

## HAROLD BLOOM THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE (1973)

Bloom, Harold. The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry. Oxford: OUP, 1973.

### "Introduction: a Meditation Upon Priority, and a Synopsis"

Using poetic 'strength' as a synonym for the poet's finding of a voice that is seemingly distinctive, Bloom contends that creativity, the act of writing, is tantamount to a Nietzschean will to power which consists in a deliberate misreading and *rewriting* of one's predecessors. Writing is an act designed to dethrone a strong predecessor similar to that which occurs between son and father, according to Freud, in the course of the castration complex which resolves the Oedipus complex of early infancy.

Here, Bloom offers a "theory of poetry by way of a description of poetic influence, or the story of intra-poetic relationships" (5). His aim is partly "corrective: to deidealise our accepted accounts of how one poet helps to form another" (5) and partly "corrective, . . . to try to provide a poetics that will foster a more adequate practical criticism" (5). His argument is that "[p]oetic history is . . . indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (5).

Bloom's focus is on "strong poets" (5), major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death. Weaker talents idealise; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves. But nothing is got for nothing, and self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness, for what strong maker desires the realisation that he has failed to create himself? (5)

Bloom quotes Oscar Wilde on this score:

'Influence is simply a transference of personality, a mode of giving away what is most precious to one's self, and its exercise produces a sense, and, it may be, a reality of loss. Every disciple takes away something from his master.' This is the anxiety of influencing. . . . (qtd. in Bloom, 6)

Bloom also quotes Wallace Stevens asserting his own originality:

While, of course, I come down from the past, the past is my own and not something marked Coleridge, Wordsworth, etc. 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. . . . I am not conscious of having been influenced by anybody and have purposely held off from reading highly mannered people like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything, even unconsciously. But there is a kind of critic who spends his time dissecting what he reads for echoes, imitations, influences, as if no one was ever simply himself but is always compounded of a lot of other people. (6-7)

Bloom concludes: "Every major aesthetic consciousness seems peculiarly more gifted at denying obligations as the hungry generations go treading one another down" (6).

The view that "poetic influence scarcely exists, except in furiously active pedants, is itself an illustration of one way in which poetic influence is a variety of melancholy or an anxiety-principle" (7). Poetic influence, however, "need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better" (7). The "profundities of poetic influence cannot be reduced to source-study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images" (7). Equating poetic influence with "poetic misprision" (7), Bloom contends that it is the "study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet" (7). He is of the

view that the "relations between poets" (8) are "akin to what Freud called the family romance, and as chapters in the history of modern revisionism, 'modern' meaning here post-Enlightenment" (8). Alluding to Walter Bate's The Burden of the Past and the English Poet, Bloom argues that the modern poet is the "inheritor of a melancholy engendered in the minds of the Enlightenment by its skepticism of its own double heritage of imaginative wealth, from the ancients and from the Renaissance masters" (8). Bloom says that his focus here is on "intra-poetic relationships as parallels of family romance" (8), albeit as a "deliberate revisionist of some of the Freudian emphases" (8).

Bloom reveals that his "prime influences" (8) upon the theory of influence presented here are Nietzsche and Freud. In the case of Nietzsche, the "prophet of the antithetical" (8), Bloom stresses that he is particularly influenced by his Genealogy of Morals, the "profoundest study available to me of the revisionary and ascetic strains in the aesthetic temperament" (8). Equally influential are "Freud's investigations of the mechanisms of defence and their ambivalent functionings" (8) which "provide the clearest analogues I have found for the revisionary ratios that govern intra-poetic relations" (8). However, Bloom rejects the

qualified Freudian optimism that happy substitution is possible, that a second chance can save us from the repetitive quest for our earliest attachments. Poets as poets cannot accept substitutions, and fight to the end to have their initial chance alone. (8)

Another influence is Vico, especially his view that "priority in divination is crucial for every strong poet, lest he dwindle merely into a latecomer" (8).

