REVISITING HAROLD BLOOM: READING AS TEXTUAL VIOLENCE

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Abstract

The article examines Harold Bloom's essay entitled "The Breaking of Form", which brings together in a nutshell the main concepts and principles of the theory of literary influence expounded in some of his previous writings, starting with the seminal 1973 volume, The Anxiety of Influence. *Bloom's criticism marks a clear break with earlier concepts of literary "influence" (most notably with T. S. Eliot's view of the relationship between "tradition" and "the individual talent", according to which the "ideal order" of existing literary monuments is modified in a peaceful and natural manner by the emergence of each "really new" work of art). The relationship between later and earlier "strong" poets, as described by Bloom, is essentially one marked by pathos and irrepressible agonistic impulses.*

Keywords: pathos, agon, evasion, strategies of lying, strategies of exclusion, poetic warfare

The Bloomian Concept of Literary "Influence"

Harold Bloom's criticism is centred on the complex, psycho-analysable relationship between strong poets and their illustrious predecessors. His theory of literary influence, developed and refined in such works as *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1976) , *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (1982), and *Poetics of Influence* (1988), presents that relationship as being first and foremost marked by "pathos", understood in the etymological sense, as "suffering" (<Greek *paschein*, "to suffer"). In other words, every strong poet suffers from an "anxiety of [literary] influence" grounded in a sense of his own "belatedness", or fear of having appeared on the literary scene at a time when the possibilities of literary expression have almost been exhausted by a great precursor. However, this agonising emotional state is not necessarily a negative one, as Bloom elsewhere remarks: although it may annihilate lesser talent, it can stimulate "canonical genius" by motivating strong poets to liberate themselves – through combat – from their

precursors' oppressive influence, overcome their epigonic fears and inhibitions, and give full rein to their own creativity. The Bloomian concept of literary "influence" marks a radical departure from both literary history's traditional emphasis on the study of sources, and T. S. Eliot's conception of the totally non-contentious relationship between tradition and originality, expressed in his authoritative 1912 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", in the following memorable terms: **"**The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (Eliot, 1920).

Poetic Form, Meaning, and the Sources of Poetic Powers

The essay "The Breaking of Form" opens with theoretical considerations on poetic form (considered as a trope, "a figurative substitution of the as-it-were 'outside' of a poem for what the poem is supposed to represent or be 'about'" (Bloom, 1999: 1), and meaning ("all that a poem can be about", or that part of a poem which is not trope), connected with "the skill or faculty of invention or discovery, the heuristic gift" of devising new "places", "themes", "topics", or "subjects". Along the lines of Kenneth Burke's notion of "the Individuation of Forms", Bloom associates invention with an "implicit presence of forms in subject-matter" (Bloom, 1999: 1), hence his insistence that poetic form can only be regarded as other than mere trope when it really becomes "a place of invention" (Bloom, 1999: 2). Bloom reiterates his long-standing concern with theory, demonstrated by his previous attempts to develop a theory of poetry in a series of books from *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), to *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (1976), and to *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (1977). By a "theory of poetry" he understands, like Curtius (Curtius, 1970), a theory of the nature and function of the poet and of poetry, and he is mainly interested in the sources of poetic powers. Within the context of his long elaborated theory of literary influence, Bloom locates those sources in "the powers of poems *already written*, or rather, *already read*" (Bloom, 1999: 3), thus shedding new light on the poets' own myth of the origin of their creativity (a myth bearing certain resemblances to Freud's psychoanalytical account of the child's myth of his origin, i.e., his fantasising about being a "changeling").

The idea of the later poem drawing its power from previous texts is not incompatible with the notion of poetic freedom, which, according to Bloom, should be understood as "freedom of meaning", or the freedom to affirm a meaning of

one's own. Like the child in Freud's "Family Romances" (based on the Oedipus complex), who imagines that he is not the biological offspring of his so-called "parents", the later poet likewise considers himself a "changeling", a free agent to the extent to which his very existence is marked by "disjunction", and the origin of his creative powers seems to be shrouded in mystery (which makes possible the "Gnostic reversal" (Bloom, 1999: 1), of the natural hierarchy between his [literary] parent and himself). The "new poet" struggles to win freedom from either a prior "dearth" (lack) or a prior "plenitude" of meaning, but in either case the necessary condition for the confrontation with the precursor to take place is that the antagonist be a redoubtable figure. It is, therefore, only between two strong poetic forces that the *agon* (<Gk. "conflict", "struggle", "contest") can take place, so that poetic sublimity may be achieved. *Agon* appears to be such an essential part of the creative process that Bloom wonders whether it would not be pertinent to conclude that all "good poems must be combative" (Bloom, 1999: 5), especially since history has so abundantly demonstrated that the poetic Sublime has always been coupled with "the agonistic spirit", and the greatest personalities have always been "fiercely competitive" in their creative endeavours. Bloom is definitely an admirer of strong poets who are able to engage in "poetic warfare" with their famous predecessors in order to "wrest" their freedom of meaning, as shown in the following encomium of strength: "What is weak is forgettable and will be forgotten. Only strength is memorable; only the capacity to wound gives a healing capacity the chance to endure and so to be heard" (Bloom, 1999: 5).

