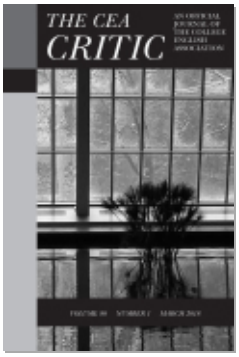
How to Read Harold Bloom and Why

Benjamin D. Carson



CEA Critic, Volume 80, Number 1, March 2018, pp. 3-20 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/cea.2018.0001*

Benjamin D. Carson

How to Read Harold Bloom and Why

> Urge and urge and urge,
> Always the procreant urge of the world.
> - Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

No other well-known literary critic elicits the kind of praise or vitriol, and not in equal measure, as does Harold Bloom. He is either championed as a professional provocateur—a "colossal" among critics—or, as is more often the case, he is condemned as a pretentious windbag. If he is not a genius, he is, in the words of Joseph Epstein in a particularly nasty hit piece for *The Hudson Review*, "that most comic of unconscious comic figures . . ., the intellectual equivalent of that character in P. G. Wodehouse of whom Wodehouse writes that he looked like someone who was poured into his clothes but forgot to say when" (215). "So far as one can determine," Epstein continues, "*The Anxiety of Influence* has had very little influence and appears to have caused anxiety chiefly in Harold Bloom, who claims that few people really understand it" (215). And, Terry Eagleton, in his *Figures of Dissent*, writes that Bloom's theory, "as Henry Fielding observed of the belief that the good will get their reward in this world, had only one drawback, namely that it was not true" (*Figures* 168). About *How to Read and Why*, specifically, Eagleton goes on to write, Bloom's "portentously self-important book would collapse at the faintest whiff of" irony (169).

Eagleton and Epstein are hardly alone in their critique of Bloom's project. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their *The Madwoman in the Attic*, suggest Bloom's theory, rooted, however nominally, as it is in Freud's Oedipus Complex, is "offensively sexist to some feminist critics" (47) while other critics follow in the same way: Geoffrey Hartman, in his *Criticism in the Wilderness*; Elizabeth Bruss, in her *Beautiful Theories*; Jonathan Arac, in his Afterword to *The Yale Critics*; and Edward Said, in his *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, all conclude that Bloom is less than what Arac labels an "iconoclast" (179) than a conservative defender of the Western, male-dominated literary canon.[1]

In this essay, I argue for a way of reading Bloom that allows us to give Bloom his due without taking recourse to *ad hominem* attacks (Epstein) or outright dismissal because his theory is not "true" (Eagleton). Rather than asking questions like "Is Bloom right?" or, more specifically, "Are poets really embroiled in a heroic struggle with their poetic fathers?"—we might instead read Bloom the same way Richard Rorty reads Plato, Heidegger,

The CEA Critic 80.1 (March 2018): 3–20.

Proust, and Nabokov: as the author of a new vocabulary, a new way of talking, describing and re-describing the world. In other words, we should read Bloom ironically—that is, through a pragmatist's eyes. In this sense, Bloom, like William Blake, is not just an ironist in an agonizing struggle for self-creation. Rather, the tetralogy of books in which Bloom outlines his theory of poetic influence—*The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), and *Poetry and Repression* (1976)—can be understood not as offering a new epistemology that must bear the burden of truth claims but, in Cynthia Ozick's words, "as a long theophanous prose poem, a rationalized version of Blake's heroic Prophetic Books" (46).[2]

If Ozick is correct about the *how* we should read Bloom, what about the *why*? Bloom's theory, finally, is about the relationship between what Nabokov calls "aesthetic bliss" and being (314). The former breathes life into the latter. Difficult reading, David Denby writes, "develops . . . stamina in the way that track practice builds lung power and muscle" (236). In a passage that sounds like it could have been written by Harold Bloom, Denby argues in his recent book, *Lit Up*,

> You make a self by matching yourself against the text. When you respond to the text fully, understanding how it is constructed, and what the parts mean, you come into being. This was hardly a narcissistic exercise; the students [at the Beacon School, Mamaroneck, and Hillhouse] couldn't do what they did without the provocation of an exceedingly complicated work of literature and an ardent teacher who believed in the book as art. Pop literature, skillfully composed by formula, wouldn't offer as rich a field of reference and action. (236)

Bloom has always claimed that he is first and foremost a teacher, a provocateur of books, if you will, a peddler of aesthetic bliss, and in bliss is being, being with and in others through and in the text. Literature is not just a "narcissistic exercise." It is also and, most importantly, a clarion call for more life, a life abetted by a rich imagination, the fruit of serious reading. "Every great civilization, including ours," Denby writes, "has had a great literature and great readers. If literature matters less to young people than it once did, we are all in trouble . . . . Together and alone, we need literature as the California valleys need rain" (xvii). In this season of drought, Bloom is a much-needed rainmaker, a poet who has given his professional life to nourishing the soil from which new words and new art might grow. Like budding shoots, we would do well to bend toward his light and heed his influence.

Bloom's Theory of Poetic Influence

Bloom is a Romanticist by training, and so it is no surprise his first three books—*Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959), *The Visionary Company* (1961), and

Blake's Apocalypse (1963)—focused on the key (male) poets of the Romantic tradition: Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, and Keats. He published a brilliant book on Yeats in 1972 (simply titled *Yeats*) before embarking on the project that would become, in effect, his life's work. What constitutes Bloom's theory of influence is outlined in his tetralogy, though it is fair to say that everything Bloom has published since, from *Figures of Capable Imagination* (1976) all the way through his recent *The Daemon Knows: Literary Consciousness and the American Sublime* (2015), is a continuation of this original project.

