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Bloomian Stride

No other American critic since Emerson — not Edmund Wilson or Alfred Kazin, not Elizabeth Hardwick or Irving Howe — has done more than Harold Bloom to make literary comment as artful, as creative, as downright *dynamic*, as the literature it aims to assess. Personal, passionate, religiously devoted: Bloom has been dazzling us for over five decades now, and not just with his clamant declarations, Falstaffian personality, and unstoppable erudition, but with his steadfast resistance to being cubicled, with his Gatsbian — his uniquely *American* — propensity for reinventing himself. Like his hero Walt Whitman, Bloom contains multitudes. "A poem is spark and act," he has written, "or else we need not read it a second time. Criticism is spark and act, or else we need not read it at all." Now in his eighty-first year, our great sage has much spark left in him. His two newest books — *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* and *The Shadow of a Great Rock: A Literary Appreciation of the King James Bible* — have arrived with an urgency and sense of legacy stronger than almost anywhere else in his work.

Bloom calls *The Anatomy of Influence* his "virtual swan song," his "final reflection upon the influence process." It has the distinction of combining manifold traits from each of Bloom's three critical phases, but it is ultimately a return to serious criticism and close-reading after a string of grandfatherly titles that attempted to jumpstart the common reader's interest in canonical literature. Not a chapter goes by in which Bloom does not remind us (and himself) of his old age, as if constant admission of that omnivorous fact can ward off its potency,

deter Grim a little while more. "This book primarily is an appreciation," he writes, "on a scale I will not again attempt."

Walter Pater, Dr. Johnson, William Hazlitt, and Oscar Wilde are never far from Bloom's critical scheme of appreciation, of aesthetic enjoyment; they have been all along chanting beside Bloom's thirty-odd books as if an approving chorus. Paterian appreciation especially is the chief component to Bloom's updated creed, one he began in his mammoth *Genius* (2002). Pater preached a personal criticism that attempts to understand the nuances of how literature affects its reader, an effect made possible by beauty. "To practice criticism," Bloom believes, "is to think poetically about poetic thinking." That is: to think beautifully about beauty. He quotes Longinus: "Beautiful words are in very truth the peculiar light of thought."

Bloom's mantra in *The Anatomy of Influence* is "Read, reread, describe, evaluate, appreciate: that is the art of literary criticism for the present time"—no doubt an allusion to Matthew Arnold's influential 1865 essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." Sleepy critics keep calling Bloom's exaltation of literature "Arnoldian," but Bloom has never had any regard for Arnold as poet or literary sage and does not share Arnold's idealizing of literature as a foundation for values. Nor would he agree with I. A. Richards's contention in *Science and Poetry* (1926) that "poetry is capable of saving us." For Bloom, literature's aesthetic beauty offers pleasure and the possibility of self-knowledge, not a blueprint for collective salvation. Don't look to literature to reinforce your ethical architecture because "you will not become a better or more moral citizen by reading Emerson." You will, however, strengthen the necessary dialogue with yourself, learn how to *be* yourself. Why is the aesthetic essential? Because for Bloom, "we live by and in moments raised in quality by aesthetic apprehension." A personal criticism of aesthetic appraisal was denigrated by New Critics and poststructuralists, and it still gets smeared in certain stuffy sets. But don't let anyone sell you on the barbarism that literary analysis has no business with beauty or with how literature impacts individual lives. What good is it otherwise?

For Pater as for Johnson, Bloom writes, "literature was not merely an object of study but a way of life." Hence *Anatomy*'s pragmatic, rallying subtitle, and this declaration at the start: "Literary criticism, as I attempt to practice it, is in the first place *literary*, which is to say

personal and passionate." At its most effective and enduring, literary criticism becomes "a kind of wisdom literature, and so a meditation upon life." He might disapprove of the pairing, but Bloom's belief in the personal, revelatory, spiritual strength of reading is partly an Augustinian design. In *Confessions*, on the verge of what we would dub a nervous breakdown, Augustine hears a divine voice saying (in Chadwick's translation), "Pick up and read, pick up and read." This is precisely the message Bloom has been fog-horning across the nation since the mid-1980s, when he swerved from obscurantist theorizing about influence anxiety and cast himself anew by embracing a more accessible system of literary criticism, one kinder to the common reader that Samuel Johnson and Virginia Woolf had imagined. This is the Bloom we have today, the one best known by readers. The first book he wrote in this new mode of criticism, *Ruin the Sacred Truths* (1989), about religious texts and poetry, read like he had thrown open the window in a packed classroom.

