

Some Notes on Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*

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Harold Bloom (born in 1930), Professor of the Humanities at Yale University, is known as one of the four Yale "Derridians", and has necessarily advanced down the path of American Deconstruction. His nature as a literary critic, and his critical activities, however, are apparently different from those of his Yale colleagues, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman and Hillis Miller (now de Man has been dead since 1983, and Miller has gone to the University of California). Though he worked with them, and even with Derrida in the symposium *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979), "he has frequently and explicitly dissociated himself from deconstructionist principles and methods."¹⁾ His critical approach resembles no one else's and may be unique: "Bloom is very much his own man, one of the most ideosyncratic critics writing today."²⁾

For Bloom, the understanding of a literary work means not "seeking to *understand* any single poem as an entity",³⁾ but seeking to understand it in the relation of other literary works. Major poets, he insists, should define the originality of the works against the works of their poetic predecessors. His remarkable knowledge of English and American poetry, especially Romantic and post Romantic poetry enables him to compare a 'belated poet' with a 'precursor' and to give the former a suitable location in the history of literature. In this sense, it is true that Bloom is influenced by Northrop Frye's archetype theory. But his rather aggressive attitude to and diachronic conception of the tradition make him oppose to Frye and T.S. Eliot who have the inclusive and synchronic conception of the tradition.

Bloom's critical works are the most daring original theorization of his interest in the tradition of poetry. Four books produced in succession, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975) and *Poetry and Repression* (1976) are elaborated in complex and esoteric terminology drawn from classical rhetoric and the Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah. The first of them, *The Anxiety of Influence*, though here he has not yet introduced his chief source of the new paradigm, Kabbalah, sufficient-

tly gives us Bloom's basic conception of the literary tradition and creative imagination which is taken over throughout other three critical works.

(1)

'Anxiety' in the title is a key word for Harold Bloom's literary criticism. Every poet, he says, is haunted by the thought that he should be influenced by the predecessors, and feels anxiety for his originality. This "melancholy of the creative mind's desperate insistence upon priority"⁴⁾ annoys poets as if it were a compulsion neurosis. It is said that Thomas Mann wrote in the diary: 'To be reminded that one is not alone in the world—always unpleasant.'

Bloom draws the idea of anxiety from Freud's definition of compulsion neuroses. Freud says that anxiety is a state of unpleasure accompanied by efferent or discharge phenomena among definite pathways. Human anxiety starts with anxiety of separation from the mother, which is an anxiety of exclusion, and soon joins itself to death anxiety, or the ego's fear of superego. This dread of superego, Freud defines, is the cause of a compulsion neurosis. The idea encourages Bloom "to explore the compulsive analogue of the melancholy of poets, or the anxiety of influence."⁵⁾

In defining anxiety, Freud speaks of "angst vor etwas" (anxiety of something) which is clearly a mode of expectation, like desire. Bloom is inspired by this remark and says :

We can say that anxiety and desire are the antinomies of the ephebe or beginning poet. The anxiety of influence is an anxiety in expectation of being flooded.⁶⁾

The young poet suffers from a compulsion neurosis of being always *flooded* by his preceding poet, fearing that "his word is not his own word only, and his Muse has whored with many before him."⁷⁾ This, Bloom believes, is the anxiety of influence from which every belated poet must undergo.

(2)

Bloom calls a poet who comes always belatedly, an *ephebe*, and his predecessor, a *precursor*. By using the analogy of Freud's "Family Romance", he explains their relationships, where the ephebe inevitably faces with his precursor and fiercely fights with him for the purpose of priority. His theme

is :

Battles between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites,
Laius and Oedipus at the crossroad.⁸⁾

The pattern of creating poetry by means of the energy for father-son battles is so essential to Bloom's theory that such a critic as Terry Eagleton concludes simply that "what Bloom does, in effect, is to rewrite literary history in terms of the Oedipus complex".⁹⁾ Bloom intends, however, to write a theory of poetry as a story of intra-poetic relationships where the ephebe is anxious about being inevitably influenced by the precursor, and desperately insists upon priority.

