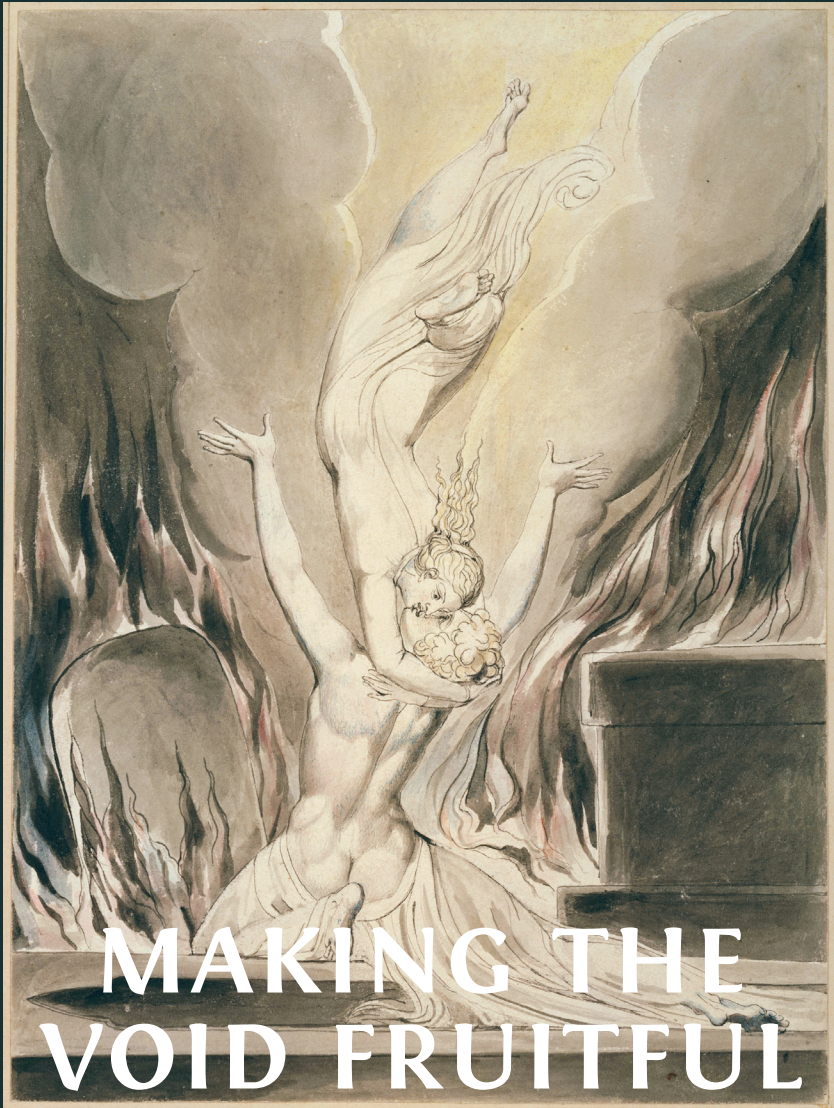


PATRICK J. KEANE



# MAKING THE VOID FRUITFUL

Yeats as Spiritual Seeker  
and Petrarchan Lover



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# Eulogy:

## Harold Bloom (1930–2019)

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On 14 October 2019, Harold Bloom died. He was 89, and had just taught two classes at Yale. Magisterial yet convivial, bigger than life yet almost comically elegiac, Bloom had been dying for decades. But to those who knew, admired, and loved this mixture of formidable colossus and warmhearted mensch, even for some who resented him, his death was *felt*. That inward impact was publicly registered. Almost every notable newspaper and magazine in the world carried his obituary, often (as in the case of the *New York Times*) on the front page: hardly par for a literary critic. Teacher, MacArthur Fellow, prolific author, holder of chairs at Harvard and NYU, Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale, his home base, Harold Bloom, at the time of his death, was, and had been for many years, the most widely read and controversial literary critic in the world, both celebrated and reviled as the foremost champion of the Western canon.

Seeming to have read almost everything, within and beyond the Western classics, Bloom was famous for his agonistic theory of poetic influence, for his almost superhuman memory and for his astonishing reading speed. I once bumped into him in the Yale Co-Op. After greeting me with the usual, 'Hello, dear,' he asked if I'd come across anything interesting while browsing. I told him I'd just read the introductory chapter of a book arguing that the reason the Church resisted Galileo, and eventually put him under house arrest, had to do, not with astronomy, but with the challenge Galileo's science posed to the doctrine of transubstantiation. 'Really,' said Harold, 'Where's the book?' I took him to it. That introduction was twenty dense pages long and had taken me at least that many minutes to get through it. Harold, rapidly flipping pages, finished it in less than two, and then began to discuss it with me in detail.

Readers of the present volume may recall the story about a friend of Stephen MacKenna seeing Yeats in a London bookstore one morning. WBK was standing in an aisle reading the first volume of MacKenna's newly published translation of the *Enneads* of Plotinus. When the friend returned in the evening, there was Yeats, standing in the same place, and still reading, now about three-quarters through. MacKenna laughed and, after wondering aloud if Yeats ever bought the damned book (he did), added: 'You know, he has a really colossal brain.' Bloom's brain was, if anything, even more colossal. But, with a reading speed of some 8,000 words a minute, he might have finished the *Enneads* before MacKenna's friend *left* that bookstore. On the other hand, if it came to a choice, Harold would have traded his prodigious memory and reading speed for Yeats's poetic genius. One of the reasons he had such reverence for the world's great creative writers, Shakespeare above all, was that he knew that *that* miraculous gift had been denied him.

