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The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life
(Yale University Press, 2011)
by Harold Bloom

BLOOM'S LATEST BOOK OF LITERARY CRITICISM displays all his strengths next to all his weaknesses; unsupported generalisations and just about believable lists abound and yet so do head-clearing insights into great works of literature and the human condition. The two most important figures in this collection of essays are Shakespeare and Whitman, the connection between the two ill-assorted horses here yoked together being those Lucretian elements in each and the observation that Whitman's "inner solitude echoes Shakespeare's Edgar" (x). The title obviously references Bloom's acknowledged critical father, Northrop Frye, and the book itself offers many helpful clarifications of Bloom's sometimes formidable critical terminology. Due to the fact that Bloom awards the laurel wreath to the Bard, I shall mainly concentrate upon his Shakespearean sallies.

Bloom's baroque anatomy retraces his life-long melancholy of solitude that would seem indistinguishable from a sense of freedom gained from reading his favourite visionary poets, the echo chamber of allusive interrelationships between which, when internalized by Bloom's splendidly sublime powers of memory, began "to form enigmatic patterns" (4). But these agonistic patternings are discovered on the page rather than lived in the poet's mind, the achieved formalistic traits of tropes, images, diction, syntax, grammar, metric, stance, that occur as anxious malformations in individual poems. Bloom's dismissal of benign transmission gratefully received and his own brand of inevitable expression of fresh anxiety are justified on the grounds that "Western culture remains essentially Greek, since the rival Hebrew component has vanished into Christianity" and hence "competition is a central fact of our cultural tradition" (7). But this rivalry is ameliorated as "*literary love tempered by defence*" since "possessed by all the ambivalence of Eros, the new but potentially strong writer struggles to ward off any totalizing attachments" (8, 14). Bloom means that the Gospel of Love is a transformation of the Judaic religion's injunction to honour one's fathers, the paradox that inspiration is none other than influence and that poetic influence is stimulated not by the empirical self or psyche that once read the father's poems, but is instead generated in the moment of inspiration by the irrational side of human nature called the daimon: "in speaking of the poet-in-a-poet, I mean precisely his daimon" (10, 12).

Bloom relates that Wimsatt abhorred his Longinian criticism and denigrated him for being an eighteen-inch naval gun that missed the cognitive target. His retaliation is this continued octogenarian celebration of the cognitive music of Shakespeare and Whitman in all its Lucretian finery. This said, Bloom's first chapter is called "Sublime Strangeness" and represents a restatement of his

critical project almost at its last gasp. He grounds his criticism in the artful mode of Longinus, Johnson and Pater. Bloom seeks the reader's sublime that Wimsatt dismissed as the affective fallacy, in which the reader comes to believe that we create what we have read because of our own emotional response to a work of literature. The reader's sublime he defines as a delightful horror, or as an uncanny strangeness that renders what should be recognizable as *unheimlich*, "for a strong writer, strangeness *is* the anxiety of influence" (19, 20). The spin Bloom puts on these matters is that the writer who honours his literary parents by emulation thinks he or she has created what in fact is inspired influenza, the poetic discourse of belatedness, "provoking the uncanny recognition that one is never fully the author of one's work or one's self" (20). Employing the Paterian formula that the aesthetic sublime adds strangeness to beauty, Bloom cleverly inverts Coleridge's maxim that imagination is stimulated when we don't understand what is paradoxical, "strangeness, in fact, arouses wonder when we do not understand: aesthetic imagination when we do" (20). Bloom finds a point of correlation with Johnson, who, "preternaturally active", "courted depressiveness whenever indolent and required labour to achieve freedom" (21). Johnson's temperament, though, is discovered to be Lucretian by Bloom, as is the sensibility of Pater, both being "deeply concerned with the effects of the works upon its reader" (21). In short, aesthetic perception and sensation are the pulse of words for the Paterian aesthete in Bloom, who forever seeks privileged moments and experiential epiphanies. The quickening apprehension of sensational phantasmagoria corresponds to the pure Epicureanism that informs the delight Bloom continually takes in his highly individual mode of reading. But the measuring rod/pleasure thermometer of the canonical considered as secular Scripture is never far from the surface; his Jewishness ever apparent, "Shakespeare is the Law, Milton the Teaching, Blake and Whitman the Prophets" (24).

The repetitiveness of Bloom's meditations upon much the same authors as he has always turned to, he explains away as a mode of exploring the influence of the self on the later self, and this mode is presented as the *modus operandi* of his newest investigation into Shakespeare. The study of Shakespeare he defines as the teaching of consciousness with its drives, defences, disorders, abysses, the warping of ethos into pathos, only to painfully discover that "what you considered your own emotions were originally Shakespeare's thoughts" (35). Shakespeare, he proposes, writes by a disinterested exploration of the law of dramatic opposites, a chiasmus akin to the torsion of Yeats twisting his initial fixation upon the Romantic individualism of Shelley into the fascist overdetermination of the self by the astrological spirit of the age. Without conflict there could be no drama and hence the fecund Claudio opposes the chaste Isabella and from this chiasmus builds a darkly problematic comedy. Bloom notes that most great authors invent just the one memorable character, a Don Quixote, or more provocatively a Jesus, as Mark mysteriously does, whilst Shakespeare conceives a whole host of believable characters. The consequence of Shakespeare's fiery invention is that, "as we go out to meet a