Belated poets do not equally respond to their predecessors's influence. Bloom classifies them, by their attitudes toward preceding poets, into 'strong poets' and 'weak poets'. Strong poets are "major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to death"¹⁰⁾; weak poets are "figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves. But nothing is got for nothing, and self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness."¹¹⁾ Oscar Wilde and Wallace Stevens, both being more or less influenced by Walter Pater, are greatly contrasting with each other in their attitudes to the precursor. Wilde says selfdeceptively, "(Pater) has escaped disciples",¹²⁾ while Stevens, even though he is a stronger heir of Pater than Wilde, says vehemently, "I know of no one who has been particularly important to me. My reality-imagination complex is entirely my own even though I see it in others."¹³⁾ Bloom calls the former a weak poet, and the latter a strong poet. In fact, Stevens is a typical, favorite strong poet who puts up a better fight with his precursors (Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Emerson and Whitman) throughout Bloom's book.

Bloom nominates Satan in *The Paradise Lost* as an archetype of a modern, strong poet. He thinks modern poetry begins with these two declarations of Satan: 'What I see and hear come not from myself' and 'In doing and suffering, I shall be happy, for even in suffering I shall be strong.' After the fall, refusing to submit to God who is his strong precursor, "Satan, organizing his chaos, imposing a discipline despite the visible darkness, calling his minions to emulate his refusal to mourn, becomes the hero as poet, finding what must suffice, while knowing that nothing can suffice."¹⁴⁾ This spasm of glorious self-destruction is the unwisdom which strong poets are often

condemned to. In answering why he calls Satan a modern poet, Bloom says :

Because he (Satan) shadows forth gigantically a trouble at the core of Milton and of Pope, a sorrow that purifies by isolation in Collins and Gray, in Smart and in Cowper, emerging fully to stand clear in Wordsworth, who is the exemplary Modern Poet, the poet proper.¹⁵⁾

(3)

When Bloom speaks of the influential relationship between the strong two poets, he refers to the poets after Milton. Milton, whose deadly vitality is seen in the state of Satan in him, is the first greatest precursor in the history of English and American poetry. The ephebe who comes after him, is, more or less, anxious about his influence, and either directly or indirectly must fight with this strongest precursor. Bloom thinks that before Milton, poets belonged to the "giant age before flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness."¹⁶⁾ Shakespeare is the biggest figure in this age, and is excluded from the arguement of the book. Anyway, he is too great to have any precursor.

Fearing to be flooded by the precursor and seeking to get rid of his strength, the belated poet must break off the continuity with him, or somehow, evade him. He is obliged to write "in a way which revises, displaces and recasts the precursor poem".¹⁷⁾ In this sense all poems are read as rewritings of other poems, and as 'misreading' or 'misprision' of them. Bloom asserts as follows :

Poetic Influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets, —always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, and act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.¹⁸⁾

'Creative correction' is a peculiar idea justifying misreading or 'perverse wilful revisionism,' and enables the poet to clear a space for his own creative

originality. The belated poet 'enlarges' his precursor by misreading and distorting him. He contrives psychological strategies to defend himself from this enlarged precursor, and to attain the possibility of new poetry. These strategies prove to be 'six revisionary ratios' which work in the relationship between the ephebe and the precursor.

