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What is Bloomian Poetics?

- Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2011. 357 p. [Price US\$ 32.50]. ISBN 978-0-300-16760-3.

What is a Bloomian reading of a literary text? Why does it matter? Why is it, for instance, that Bloom always begins his criticism of a literary text with the identification of a significant precursor poet or a predecessor text? These are some of the important questions on method that will come to a reader's mind when he begins to read Harold Bloom's books on literary criticism seriously. A Bloomian reading, as I go on to demonstrate later in this review, is mainly an expression of »literary love« (3–15) since Bloom has a habit of falling in love with poems and literary characters without worrying about the differences between reality and representation. While it is not uncommon for a Bloomian reading of a literary text to begin with the identification of a relevant precursor poet or predecessor text; a preoccupation with what came before is not synonymous with a Bloomian reading as such. The identification of a precursor poet or a predecessor text is only a methodological means to an end rather than an end in itself. The identification of what came before is a necessary condition, but it is not a sufficient condition to attempt a Bloomian reading of a literary text. There is a good reason for this: literary influence, or the anxiety of influence, for Harold Bloom, is not always a conscious literary transaction between poets of different generations who decide to be influenced, or not to be influenced by a predecessor; but, more often than not, an unconscious relationship between poems or literary texts that the participating poets (i.e. the predecessor and the ephebe) may not be fully conscious of. Literary critics however talk about literary transactions as though they were about conscious literary relationships between poets or writers that are modelled on who-learnt-what-from-whom, when, and why. This is because the structure of language forces us to personify these dynamics as though the ephebe is talking to his predecessors, or misreading them deliberately, in order to create space for his own work.

The literary convention of poets talking about their predecessors then is a way of capturing certain autonomous textual processes that they may not be fully conscious of, but which a literary critic – informed by the theory of influence – can reconstruct for readers through the invocation of Bloom's six revisionary ratios *après coup* in the act of reading. This is however not to say that Bloom recommends his six revisionary ratios to all readers – or that invoking these six revisionary ratios to situate a text is the only thing that a literary critic can do when he writes about a poet since the critic must demonstrate some love for the text that he is writing about rather than treat it like a mere scientific specimen. The Bloomian revisionary ratios, like the identification of the relevant predecessor, constitute a technical vocabulary that is specific to Bloom's critical idiolect; it may or not be useful for all readers who attempt to do literary criticism if they don't experience the passion that Bloom does. It is also a matter of transferential affinity to the Bloomian persona of the solitary reader that will help readers decide whether or not they will deploy these six revisionary ratios when they read and write about poems. I do not attempt to situate Bloom within a particular school of thought, or school of literary criticism in this book review, because that is precisely what Bloom has himself dedicated his career to not doing. The main grouse that Bloom has had against literary forms of deconstruction is the fact that it becomes a predictable form of critical discourse. So, whether a literary critic deconstructs a text, or a text deconstructs itself, and a literary critic merely notices that it does so; it becomes,

or can be construed as becoming, a form of endless critical repetition without adequate passion to animate the reader. The practice of solitary reading, as Bloom understands it, is not merely to tell somebody else how they must read a literary text, but to also embody an ethic of why they should bother to read at all in this day and age. It would therefore be incorrect to pretend that the usefulness of such an ethic can be lexicalized as a disembodied approach to literary criticism or as an academic discourse. Or, to put it more directly, Bloom is not trying to be a systematic thinker like a semiotician though he returns to his favorite themes, like the *agon* and the anxiety of influence, in book after book.

Another way of putting this idea across is to say that while the Bloomian ratios can be invoked within a semiotic approach to literary criticism, that is clearly not Bloom's authorial intention. Bloom's approach to reading and writing is to resist precisely those forms of lexical appropriation that can be construed as ›reductive‹ within semiotics and attempt something that is more akin to a Bloomian poetics. There is a greater sense of transferential embodiment, for Bloom, within a model of poetics as opposed to a model of semiotics. The attempt to situate Bloom as though he is just another literary theorist in a long list of theorists is based on a fundamental misunderstanding: it conflates the epistemological difference between semiotics and poetics in a theory of poetry. It would also violate the spirit of Bloomian poetics insofar as Bloom describes »literature as a way of life« in the subtitle of this book. The semiotic approach is more appropriate to the lexicalization of forms of representation that have a clearly articulated method; but it will not be able to capture the spirit of the Bloomian enterprise if it is defined as a way of life and as an expression of literary love. That is why it is important to read Bloom within the tradition of transferential genealogies of reading and writing rather than in terms of whatever the latest fads in literary criticism might be. This is a singular honor that is usually attached to certain literary critics of stature like Erich Auerbach, Ernst Curtius, George Steiner, and Harold Bloom. We do not situate them as literary critics; instead we find that they situate us as readers, or as students of literature, in a fundamental state of belatedness to their example. This is however an ethic that Bloom applies to his own reading practice when he reads Richard Burton on melancholia. Not surprisingly, then, Bloom even begins with an invocation of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* as the relevant predecessor text since the object of influence here is the literary melancholia of the solitary reader and solitary writer. Bloom's intention is to identify the role that literary melancholia plays as a form of literary influence. I must however hasten to add that while Bloom identifies Burton as an important predecessor, the goal of this book is not to produce a reading of Burton *per se*. It is of course worth asking why Bloom doesn't actually begin this book with a reading of Burton's meditations on melancholy; Bloom on Burton is the *unrealized* element of this book; its textual unconscious, as Lacanian psychoanalysts might put it. Is that because Bloom refuses to take Burton's admonition on the solitary life seriously? Is it not Bloom's wager *contra* Burton to take the ethic of the solitary life forward despite the dangers involved in doing so? Taking Burton too seriously then would lead to a performative contradiction; but, nonetheless, Burton's melancholia symbolizes Bloom's existential predicament of being a solitary reader in a way that is compelling enough to serve as a predecessor for readers who come in his wake.