Bloom's theory, which, at the time it was first "mapped" between 1973 and 1976, drew not only on the work of many of his teachers (Frederick Pottle and M. H. Abrams) but also, and increasingly, on more what David Fite identifies as obscure "figures as diverse as the second-century Gnostic, Valentinus, the sixteenth-century Kabbalists Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria, [and] the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher of rhetoric Giambattista Vico" (55–6). Bloom has also found influential great philosophers, poets, and critics as disparate as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Freud, Stephane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, Ralph Waldo Emerson, C. S. Peirce, and Kenneth Burke (56). This heady mix of thinkers, to whom Bloom often refers obliquely and without assignation, coupled to his special terminology (*clinamen*, *tessera*, *kenosis*, *daemonization*, *askesis*, *apophrades*) can make for tough reading. But, as Fite, drawing on Denis Donoghue's work on Bloom, points out, "these and the other thinkers Bloom uses with such profligacy in his recent work are models, . . . not sources" (56). Bloom's real source, his real precursor, according to Donoghue, is Blake.

A great many good critics have summarized Bloom's theory, but few have done so as well as Fite in his *Harold Bloom: The Rhetoric of Romantic Vision* (1985). A brief summary here will stand in for a detailed reading of Bloom's tetralogy, which, for my purpose, is unnecessary. Fite sums up Bloom's theory as follows:

> Ever since Milton justified the ways of Satan for imaginative man, all poets in the Western tradition have had to battle with a sublimity, an imaginative achievement not their own, an achievement that, precisely by coming before them, threatens their own claims to imaginative priority and *thereby* establishes the conditions for meaning in their poems. Poets cannot escape the imperatives of influence; those who attempt to "idealize" about the bloody parricide of poetic relations will succeed only in creating weak poetry, weak criticism. "Figures of capable imagination," Bloom says, borrowing a phrase from Stevens, "appropriate for themselves" (*AI*, p.5) by strongly, even savagely, misreading the poems of central precursors, and thus winning through to an achievement of their own—an achievement that *only* exists, however, by virtue of its desperate battle with what came before. (10)

Fite usefully goes on to clarify Bloom's relationship with Freud, writing that Bloom's theory has "'nothing in common with anything now miscalled Freudian literary criticism'" (10). Unlike Freudian critics who would read a poem as a successful sublimation of the anxiety of influence, for Bloom, Fite says, "a poem is itself a *process* of [italics original] repression, . . . not a product of a completed sublimation" (10). "The meaning of a poem," Bloom often reminds us, "can only be a poem, but *another poem—a poem not itself* [italics original]. And not a poem chosen with total arbitrariness, but any central poem by an indubitable precursor, even if the ephebe *never read* [italics original] that poem" (*Anxiety* 70).

Bloom's obscurity, his often acerbic tone, seemingly outrageous claims, and unapologetic and impolitic defense of the Western Canon, the Great Books and Schools of the Ages, are, undoubtedly, what make Bloom an easy target. Even those who have *never read* Bloom know to dislike him. But, critics such as Eagleton and Epstein are, among other things, guilty of taking Bloom too seriously—they are taking Bloom (and, by extension, his theory of influence) literally, that is, unironically, and, I argue, it is a mistake to do so. To be fair, Bloom invites accusations of too much earnestness. When in his "Elegiac Conclusion" to *The Western Canon* Bloom tells us that after forty years of teaching in the academy he now finds himself "surrounded by professors of hip-hop; by clones of Gallic-Germanic theory; by ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited" (517), and that none of these "[r]esenters of the aesthetic value of literature are . . . going to go away" (518), it is easy to forget he is talking about literature and not the Ebola virus or plague.

Rorty's Pragmatism: Reading Bloom Ironically

In his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty compares his cultural hero, the "liberal ironist," to Bloom's "strong poet." (Whether Bloom, incidentally, is a "liberal," by Rorty and Judith Sklar's definition, is another matter altogether.[3]) An ironist, for Rorty, is "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and change" (*Contingency* xv). So, while an ironist may be a system builder—what Rorty calls the "maker of new words, the shaper of new languages . . . the vanguard of the species" (20)—he or she concedes, with the traveler in Shelley's "Ozymandias," that however much one strives for immortality, ultimately "nothing beside remains."

In his *Jerusalem*, Blake writes, "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create" (153). Like Blake, Bloom is a strong poet, and his theory of influence is his own personal "system," an "original literary imagining" that evidences, in

a point conceded to Epstein, his own experience of anxiety about living in the long shadow of Johnson, Hazlitt, Burke, and, importantly, Walter Pater, whom Bloom has "taken as a critical ideal all [his] life" (*Daemon* 494). In other words, what Bloom says about poetic influence could equally apply to literary theory/critics, including himself. In the following passage that demonstrates as much, I have simply substituted "literary theory" and "critics" for "poetic influence" and "poets":

> [Literary theory]—when it involves two strong, authentic [critics],—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior [theory], an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful [critical] influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western [literary criticism] since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern [criticism] as such could not exist. (*Anxiety* 30)

Bloom's "theory of influence," like Shakespeare's plays, the poetry of John Ashbury, or Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is, in his mind, his one shot at immortality, and the criteria Bloom outlines for canonicity—that is, for becoming one of the books and schools of the ages—apply just as well to his own theory: "strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange" (*Western* 3). "Fresh metaphor, or inventive troping," Bloom writes, "always involves a departure from previous metaphor, and that departure depends upon at least partial turning away from or rejection of prior figuration" (9). By reading Bloom's theory of influence pragmatically, we are reading it "aesthetically" (as a wild orchid rather than Trotsky)—that is, as one artistic enunciation in the long tradition of literary criticism that is itself a series of artistic enunciations that includes, among others, the works of not just Johnson, Hazlitt, and Pater but William K. Wimsatt, Northrop Frye, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, and Burke. We come to see it as a "clinamen," a swerve away from his poetic fathers, an attempt to create an authentic voice in and against the din of literary history. This is just another way of saying that we can read Bloom's theory of influence in terms of his own theory of influence; it is an expression of his own anxiety of influence, an evasion, "a process of avoiding, a way of escaping," and what is being evaded, Bloom writes, in the "The Breaking of Form," "ultimately is fate, particularly the necessity of dying" (9).

