THE FUTURE OF THE LITERARY IMAGINATION AND ITS FORMS IN RELATION TO CATALAN ACHIEVEMENT

By Harold Bloom

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I grew up in the literary age of high Modernism, and even as a very young man protested its insistence that human nature and Western culture had altered forever in the aftermath of the First World War. And so now, going on seventy-two, I find myself for a fourth time denying a current unwisdom. The sky did not fall during the Age of T.S. Eliot, nor in the vogue of the Post-Modernist prophets of Paris, nor has it come down upon us in what I have named as the days of Resentment, the Political Correctness that now wanes. I do not believe that the Age of Information and of Virtual Reality marks a new consciousness or a new perspective in whatever remains of high culture in the West. Remnants there certainly are and will be; reading dies hard, once you have learned to read deeply. Solitary readers spring up everywhere. As Emerson wrote: “the astonished Muse finds thousands at her side.”

Yet the forms of literature mutate, and some cease to be available to us. The novel from Cervantes through Proust was the center of aesthetic narrative, replacing prose romance and the long poem. There are still admirable living novelists, but even figures as vital as José Saramago and Philip Roth are necessarily post-Proustian. Samuel Beckett, who emerged from the wake of both Joyce and Proust, marks the end of their encyclopedic energies, their great drive to get the cosmos into a book. The Beckett narrative take *Ulysses* and *In Search of Lost Time* as the given that has been withdrawn. That helps give Beckett his authentic affinity with Kafka, whose fragments take Goethe and Kleist as both gift and absence.

No one can prophesy the advent of another writer who will be of that eminence we rightly associate with Kafka, Proust, Joyce, and Beckett. Until persons of such fecundity and originality clearly again are among us, we will be unable to say whether new literary forms will engender titans, or whether the restless intensity of a great spirit will create a new form, a mode of narrative we might now not recognize as such. But we should not over-estimate the influence of technology upon literary genius, which follows it own laws, frequently in defiance of the over-determinations of all historicism.

I suggest that, more than ever, we need to return to the idea of individual genius, to the form in the writer rather than the writer in the form. The literary imagination and the modes of narrative will not exist apart from their incarnations in possible writers and possible works. The future of literary narrative necessarily is the future of writers, who in their crucial contests with the past will repeat the struggle of Homer. Homer's agon was with the poetry of the past, and not with the replacement of oral composition and transmission by literacy.

My personal horror of the Internet is founded comically upon a perpetual burden in my own life: every day brings in its flow of unsolicited masterpieces: of poems, stories, plays, novels, whether in manuscript, proofcopy, or bound form. I cannot respond and by now might not even if I could. Millions of new writers, in all languages, will be published on the Web: who will differentiate between and among them? How can we speak of the future of literary forms when they will float on the great formless ocean of the Internet? No one will have strength to assert the power of an individual mind over *that* ocean of death, the universal sea of a chaos come again. I muse sometimes of becoming a Prospero-like necromancer, and of awaking my hero, Dr. Samuel Johnson, greatest of literary critics, from the sleep of death. Johnson, already appalled by the gathering tides of Grub Street, would turn away from our oncoming chaos with an eloquent shrug, and would return to Homer and to Shakespeare.

But what are *we* to do, in the early twenty-first century? Our universities and academies have abandoned almost all aesthetic and intellectual standards, and promote cheerleaders for one interest-group or another. The media, as I discover in my ongoing war with the *New York Times*, official newspaper of the

established Counter-culture, will shower a Johnsonian critic with ignorant abuse. Canonical criteria are not merely obsolete; they are socially wicked, and scarcely will be tolerated. If absolutely anything goes, then we need not concern ourselves with the future of literary narrative: it has none. To be a touch more hopeful, I would affirm that it may have a future, of sorts, if we can learn to be elitist readers again. Narrative simply will cease to be literary, if there are too few literary readers.

The Internet is formless, except in the sense of Borgesian labyrinth. Dandy Red Scharlach, in Borges's "Death and the Compass," ends the story by promising the detective Erik Lönnrot: "The next time I kill you, I promise you that labyrinth, consisting of a single line which is invisible and unceasing." Zeno the Eleatic is another of Borges's precursors, but is narrative possible as Zeno's paradox? Let us assume that an advanced readership survives, and that we thus can risk a prophecy as to narrative form.