Freud's recognition of "sublimation" (9), which "involves the yielding-up of more primordial for more refined modes of pleasure, which is to exalt the second chance above the first" (9), allies him to the Plato and the Judaeo-Christian tradition. "Freud's poem" (9) is not "severe enough" (9), however, as to "equate emotional maturation with the discovery of acceptable substitutes" (9) is not the wisdom of the "strong poets" (9) for whom the "surrendered dream is not merely a phantasmagoria of endless gratification, but is the greatest of all human illusions, the vision of immortality" (9).

Every poet, Bloom argues, "begins (however 'unconsciously') by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do" (9). The "young citizen of poetry, or ephebe as Athens would have called him, is already the anti-natural man or antithetic man, and from his start as a poet he quests for an impossible object, as his precursor quested before him" (10). The history of English poetry is one of decline, he argues, in that the

great poets of the English Renaissance [e.g. Shakespeare, Donne, Milton] are not matched by their Enlightened descendants [e.g. Pope, Johnson], and the whole tradition of the post-Enlightenment, which is Romanticism, shows a further decline in its Modernist and post-Modernist heirs. . . . [P]oetry in our tradition, when it dies, will be self-slain, murdered by its own past strength. (10)

Bloom's "anguish" (10) is that Romanticism, "for all its glories, may have been a vast visionary tragedy, the self-baffled enterprise not of Prometheus but of blinded Oedipus" (10). The strong poets have followed Oedipus "by transforming his blindness towards their precursors into the revisionary insights of their own work" (10). Bloom identifies six such "revisionary movements" (10) by which "one poet deviates from another" (11).

Bloom points out that his focus is not on Shakespeare in this book partly because he "belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness" (11) and partly because he was a playwright and not a poet for the most part: as "poetry has become more subjective, the shadow cast by the

precursors has become more dominant" (11). Another reason was that Shakespeare's precursor was a lesser poet than himself, Marlowe. By contrast, Milton struggled (and was "malformed" [11] by) Spenser, while Coleridge was the ephebe of both Milton and, later, Wordsworth. This is Bloom's main concern here:

Battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads; only this is my subject here, though some of the fathers . . . are composite figures. That even the strongest poets are subject to influences not poetic is obvious even to me, but again my concern is only with *the poet in a poet*, or the aboriginal poetic self. (11)

All Victorian poetry, by Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Hopkins and Rossetti, for example, is nothing but a misinterpretation of Keats, Bloom argues. By the same token, Pound was caught up in a struggle with Browning in particular, Stevens in a "largely hidden civil war with the major poets of English and American Romanticism" (12).

This book is a "unified meditation on the melancholy of the creative mind's desperate insistence upon priority" (13). "To search for what you already are is the most benighted of quests, and the most fated" (13). At this point, Bloom offers a synopsis of the six "revisionary ratios" (14):

- *Clinamen*: "poetic misreading or misprision proper" (14). Borrowing the word from Lucretius, Bloom writes that a poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves. (14)
- *Tessera*: "completion and antithesis" (14). Bloom borrows this word from the "ancient mystery cults" (14) where it meant a token of recognition, the fragment say of a small pot which with the other fragments would re-constitute the vessel. A poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough. (14)
- *Kenosis*: a "breaking device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions" (14). Borrowing the word from St. Paul who used it to refer to the "humbling or emptying-out of Jesus by himself when he accepts reduction from divine to human status" (14), Bloom uses it to allude to a "movement towards discontinuity with the precursor" (14): the later poet, apparently emptying himself of his own afflatus, his imaginative godhood, seems to humble himself as though he were ceasing to be a poet, but this ebb is so performed in relation to a precursor's poem-of-ebbing that precursor is emptied out also. (14-15)
- *Daemonisation*: a "movement towards a personalised Counter-Sublime, in reaction to the precursor's Sublime" (15). Borrowing the term from the Neo-Platonists, Bloom argues that the later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent-poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor. He does this, in his poem, by so stationing its relation to the parent-poem as to

- generalise away the uniqueness of the earlier work. (15)