Bloom, Lentricchia, and the public/private split

In his *After the New Criticism* (1980), Frank Lentricchia adumbrates this particular reading but is openly critical of the need for originality and thus, by dint of being original, achieving a kind of immortality. Bloom's precursors, his "demanding father-figures," Lentricchia writes, must be

> symbolically slain in an act of "misprision," or willful misreading. Such an act will presumably clear imaginative space for the young apprentice whom Bloom calls (after Wallace Stevens) the ephebe. Within this unoccupied space the strong poet-to-be (or young critic: Bloom's system will allow no distinction) believes himself free to make his own unique identity, to create himself out of nothing. (319)

Lentricchia is right to argue that Bloom's theory "is itself a complicated example of the theory of influence" (321). But, it is not just that, for Lentricchia, just after praising Bloom's contribution to "contemporary criticism" (contemporary at the time was the 1960s and 70s), takes issue rather inexplicably not only with the very *raison d'être* of Bloom's theory—its novelty—but also with the state of literary culture inside academia. In the final paragraph of *After the New Criticism,* Lentricchia writes, "Bloom represents much that is most valuable in contemporary criticism; he also represents what is most retrograde and anti-intellectual: the desire, articulated frequently in our advanced critical journals and graduate centers of theoretical training, to be an original theorist" (346). The earnestness of Lentricchia's disaffection for academic criticism was borne out famously by his decision in the mid-1990s to give up criticism and write novels, a decision that is itself ironic given his claim that originality is retrograde and anti-intellectual. "Novel" not only implies new or original but, by the early 15th century, it also connoted the strange or unusual, criteria Bloom suggests are necessary for canonicity.

In his *Empire Burlesque: The Fate of Critical Culture in Global America*, Daniel O'Hara includes a chapter on Lentricchia, "Lentricchia's Frankness and the Place of Literature." It is an illuminating and puzzling piece given Lentricchia's criticisms of Bloom. According to O'Hara, Lentricchia's memoir, *The Edge of Night: A Confession*, satirizes an author's need for originality while bemoaning, in Bloomian fashion, how literary studies is transforming "itself into cultural studies out of embarrassment over the politically incorrect social positions of most canonical authors, particularly all those modern makers of surprising formal inventions of the creative imagination such as Pound, Yeats, Stevens, Frost, and Eliot" (O'Hara 63). Lentricchia's complaint, O'Hara argues, is that literary critics now write for the market place and "practice [their] theories and methods by rote, performing in [their] works predictable roles according to purely predetermined scripts, with no space or time for the smallest improvisations. . . . The possibilities for intelligent selfhood and imaginative exchange have been crowded out" (63). What is needed, in Lentricchia's view, are "literary works that experiment with and perform new modes of human subjectivity. In their stylistic choices, structural configurations, and intertextual resonances, such literary works dramatize their imaginative critique of all normative critical prescriptions, whatever the informing model or motivation" (64). Except

for Lentricchia's Foucauldian dislike of original authorship, Bloom would agree with this. For Lentricchia, as for New Historicists, "our identities are not ours to create autonomously, by singular fiat, but negotiated composite formations constituted in the give-and-take of social experience, however destitute, surprising, absurd, or painful that may turn out to be" (63).

Lentricchia's position, however, is much closer to Bloom's than he would probably be willing to admit. They not only love many of the same poets (Whitman, Yeats, Frost, Stevens) and critics (Walter Pater, in particular) but are ardent critics of cultural studies in all of its iterations and mourn the passing of high literary culture.[4] In some ways, *The Edge of Night* is Lentricchia's own elegiac conclusion. But, Bloom and Lentricchia appear to part ways when it comes to the importance of originality. I say "appear" here because Lentricchia's criticism of authorship rings hollow. While Lentricchia wants to distance himself from the need to claim original authorship (he would nod affirmatively at Foucault's question "What matter who's speaking?"), in *The Edge of Night* we find him, when traveling in Ireland, checking obsessively for his manuscript (of *The Edge of Night*): "Each morning of my sojourn in the west of Ireland it happens. In my bed and breakfast, arise, pack the few things I've removed from my luggage the night before, check the manuscript in the small bag: take it out, look at it, make sure all the pages are there, in order, put it back in, zip it up in its special side compartment" (81–2). Only minutes later, he is checking again to be sure he has not misplaced his manuscript. If originality is retrograde and anti-intellectual, then why might an original utterance be given pride of place in a "special side compartment"? Why the fear of losing what is not yours to claim?