Reading as "Textual Violence": The Cabbalistic Model

The fact that the "combat" or "struggle" by which the strong poet wins his "freedom of meaning" takes the intellectual form of "a reading encounter" (Bloom, 1999: 5) consisting in a "strong", "alert" reading does not make it a less aggressive, or a more "polite" process. It is still marked by violence in so far as it is a misreading of a literary work based on a process of "troping" (in the etymological sense of "deviation" or "swerve" from the precursor's text) that is not quite up to the "standards of civility" (Bloom, 1999: 6).

Bloom admits that his own notion of good, agonistic reading is somewhat similar to Paul Valéry's concept of reading with a "personal goal" in mind, and calls into question the "pretty myth" of "innocent" reading, or the "mystique" of a sort of reading that would be both "disinterested" and "energetic", or both "detached" and "generous" (Bloom, 1999: 6). To him, the supreme models of de-idealising "creative reading" and "critical writing" are Gnosis and Kabbalah, both of which involve a measure of "violence" and "transgressiveness". Bloom's essay uses the powerful Cabbalistic metaphor of the shattering of the material vessels of this world by the strength of God's radiating energy to convey the idea that the only

way of conveying a new meaning of one's own, a meaning worthy of being imparted to others, is to "deviate", "break form" and "twist" lines: "There is no reading worthy of being communicated to another unless it deviates to break form, twists the lines to form a shelter, and so makes a meaning through that shattering of belated vessels" (Bloom, 1999: 22). A good reader, in his opinion, should try to emulate the "salutary act of textual violence" (Bloom, 1999: 6) performed by the Gnostic exegesis of Scripture, and illustrated by the writings of such scholars as Rabbi Isaac the Blind in the 13th century, or Gershom Scholem in the 20th century. From Isaac the Blind, the Provençal Kabbalist, Bloom derives the knowledge about the inexistence of Scripture understood as what today's criticism would call "Text Itself" – an intuition that he extends to all the other "lesser texts" that followed after the Torah. As Rabbi Isaac puts it, "the written Torah can take on corporeal form only through the power of the oral Torah" (Bloom, 1999: 7), which Scholem interprets, in his turn, as follows: "there is no written Torah here on earth" (apud Bloom, 1999: 7), since "everything that we perceive in the fixed forms of the Torah, written in ink on parchment, consists, in the last analysis, of interpretations or definitions of what is hidden. *There is only an oral Torah*: that is the esoteric meaning of these words, and the written Torah is a purely mystical concept…. There is no written Torah, free from the oral element that can be known or conceived of by creatures who are not prophets" (apud Bloom, 1999: 7-8). In Bloom's critical idiom, this translates as: the literary text has no "real presence" and no meaning apart from the critic's interpretive activity (Bloom, 1999: 8), or "there are no texts, but only interpretations" (Bloom, 1999: 7). Therefore, we can only "know" a text to the extent to which we "know" a reading of that text, but we can never know "*the Lycidas* by *the* Milton", simply because "*the* Milton, *the* Stevens, *the* Shelley, do not exist" (Bloom, 1999: 8). The text only exists for me due to my own or others' reading of it, and so, the only text available is "a strong reading", i.e., a "misreading" that turns out to be "the only lie against time that endures" (Bloom, 1999: 7), as every reading involves "bias, inclination, pre-judgment, swerve", in a word, the eternal "verbal agon for freedom" (Bloom, 1999: 9) that cannot avoid lying. Bloom indeed looks upon "freedom" and "lying" as the two indissociable characteristics of belated poetry, whose unity he calls "evasion" (understood as a process of "avoiding" or "escaping" fate – that is, "the necessity of dying" [Bloom, 1999: 9]).