Bloom was an absorber of knowledge almost from birth. The son of a Jewish garment worker, he grew up in the Bronx, speaking Yiddish before he knew English. He was exposed to both Testaments of the Bible early on, though even then, he later said, he was skeptical about orthodox notions of spirituality. By the age of eleven, the precocious 'Childe Harold' was drawn to the sublime in secular literature as well. He was overwhelmed in particular by the Marlovian rhetoric of Hart Crane, a first love he always ranked second only to W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens among twentieth-century poets. Along with his Cornell mentor, M. H. Abrams, Bloom would later revive Romantic poetry, fallen into post-Eliotic academic disfavor, with Bloom tracing a lineage from Shakespeare, through Milton (he had much of *Paradise Lost* by heart) and the great British Romantics, then Emerson and Whitman and Dickinson, to their twentieth-century heirs: Crane, Yeats, Stevens, and others, many of them his friends, in a continuing Romantic tradition.

Bloom felt himself to be a man appointed to guard a position. The canon he felt obliged to defend was not only a victim of declining literacy, but under direct assault by academicians he described, in the spirit of Nietzsche, as 'the School of Resentment': those practitioners of postmodern critical approaches that subordinated aesthetic appreciation to external social and political considerations. No wonder he was resisted, even despised, by most Marxist, New

Historicist, Deconstructionist, and Feminist critics, all of whom he intemperately dismissed as ‘a rabblement of lemmings.’ One day when we were walking in Manhattan, Harold suddenly turned to me, ‘You know why they hate me so, don’t you, Pat?’ His answer to his own question would have been a display of monstrous egotism if it weren’t both self-consciously humorous and true: ‘Because they know I know everything they know, and a lot more besides.’

Though John Keats recognized Wordsworth as the master poet of the age, and, along with Shakespeare and Milton, one of his own great precursors, he was hardly wrong to refer, famously, to the author of ‘Tintern Abbey’ and the ‘Intimations of Immortality’ Ode as the epitome of the ‘egotistical sublime.’ Both adjective and noun could be applied to Harold Bloom. But despite his arrogant dismissal of enemies and his polemical excesses, Bloom was in fact committed to aesthetic and spiritual enrichment extending far beyond the merely egoistic Self and an exclusively Western canon. ‘Cultivating deep inwardness,’ he insisted, ‘depends upon the reading of the world’s masterpieces of literary work and religious scriptures.’ In a note thanking me for my letter of condolence, including an earlier version of these remarks, Harold’s beloved wife, Jeanne, remarked that she especially liked my reference to Bloom feeling himself ‘a man appointed to guard a position,’ which caught, she thought, ‘the fighting stance that motivated a part of his writing and teaching.’ A ‘part’—for that fighting stance could also reflect a generosity of spirit that made him, above all, a courageous guide to wisdom and consolation in distress—as I personally experienced at the time of my father’s death.

Jeanne included in her note the following passage from Bloom, later inserted in the program for the 18 January 2020 Memorial Service at Yale’s Battell Chapel, celebrating her husband’s life and legacy, and still later as the final paragraph of Harold’s ‘Prelude’ to his posthumously published final book, *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles: The Power of the Reader’s Mind over a Universe of Death*: ‘The great poems, plays, novels, stories teach us how to go on living, even submerged under forty fathoms of bother and distress. If you live ninety years you will be a battered survivor. Your own mistakes, accidents, failures and otherness beat you down. Rise up at dawn and read something that matters as soon as you can.’

The title of Bloom's *Possessed by Memory: The Inward Light of Criticism*, also published posthumously, emphasized his phenomenal powers of recall, summoning up and sharing with us all those literary masterpieces he had spent a lifetime absorbing and cherishing. The last time I got to spend time with Harold, we sat, along with Jeanne and my then student-assistant, Sean Abrams, at their kitchen table in the book-filled house on Linden Street in New Haven. He had recently been hospitalized with a broken hip, the result of only one of several falls he had taken in his final years. After we exhausted the possibilities of prose, we chanted poems back and forth from memory. I could have gone on for perhaps another hour; Harold would still be chanting. But the hour was growing late, and the old man's body was tiring, however willing his inexhaustible spirit.

In keeping with the quasi-spiritual 'deep inwardness' he urged us to cultivate, the more explicitly spiritual book Harold was planning at the time was to be an exploration of ideas of the afterlife in the Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman, and Islamic traditions. Tentatively titled *Immortality, Resurrection, Redemption: A Study in Speculation*, the book, he confided, would play another variation on inwardness. Though he shared some form of 'spiritual hope,' Bloom, extrapolating from his own psychological and medical history—a battered survivor, enabled by love and literature to 'rise up at dawn'—speculated that his titular, ultimately redemptive triad occurs in *this life*. When the book appeared, fourteen months after his death, in the final month of the Year of the Plague, and retitled by Bloom *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles*, it was a literary rather than a normatively spiritual text, since, as he says in the Prelude, 'Now, for many of the most literate among us,' such figurations as immortality, resurrection, and redemption 'can only be tropes.'

Though he has departed this life, for those of us personally moved and intellectually influenced by him, Bloom will never be completely gone. He now survives, beyond that battered body, as a trope—for me, one of the similes of one of his favorite poets. In 'The Auroras of Autumn,' Wallace Stevens refers to stars putting on their 'glittering belts' and throwing around their shoulders cloaks 'that flash/ Like a great shadow's last embellishment.' Yet what seems like the last glimmer somehow perpetuates itself. So, for those possessed as he was by memory, will it be with the luminous shadow of Harold Bloom.