A Personal Foreword

HAROLD BLOOM

In September 1951 I wandered disconsolately into the lounge of the Hall of Graduate Studies at Yale. A few unhappy weeks in New Haven had made me wonder how long I might endure what seemed rather a hostile context. Nearly sixty years ago a student of my temperament and background was unlikely to be comfortable with the Yale Department of English. I remain, in my fifty-fifth year of teaching, and still do not find myself at home.

I entered the lounge and delighted in hearing a vigorous performance of Bela Bartok's *Sonata for Piano*. Sitting down, I listened to its percussive splendor being played by a yellow cowlick bobbing up and down behind the piano. The Bartok concluded and I walked around to introduce myself to Angus Fletcher, like myself a twenty-one-year-old graduate student in English. Loneliness abated as our lifelong friendship began.

Fletcher sustained me that first year at Yale. He then left to continue graduate work at Harvard, where I. A. Richards supervised what was to become *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Fletcher and I continued our dialogue through the post and mutual visits; later by reading each other. In retrospect I consider myself his pupil. A pragmatic critic, I needed a capacious guide to poetic wisdom and found in Fletcher the curious universal learning of an authentic Renaissance visionary.

His new afterword to *Allegory* renders redundant the observations I might add. Instead I devote this brief foreword to conveying my sense of his ongoing critical achievements in books and essays for which *Allegory* served as fecund matrix. Of Fletcher's works, after his inaugural *Allegory*, I have been most deeply influenced by *Colors of the Mind: Conjectures on Thinking in Literature* (1991). We still know surprisingly little about the rhetoric of cognition, particularly in poetry, where William Blake and Emily Dickinson trail only Shakespeare as thinkers through metaphor. Many notable critics have contributed to our understanding of cognitive rhetoric, including Kenneth Burke, William Empson, A. D. Nuttall, Ann Banfield, and Sharon Cameron. Fletcher aids my work most because his central concern is the representation and iconography of thought. Shakespeare, supreme creator both of character and of language, has to be Fletcher's exemplary instance:

Thought is understood then to include a wider variety of mental acts than may be considered allowable by the philosopher. It includes perceptions, cognitions of all sorts, judgments, ruminations, analysis, synthesis, highly figured representations of inner states, as when a poet personifies a passion. Such mental acts, along with others, would not be allowed as thought by some philosophers.

This leads to a fine emphasis:

To the extent that an author like Shakespeare speaks with streams and cataracts of poetic figures, the assumption seems to arise that thought is whatever can be put into language, *somehow*.

This *somehow* is the aim of Fletcher's critical quest. I myself do not know of any other poet at all like Shakespeare. So capacious are his mind, spirit, heart that he gives an utterly new meaning to Aristotle's *anagnorisis*. His scenes of recognition compel me to realize again Owen Barfield's insight that what we desire to call our own emotions originally were Shakespeare's thoughts.

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Fletcher suggests that recognition may be the central modality of poetic thinking. Wallace Stevens, master of intricate evasions, spoke rather of the hum of thoughts evaded in the mind. Whitman, who haunts Stevens's poetry more than Stevens the man, invited his own soul in *Song of Myself*

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from
your throat
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not
custom or lecture,
not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd
voice.

The cry of the human in Whitman and Stevens alike frequently subsides into a wordless hum of thoughts. Shakespeare's art of leaving things out becomes an American sublime that gestures at plenitude while sinuously evading it. Reticence we hardly ascribe to Whitman but he remains too shy for us:

Will you speak before I am gone? will you
prove already too late?

No one has outdone Fletcher in the analysis of what he terms: "the Whitman phrase":

To read Whitman aright, we have to remain perpetually intransitive, like the vast majority of his middle-voicing verbs, his verbs of sensation, perception, and cognition.

Wishing to intensify the phrase of the pure verb, the verb before it is locked down into predication. Whitman's favorite and most effective phrase is crafted from the present participle.

Is not Walt's craftiest power the phrasing of evasion? Stevens learned from Whitman "the intricate evasions of as." Both passersby suggest a poetry of thought while singing and chanting the things that are part of them, death and day.

Fletcher, who loves both poets and links them to Ashbery, their worthy legatee, culminates his vision of Whitman superbly:

We have to imagine the rhythms produced by a phrasal style, undulant rhythms. The wave and the participle are not things; they are virtually agencies of thought, like waves of reminiscence. Whitman composes so as to *assimilate* all his units of expression, no matter how clausal and hypotactic they appear, to the participial idea, to the phrase. Throughout *Leaves of Grass* one notices a resistance to poetic argument, which, on a local level, would require controlled predications along with their extension into further sequences of predication, leading in logical fashion to clear conclusions.

In Stevens and in Ashbery also, poetic argument, such as Dante's, is set aside for what Hart Crane, another great poet in the American Romantic tradition, called "the logic of metaphor." Angus Fletcher, for sixty years my essential critical guide, invented what should be called a transumptive poetic criticism. Transumption is the trope that undoes prior metaphors and substitutes an ever-early candor for the poet's anxiety of belatedness. Critics too can fear that they have arrived rather late in the story. Fletcher, Orphic hermetist, inspires hope for a path out of that labyrinth, until we reach the threshold from which Walt Whitman beheld his vistas.