PROJECT OF REDESIGNING THE WORLD AND THE PAST, NO PROJECT OF SELF-CREATION THROUGH IMPOSITION OF ONE'S OWN IDIOSYNCRATIC METAPHORIC, CAN AVOID BEING MARGINAL AND PARASITIC. METAPHORS ARE UNFAMILIAR USES OF OLD WORDS, BUT SUCH USES ARE POSSIBLE ONLY AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF OTHER OLD WORDS BEING USED IN OLD FAMILIAR WAYS. A LANGUAGE WHICH WAS "ALL METAPHOR" WOULD BE A LANGUAGE WHICH HAD NO USE, HENCE NOT A LANGUAGE BUT JUST BABLE. FOR EVEN IF WE AGREE THAT LANGUAGES ARE NOT MEDIA OF REPRESENTATION OR EXPRESSION, THEY WILL REMAIN MEDIA OF COMMUNICATION, TOOLS FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION, WAYS OF TYING YOURSELF UP WITH OTHER HUMAN BEINGS.

THIS NEEDED CORRECTIVE TO NIETZSCHE'S ATTEMPT TO DIVINIZE THE POET, THIS DEPENDENCE OF EVEN THE STRONGEST POET ON OTHERS, IS SUMMED UP BY BLOOM AS FOLLOWS:

THE SAD TRUTH IS THAT POEMS DON'T HAVE PRESENCE, UNITY, FORM OR MEANING. ... WHAT THEN DOES A POEM POSSESS OR CREATE? ALAS, A POEM HAS NOTHING, AND CREATES NOTHING. ITS PRESENCE IS A PROMISE, PART OF THE SUBSTANCE OF THINGS HOPEFUL FOR, THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN. ITS UNITY IS IN THE GOOD WILL OF THE READER. ... ITS MEANING IS JUST THAT THERE IS, OR RATHER WAS, ANOTHER POEM.

IN THIS PASSAGE BLOOM DE-DIVINIZES THE POEM, AND THEREBY THE POET, IN THE SAME WAY IN WHICH NIETZSCHE DE-DIVINIZED TRUTH AND IN WHICH FREUD DE-DIVINIZED CONSCIOUSNESS. HE DOES FOR ROMANTICISM WHAT FREUD DID FOR MORALISM. THE STRATEGY IS THE SAME IN ALL THESE CASES: IT IS TO SUBSTITUTE A TISSUE OF CONTINGENT RELATIONS, A WEB WHICH STRETCHES BACKWARD AND FORWARD THROUGH PAST AND FUTURE TIME, FOR A FORMED, UNIFIED, PRESENT, SELF-CONTAINED SUBSTANCE, SOMETHING CAPABLE OF BEING SEEN STEADILY AND WHOLE. BLOOM REMINDS US THAT JUST AS EVEN THE STRONGEST POET IS PARASITIC ON HER PRECURSORS, JUST AS EVEN SHE CAN GIVE BIRTH ONLY TO A SMALL PART OF HERSELF, SO SHE IS DEPENDENT ON THE KINDNESS OF ALL THOSE STRANGERS OUT THERE IN THE FUTURE.

THIS AMOUNTS TO A REMINDER OF WITTGENSTEIN'S POINT THAT THERE ARE NO PRIVATE LANGUAGES — HIS ARGUMENT THAT YOU CANNOT GIVE MEANING TO A WORD OR A POEM BY CONFRONTING IT WITH A NONLINGUISTIC MEANING, SOMETHING OTHER THAN A BUNCH OF ALREADY USED WORDS OR A BUNCH OF ALREADY WRITTEN POEMS. EVERY POEM, TO PARAPHRASE WITTGENSTEIN, PRESUPPOSES A LOT OF

18 Bloom, Kabbalah and Criticism, p. 122.
19 "Just as we can never embrace (sexually or otherwise) a single person, but embrace the whole of her or his family romance, so we can never read a poet without reading the whole of his or her family romance as poet. The issue is reduction and how best to avoid it. Rhetorical, Aristotelian, phenomenological, and structuralist criticisms all
stage-setting in the culture, for the same reason that every sparkling metaphor requires a lot of stodgy literal talk to serve as its foil. Shifting from the written poem to the life-as-poem, one may say that there can be no fully Nietzschean lives, lives which are pure action rather than reaction — no lives which are not largely parasitical on an un-redescribed past and dependent on the charity of the unborn generations. There is no stronger claim even the strongest poet can make than the one Keats made — that he would be among the English poets, construing “among them” in a Bloomian way as “in the midst of them,” future poets living out of Keats’s pockets as he lived out of those of his precursors. Analogously, there is no stronger claim which even the superman can make than that his differences from the past, inevitably minor and marginal as they are, will nevertheless be carried over into the future — that his metaphoric redescriptions of small parts of the past will be among the future’s stock of literal truths.

To sum up, I suggest that the best way to understand the pathos of finitude which Larkin invokes is to interpret it not as the failure to achieve what philosophy hoped to achieve — something nondiosyncratic, atemporal, and universal — but as the realization that at a certain point one has to trust to the good will of those who will live other lives and write other poems. Nabokov built his best book, Pale Fire, around the phrase “Man’s life as commentary to abstruse unfinished poem.” That phrase serves both as a summary of Freud’s claim that every human life is the working out of a sophisticated diosyncratic fantasy, and as a reminder that no such working out gets completed before death interrupts. It cannot get completed because there is nothing to complete, reduce, whether to images, ideas, given things, or phonemes. Moral and other blatant philosophical or psychological criticisms all reduce to rival conceptualizations. We reduce — if at all — to another poem. The meaning of a poem can only be another poem” (Bloom, The Anxiety of Influence, p. 94; italics added). See also p. 70, and compare p. 43: “Let us give up the failed enterprise of seeking to ‘understand’ any single poem as an entity in itself. Let us pursue instead the quest of learning to read any poem as its poet’s deliberate misinterpretation, as a poet, of a precursor poem or of poetry in general.

There is an analogy between Bloom’s antireductionism and Wittgenstein’s, Davidson’s and Derrida’s willingness to let meaning consist in relation to other texts rather than in a relation to something outside the text. The idea of a private language, like Searle’s Myth of the Given, stems from the hope that words might get meaning without relying on other words. This hope, in turn, stems from the larger hope, diagnosed by Sartre, of becoming a self-sufficient être-en-soi. Sartre’s description (“Portait of the Anti-Semite,” in Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, ed. Walter Kaufmann [New York: New American Library, 1957], p. 345) of the anti-Semite as “the man who wants to be pitiless stone, furious torrent, devastating lightning — in short, everything but a man” — is a criticism of Zarathustra, of what Bloom calls “reductionist” criticism, and of what Heidegger and Derrida call “metaphysics.”