What is the aim of literary criticism in the Bloomian theory of reading? This is where Bloom will take his readers by surprise. Bloom does not read to deconstruct or reconstruct as literary theorists usually do, but to express his notion of literary love. In Bloom's case, it would not be inappropriate to invoke the notion of reading as necessarily a form of re-reading since he reads a section of the literary canon year after year, and has taught literature at Yale for six decades. Bloom does not define literary criticism as a means to anything immediate, but rather as a secular pursuit of wisdom: it is, quite simply, a way of life, as the subtitle puts it, that prizes individuality of thought and expression. It is an ode to the solitary reader. This is a theme that Bloom returns to repeatedly; it is one of the main *motifs* in his ethic of reading. This ethic is

stated as an individual norm and Bloom does not consider whether it will be widely shared in the future. And, again, Bloom does not consider what, if anything, literary critics can do to widen the ambit of serious readership in the future. What he does instead is to redefine solitary reading as the pursuit of wisdom in a world where there is a huge preoccupation with data and information. What is at stake in these solitary pursuits is the very definition of the term literary, which is just another term for the canonical lists of texts that will endure the test of time. These literary relationships take the form of an *agon* (i.e. conflict) between the ephebe and the predecessor. These literary dynamics are not only constitutive of the structure of the literary text, but help us to understand a large number of contemporary discourses since what is at stake is the problem of creative misreading through which a strong writer tries to clear space for his own work.

There are four parts to this book. The first part sets out Bloom's point of view as a literary critic. The main preoccupation in this part is with the themes of literary love, the quest for strangeness in the reading and writing of literary texts, and on the dynamics of literary influence. The notion of love is important for Bloom since he is critical of the notion of affective fallacy, which forbids a literary critic from factoring in his emotions while interpreting a literary text. One of the fall-outs of this fallacy is that it left no room for the sublime in literary interpretation. Bloom's preoccupation with Longinus is related to the prefiguration of the Freudian problem of the uncanny in the notion of the sublime; which, incidentally, is not reducible to the beautiful. In addition to Longinus's take on the sublime, another crucial predecessor for Bloom's theory of poetry is the Roman poet Lucretius; whose notion of the swerve in his Epicurean theory of atomic behavior has proved to be of great importance in both poetry and psychoanalysis, since it has implications for not only a theory of free will but also for theories of the subject. The swerve is that which serves to limit the scope of physical determinism; and, by implication, psychic determinism, within theories of subjectivity. So, when atoms fall, they don't fall mechanically (making it easy to calculate their trajectories) but rather as probabilities. What is at stake here is the difference between a mechanical trajectory and the path of a subjective probability. When the poet swerves, it is hard to say what will happen. The new path that emerges is the object then of poetic consciousness. If every fall were mechanical, there would be no possibility of either poetic consciousness or poetic representation in the poet's mind. When more than one poet takes up the challenge of representing the fall, the latter-day poet will have to wrestle with a notion of strangeness to fall in a way that is significantly different from his predecessor. It is not enough to merely swerve, but to swerve in a way that is significantly better than the predecessor. The goal of the literary *agon* is to make the predecessor appear as not having swerved adequately enough compared to the sense of daring with which the ephebe swerves in his turn. The ephebe thereby fulfills the unrealized potential in his predecessor. This is quite simply the mechanism that constitutes the topology of literary influence. While Bloom states this model to be of specific interest to the history of post-Miltonic poetry, it is not difficult to understand that a number of additional discourses can also come under its scope.