Unlike Lentricchia, Bloom follows Rorty in how Rorty distinguishes between "a private ethic of self-creation and a public ethic of mutual accommodation" (*Contingency* 34), which is another way of saying that Bloom, as Rorty comments in "Wild Orchids and Trotsky," "abjure[s] the temptation to tie in one's responsibilities to other people with one's relation to whatever idiosyncratic thing or persons one loves with all one's heart and soul and mind (or, if you like, the things or persons one is obsessed with)" (42). This distinction is key because it allows Bloom to practice obsessively his aesthetic criticism *without having to justify it*. He no more needs to defend himself against Eagleton, who links "the construction of the modern notion of the aesthetic artefact" to the "construction of the dominant ideological forms of modern class society" (*Ideology* 3), than Proust needs to defend himself against Sartre's claim that he is a "useless bourgeois wimp, a man whose life and writings were equally irrelevant to the only thing that really matters, the struggle to overthrow capitalism" (Rorty, "Wild" 42). Lentricchia wants to reconcile his private love of T. S. Eliot with his longing for justice—that is, "the liberation of the weak from the strong" (36). Like Rorty in his youth, Lentricchia wants "to be both an

intellectual and spiritual snob and a friend of humanity" (36), the "Dirty Harry" of the academy. Bloom, by contrast, does not seek this reconciliation. Leaving his political leanings aside, he seeks rather to indulge his personal obsession: to create a new and interesting vocabulary, his "chosen metaphoric," the anxiety of influence (Rorty, *Contingency* 39). This is how we should read Bloom.

Reading Bloom Horizontally

When reading Bloom's theory of influence through a pragmatist's eyes, we further benefit by not having to adjudicate between what admittedly appears to be two contradictory impulses in Bloom's theory: an *un*ironic Bloom who believes, like Kant and Plato, in the correspondence theory of truth; and an ironic Bloom who concedes that his novel system is contingent and that, however original, must be defeated in the war against time. The awareness of this potential defeat ("potential" because it must be repressed) is, in Bloom's theory, the very source of the poet's anxiety—it is the "dark and daemonic ground upon which" every poet takes his or her stand (*Anxiety* 25). Despite the brooding language here, Bloom, read ironically, offers not a tragic but a comedic vision, the hallmarks of which are, according to John Morreall, complexity, high tolerance for disorder, for ambiguity, for the unfamiliar, divergent thinking, playfulness and pragmatism (21–39).

The tone of so much of Bloom's writing, from his earliest work through *The Daemon Knows* (2015), makes it easy to take Bloom at his word: that his theory of influence is a meta-narrative, *the* way of reading poetry, having slain the New Critics in the 1970s and all Resenters since. Bloom's theory, read unironically (or Idealistically or as a Tragic vision, in Morreall's terms), articulates what Rorty would call a "final vocabulary" and thus describes the poetic world of psychic warfare "as it really is." In this reading, Bloom's theory finds itself in the philosophical tradition of Kant, which, in Rorty's words, "thinks of truth as a vertical relationship between representations and what is represented" ("Philosophy" 92). This reading helps us to understand better Eagleton's rejection of Bloom's theory. Marxist criticism argues for what Frederic Jameson calls the "priority of the political interpretation of text" (17), and is thus, for Eagleton, in Jameson's words, "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (*Political* 17).

But, if we situate Bloom's theory within the context of the history of literary criticism (a history of competing novel narratives), then Bloom writes in the tradition not of Kant but of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which, again in Rorty's words, "thinks of truth horizontally—as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors' reinterpretation of their predecessors' reinterpretation" (92). Like Heidegger and Hegel, Bloom rejects the "intuition" that "sentences

are made true by the extralinguistic entities that they are about" (Rorty, *Philosophy* 28). He rejects, that is, the notion that language hooks up to something (an object) outside of language. Bloom's theory, in this sense, is about re-describing things, not making things clearer, as analytic philosophers like Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell thought they were doing (28). Bloom is a storyteller, and the goal of his long prose poem, his tetralogy, is not to get things right. In Rorty's words, Bloom hopes "to change not only your intuitions but your sense of who you are, and your notion of what it is most important to think about" (28–9). In his *Philosophy as Poetry*, Rorty teaches us how to think about Heidegger's and Hegel's projects, and what he says about these two great philosophers applies equally to Bloom:

> In the hope of getting you to change your self-image, your priorities, and your intuitions, Hegel tells you that the Absolute alone is true and Heidegger that language is the house of Being. If you stop at each such sentence and pause to ask yourself whether it has been backed up with a sound argument, you will never finish their books. To get through their books, you must temporarily suspend disbelief, get into the swing of the story that is being told, pick up the jargon as you go along, and then decide, after having given the entire book the most sympathetic reading you can, whether to move out into uncharted space.
>
> If you lay down those books feeling no temptation to make any such move, you may conclude that Hegel and Heidegger are, at best, failed poets and, at worst, self-infatuated obscurantists. (29)

If it is the case that Bloom's theory of influence, as articulated in his tetralogy, fails in "its transformative task" (29), then it does so not because it is not true but because Bloom's new vocabulary did not catch on, leaving him a failed poet or a "self-infatuated obscurantist." Whether or not this is the case is yet to be decided.

Reading literary history horizontally, as Rorty does, allows for new critical vocabularies to enter the unending conversation and make their mark. Bloom's theory, in this reading, competes (has an agonistic relationship) with preceding theories for originality. Again, it can be read ironically in how Rorty refuses "to think of truth as correspondence to reality" ("Nineteenth-Century" 151). If taken unironically, however, Bloom's anxiety of influence is Eagleton's and Jameson's Marxist criticism: "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation." It is now one of those pesky meta-narratives Jean-François Lyotard warned us about. And, Bloom does flirt with onto-theology, if not mysticism, when writing about the agonistic lives of poems. When Bloom writes, "Why most strong poems in our tradition, from Wordsworth on, manifest this masochistic impulse of representation, *even as they strive to pull away from initial ironies*, is beyond my present capacity to surmise" ("Breaking" 28), one gets the impression that

poems would be manifesting masochistic impulses and pulling away from initial ironies whether literary critics cared to notice or not. Yet, Bloom can also sound like a card-carrying deconstructor when he writes, "words, even if we take them as magic, refer *only* to other words, to the end of it. Words will not interpret themselves, and common rules for interpreting words will never exist" (9). Here, we see Bloom as what Rorty would call a "textualist," a