1. *Clinamen* (Misprision, Misreading)

Bloom takes the word from Lecretius, "where it means a *swerve* of the atom so as to make change possible in the universe."¹⁹ An ephebe achieves the possibility of a new poem by swerving away (turning away) from his precursor. This means a 'corrective movement' in his poem. Bloom says, "the *clinamen*, or swerve is necessarily the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence, for what divides each poet from his Poetic Father is an instance of creative revisionism".²⁰ "The stronger the man, the larger his resentments, and the more brazen his *clinamen*."²¹

2. *Tessera* (Completion and Antithesis)

The word *tessera* is taken from the ancient mystery cults, "where it means a token of recognition, the fragment say of a small pot which with the other fragments would re-constitute the vessel."²² An ephebe, by his imagination, antithetically complete the 'truncated' precursor poem. This completion is also misprision. "*Tessera* or a comleting a link represents any later poet's attempt to persuade himself (and us) that the precursor's Word would be worn out if not redeemed as a newly fulfilled and enlarged Word of the ehpebe."²³

Bloom indicates that British poets usually *swerve*, while American poets *complete*. Wallace Stevens abounds in *tesserae* because his antithetical completion is the chief relation to his American Romantic precursors.

3. *Kenosis* (Discontinuity and Repetition)

Kenosis is a word taken from St. Paul, "where it means the humbling or emptying-out of Jesus by himself, when he accepts reduction, from divine to human status."²⁴ It is a kind of breaking-device similar to the defence mechanism of our psyches against the repetition compulsion.

An ephebe fears that what he writes is simply a repetition of the former poets and he wants to break off the continuity, because "discontinuity is freedom"²⁵ Most of what we call poetry is the quest for discontinuity, that

is, originality. To attain the possibility of new poetry, the belated poet "apparently empties himself of his own afflatus, his imaginative godhood."²⁶ It seems that he humbles himself by ceasing to be a poet, but this ebbing is "so performed in relation to a precursor's poem-of-ebbing that the precursor is emptied out also, and so the later poem of deflation is as absolute as it seems."²⁷ *Kenosis*, in this revisionary sense, "appears to be an act of self-negation, but tends to make the fathers pay for their sins, and perhaps for those of the sons also."²⁸ Being much more ambivalent than *clinamen* and *tessera*, *kenosis* invites poetry deep into the antithetical world.

4. *Daemonization* (A Movement towards a Personalized Counter-Sublime)

The term comes from Neo-Platonic usage, "where an intermediary being, neither divine nor human, enters into the adept to aid him."²⁹ Resisting the precursor's Sublime, the strong poet, having undergone *daemonization*, becomes Counter-Sublime. This means the precursor's relative weakness; "When the ephebe is daemonized, the precursor necessarily is humanized."³⁰ *The daemonic* in poets which makes the ephebe a strong poet "cannot be distinguished from the anxiety of influence, and this is, alas, a true identity and not similitude."³¹

5. *Askesis* (Purgation and Solipsism)

The term is, general as it is, particularly taken from the practice of pre-Socratic shamans like Empedocles. It means a movement of self-purgation for attaining a state of solitude. An ephebe undergoes a revisionary movement of 'curtailing'; "he yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor."³²

Bloom expounds *askesis* citing Freud's theory of sublimation, where Freud says that only sublimation can make one separate from his sexual past and to modify the instinctive impulse without destroying it. Because this sublimation of aggressive instinct is the essential process for writing and reading poetry, it almost identifies with the total process of poetic misprision. Poetic sublimation is *askesis*.

"Poetic *askesis* begins at the height of the Counter-Sublime, and compensates for the poet's involuntary shock at his own daemonic expansiveness."³³ Its process finally achieves "the formation of an imaginative equivalent of the superego, a fully developed *poetic will*"³⁴

6. *Apophrades* (The Return of the Dead)

The word is taken from "the Athenian dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead returned to reinhabit the houses in which they had lived."³⁵ The later poets keep returning from the dead and the decisive matter is *how* they return. If they return *intact*, the return impoverishes them. The strongest poets return with the achievement of "a style that captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors, so that the tyranny of time almost is overturned, and one can believe, for startled moments, that they are being *imitated by their ancestors*."³⁶

The idea that the precursor's poem seems to exist not as the presages of the advent of the strongest poet but as the work wholly indebted to the later poet's own achievements sounds extremely absurd. But this is the final step the later strong poets must attain.