In poetry, then, the main preoccupation is with the notion of the fall from an earlier state of Grace as the necessary prelude to a theory of eschatology. Both the thematic concerns and the functional goals of poetry, its basic Aristotelian *telos*, are related to either the theological or secular representations of this eschatology. The fall is the narrative mechanism that gets the text started in the Judeo-Christian tradition and revolves around the myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. However, what is really at stake in this myth is not the fall from a higher to a lower strata of society, or matter as such, but the trajectory of the swerve in which the poet falls, or represents his protagonist as falling (as John Milton knew well in his depiction of Satan in *Paradise Lost*). Satan repeats the fall of Adam, but swerves in a way that is much more interesting for a poet who is observing or constructing the trajectory. It is again the Lucretian swerve that is in contention in the Freudian notion of the death instinct. The Freudian analogue

of the fall is the desire of the organism to eventually return to an inorganic state of matter – to once again return to the basic elements of the physical world as an entropic dissolution; what is true for the organism is true for the poet as well. Since most of the poets whom Bloom finds engaging in both the Anglo-American and European traditions are Lucretian by intention and temperament, it is important for him to assert strongly the relationship between strangeness and the anxiety of influence. Strangeness becomes a prerequisite in the literary tradition for the expansion or the Bloomian augmentation of consciousness that only great writers can achieve. In the absence of the literary trope of strangeness, all representations of the fall would be identical, and there would be no means available to determine which, if any, are worthy of the sublime; that is why, as Bloom points out, strangeness »is *the* canonical quality, the mark of sublime literature« (19).

This is an argument that is not only specific to this book, but one which Bloom had taken up earlier: the aesthetic function of poetry and the literary mechanisms needed to facilitate it in the form of textual constructs are interlinked in his theory of reading. We must however not conflate Longinus with Lucretius: the former is preoccupied with the notion of the sublime as a form of lifting to a higher order and the latter with the swerve as a form of falling to a lower order. Longinus is preoccupied with the internal world of language; Lucretius is trying to describe the external world of atomic physics. These poets are important for Bloom because they constitute the basic typology of literary possibilities: the ephebe's basic complaint is precisely that these predecessors not only represent, but exhaust the typology of both that which is higher and that which is lower; hence the anxiety of influence is the operative trope within the locus of belatedness in which the latter-day poets find themselves. These poets do not represent archaic theories: they are probably those who really understand what it means to embody a theory of literature within a genealogy of the Lucretian swerve. Latter-day theories of literature suffer precisely insofar as they are not able to improve adequately upon these predecessors. To term these theories archaic is to misunderstand the function of the predecessor text in Bloomian poetics. For Bloom, what current literary theory does is to merely annotate the typological possibilities inherent in the predecessors who really matter without necessarily improving upon their work. So, for Bloom, the Lucretian swerve is not just another trope of literary figuration that has outlived its usefulness; it is, on the contrary, the very prototype of the fall in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It becomes prototypical not only because it is featured in Milton and the ancient poets, but also because the prototypical rendition of the swerve in the atomic physics of Lucretius is articulated as a poem, a series of tropes, in an era when there was no formal distinction in the history of ideas between a poet and a physicist.

The second part of the book is an attempt to up the *ante* of the swerve in the history of poetry by moving backwards from John Milton to William Shakespeare as »the« locus of the influential predecessor in the history of early modern literature. This is something that Bloom did not have the time to do earlier when he first broached the topic of the anxiety of influence. Bloom now sets out to explain why Shakespeare is an important predecessor in as many as five to six chapters of this book. The themes that he touches upon include the sheer proliferation of major and minor characters in Shakespeare (which, incidentally, is so realistic in its depiction that it spawned the character is destiny school of literary analysis); rivalries between Shakespeare and his own lead characters (like Lear, Prospero, and Hamlet despite the fact that they don't belong to the same ontological realm), in terms of their unusual ability to augment our consciousness as readers; and, finally, in articulating the modes of subjective possession in the sonnets. Bloom doesn't believe that it is possible to read or reread Shakespeare in a way that will completely subsume the ontological residues of the poet's persona in the sonnets or elsewhere even if we don't know who Shakespeare really was as a figure in empirical history. It is not Shakespeare's readers who analyze these phenomena objectively: what we find instead is that their augmented consciousness is coeval with the forms of subjectivity thrown up by the Shakespearean text in

acts of literary interpretation. That is why Bloom is fond of pointing out that what is required is not another Freudian reading of Shakespeare, but rather a Shakespearean reading of Freud as a theoretical corrective in order to ensure that there is greater methodological reciprocity between psychoanalysis and literature in literary criticism.