With such populist compendiums as *The Western Canon* (1994), *How to Read and Why* (2000), and *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (2004), Bloom might have fashioned himself into our reluctant Saint Nick of Literature, but he began his career in the late 1950s as a champion of Romanticism. In *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959), *The Visionary Company* (1961), and *Blake's Apocalypse* (1963), Bloom—pulling up behind Geoffrey Hartman, Northrop Frye, and his one-time teacher M. H. Abrams—helped resurrect the English Romantic poets from the boneyard of irrelevance T. S. Eliot and his New Critic cronies had buried them in. The New Critics considered Keats, Byron, and Shelley (especially Shelley) mere drunken satyrs grooving to the melodies of Mammon. Bloom, however, accepted the Romantic poets for what they are: by *visionary* he means they reached for the ecstatic and sublime, a Hellenic or *daimonic* spirituality. Bloom was stunned by the vitality of this questing clan who welcome home the gods and kneel at the altar of imagination, who make religion of their art. His dedication to a life of reading might have begun when as a child he discovered Hart Crane at the Bronx Library, but it was the English Romantics who allowed Harold Bloom his mission, his own specific vision of what literature can achieve.

By the time Bloom arrived at Yale in 1955, New Criticism had

devolved into a cloistered pedagogy. The novel method of apprehending literature that rose around him came to be known as the Yale School. Bloom's colleagues Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Paul de Man had caught the blister of Deconstruction from Jacques Derrida, but Bloom was free of it and outright scornful of the French contagion that sought to theorize a text straight into oblivion. "Linguistic nihilism," he called it. As Bloom saw them, the Deconstructionists had no authentic love of literature, only barbed theories to hang books on. The much-needed shaking up of New Criticism indeed happened under Deconstruction, except that it shook all good sense from the act of reading. Bloom had other ideas. Among them was a five-hundred-page study titled *Yeats* (1970), a tome of dizzying, obsessive concentration in which he accuses Yeats of failing as a poet after he abandoned Shelley's influence. Bloom might have been infuriated by how Eliotic close-reading had infected the academy for so long, but as a close-reader himself he had Eliot beat by miles.[1] *Anatomy* is Bloom's reminder that, although some have come to view him as a populist bloviator, he began as, and still is, the best reader on the planet of poems.

Bloom's central concern in *Anatomy* is one he took up briefly in *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (2003): Valéry's notion of self-influence, "the influence of a mind on itself and of a work on its author." Bloom defines Valérian self-influence not as "self-reflection or self-reference," but rather as "a sublime form of self-possession" (Shelley's sublime has been an integral piece of Bloom's strategy since 1959). Influence is no longer the warfare it once was: "In this, my final statement on the subject, I define influence simply as *literary love, tempered by defense.*" He proclaims that "the overwhelming presence of love is vital to understanding how great literature works"—a credo that should be posted in every classroom across the land. The two towering figures of love throughout this study are of course Shakespeare and Whitman—"the worlds they made made us"—to whom Bloom has been returning again and again across five decades of our most pressing literary opinion. His other beloveds, Shelley and Milton, Dr. Johnson and Emerson, Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane, play prominent roles here as well. His memo to those lingering New Critics, who hang on like the Amish, and the robust New Cynics everywhere in the academy who would renounce the beauty of his beloveds: "We cannot

understand literature, *great* literature, if we deny authentic literary love."

This talk of love might sound a bit odd to those who have willfully misunderstood Bloom as an unnecessary apologist for the fisticuffs between poets, for how one text wields its influence upon another. Bloom's interest in poetic influence had been evident since early on, but when *The Anxiety of Influence* appeared in 1973, literary people didn't quite know what to do about it, and they still mostly don't. It marked the beginning of his first metamorphosis: Bloom the resuscitator of Romanticism was now Bloom the impenetrable theorist of influence and agon. Ask English majors, pedestrian book reviewers, or anointed scholars what characterizes the anxiety of influence and they're likely to say a Freudian/Oedipal contest between a poet and his precursor. You will hear this definition despite Bloom's admonishment, again and again, that his theory is not Freudian (i.e. psychoanalytical, sexual, Oedipal). This might be baffling for some because Freud is everywhere in the four books that constitute the full articulation of Bloom's theory.[2] Bloom intends "Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads" as only a metaphor, only "akin to what Freud called the family romance" and not family romance itself. By turns radiant and remote, *The Anxiety of Influence* was the point at which Bloom began to lose people. Alfred Kazin, though he recognized Bloom's genius, once jabbed, "It may be essential to Harold Bloom that his audience not know quite what he is talking about." Bloom himself admitted in a 2002 *New Yorker* profile that when he reread the book a year after its publication, he couldn't understand it.