These six revisionary ratios provide the belated poets and critics with the strategies to reach the possibility of a new poetry. *Clinamen* and *tessera* fight in order to revise or complete the dead poet, and *kenosis* and *daemonization* work to repress the memory of the dead, while *askesis* is "the contest proper, the match-to-the death with the dead."³⁷ Bloom believes that, with these strategies, the strong belated poets (Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Blake, Yeats, Emerson, Whitman, Stevens, etc) can put up a better fight.

Bloom draws many strange words and complex ways of thinking from Freud and Nietzsche as well as ancient philosophies and beliefs. Especially, Freud is his main source; Freud's defence mechanism has the similar function to Bloom's revisionary ratios in the relationship between the precursor and the ephebe. The mechanism of *kenosis* resembles the defense mechanism for repetition compulsion, while sublimation of aggressive sexual instinct is converted into poetic sublimation in *askesis*. Freud and Nietzsche, however, are to give way to Kabbalah, a Jewish mysticism. In Bloom's second book *The Map of Misreading*, the six ratios are enlarged by the introduction of Kabbalah, and in the third, *Kabbalah and Criticism*, Bloom enriches and completes his new paradigm by means of the fully Kabbalistic model.

Great as the influences of these sources, Bloom takes them into his world through revisions which make them peculiarly his own. We cannot call his strategies neither constructive nor deconstructive. They appear so much his own and ideosyncratic that not a few may agree with Frank Lentricchia who

says, "Bloom's revisionary ratios are merely six strange names for the six strategies of evasion which cannot succeed."³⁸⁾

(4)

Revisionism or antithetical criticism is the name given to Bloom's literary criticism. It stands on the idea that the poet can write only when he takes a revisionary and antithetical attitude to his precursor. Bloom explains that revisionism is "a re-aiming or a looking-over-again, leading to re-esteeming or a re-estimating,"³⁹⁾ and that "the revisionist strives to *see* again, so as to *esteem* and *estimate differently*, so as then to *aim* 'correctively'."⁴⁰⁾ In this sense, the possibility of both poetry and criticism is rather strictly limited within the relationship between the ephebe and his precursor, which also indicates Bloom as a literary historian.

Antithetical criticism must begin by denying both tautology (in which poem is and means itself) and reduction (in which poem means something that is not itself a poem), a denial best delivered by the assertion that the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but *another poem—a poem not itself*. And not a poem chosen with total arbitrariness but any central poem by an indubitable precursor, even if the ephebe *never read* that poem.⁴¹⁾

Bloom places criticism and critic on the same basis as that of poetry and poet : "As literary history lengthens, all poetry necessarily becomes verse-criticism, just as all criticism becomes prose-poetry."⁴²⁾ As the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but another poem, so the interpretation of a poem is necessarily the interpretation of what the poem interprets other poems. In short, criticism is just as much a form of poetry as poems are implicit literary criticism. Terry Eagleton suggests the inevitable danger involved in this conception, pointing out, "whether the critical reading 'succeeds' is in the end not at all a question of its truth-value but of the rhetorical force of the critic himself."⁴³⁾

(5)

The key word of Bloom's theory is *influence* which means there are no texts, but only a relationship *between* the texts. The relationship depends

upon a critical act, misreading, misprision. The word *between* somehow reminds us of the deconstructionist's reading of the text, but the concept of misprision makes the theory all Bloom's own.