The third source of influence on Bloomian poetics after Longinus and Lucretius is Epicurus. Before setting out why Bloom is interested in Epicurus, it is important to differentiate between Longinus and Kant on the sublime. Occasional readers of Bloom may not realize his preoccupation with ancient poetics and may situate him incorrectly with better known Kantian themes in English and American romantic poetry. The Greek term that is associated with Longinus on the sublime is *ekstasis*: it represents a literary mode of transporting the reader to a higher level of consciousness through transcendental forms of literary invocation. The Kantian sublime however pertains to the external world. Bloom encounters Epicurus through a text by Walter Pater that is entitled *Marius the Epicurean*. I will develop the relationship between Lucretius and Epicurus in the next section as a way of leading into Bloom's readings of American literature, but suffice it to note at this juncture that the Lucretian model of the swerve is derived from the atomic theories of Epicurus; the ancient Bloomian triumvirate then is Longinus, Lucretius, and Epicurus. To make sense of the third and fourth parts of this book, we must understand why Epicurus is so important for Bloom. The third part explores the »skeptical sublime« (131–206), while the fourth part is a collection of readings of mainly American poets (and one English poet D.H. Lawrence) who take further the Lucretian swerve in an Epicurean direction. Unlike the texts in the first two parts, the poets included in the last two parts are not as fully canonized on both sides of the Atlantic. It is therefore a lot more difficult to make sense of them as working-through anxieties of Epicurean influence; especially if readers don't differentiate rigorously between Longinus, Lucretius, and Epicurus or fail to appreciate the fact that the atomic theory of the ancients can provide an important theoretical analogue for poets who are our near contemporaries. A note on the Epicurean element, the Epicurean swerve, might help readers through the more difficult parts of this book. The Epicurean critic, Bloom observes, works mainly with three modes; they are sensations, perceptions, and feelings; this is an aesthetic that he associates most powerfully with Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde in the Victorian era. The main Epicurean intervention in a theory of the Lucretian swerve is to ensure that there is room for free will in a theory of the subject. Neither physical determinism nor psychic determinism is what we think it to be. The swerve may be only random and slight, but everything in the inner world and outer world depends on it. What did Epicurus want? Bloom points out that he wanted »absolute non-determination and ethical choice« – hence the unwilling swerve. Epicurean freedom then is a form of »sublime indifference« that can be termed *ataraxia*; it renders the subject »immune from anxieties and irrational fears«, when it considers its own eventual dissolution into nothingness (142).

What the fourth part of the book does is to place the poet himself in the locus of the Lucretian subject. It then asks a more difficult question (given the Bloomian contention that a poem is a form of achieved anxiety): »Can you be a Lucretian poet without being an Epicurean?« (143). Another way of putting this question is to ask: Can the fall that constitutes the Lucretian swerve be secular in its trajectory? Or, will it seek recourse to some form of religious consolation? The Bloomian readings in the third and fourth part of the book wrestle mainly with existential questions like this. Many readers, including Bloom himself, might answer no to the questions given above; but this is possible in some exemplary cases. Bloom himself cites Percy Shelley, Walt Whitman, and Wallace Stevens as the best instances of the skeptical sublime that will not seek recourse to forms of religious consolation in the history of poetry. While there is not sufficient space to summarize all the Bloomian readings on the Epicurean inflection of the Lucretian swerve in this review, I conclude by asking what, if any, was the achieved anxiety that Lucretius himself experienced in relation to Epicurus? Are we Lucretian readers precisely

because Lucretius himself did not experience an anxiety of influence in his transference to Epicurus? Or was it rather the case that Lucretius could work-through the need to hold fast to the topological structure of the swerve without expecting it to be anything more than a tilt in its trajectory? The need for religious consolation itself can then be understood (as opposed to literature as a way of life) as the inability of the poet to manage his own existential expectations or represent them as adequate figures in a poem. This is, however, not to say that the poet is necessarily conscious of what he is doing, or can necessarily explain his aesthetic rationale, to a literary theorist when he decides that religious consolation is more important than exploring the topology of the swerve as an aesthetic end in itself. Most of these processes are however unconscious transactions between poets; they are forms of figurations that mediate their transference to a precursor poet or a predecessor text. What Bloomian poetics does then is to set out a formal theory of revisionary ratios that will help readers to make sense of the formations of the poet's unconscious within a theory of poetry. This book will be of great interest to those working on the history of literature, theories of poetics, and for those literary theorists who want to understand the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. It is based on the fundamental assumption that the doctrines of Longinus, Epicurus, and Lucretius cannot be reduced to a mere collection of ideas that we can agree or disagree with. They constitute fundamental tendencies within not only the history of ancient atomism; but, more importantly, for poets, the very history of figuration. The Lucretian swerve embodies then, to conclude, the moment of epistemological continuity between the topological structure of the swerve and its tropological representation in the history of Bloomian poetics.

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