

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Edited and with an introduction by HAROLD BLOOM / Volume Editor: BLAKE HOBBY



Bloom's Literary Themes

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Edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities





Bloom's Literary Themes: Civil Disobedience

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Series Introduction by Harold Bloom: Themes and Metaphors



1. Topos and Trope

What we now call a theme or topic or subject initially was named a topos, ancient Greek for "place." Literary topoi are commonplaces, but also arguments or assertions. A topos can be regarded as literal when opposed to a trope or turning which is figurative and which can be a metaphor or some related departure from the literal: ironies, synecdoches (part for whole), metonymies (representations by contiguity) or hyperboles (overstatements). Themes and metaphors engender one another in all significant literary compositions.

As a theoretician of the relation between the matter and the rhetoric of high literature, I tend to define metaphor as a figure of desire rather than a figure of knowledge. We welcome literary metaphor because it enables fictions to persuade us of beautiful untrue things, as Oscar Wilde phrased it. Literary *topoi* can be regarded as places where we store information, in order to amplify the themes that interest us.

This series of volumes, *Bloom's Literary Themes*, offers students and general readers helpful essays on such perpetually crucial topics as the Hero's Journey, the Labyrinth, the Sublime, Death and Dying, the Taboo, the Trickster and many more. These subjects are chosen for their prevalence yet also for their centrality. They express the whole concern of human existence now in the twenty-first century of the Common Era. Some of the topics would have seemed odd at another time, another land: the American Dream, Enslavement and Emancipation, Civil Disobedience.

I suspect though that our current preoccupations would have existed always and everywhere, under other names. Tropes change across the centuries: The irony of one age is rarely the irony of

another. But the themes of great literature, though immensely varied, undergo transmemberment and show up barely disguised in different contexts. The power of imaginative literature relies upon three constants: aesthetic splendor, cognitive power, wisdom. These are not bound by societal constraints or resentments, and ultimately are universals, and so not culture-bound. Shakespeare, except for the world's scriptures, is the one universal author, whether he is read and played in Bulgaria or Indonesia or wherever. His supremacy at creating human beings breaks through even the barrier of language and puts everyone on his stage. This means that the matter of his work has migrated everywhere, reinforcing the common places we all inhabit in his themes.

2. Contest as Both Theme and Trope

Great writing or the Sublime rarely emanates directly from themes since all authors are mediated by forerunners and by contemporary rivals. Nietzsche enhanced our awareness of the agonistic foundations of ancient Greek literature and culture, from Hesiod's contest with Homer on to the Hellenistic critic Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime*. Even Shakespeare had to begin by overcoming Christopher Marlowe, only a few months his senior. William Faulkner stemmed from the Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad, and our best living author of prose fiction, Philip Roth, is inconceivable without his descent from the major Jewish literary phenomenon of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka of Prague, who wrote the most lucid German since Goethe.

The contest with past achievement is the hidden theme of all major canonical literature in Western tradition. Literary influence is both an overwhelming metaphor for literature itself, and a common topic for all criticism, whether or not the critic knows her immersion in the incessant flood.

Every theme in this series touches upon a contest with anteriority, whether with the presence of death, the hero's quest, the overcoming of taboos, or all of the other concerns, volume by volume. From Monteverdi through Bach to Stravinsky, or from the Italian Renaissance through the agon of Matisse and Picasso, the history of all the arts demonstrates the same patterns as literature's thematic struggle with itself. Our country's great original art, jazz, is illuminated by what

the great creators called "cutting contests," from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington on to the emergence of Charlie Parker's Bop or revisionist jazz.

A literary theme, however authentic, would come to nothing without rhetorical eloquence or mastery of metaphor. But to experience the study of the common places of invention is an apt training in the apprehension of aesthetic value in poetry and in prose.

Wolume Introduction by Harold Bloom



As a term, "civil disobedience" for most of us evokes the activists of the twentieth century who followed Thoreau: Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., and our protestors down to the present moment. Yet its literary history is far richer than Henry David Thoreau, and goes back to Sophocles, Aristophanes, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Milton, Melville, Hawthorne, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, and Ralph Waldo Ellison.