• *Askesis*: a “movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude” (15). Borrowing the word from the Pre-Socratic Empedocles, Bloom contends that the later poet undergoes a movement not of emptying (kenosis) but of curtailing; he yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor, and he does this in his poem by so stationing it in regard to the parent-poem as to make that poem undergo an *askesis* too; the precursor’s endowment is also truncated. (15)
- *Apophrades*: the “return of the dead” (15). Alluding to the Athenian belief that the dead would return to inhabit their former homes, Bloom contends that the later poet, in his own final phase, already burdened by an imaginative solitude that is almost a solipsism, holds his own poem so open again to the precursor’s work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet’s flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself in the revisionary ratios. But the poem is now *held* open to the precursor, where once it *was* open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem’s achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work. (15-16)

#### “Interchapter: a Manifesto for Antithetical Criticism”

Here, Bloom begins by suggesting that if to “imagine is to misinterpret, which makes all poems antithetical to their precursors, then to imagine after a poet is to learn his own metaphors for his acts of reading” (93), then, from this point of view, criticism “necessarily becomes antithetical also, a series of swerves after unique acts of creative misunderstanding” (93).

The first swerve is to “learn to read a great precursor poet as his greater descendants compelled themselves to read him” (93). The second is to “read the descendants as if we were their disciples, and so compel ourselves to learn where we must revise them if we are to be found by our own work and claimed by the living of our own lives” (93). Neither of these, he suggests, is “yet Antithetical criticism” (93). That begins, rather, “when we measure the first *clinamen* against the second” (93): “[f]inding just what the accent of deviation is, we proceed to apply it as corrective to the reading of the first but not the second poet or group of poets” (94). To perform antithetical criticism on the more recent poet is possible “only when they have found disciples not ourselves. But these can be critics, and not poets” (94).

Bloom defends his theory against the criticism “that we never read a poet as poet, but only read one poet in another poet, or even into another poet” (94). Bloom’s response is to

deny that there is, was or ever can be a poet as poet – to a reader. Just as we can never embrace (sexually or otherwise) a single person, but embrace the whole of her or his family romance, so we can never read a poet without reading the whole of his or her family romance as poet. The issue is

reduction and how best to avoid it. Rhetorical, Aristotelian, phenomenological, and structuralist criticisms all reduce, whether to images, ideas, given things, or phonemes. Moral and other blatant philosophical or psychological criticisms all reduce to rival conceptualisations. We reduce – if at all – to another poem. The meaning of a poem can only be another poem. This is not a tautology . . . since the two poems are not the same poem, any more than two lives can be the same life. (94)

True poetic history is the “story of how poets as poets have suffered other poets, just as the true biography is the story of how anyone suffered his own family” (94).

“Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem” (417). A poem is “not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety” (417). “Poet’s misinterpretations or poems” (94) are different only in degree from “critics’ misinterpretation or criticism” (94). “There are not interpretations but only misinterpretations, and so all criticism is prose poetry” (95). Just as a “poet must be found by the opening a precursor poet, so must the critic. The difference is that a critic has more parent. His precursors are poets and critics” (95). But this is true as well of poets, he says, whose forbears are also both poets and critics.

Poetry is the anxiety of influence, is misprision, is a disciplined perverseness.

Poetry is misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misalliance. Poetry (Romance) is Family Romance. Poetry is the enchantment of incest disciplined by resistance to that enchantment. Influence is influenza – an astral disease. If influence were health, who would write a poem? . . .

When we say that the meaning of a poem can only be another poem, we may mean a range of poems: The precursor poem or poems. The poem we write as our reading. A rival poem, son or grandson of the same precursor. A poem that never got written – that is – the poem that should have been written by the poet in question. A composite poem, made up of these in some combination. (95)

A poem is a “poet’s melancholy at his lack of priority” (96). The “failure to have begotten oneself is not the cause of the poem, for poems arise out of the illusion of freedom, out of a sense of priority being possible” (96). But the poem “unlike the mind in creation – is a made thing, and as such is an achieved anxiety” (96). Criticism, he asserts, is the “art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem” (96).

### Chapter 1: “Clinamen, or Poetic Misprision”

Poetic influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence . . . is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism. . . . (30)