larger consciousness, we metamorphose into a provisional acceptance that sets aside moral judgement, while wonder transmutes into a more imaginative understanding" (37). Montaigne is closest to Hamlet's enigmatic questionings that nevertheless echo the Jesus of Mark, who continually asks his thick-headed disciples: "who do people say I Am?" Bloom quips that Hamlet does not want to know that potentially he is the son of his murderous uncle: "Hamlet alone senses that his quest is metaphysical, perhaps an agon with God" (43).

The reader soon realises that this book is composed of a stream of small interlocking essays, but this structure adds to the elliptical, even desultory nature of Bloom's labyrinthine theme of influence. Bloom would seem the free author of himself in these pages; his books are his plays, he always talks through his love of literature. But love is a mixed blessing in influential terms; thus, Bloom devotes an essay to *King Lear*, in which Shakespeare's ambivalence towards Marlowe is recapitulated in terms of Edmund and Edgar. Edmund, like Iago, has the negative afflatus to capture an audience with his declamatory rhetoric, just as Marlowe ravished Shakespeare when he was part of the same Renaissance audience. Hal's desire to prove Falstaff a coward is interpreted by Bloom as "a kind of revenge for once having been influenced," whilst Edgar's masochism and benign obduracy "hint at authorial remorse for imposing agonies upon us" (52, 60). But Shakespearean agonies are in flux since Bloom underlines that Shakespeare preferred Ovid to Plato and that while Ovid and Marlowe float on the surface, his agons with Tyndale and Chaucer lie deep. Thus, Bloom psychoanalyses the ellipsis in Shakespearean characterization, i.e. the ironies of Hamlet's quiddity take on a life of their own, which runs away from the playwright, a "Hobgoblin run off with the garland of Apollo" (65). With Falstaff Bloom escapes the Marlovian influence that infected *Richard III* and so Bloom argues that Shakespeare peaks in the great tragedies only for his career to tail off towards the self-parody of *Cymbeline* and the final glories of *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Indeed Bloom asserts that all of western literature is a preparation for the pinnacle of *Hamlet*, whilst everything afterwards languishes in its lengthening shadow.

Sardonic to say, but when Bloom lauds Shakespeare as the creator of personalities, it does seem odd that the critic ever returns to *Hamlet*, just as if Bloom had a world-without-end pact with the play and its charismatic lead. Bloom's fascination is such that he even pines to catch glimpses of the unfallen Hamlet whose angelic splinters are to be found in the graveyard scene: "what is missing is an actual representation of the Shakespearean moment of soliloquy in which Lucifer overhears himself and through that shock changes into Satan" (120). The same thought when turned upon Satan's studious nostalgias results in the identification of Lucifer with Hamlet, the prince of consciousness. Metamorphosis is taken as the mode of thinking in Shakespeare and this Bloom breaks down into thinking and thanking where praise is traced back to the *Psalms* and thinking becomes the agonistic overhearing of self (93). The main breakthrough of *The Anatomy of Influence* would seem Bloom's crackerjack

insight that Satan possesses "Hamlet's infinite self-consciousness," which is refined to the apothegm, "Satan is the badly fallen Hamlet" (99, 106). Yes, Hamlet's humour is distinctly lacking, and yes, Hamlet is actually interested in all his interlocutors but nevertheless that element of Mark's Jesus that can be discerned in Hamlet is answered by the figure of the fallen Lucifer in Milton's intense visionary tale. He writes that Milton worshipped two gods; the irascible heavenly tyrant and Milton's own inner light defined as "the pure and upright heart" (94). Thus, Bloom proposes that Milton "inaugurated the literary tradition of Protestantism without Christianity, to be followed by Blake, Shelley, Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, the Brontës, Browning, Hardy, and Lawrence, among others" (102). The point being made is the large one that from the Renaissance and, perhaps even as early as Chaucer onwards, writers are defined by the brio of their free thought in relation to personality rather than their religious chains. Hence the main argument of this book is that Bloom transforms his Yiddish roots and American protestant background into telescoped genealogies altogether new in their trans-canonical scope but which nevertheless contain signs of their breach birth. Bloom shows us the American religion for what it is, together with the J-Writer's influence on later Judaicism; he deconstructs religion to show its beginning in poetic tales. Thus, Shakespeare would seem Bloom's talismanic champion of humanism: "Shakespeare himself is change, and the bounds of existence are broken and reformed because it is through Shakespeare that we are reminded that the mind is a ceaseless activity" (130). As Bloom's epicurean Englishman, Shakespeare holds a mirror to nature's sensational surface and yet critics find their own visage reflected in this glass; therefore, Bloom's mind is precisely defined as unceasingly active. Even in old age, his criticism maintains its love affair with metaphysical materialism.