> critic [who] asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose. He makes the text refer to whatever is relevant to that purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary—a "grid," in Foucault's terminology—on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens. ("Nineteenth-Century" 151)

Bloom's theory of influence is his grid, an entirely idiosyncratic vocabulary imposed on texts from Shakespeare to Stevens to Crane.[5]

The contradictory impulse—to declare unironically the anxiety of influence a final vocabulary, an absolute horizon, on the one hand; and to concede to the contingencies of history, textuality, and the movement of time, on the other—can be seen in Heidegger and Derrida, with whom Bloom has a kind of sibling rivalry. Though Heidegger set out to overthrow onto-theology, Derrida argues, according to Rorty, that Heidegger's urge "to be still and listen to the single line of verse," and his "preference for the simplicity and splendor of the word spoken on the hill, and also of his contempt for the footnote scribbled in the *ergastulum* down in the valley[,] . . . betrays a fatal taint of Kantianism, of the Platonic 'metaphysics of presence'" ("Philosophy" 94). Derrida, too, Rorty furthers, in his attempt to find "a way to say something about language which will not convey the idea of 'sign' or 'representation' or 'supplement'"—his solution is the notion of the "trace"—comes "perilously close to giving us a philosophy of language, and thereby perilously close to slipping back into" the onto-theological tradition he accused Heidegger of failing to overcome (100). When referring to Emerson, in *Agon*, Bloom speaks of making a "covenant with one's own *pneuma* or spark-of-the-primal-Abyss" (24). He writes, "if the true soul is in full-ness of presence it is not the *psyche* but that spark, and the rich internal way of speaking is of what works and is" (25). Here we can imagine "one's own *pneuma*" escaping the vicissitudes of time and influence, and settling fitfully into a moment of presence. Like Heidegger and Derrida, Bloom walks the tight-rope between onto-theology, which, writes Rorty, "originates in an attempt to evade our mortality"—and its deconstruction. (Rorty, "Fire").

On (not) Applying Bloom

The teasing out of contradiction in Bloom's theory of influence is finally beside the point. It is the very trap we should avoid. It is not why we should read Bloom. Sorting out incongruities in Bloom's theory of influence whether to dismiss it as "inflexible and all-engulfing," as Bruss does (*Beautiful* 362) or to put it to good use is equally off the mark.[6] In fact, I argue that Bloom's theory of influence is so novel, so singular and subjective, that it cannot be applied by anyone other than Bloom. Despite the tetralogy of books outlining in painstaking detail how "misprision" or willful misreading works and presumably can be applied, it is difficult to see anyone writing Bloom's books but Bloom, who, when writing, unleashes the same degree of "speculative energetics" he attributes to Emerson upon composing "Circles" (*Daemon* 175). No one can map "the influence of a mind on itself and of works on their author" like Bloom (*Anatomy* 29). Literary theories by definition are applied, but it is well-nigh impossible to imagine something we might call "Applied Bloomatology." Bloom has a particular kinship with Burke. The breadth and depth of Burke's reading, and his ability to synthesize the ideas of thinkers as disparate as Duns Scotus, Quintilian and Bentham, is stunning, and this makes his work particularly difficult to assimilate. Yet, Burke's work, which Burke himself constantly revisited (often revising Prefaces) and which in its aim and scope was highly variegated, has found application in nearly every academic discipline. Bloom's work, the product of a rather singular and obscure vision, hasn't, and this, in my view, is not a strike against it.

Two key works on Bloom speak to this point. Fite's aforementioned important book *Harold Bloom: The Rhetoric of Romantic Vision* (1985) is purely exegetical, explaining how Bloom's project developed and then locating his "extreme version of revisionary Romanticism within relevant contexts in modern literary theory" (ix). It is not within the scope of Fite's much-needed book to apply in new ways Bloom's theory of influence to texts but rather to clarify the "esoteric paradigms" that Bloom has appropriated and which "intimidate or dismay many an interested reader" (ix). Peter De Bolla has done more than anyone to find applications for Bloom's theory by first setting Bloom's "diachronic rhetoric" within the history of rhetoric. But, as De Bolla makes clear early in *Harold Bloom: Towards Historical Rhetorics* (1988), his primary concern is "with the implications and extension of Bloom's critical and theoretic work" in order to "build upon and develop Bloom's notion of a re-conception of the field of rhetoric" (3). He is not concerned with "the problematic question of the 'relevance' of Bloom's 'theoretical' work for traditional literacy criticism" (4), and, while he expounds on the notion of "misreading," he does not offer novel readings of texts—that is, he does not apply Bloom's theory to reveal the ways in which a poem manifests its anxiety by swerving away from a precursor

poem. This, of course, is hardly a criticism but rather a statement about the aim and scope of two key monographs on Bloom.[7]

Reading Bloom, however, as a Rortyan pragmatist allows us to do another kind of exegesis, the same kind we would apply to Blake, Stevens, or Heidegger, whom Sarah Bakewell, in her *At the Existentialist Café*, calls "a literary innovator, and perhaps even as a kind of modernist novelist" (61). Cynthia Ozick, who is critical of Bloom's project, is right to claim, as noted above, that Bloom's *oeuvre* is less criticism than "a long theophanous prose poem, a rationalize version of Blake's heroic Prophetic Books" (46). Bloom, she writes, is "a vast and subtle system-maker, an interrupter of expectations, a subverter of predictability—the writer, via misprision, of a new Scripture based on discontinuity of tradition" (46). Bloom, then, is a poet whose system offers a new way of thinking about poetry and the poet. Having suffered from what Sartre called "the neurosis of literature" since he was a very young man, Bloom developed a system deeply rooted in the now unfashionable private psyche. In his beautiful introduction to *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, John N. Serio writes, "But the force of Steven's poetry, what keeps drawing us back to his poems—to his words and images and metaphors and rhythms—is that he speaks to our vast and inarticulate interior world" (xiii), and he gives Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom credit for being two of "only a handful of readers" to have "emphasized this quality" in Stevens' work (xiii). Serio continues, "Bloom places Stevens squarely 'in the curiously esoteric but centrally American tradition of Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau and Dickinson.' He sees Stevens as the twentieth-century poet who best expresses 'that solitary and inward glory we can none of us share with others'" (xiv). Bloom's entire body of work (and not just his *The Anatomy of Influence*) is his attempt to share, in Valery's words, "the influence of a mind on itself and of a work on its author" (qtd. in *Anatomy* 27). It is an attempt to make explicit his own "solitary and inward glory," however "curiously esoteric."