The novel of Cervantes and Jane Austen, of Flaubert and of Joyce, of Thomas Mann and of Proust, sounds its elegiac litany in Beckett. What is it that we have now, in José Saramago and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in Philip Roth and Thomas Pynchon? To me, what goes on now, in these very distinguished masters of fiction, seems an authentic suspension between two worlds, the cosmos of Cervantes and the return (hardly yet a cosmos) of the romance-form that Cervantes satirized and displaced. But what was romance? It had many episodes, featured mysterious ancestries, and tended to picaresque. That has little prophetic illumination, so far. More important—I think—is that is relied upon incomplete knowledge, which tends to make Gnostic romance impossible. On the World Wide Web all knowledge is available; only wisdom is lacking. Are we then to see a new kind or romance, in which everything is known, and no one is wise?

Where shall wisdom be found, if it is to be exiled from literature? Discontinuities in narrative almost always have marked the romance form; perhaps the romances of the twenty-first century will take discontinuity as their starting- and end-points. But whether an absolute discontinuity can still be narrative is a question already answered by the failure of all those methods, from Dada to Burroughs, that have left us with an aphorism or two, and little more. Where then shall the coming mode find its models?

It may be that there will be no more monsters of reading. Perhaps I represent an extinct species, which is the fear that informs my sporadic joke that I am Bloom Brontosaurus Bardolator. Since all of imaginative literature is implicit in Shakespeare, he may provide a better clue to the future than Beckett or Borges. His largest triumph was the invention of a more radical inwardness than the world had known before, or has achieved since. Hamlet represents a limit, a point beyond which thought cannot exist as thought, since no literary character possesses anything like so much persuasive genius. Is it likely than any other model can replace Hamlet in the future biography of genius?

Narrative is a dubious genre distinction, as Alistair Fowler emphasizes in his *Kinds of Literature* (1982). Narrative, as we now employ it, tends to be a misleading literary term, since by it we mean the Western novel, from Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne on to Marcel Proust and the earlier Samuel Beckett. That form, while not dead, is dying; it will drown in the oceanic Internet. And yet Homer, who remains the greatest teller of tales, together with the Yahwist or J Writer, founds his art upon not telling everything he has heard. There, in the transition between oral memory and writing, he holds us by the authority of stories only partly told. I read this as a clue to the future of narrative, as we enter upon the age of total information. When new geniuses of story-telling come among us, they will avoid the encyclopedic, which is still a dangerous glory in Thomas Pynchon. Narrative art will be an ellipsis, but then Shakespeare is the greatest master of leaving things out, though we are slow to realize his slyness.

Wisdom literature is almost always elliptical; good proverbs evade declaring their values. Where shall wisdom be found? In the elliptical narratives of the future, that will resemble Lewis Carroll more than they do Flaubert and Joyce, I hope to see the indirect and sage counsel that only imaginative literature can provide. Thoreau said that he was not a bit better than his neighbors, but that he read better books. The difficulties of the encyclopedic—of *Finnegans Wake* and *In Search of Lost Time*—do not suit the Age of Information. But the quest for the reader's Sublime always will require abandoning easier pleasures for more difficult pleasures. I think that the future partly belongs to a kind of elliptical wisdom literature, perhaps indeed in a return to Lewis Carroll and related visionaries of a looking-glass world. Looking in a

glass, you do not observe virtual reality. You see instead our reality, but with much left out. Wisdom will determine how much is to be omitted in those expensive and elitist torsoes that will constitute our best narratives in the near future.

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I am a professional literary critic, but only an amateur student of Catalan language and literature. Though I can make a tentative approach to some Catalan poets with the help of Provencal and Italian, and above all of a good dictionary, it is only an approach, more reflective of my own critical personality and limitations than it is of the actuality of Catalan poetry. Here I will confine myself to one remarkable novel each by Joan Perucho and Mercè Rodoreda, relying upon the eloquent translations of the late David Rosenthal. I am also grateful to Rosenthal for his translation of, and commentaries upon, modern Catalan poetry. At the close of these brief reflections, I will go back to Ramon Llull, a founder of Catalan literature. Whether the Catalan Kabbalah influenced Llull directly is uncertain, but my own understanding of Llull is more Kabbalistic than not, and my consuming interest in Jewish imagination has long impelled my interest in certain analogues between the situations of Catalan and Jewish literary imagination.