"Strategies of Lying" and "Strategies of Exclusion"

Once he introduces lying into the equation, Bloom expounds his theory of the "darker relationships" existing between later and earlier poets and texts. The six "revisionary ratios" or relations of literary "sons" to their "fathers" (*clinamen, tessera, kenosis, daemonization, askesis, apophrades*) theorised in his previous volumes are now redefined not only as positions of freedom but also as "strategies

of lying" (Bloom, 1999: 10). Since, according to this theory of literary influence, evasion (i.e., freedom and lying) manifests itself linguistically as "trope", Bloom calls for "a larger vision of trope" (Bloom, 1999: 10) than the one offered by traditional rhetoric, in keeping with the suggestion made by Paul de Man in his 1974 review of *The Anxiety of Influence* – that of transposing the six ratios "back to the paradigmatic rhetorical structures in which they are rooted" (de Man, 1997: 275), and consequently replacing "a subject-centered vocabulary of intent and desire" by "a more linguistic terminology" (favoured by deconstruction). Trope is thus viewed by Bloom as the linguistic expression of "psychic defense", and the connection between the two appears to him as a key to the reading of poetry.

However, in order to explain the act of reading regarded as "aggression", Bloom resorts once more to the psychic model identified in his earlier volumes rather than to a linguistic model of the type suggested by de Man. He quotes Anna Freud's views (put forward in her study, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*) on the "defensive measures of the ego against the id", carried out "silently" and "invisibly" as forms of "repression" – where, in terms of his theory of literary influence, the "precursor" stands for the "id", whereas the belated poet (and, by extension, the "poetic self" in general) is the "ego". Identified as "strategies of exclusion" or "litanies of evasion" that represent "the norm, or the condition of belated strong poetry" (Bloom, 1999: 15), the defense mechanisms used by the poetic self against the idealised predecessor are shown to be at work even in passages of poetic "allusion"; as Bloom remarks, allusion is never an innocent and peaceful device but always speaks about "darker relationships" between poems, since, at its best and most authentic, it operates by exclusion: "A strong authentic allusion to another strong poem can be only by and in what the later poem *does not say,* by what it represses" (Bloom, 1999: 15).

It is indeed Bloom's belief that poetic change (as well as change in criticism), originality, value – and consequently, immortality, the dream of all poets, can only be the effect of an aggressive act (very similar to what Freud paradoxically calls "defense"), which is understandable if we consider the fact that poets are narcissistic natures, and can, as such, be wounded by the "realisation of belatedness", or the paralysing consciousness of having emerged on the literary scene too late, when the resources of literary expression have already been exhausted by their great precursors or masters. There are only two possibilities open to belated poets overwhelmed by their precursors' superiority: they can become "either rebellious or servile" (apud Bloom, 1999: 18), as noted by Hölderlin in a letter addressed to his illustrious precursor, Schiller, quoted by Bloom as an illustration of a revisionary ratio. The wounded strong poet will always struggle to break free from the oppressive, anxiety-generating influence of his precursor through "a psychic and linguistic cunning" (Bloom, 1999: 20) that

will spur his imagination. The revisionary ratio used by Hölderlin against Schiller is "kenosis, or repetition and discontinuity" (Bloom, 1999: 18) by which the "belated" poet resorts to a delusive rhetoric of pathos to feign weakness, or to apparently "empty himself of his poetic godhead" (Bloom, 1999: 18), while in effect he "undoes" and "isolates" Schiller, thus liberating himself from his precursor's "enslaving" influence. Here, as in the case of an earlier relationship (between Hieron of Syracuse and Pindar), the belated poet's narcissism appears as the very origin of the "lyric Sublime" (Bloom, 1999: 17).

The "Daunting" Task of Reading

Therefore, it is only by initially confronting another, previous poem that a poetic text can derive its own meaning and open up its own imaginative space. This means that a poem treats experience and emotion "as if they already were rival poems" (Bloom, 1999: 15). The multiple levels of "intertropicality" noticed by Bloom (i.e., poetic knowledge, understood as a knowledge by tropes; emotion experienced as trope; the further troping involved in the poetic expression of knowledge and emotion; and, finally, the troping operated by the strong reading of a poem) are enough to explain the difficulty (though not the impossibility) of any act of reading, and to justify the critic's use of such "critical tropes" as "misreading" and "misprision". In the light of Bloom's criticism (as exemplified by his interpretation of John Ashbery's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* as an effort to swerve away from both Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens), reading undoubtedly appears as a "daunting", almost heroic task (of restituting meaning) that, in spite of its avowed difficulty, "can and must be attempted" (Bloom, 1999: 16).

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