Bloom, Rorty, and the Reading Life

Bloom would agree with philosopher Robert Brandom (one of Rorty's former students) that the point of human life is "to make and understand an indefinite number of novel claims, frame an indefinite number of novel purposes . . . and to say things that no-one else has ever said, things furthermore that would never have been said if we did not say them" (178). Brandom goes on to argue, "it is our capacity to transform the vocabularies in which we live and move and have our being, and so create new ways of being (for creatures like us)" (178). Bloom's theory of influence invites us to do just that: "transform the vocabularies," the poems, "in which we live and move and have our being." It invites us—as "vocabulary mongers" (Brandom's phrase)—to speak a new language, to, in Rorty's words, "com-

pose one's own variations on old themes, to put one's twist on old words, to change a vocabulary by using it" ("Response" 189). Bloom, as creator and transformer of vocabularies, would also agree with Heidegger that poetry is "the supreme human activity" (Bakewell 184). And, Heidegger, Bakewell argues, "uses the word 'poetry' in a broad sense to mean much more than arranging words into verses. He traces it to its Greek root in poïesis—making or crafting—and he cites Hölderlin again, saying, 'poetically, man dwells on this earth.' Poetry is a way of being" (184). Poetry, and literature, more broadly, for Bloom, too, as the subtitle of *The Anatomy of Influence*—"Literature as a Way of Life"—asserts, is not only a way of being, but a way of life. Like Nietzsche, who "writes that what is necessary for coming to know what most people are like is *reading* [italics original]," Bloom's commitment to reading is, finally, about connecting with others, sharing intimately one's nature in and through texts (Nehamas 29). And, this is why we should read Bloom.

Shortly after being diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer, Rorty, to whom Bloom dedicates *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (2004), was having coffee with his elder son and a cousin, who happens to be a Baptist minister. In light of his recent diagnosis, the visiting cousin asked "whether [he[had found [his] thoughts turning toward religious topics" ("Fire"). Rorty, a lifelong non-believer, said no:

> "Well, what about philosophy?" my son asked. "No," I replied, neither the philosophy I had written nor that which I had read seemed to have any particular bearing on my situation. I had no quarrel with Epicurus's argument that it is irrational to fear death, nor with Heidegger's suggestion that ontotheology originates in an attempt to evade our mortality. But neither *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance) nor *Sein zum Tode* (being toward death) seemed in point. ("Fire")

When his son, undoubtedly puzzled by the response, persisted and then asked, "Hasn't *anything* you've read been of any use?" Rorty "found himself blurting out, 'poetry'" ("Fire"). While this may sound strange coming from a philosopher, it is hardly strange coming from *this* lover of wisdom. Rorty long ago ceased to distinguish between philosophy and literature, and, in fact, he came to privilege literature over what is still considered traditional philosophy. For Rorty, as for Bloom, poetry is deeply connected to life.[8] When Serio writes about Stevens' poems that "they transform us into introspective voyagers, questioners of our beliefs and certitudes," and that "they excite the mind, test our core response to the world outside us, and deepen our self-awareness" (xv), he is articulating a sentiment fundamental to Bloom and Rorty's projects. In the final paragraph of "The Fire of Life," published six months after his death on June 8, 2007, Rorty, sounding much like Bloom, writes,

> I now wish that I had spent somewhat more of my life with verse. This is not because I fear having missed out on truths that are incapable of statement in prose. There are no such truths; there is nothing about death that Swinburne and Landor knew but Epicurus and Heidegger failed to grasp. Rather, it is because I would have lived more fully if I had been able to rattle off more old chestnuts [e.g. poems by Swinburne and Landor]—just as I would have if I had made more close friends. Cultures with richer vocabularies are more fully human—farther removed from the beasts—than those with poorer ones; individual men and women are more fully human when their memories are amply stocked with verses. ("Fire")

We are more fully human when our memories are amply stocked with verses. In the age of Google, a memory stocked with much of anything is increasingly rare, and it takes little effort to imagine the dystopian future sketched by Walter M. Miller, Jr., in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Miller writes, "After the Deluge, the Fallout, the plagues, the madness, the confusion of tongues, the rage, there began the bloodletting of the Simplification," a time when books were burned and teachers and scientists—the bearers of "knowledge-systems"—were killed (62, 63). Inhumanity reigned supreme; forgetfulness was *de rigueur*. Into this breech stepped Father Isaac Edward Leibowitz, a Cistercian, who, with permission from Rome,

> found a new community of the religious. . . . Its task, unannounced, and at first only vaguely defined, was to preserve human history for the great-great-great-grandchildren of the children of the simpletons who wanted it destroyed. . . . Its members were either "bookleggers" or "memorizers," according to the tasks assigned. The bookleggers smuggled books to the southwest desert and buried them there in kegs. The memorizers committed to rote memory entire volumes of history, sacred writings, literature, and science, in case some unfortunate book smuggler was caught, tortured, and forced to reveal the location of the kegs. (64)

Among the "memorizers" we must include Rorty and, of course, Bloom, who, writes Sam Tanenhaus, in his review of *The Anatomy of Influence*, is "thoroughly steeped in several centuries' worth of English and American poetry, acres of it committed to memory" ("Harold").[9] In an age more political than literary, such a view sounds nostalgic—or worse, sentimental, another tired elegiac conclusion. But, this is a risk worth taking. Lovers of deep-reading, seekers of wisdom, the intellectually curious in search of "difficult pleasures" could do worse than read Harold Bloom, and read him through a pragmatist's eyes, as a thinker, a poet, in its broadest, Heideggerian sense, who takes literature—literature as a way of life—and the vocabularies it bequeaths to us, seriously.