What possibly can unite figures so diverse as Antigone, Hamlet, Milton's Samson, Bartleby the Scrivener, Hester Prynne, Svidrigailov, Joseph K., and Ellison's Invisible Man? I hold aside, for now, the literary master of civil disobedience, my hero Sir John Falstaff. When rhetoric and dramatic representation replace civic action and suffering, civil disobedience can begin to mean everything and nothing. Antigone asserts a private ethic against the state, yet the ironist Hamlet disdains assertion and questions even his own questionings. Milton's Samson like blind Milton himself asserts the God within against all outward authority.

Melville's Bartleby would prefer not to, and declines explanation, while Hester Prynne stubbornly will outwait all of male society. The most fascinating of all is *Crime and Punishment*'s Svidrigailov, who ends himself with a pistol-shot to his forehead while cheerfully explaining to a policeman that he is "Going to America!"

What literature can teach us is that our sociopolitical ideas of civil disobedience are too limited in imagination. Svidrigailov the nihilist refused to teach us anything but the wise comedian Falstaff is our Montaigne-like Socrates, and he provides us with the ultimate demand that animates all civil disobedience, everywhere: "Give me life."

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1984 (George Orwell)



"Of Man's Last Disobedience: Zamiatin's We and Orwell's 1984"

by Gorman Beauchamp, in Comparative Literature Studies (1973)

Introduction

Gorman Beauchamp argues that both Eugene Zamiatin's We and George Orwell's 1984 are dystopian novels in which individuals perform acts of civil disobedience. According to Beauchamp, these individuals mirror Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden. Beauchamp describes how literary characters in these novels rebel against a tyrannical, God-like state and, in doing so, fall from grace in dystopias that are grotesque metaphorical Edens. Beauchamp articulates how this rebellion mirrors the world as described by Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents, in which modern human beings, constricted and suppressed by the social order, find their source of discontent in civilization's utopian dreams.



Utopia can be defined as civilization-only-more-so: that is, as a systematic intensification of the restraints upon which all society rests. All civilization is predicated on order, regulation, some degree of regimentation—limitations that conflict with man's natural or instinctual drives and result in the phenomenon Freud called repression. Because repression is the inevitable cost exacted for civilization, man will, on an instinctual, subconscious level, always remain its enemy. Primitive man, Freud argues, was psychically "better off knowing no restraints on instinct. To counterbalance this, his prospects of enjoying . . . happiness for any length of time were very slender. Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities for happiness for a portion of security."

In the tradition of rationally planned utopias, from Plato's Republic to B. F. Skinner's Walden Two, the ideal has been to enlarge that "portion of security" by increasing the degree of civilization—to reorder society into a more harmonious, efficient (but more regimented, repressed) whole, in which each "unit" plays only his socially determined role. Lewis Mumford has likened the utopian model to the military one: "total control from above, absolute obedience from below," whether the "above" be occupied by philosopher kings or behavioral engineers. The price of utopia, he says, is total submission to a central authority, forced labor, lifetime specialization, and inflexible regimentation.3 A reader familiar with Freud's psychosocial theory, set out most fully in Civilization and Its Discontents, will recognize the utopian ideal as but a more systematic, rigorous application of civilization's existing prohibitions and restraints—will recognize, that is, that the dreamworld of chiliastic social planners can be realized only at further, and extreme, expense of individual, instinctual freedom.4

The claims of utopianism are essentially religious ones. In the vacuum created by the breakup of "the medieval synthesis," a Weltanschauung that subsumed all social activity in one embracing theocentric enterprise overseen by the Church, there grew up anew secularized religion that dominated men's lives: étatisme, or worship of the State. The State, as the Church's successor, became the object of what Paul Tillich has called "ultimate concern"—became, that is, the supreme value in men's lives to which all other values are subordinated. When a people makes the nation its ultimate concern, he wrote, "it demands that all other concerns, economic well-being, health and life, family, aesthetic and cognitive truth, justice and humanity, be sacrificed Everything is centered in the only god, the nation." Utopianism is