The anxiety of influence centers on Bloom's key term *poetic misprision*, by which he means a creative misreading, and it occurs *between poems, not between poets.* Every "strong" poet is engaged in psychic agon with a strong poet who came before because every strong poet unconsciously knows he is "belated," too late to be original (Dante and Shakespeare are the sole exceptions). "Without Tennyson's reading of Keats, we would have almost no Tennyson." But this doesn't mean Tennyson was the son bent on rubbing out Keats the father. Tennyson felt no anxiety regarding Keats because "influence-anxiety does not so much concern the forerunner but rather is an anxiety achieved in and by" *the poem.* The theory can't be Freudian because

the new poem is not a sublimation of anxiety but rather is *the anxiety itself*. Tennyson's creative misreading or poetic overcoming of Keats was essential in order for Tennyson to "swerve" into his own strength of originality, achieve his own will to power, which is what makes the theory more Nietzschean than Freudian. (In *A Map of Misreading* Bloom writes: "We have discovered no way as yet to evade the insights of Nietzsche, which are more dangerously far-reaching even than those of Freud.") Bloom follows Nietzsche in asserting that agon was the foundation of all Hellenic artistic life, as when Homer supplanted Hesiod, or when the Attic tragedians competed in the annual Festival Dionysus. That same agonistic foundation now belongs to all of Western literature. The theory angered (and angers) so many partly because it requires us to become better readers, better lovers of poetic tradition, Sherlock-Holmesian text detectives. More dauntingly, it requires us to enter the magisterial mind of Harold Bloom. Some would rather rappel into bat-filled caves with no hope of water or light.

Over the years Bloom's detractors have multiplied like so many pathogens. Perhaps it's the cost of his outsized fame or his own overweening influence, but nobody in American letters has more enemies than Harold Bloom. In obscure academic journals and popular publications alike, his adversaries—"assassins and thugs" to Bloom—have let loose with a breed of vitriol usually reserved for genocidal sultans. In 1982, for example, *Harper's* ran a hatchet job so chimerical in its unfairness and error, so unashamedly *silly*, that one wonders if the writer, a forgotten academic named Marvin Mudrick, was not seriously ill. (Indeed, Mr. Mudrick dropped dead just four years later, at the age of sixty-five.) Bloom's theories of agon and superiority can have him sounding agonistic and superior, and his critics respond in kind, in part because, as Bloom himself states in a 1986 interview, "discourse about anxiety . . . is necessarily going to induce anxiety." As Geoffrey Hartman suggests in his memoir *A Scholar's Tale* (2007), Bloom, the street-fighting boy from the Bronx, who fended off anti-Semitic Irish thugs, brought into the academy that same eat-or-be-eaten will never to back down from those who seek to diminish him or what he holds dear.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the marginalized began to get a

foothold in academia, and when Bloom admits that he "gave up on the academy's betrayal of the true use of literary study more than forty years ago," he is referring to this foothold. Since that time he has been in almost constant combat with those academic politicizers he famously dubbed the School of Resentment, or the Rabblement of Lemmings, "a pride of displaced social workers" consisting of New Historicists, multiculturalists, Lacanians, Marxists, semioticians, feminists—all of them denigrators of the imaginative faculty. In *The Western Canon*, Bloom asks: "If multiculturalism meant Cervantes, who could quarrel with it?" But of course it doesn't mean Cervantes; it means for the most part woefully inadequate writers, aesthetically inert, chosen for their ethnicity only. The School of Resentment nurses their social grievances by devaluing the authors Bloom has spent a lifetime defending, those devilish Dead White European Males you hear so much about, all of them hellbent on oppressing minorities of every ilk. As defender of the canon, Bloom has become also the academic poster boy for white male privilege (and never mind that as a Gnostic Jew whose first language was Yiddish and whose parents were breadcrumb-poor immigrants, Bloom is more of a minority than most of the resenters could ever hope to be).