Salvador Espriu (1913-1985), a remarkable poet by any international standard, fascinates any Jewish critic because of the deep analogies he opened up between the Catalan and Jewish experiences. *La pell de brau* (*The Bull's Hide)* founds its title upon Spain's shape on the map, but its name, *Sepharad*, is the Hebrew for the Spain of such major poets as Samuel ha-Nagid and Jehudah Halevi. Here is Rosenthal's version of an uncanny vision of God in Espriu.

No convé que diguem el nom
del qui ens pensa enllà de la nostra por.
Si topem a les palpentes
amb aquest estrany cec
i ends sentim mirats
pel blanc esguard del cec,
on sino en el buit i en el no-res

fonanmentarem la nostra vida?

(It's better not to utter the name
of that one who imagines us past our fear.
If groping we bump up against
this queer blind man
and always feel watched
by his blind, vacant stare,
where but in void and nothingness
shall we lay our life's foundations?)

Who but God, unnameable by the Jews, could imagine the Catalans beyond their justified fear during the obscene reign of Franco? How much Espriu understood of Kabbalah, I do not know, but the *En Soph* or God of Kabbalah is called *ayin* or nothingness. There is a memorable anguish in Espriu's image of the Hebrew God as a curious blind man. In seeking the foundation of Catalan existence in the Kabbalistic void of nothingness, Espriu returns us to the Provencal-Catalan Kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac the Blind, who recreated God as the *En-Soph* and reinvented the ten *Sefirot*, the divine attributes and potencies. Though I don't recall that Paul Celan was familiar with Espriu, there seems to me an authentic affinity between them. They shared a God who was nothing and noone, and a mutual sense that their peoples' traditions were threatened, whether by Castilian Fascism of Germano-Romanian Nazism.

Espriu makes a personal appeal to me, but I appreciate greatly the eminence of J.V. Foix, who renewed the relationship of Catalan literature with its Renaissance roots, as here in the marvelous irony of his "Em plau, d'atzar" ("I like, at Random"):

L'antic museu, les madones borroses,
I el pintar extrem d'avui! Càndid rampell:
M'exalta el nou i m'enamora el vell.

(The ancient museum, the faded madonnas,
And today's extreme painting! A naïve sudden impulse;
The new inflames me and I'm in love with the old.)

That is no more than an epitome of Foix, but I press on to two wonderful Catalan novels, Joan Perucho's *Natural History* (1960) and Mercè Rodoreda's *The Time of the Doves* (1962). *Natural History*, set in the 1830s, the era of the Carlist Civil Wars, is still one of the narratives of the future, more than forty years later. It is a sublimely outrageous narrative, mixing together a vampire tale, history, and an irony that seems altogether Catalan. It concludes with an "Index of Proper Names" that is totally hilarious, and in itself suggests an elliptical form for narratives in the future.

Rodereda's *The Time of the Doves* invests an infinitely gentle pathos in its heroine Natalia's sensibility. Her anguish, which she is unable to express, is experienced all the more deeply by the lacerated reader. There is an authentic return to the Dostoevsky of the *Notes from the Underground* in *The Time of the Doves*. Here, as in the very different Perucho, there is another way hinted out of the Post-Modernist dilemma of the novel.

I conclude with the great Catalan master of the art of memory, Ramon Llull. The great Israeli Kabbalist scholar, Moshe Idel, prime successor to Gershom Scholem, has traced the influence of the Kabbalist Rabbi Ezra of Gerona upon Llull. The Kabbalistic Catalan Sefirot helped stimulate Llull's dignitates, attributes of God's nature.

In Catalan Kabbalah the first sefirah, *Keter* or the crown, is also the ultimate cause of all being. The great Catalan sage, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides) took Keter as an uncreated entity, the cause of the other sefirot or of the dignitates, in Llull's term. Idel demonstrates that Nachmanides' secret doctrine of *kavod* or glory as an alternate name for Keter was transmitted to Llull by the Catalan Kabbalists of Gerona.

That returns me full circle to the poet Espriu's association between the Catalans and the Jews. As the proud recipient of the International Prize of Catalonia, I want to add the voice of a Jewish literary critic to this link between the peoples. Jewish literature has been written in a variety of languages, including the Yiddish I spoke in my own youth. But the Yiddish language was

destroyed by Hitler even as Franco sought to destroy the Catalan language. Hebrew literature, which revived in Iberia, flourishes now in Israel. Espriu's insight was profound: the Catalan struggle to maintain their literary culture and its language has a clear analogue in the Jewish effort to maintain its own linguistic and literary identity. I take great comfort from this analogue, and hope in the years remaining to me to properly absorb Catalan language and literature.