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the most extreme form of *étatisme*, claiming for the State a godlike efficacy. Like its predecessor in divinity, the State offers salvation, not in the next world, however, but in this; not through eschatology, but through utopianism.⁶ The State can effect the millennium, but only, of course, if its creatures obey its dictates. The new god is not less jealous than the old, and, like the old, aspires to omniscience and omnipotence, for only with such divine powers can it know of and punish the deviations of the sinner who would resist its enforced salvation. Thus even the most benevolently intended utopias are, by the very nature of their claims, totalitarian, demanding the ultimate concern of their subjects and asserting ultimate control of their destinies.⁷

The dream of social redemption through the State, dawning with such bright hopes in the decade of the French Revolution and growing ever brighter through the nineteenth century, became for many in the twentieth century a nightmare. The reasons are historical: the rise of messianic totalitarian regimes, whose utopianistic schemas resulted not in man's salvation but his damnation. The more humane among utopian thinkers would claim Nazism and Stalinist Communism to be aberrations, bastards rather than true heirs of Plato and More and Wells; but Mumford has argued—correctly, I believe—that these regimes arose logically from the assumptions of venerable utopian ideals:

Isolation, stratification, fixation, regimentation, standardization, militarism—one or more of these attributes enter into the conception of the utopian city, as expounded by the Greeks. And these same features, in open or disguised form, remain even in the supposedly more democratic utopias of the nineteenth century. . . . In the end, utopia merges into the dystopia of the twentieth century; and one suddenly realizes that the distance between the positive ideal and the negative one was never so great as the advocates or admirers of utopia had professed.⁸

Such a realization underlies the emergence of a distinctly twentieth-century literary subgenre, the dystopian novel, a *roman à thése* whose purpose, clearly ideological, is to assert the ultimate value of man's instinctual freedom over the putatively melioristic repression of utopian civilization.⁹

In two dystopian novels in particular—Eugene Zamiatin's We and George Orwell's 1984—the central conflict of the individual's rebellion against the State reenacts the Christian myth of man's first disobedience, Adam's against God. For in each novel there is a god figure, the embodiment of the State, who demands absolute adoration and obedience. And in each there is an Adam-like protagonist who, for love of an Eve, defies this god by asserting his instinctual freedom and thus "falls" from the utopianistic new Eden. This mythic conflict—Adam rebelling against the étatist god figure—is a fictional manifestation of the psychic conflict that Freud posited between the individual and society.

Freud shared, on the one hand, the belief of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor that man needed, and wanted, a dominant figure to rule and protect him. The "coercive characteristic of group formation" Freud traced back to "the fact of their origin from the primal horde. The leader of the group is still the dread primal father; the group still wishes to be governed by unrestricted force; it has an extreme passion for authority, ... a thirst for obedience." This political führer is "loved" in the same ambivalent way the personal father is "loved"; and, as Philip Rieff points out, "Freud's belief that politics is founded on the group's erotic relation with authority is made concrete by his claim that authority is always personified." Love for this power-as-person, then, constitutes "the most fundamental source of authority." In dystopian fiction, the embodiment of the state is always such a figure: Zamiatin's Well-Doer, Orwell's Big Brother, Huxley's World Controller, even Forster's Machine (in "The Machine Stops"), all of them incarnations of the Grand Inquisitor. And no clearer confirmation of the "displacement" of Eros which Freud saw underlying all authority can be found than in the erotic language Orwell's disobedient Adam uses to express his ultimate submission: "I love Big Brother." In the megacivilization of utopia, man's whole duty is to love the führer and serve him.