The callous denial of Shakespeare's self-begotten aesthetic genius—a genius that exists outside of culture, race, and history—in favor of a proto-feminist fourth-rater like Aphra Behn is an insult Bloom cannot let pass. Literature won't work as propaganda; it is personal and emotional and *sublimely true* or it is forgotten, a meager period piece. Others suffer a paucity of aesthetic discernment and go yellow with political correctness, but Bloom makes sure to point out that Alice Walker is talentless, Stephen King a dummy, and J. K. Rowling an ignoble contaminator of childhood imagination. "I ask of a poem three things," Bloom writes in *The Anatomy of Influence*: "aesthetic splendor, cognitive power, and wisdom." The sentimentalist Maya Angelou doesn't fit the bill, but Shakespeare, Whitman, and Dickinson certainly do. In *Genius*, Bloom argues: "The study of mediocrity, whatever its origins, breeds mediocrity. . . . We do not accept tables and chairs whose legs fall off, no matter who carpentered them, but we urge the young to study mediocre writings, with no legs to sustain them."

And with five books about religion, Bloom is in the unlikely

position of being loathed by some clergy equally as much as by some critics. Like Arnold and Frye before him, he refuses to differentiate between religious texts and literature, nor does he shrink from saying that millions of the world's devout—Jews, Christians, Muslims all—worship literary characters less skillfully conceived than Hamlet and Falstaff. In 1990 he found himself a bestseller with *The Book of J*, in which he claims that the Yahwist, or J Writer, was a female in King Solomon's court. Frank Kermode has stated that "Bloom the biblical scholar and Bloom the Shakespearian and Bloom the Romantic critic really are creatures of one substance." *The Shadow of a Great Rock* will win him no fans among those Christians who view their King James Bible as the inviolate word of God and not William Tyndale's literary masterwork. One cannot properly understand literature in English unless one understands Tyndale's creation: "Luther's Bible translation in effect created a new German. Tyndale's New Testament even more strongly affected all subsequent expression in the English language." We've become a "post-literate era" in part because we've chosen to be believers instead of readers.

In one of Joseph Epstein's spirited attacks on Bloom, he writes that his "pretention rate is outside the solar system." (The neoconservative coven at *Commentary* have long been registered anti-Bloomians. Bloom refers to Norman Podhoretz as Norman Pod*horrors*.) But if Harold Bloom is going to guard the best of what the imaginative faculty has created, he has an obligation to fulminate against the worst, to wed Satanic arrogance to Odyssean resolve. When Denis Donoghue harangued Bloom as "the Satan of criticism," he meant it as both a calumny and the loftiest possible compliment—Milton's Satan, paragon of poeticism and seditiousness, supreme abider of the Self, is of course one of Bloom's heroes. With his bestsellers *The Western Canon* and *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), Bloom simultaneously punctured the membrane-thin arguments of his enemies and also became our official, unabashed Canonizer and Bardolotar, our go-to Shakespearian sage and much-needed keeper of the flame.

In *The Anatomy of Influence*, Bloom highlights with renewed vigor the points he's been making about Shakespeare since *Ruin the Sacred Truths*: "Your own emotions were originally Shakespeare's

thoughts" and "without Shakespeare we would not have seen ourselves as what we are." Bloom here revises his incisive assertion that Shakespeare's characters change while overhearing themselves (as opposed to Cervantes' people, who change while overhearing others). The suggestion now is that Shakespeare himself changes while listening to his own characters, and that those changes in turn get fed back into the work: a sublime reciprocity. After Shakespeare steamrolled Chaucer, Tyndale, and Marlowe, the only thinker/writer left to influence him was himself. And once Hamlet came alive, he outwitted his maker in the ultimate show of hubris, self-begetting, and "the will overhearing itself" (or *Will* overhearing *him*self). Some foes have charged Bloom with substituting his famous ardor for evidence, with sloppy repetition, with simply recycling one book into another. But as Cynthia Ozick stresses in "Literature as Idol" (1979), his books "reinforce one another even as they enlarge, through fresh illustrations, allusions, paradoxes, and widening sources, the arena of the Bloomian stride." The enlargement of that arena happens as Bloom, like his darling Bard, overhears himself, instructs himself, and then engages in his own sublime reciprocity. There's a difference between cutting-and-pasting and repeating with revision, with emphasis, as Bloom does in his analysis of *Hamlet* across three books: from *Shakespeare* to *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* to *The Anatomy of Influence*, his take on "the hero of Western consciousness" gets refined, clarified, tightened, so that by the time you are finished assimilating Bloom on Hamlet, you almost feel as if you could have a brief back-and-forth with this puzzling Danish prince who knows, feels, and expresses more than any other human in history.