Like the greatest of all American poets, Whitman, Bloom contains multitudes, and we should read Bloom for the same reason we read deeply any original literary imagining. It is Bloom's belief that "Whitman uniquely calls the reader-in-a-reader into more life" (*Daemon* 33). But, here "Whitman" can be read in an extended sense, as all original literary imaginings, particularly those which "impart wisdom by provocation, not instruction" (174). Finally, to give the old Bardolator the last word, we should read Bloom "not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to learn to share in that one nature that writes and reads" (*How to Read* 29).

Bridgewater State University

Notes

[1] The charge that Bloom prefers the Great Books and Schools of the Ages over works that speak directly to the issues of our time (particularly the race, class, and gender triumvirate) may be true but that, in my view, is no reason to dismiss him. While Bloom shares Nabokov's disdain for what the latter calls "topical trash," it is silly and, frankly, insulting to suggest that Homer, Shakespeare, Melville, Faulkner, Dostoevsky, James, etc. have nothing to offer people of color, women, or the poor. Dorothy Day would scoff at such a claim, as would Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. Along with Bloom, one of the best defenders still of the Great Books tradition is Denby, whose recent book *Lit Up: One Reporter. Three Schools. Twenty-Four Books That Can Change Lives* (2016) makes a remarkable case for the transformative power of literature, for literature *as* art. By observing a number of classrooms at the Beacon School, in Manhattan, a "cramped, ridiculously overcrowded place with a gym so intimate that a jump shot launched from fifteen feet would scrape the ceiling" (xiv), Denby "wanted to see if readers could be born—what happens when a nonreader becomes a reader?—which meant necessarily recording the students' mistakes and awkward moments as well as their insights and breakthroughs as they struggled into life. *If* they struggled into life" (xix-xx). Unsurprisingly, with the guidance of excellent and committed teachers, readers at Beacon, New York City; Mamaroneck, Westchester County; and at Hillhouse High School, New Haven, were born into life. At Beacon, Daniel Guralnick assigned students Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Denby comments, "if you read [*Invisible Man*] just for what it says about race, you were only half reading it" (235); and Guralnick adds, "'There's something much bigger here than any message. It's art'" (235).

[2] In "Solidarity or Objectivity?", Richard Rorty writes, "Those who wish to ground solidarity in objectivity—call them 'realists'—have to construe truth as correspondence to reality. . . . So they must construct an epistemology which has room for a kind of justification which is not merely social but natural, springing from human nature itself, and made possible by a link between that part of nature and the rest of nature. . . . By contrast, those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity—call them 'pragmatists'—do not require either a metaphysics or an epistemology. They view truth as, in William James' phrase, what is good for *us* to believe. So they do not need an account of a relation between beliefs and objects called 'correspondence,' nor an account of human cognitive abilities which ensures that our species is capable of entering into that relation" (22). To be clear, when I speak of pragmatism

generally or of reading Bloom "through a pragmatist's eyes," I am invoking Rorty's version of pragmatism. Readers interested in Rortyan pragmatism should start with *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989); Rorty's 2004 Page-Barbour Lectures, recently published as *Philosophy as Poetry* (2016), will prove a useful introduction to Rorty's thinking about the relationship between philosophy and literature. His *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) and *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (2007) collect early and late papers, respectively, on all of the issues that he was most interested in throughout his long career. For Bloom's influence on Rorty, see Áine Mahon's *The Ironist and the Romantic: Reading Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell* (2014).

[3] In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty "borrows [his] definition of 'liberal' from Judith Sklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do" (xv). Sklar sketches her version of liberalism in *Ordinary Vices* (1984).

[4] Lentricchia and Bloom, while splitting over T. S. Eliot, are one when it comes to Pater. In "My Kinsman, T. S. Eliot," Lentricchia writes, "is it becoming obvious to you that I'm a somewhat uneasy Italian American esthete who finds Walter Pater, unofficial mentor of Oscar Wilde, almost sufficient?" (55). Bloom, incidentally, claims Oscar Wilde "was right about everything" (*Western* 16).

[5] Bloom's claims about Shakespeare, e.g. that he "is the Canon" or that he "invented the human," are outside the scope of this essay. For these particular issues, see Chapter 2. Shakespeare, the Center of the Canon, in his *The Western Canon* (1994), and, of course, his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1999).

[6] Paul de Man once felt confident enough to suggest, "it will probably turn out that, in his understanding of the patterns of mis-reading . . . Harold Bloom has been ahead of everybody else all along" (274). While this may be the case, mis-reading never quite caught fire in the way either Bloom or de Man might have wished.

[7] The most recent study on Bloom, Alistair Heys' *The Anatomy of Bloom: Harold Bloom and the Study of Influence and Anxiety*, "outline[s] those elements in Bloom's work that explore his Gnostic relationship with important Protestant and American figures like Blake, Whitman, and Emerson" (1); Heys "proposes to distinguish between Bloom's Jewish cultural background and the more pervasive American-Protestant culture that he entered as an academic . . ." (5).