Though *influence* refers to the relationship between the former great poets and the later poets, it never corresponds to T. S. Eliot's 'tradition' which has inherited Northrop Frye's 'Myth of Concern'. Though both Bloom and Eliot try to define the present in relation to the past, the difference of time between the former and the later poet is never effaced in Bloom, while it is included into the single, great 'tradition' in Eliot. Bloom denies Eliot's simultaneity as a fiction :

Northrop Frye...has Platonized the dialectics of tradition, its relation to fresh creation, into what he calls the Myth of Concern, which turns out to be a Low Church version of T.S. Eliot's Anglo-Catholic myth of Tradition and the Individual Talent ... Freedom, for Frye as for Eliot, is the change, however slight, that any genuine single consciousness brings about in the order of literature simply by joining the simultaneity of such order. I confess that I no longer understand this simultaneity, except as a fiction that Frye, like Eliot, passes upon himself.⁴⁴⁾

This fiction, for Bloom, is 'a noble idealization' as well as 'a lie against time', and any continuities which are 'badly' required during the sixties are also imaginative, because Bloom's criticism is involved in the interplay of repetition and discontinuity.

When he declares, "Let us give up the failed enterprise of seeking to *understand* any single poem as an entity in it self,"⁴⁵⁾ or "Few notions are more difficult to dispel than the 'commonsensical' one that a poetic text is self-contained,"⁴⁶⁾ Bloom is apparently against New Criticism :

We need to thrust aside utterly, once and for all, the critical absurdities of the Age of Eliot, before we can see again how complex the Romantics were in their passionate ironies, and see fully how overwhelmingly Stevens and Crane are their inheritors and continuators, as they are of Emerson and Whitman as well.⁴⁷⁾

Bloom's repeated attacks on his New Critical forbearers define his critical stance that is "an impassioned, defiant return to the Protestant Romantic 'tradition' from Spenser and Milton, Blake, Shelley and Yeats, a tradition ousted by the conservative Anglo-Catholic lineage (Donne, Herbert, Pope, Johnson)."⁴⁸ On the other hand, believing in creative imagination and trusting fully the 'will to expression' of the strong poet in the struggle for originality, Bloom as a Romantic individualist, is forced to make a difficult war against the deconstructionists with the sceptical, anti-humanist *ethos*.

Notes :

- 1) David Lodge ed. *Modern Criticism and Theory*, Longman, 1988, p. 240
- 2) *Ibid.*
- 3) Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, Oxford University Press, 1973, 1975, p. 43
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 13
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 58
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 57
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 61
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 11
- 9) Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory : An Introduction*, Basil Blackwell, 1983, p. 183
- 10) Bloom, *op. cit.*, p. 5
- 11) *Ibid.*
- 12) *Ibid.*, p. 6
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 7
- 14) *Ibid.*, p. 22
- 15) *Ibid.*, p. 20
- 16) *Ibid.*, p. 11
- 17) Eagleton, *op. cit.*
- 18) Bloom, *op. cit.*, p. 30
- 19) *Ibid.*, p. 14
- 20) *Ibid.*, p. 42
- 21) *Ibid.*, p. 43
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 14
- 23) *Ibid.*, p. 67
- 24) *Ibid.*, p. 14
- 25) *Ibid.*, p. 39
- 26) *Ibid.*, p. 14
- 27) *Ibid.*, p. 15
- 28) *Ibid.*, p. 91
- 29) *Ibid.*, p. 15
- 30) *Ibid.*, p. 100
- 31) *Ibid.*, p. 103
- 32) *Ibid.*, p. 15

- 33) *Ibid.*, p.120
- 34) *Ibid.*, p.119
- 35) *Ibid.*, p.15
- 36) *Ibid.*, p.141
- 37) *Ibid.*, p.122
- 38) Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*, The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.331
- 39) Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, Oxford University Press, 1975, 1980, p.4
- 40) *Ibid.*
- 41) Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.70
- 42) Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, p.3
- 43) Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p.185
- 44) Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, p.30
- 45) Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.43
- 46) Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*, Yale University Press, 1976, p.1
- 47) Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p.184
- 48) Harold Bloom, "The Central Man: Emerson, Whitman, Wallace Stevens", *Massachusetts Review* 7 (Winter 1966), p.37

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