On the other hand, however, Freud himself had little faith in the efficacy of utopias. Dostoevsky's implacable dystopian, the Underground Man, accused utopians of wanting to convert society into a human anthill, but man's instincts—his desire to follow "his own foolish will"—would (he asserted) thwart all their efforts to regiment him. Freud, employing a similar insect metaphor, agreed: "It does not seem as though any influence could induce a man to change, his nature into a termite's. No doubt he will always defend his claim to individual

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liberty against the will of the group." His "urge to freedom" is forever pitted against the coercive unity of society, so that the conflict between the individual, "I," and the group or State, "We," appears from a Freudian vantage point irreconcilable.

"I do not want to be 'I," cried Bakunin a century ago; "I want to be 'We." His sentiment informs utopianism, historical as well as fictional, so that in the dream-turned-nightmare world of Koestler's Darkness at Noon, the I has become suspect, a "grammatical fiction." "The Party did not recognize its existence. The definition of the individual was: a multitude of one million divided by one million."13 Whatever encourages individualism, "I-ness," is the enemy, for it separates the one from the many, man from the godlike State. Prime among such estranging emotions is sexuality: in the new Edens, as in the old, the serpent that seduces man into disobedience is sexual, Adam's love for Eve. "Present-day civilization makes it plain," Freud points out in Civilization and Its Discontents, "that it does not like sexuality as a source of pleasure in its own right and is only prepared to tolerate it because there is so far no substitute for it as a means of propagating the human race."14 (In Brave New World, of course, a substitute has been found: the bottled baby.) Elsewhere, Freud explains the reason for this animus:

Sexual impulsions are unfavorable to the formation of groups.... The more important sexual love became for the ego, and the more it developed the characteristics of being in love, the more urgently it required to be limited to two people.... Two people coming together for the purpose of sexual satisfaction, in so far as they seek solitude, are making a demonstration against the herd instinct, the group feeling....

In the great artificial groups, the church and the army, there is no room for woman as the sexual object. The love relation between man and woman remains outside these organizations.... Even in a person who has in other respects become absorbed in a group, the directly sexual impulsions preserve a little of his individual activity. If they become too strong, they disintegrate every group formation.¹⁵

This conflict, then, that Freud postulated between the individual and civilization adumbrates the central struggle in the dystopian novel:

"the dreadful father," a secularized god demanding total allegiance and obedience to the utopian decalogue, challenged by the individual's instinctual will to freedom. And particularly with respect to the sexual nature of that challenge, the conflict recapitulates the myth of Adam's rebellion against God. With this background, let us turn to an examination of the dystopian versions of paradise lost, *We* and *1984*.

"Put me in a System and you negate me," Kierkegaard declared; "I am not just a mathematical symbol—I am." This affirmation underlies Zamiatin's We, a satirical depiction of a futuristic United State whose members have become, almost literally, mathematical symbols: they have no names and are known only by their numbers, indeed are called Numbers. Sealed off from the natural world in a glass-walled city, they function as interchangeable parts of one vast machine, regulated by a Table of Hours: "Every morning, with six-wheeled precision, at the same hour, at the same minute, we wake up, millions of us at once. At the very same hour, millions like one, we begin our work, and millions like one, we finish it. United in a single body with a million hands, at the very same second, designated by the Tables, we carry the spoons to our mouths; at the very same second we all go out to walk, go to the auditorium, to the halls for Taylor exercises, and then to bed."16 Zamiatin's imagination has projected the ideal of utopian organization to its logical extreme: "A magnificent celebration of the victory of all over one, of the sum over the individual" (p. 44).

In the United State, not surprisingly, freedom is equated with sin. Employing the Eden metaphor, one Number explains:

That legend referred to us of today, did it not? Yes. Only think of it for a moment. There were two in paradise and the choice was offered to them: happiness without freedom or freedom without happiness. No other choice.... They, fools that they were, chose freedom. Naturally, for centuries afterward they longed for fetters, for the fetters of yore.... For centuries! And only we found the way to regain happiness.... The ancient god and we, side by side at the same table! We helped god defeat the devil definitely and finally. It was he, the devil, who led people to transgression, to taste pernicious freedom—he, the cunning serpent. And we came along, planted a boot on his head, and ... squash! Down with him! Paradise again! We returned to the simple-mindedness of Adam and Eve. (p. 59)