[8] In *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*: *An American Pilgrimage*, Paul Elie recounts a conversation between Dorothy Day and Robert Coles's students. Day, also looking back on her life, shares Rorty's sentiment about the importance and power of reading great works of literature:

> During a visit to St. Joseph's House, one of Robert Coles's students had asked her: *What is the meaning of your life? How would you like to be remembered?* She had replied at length, apologizing for her "rambling, disconnected thinking." She said she had tried to treat the stranger as Christ: speaking kindly to the guests, making sure they were well fed, earning their respect. And she hoped she had lived a life worthy of the great books she had read. "I'd like people to say that 'she really did love those books!' You know, I'm always telling people to read Dickens or Tolstoi, or read Orwell, or read Silone. I could be one of your teachers—though I'm not a great one for analyzing those novels; I want to live by them! That's the 'meaning of my life'—to live up to the moral vision of the Church, and of some of my favorite writers . . .

> to take those artists and novelists to heart, and live up to their wisdom: a lot of that came from Jesus, as you probably know, because Dickens and Dostoevski and Tolstoi kept thinking of Jesus themselves all through their lives." (452–53)

[9] In 1984, Sam Tanenhaus published a wonderful little book called *Literature Unbound: A Guide for the Common Reader*. As his subtitle suggests, he, like Bloom, believes great literature is accessible to everyone, not just the academic élite. And, in a very Bloomian move, he provides at the end of the book a list of "Suggested Readings" that could easily be dubbed "the Great Books and Schools of the Ages."

Works Cited

Arac, Jonathan. Afterword. *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America*, edited by Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, and Wallace Martin, U of Minnesota P, 1983, pp. 176–202.

Bakewell, Sarah. *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails*. Other P, 2016.

Blake, William. "Jerusalem." *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman, Anchor, 1988, pp. 146–258.

Bloom, Harold. *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*. Oxford UP, 1982.

———. *How to Read and Why*. Scribner, 2000.

———. *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*. Yale UP, 2011.

———. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford UP, 1973.

———. "The Breaking of Form." *Deconstruction and Criticism: Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller*. Continuum, 1979.

———. *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*. Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

———. *The Western Canon*: *The Books and School of the Ages*. Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994.

Brandom, Robert B. "Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism." *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert B. Brandom, Blackwell, 2000, pp.156–183.

Bruss, Elizabeth. *Beautiful Theories*: *The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1982.

De Bolla, Peter. *Harold Bloom: Towards Historical Rhetorics*. Routledge, 1988.

De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. U of Minnesota P, 1983.

Denby, David. *Lit Up*: *One Reporter. Three Schools. Twenty-Four Books That Can Change Lives*. Henry Holt, 2016.

Eagleton, Terry. *Figures of Dissent*: *Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Zizek and Others*. Verso, 2003.

———. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Blackwell, 1997.

Elie, Paul. *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*: *An American Pilgrimage*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003.

Epstein, Joseph. "Bloomin' Genius." *The Hudson Review*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2002, pp. 213-21.

Fite, David. *Harold Bloom: The Rhetoric of Romantic Vision*. U of Massachusetts P, 1985.

Gilbert, Sandra M, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale UP, 1979.

Hartman, Geoffrey. *Criticism in the Wilderness*. Yale UP, 1980.
Heys, Alistair. *The Anatomy of Bloom: Harold Bloom and the Study of Influence and Anxiety*. Bloomsbury, 2014.
Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*: *Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell UP, 1981.
Lentricchia, Frank. *After the New Criticism*. U of Chicago P, 1980.
———. "My Kinsman, T.S. Eliot." *Wild Orchids and Trotsky: Messages from American Universities*, edited by Mark Edmundson, Penguin, 1993, pp. 53–75.
———. *The Edge of Night*: *A Confession*. Random House, 1994.
Mahon, Áine. *The Ironist and the Romantic*: *Reading Richard Rorty and Stanley Cavell*. Bloomsbury, 2014.
Miller, Walter M. Jr. *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. Eos, 2006.
Morreal, John. *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion*. State U of New York P, 1999.
Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. Vintage, 1997.
Nehamas, Alexander. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Harvard UP, 1985.
O'Hara. Daniel T. *Empire Burlesque*: *The Fate of Critical Culture in Global America*. Duke UP, 2003.
Ozick, Cynthia. "Judaism & Harold Bloom." *Commentary*, vol. 67, no. 1, 1979, pp. 43-51.
Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. Cambridge UP, 1989.
———. "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism." *Consequences of Pragmatism*. U of Minnesota P, 1982, pp. 139–59.
———. "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida." *Consequences of Pragmatism*. U of Minnesota P, 1982, pp. 90–109.
———. *Philosophy as Poetry*. U of Virginia P, 2016.
———. "Response to Robert Brandom." *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert B. Brandom. Blackwell, 2000, pp. 183–89.
———. "Solidarity or Objectivity?" *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, Philosophical Papers Volume 1*. Cambridge UP, 1995, pp. 21–34.
———. "The Fire of Life." *Poetry Foundation*. N.p., 18 Nov. 2007. Web. 13 Aug. 2016.
———. "Wild Orchids and Trotsky." *Wild Orchids and Trotsky: Messages from American Universities*, edited by Mark Edmundson, Penguin, 1993, pp. 31–50.
Said, Edward. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Harvard UP, 1983.
Serio, John N. Introduction. *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, edited by John N. Serio. Knopf, 2013.
Sklar, Judith N. *Ordinary Vices*. Harvard UP, 1984.
Tanenhaus, Sam. "Harold Bloom: An Uncommon Reader." *The New York Times* N.p., 20 May 2011. Web. 8 Aug. 2016.