Bloom himself feels no absurdity in pronouncing Shakespeare God. The new speculations regarding Shakespeare and his influence are enthralling to ponder: If Othello and Desdemona never consummated their marriage, "the heroic Moor's vulnerability to Iago's demonic genius becomes far more understandable"; blind Milton and Joyce could have "relied upon auditory memories of reciting Shakespeare out loud to themselves, since both *Paradise Lost* and [*Finnegans*] *Wake*" are indisputably "alive with Shakespearean revelations." With his own bear-trap brain, Harold Bloom has committed to memory most of the canonical poetry in English, including all of Shakespeare. "Possess Hamlet by memory," Bloom knows, "and he

ceases to seem merely clever or as crazy as the rest of us." To remember and recite is not only to sing but to *create*.

For as long as he's been declaring William Shakespeare's centrality in the canon, Bloom has been hailing Walt Whitman as our "Central Man" of American Romanticism, our "prophet of the American religion." If Shakespeare made mankind—gave the first comprehensive expressions of human psychology and emotion—then Whitman made America, transformed the democratic spirit of the nation into "acute individuality." He is "not just the most American of poets but American poetry proper." And like America, Whitman cannot be contained. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman's elegy for President Lincoln, is to Bloom "the greatest American poem" not because the title includes his name, but because "its largeness of vision is inevitably expressed by a metric of which the poet had become a master." (Those critics like Kermode who have blamed Bloom for neglecting to examine language in favor of character studies—the Great American Personality merely adoring other poetic personalities—have always had it wrong. What else but language?) We are everywhere in Whitman, and Whitmanian everywhere in America; he "mysteriously does not so much reflect as project us." Whitman's sublime pulsates in Wallace Stevens, Hart Crane, A. R. Ammons, and John Ashbery, and so Whitman continues to create, or, in Bloom's words, to "bring us fire and light." Bloomian zeal is full throttle when discussing our national bard; he writes about him with a tenderness and acumen capable of touching even those who wake each day already donned in anti-Bloomian Kevlar. His eighth decade has done nothing to dull the edge of his insights; you want to carry some of them into the day, turn them round and round like redolent verse, live in them a while: "As Adam early in the morning, Walt is the unfallen God-Man, an androgyne."

The original title of *Anatomy* was *Living Labyrinth: Literature and Influence*, a lovelier, more fitting name. The epigraph by Tolstoy declares the importance of recognizing the "endless labyrinth of linkages that makes up the stuff of art," while Bloom confirms throughout that "the structure of literary influence is labyrinthine, not linear." *Labyrinthine* is also the best description of Bloom's grand mind and humanistic program of appreciation. His humanism has always been his most attractive trait, because for all his curmudgeon's

complaining, a devotion to the best books is really a devotion to what is best in us. "Canonical literature is necessary if we are to learn to see, hear, feel, and think," if we are to achieve "a greater widening of our consciousness." Voice your disagreement with that and reveal to the world exactly who you are. As Bloom stresses in *How to Read and Why*, we turn to the best books to "strengthen the self" and learn to prepare for change, because "the final change alas is universal." What better preparation for death than an appreciation of life learned through literature? "Literature for me," Bloom writes in *Anatomy*, "is not merely the best part of life; it is itself the form of life, which has no other form."

With the exception of *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, there are surprisingly few references to Santayana in Bloom (Stevens was Santayana's student), and yet Bloom would applaud Santayana's judgment, in *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, Goethe* (1910), that "the sole advantage in possessing great works of literature lies in what they can help us to become." That's also one of the advantages in possessing Harold Bloom. To read his oeuvre first to last is to trace a stupendous development, to enter an expansive and expanding universe of learning, a veritable Proustian epic of book love and bard worship, and to understand that for Bloom the labyrinth of anxiety and influence was the only way to make use of such a tentacled intelligence. Feel what you will about this singular American personality and intellect, but we require his counsel, his *influence*. If Harold Bloom did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.

Notes

[1]Scarcely a book goes by in which Bloom does not castigate Eliot for his overall awfulness as a human. Right from the outset there was a contest in Bloom between revering Eliot the artist and reviling Eliot the critic and man. In *The Anatomy of Influence*, Bloom christens Eliot "one of the worst literary critics of the twentieth century." In *The Shadow of a Great Rock*, he is "the anti-Semitic obsessive."

[2]In addition to *The Anxiety of Influence* these are *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), and *Poetry and Repression* (1976). One could also add *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (1977) and *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (1982), but Bloom hardly has a book, interview, or article after 1973 in which he does not in some way try to clarify what he means by anxiety and influence.