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Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* and Intertextuality

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Abstract:

Harold Bloom, the American theorist, in an interview in 1985 held with and recorded by Imre Salusinszky admitted that he "will be regarded as the author of one book: *The Anxiety of Influence*" (49). In the field of literary theory Bloom contributed a sequel of four books: *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975) and *Poetry and Repression* (1976). He attempted to develop, through the tetralogy of these books, an innovative and antithetical poetics of influence as against the formalist and anti-humanist poetics of Anglo-American New Criticism, Structuralism and Poststructuralism. As per Lane, Bloom "portrayed himself as a bastion of humanism in the midst of anti-humanist literary theories". (36)

The present paper focuses on the concept of agonistic contest, for gaining aesthetic supremacy, between strong precursors and their successor *ephebes* as per Bloom's poetics, which is built upon the postulate that "influence – anxieties are embedded in the agonistic basis of all imaginative literature" (*Anxiety*. Pref. xxiv). Bloom argues that in "kind", "the agonistic struggle for individual assertion" usually remains the same in Western literature. One may, however, discern differences of degree among different cultures in western tradition.

Keywords: *agone*, *agonistic struggle*, *ephebe*, its belatedness, oedipal conflict, anxiety of influence, misreading, misprision and revisionary tropes, and also intertextuality.

In the book *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom expounds his Freudian-inflected theory and thereby proposes a new poetics of reading literary discourse with his typical terminology, such as *ephebe's* influence-anxiety, belatedness, gnostic struggle and the use of revisionary tropes/misreading/misprision by the latecomer poet to find imaginative space and self-identity in the poetic realm. The theory in practice is demonstrated in the sequel of that book *A Map of Misreading*, in which Bloom endeavors "to demonstrate the use of this model for practical criticism, for the quest of how to read a poem" (*Map* 105).

Bloom identifies the beginning of the central *agone* of western literature in the agonistic contest of Plato with Homer. A belated poet, willy-nilly, is involved in oedipal conflict with his precursor through influence–anxiety. Traces of this dialectic of influence can be located in his belated text, the product of his "misreading" or "misprision" performed upon the precursor text by way of a kind of re-writing or re-creation.

In such a literary situation, the succeeding literary text, more or less, are seen as embedded in the phenomenon of intertextuality. One may, in a way, assume that occurrence of intertextual traces from one text to another is a kind of transference of influence–anxiety

infecting the subsequent writings via one poet to another poet as a never - ending process. Bloom visualizes this as a dilemma of modern poets, in particular.

In Bloom's version of dialectic relationship between poetic texts one may anticipate the ensuing theory of Intertextuality formulated by, the French critic, Julia Kristeva. In her study of the Russian critic Bakhtin, Kristeva is influenced by his view that the novel form is essentially "dialogic" or "polyphonic" or "heteroglottal". Bakhtin appreciates the dialogic novel of Dostoevsky. On that basis Bakhtin compares and contrasts the monologic novels of Tolstoy with that of the dialogic novels of Dostoevsky, "in which a variety of independent and equal voices are allowed to speak through the characters" (Gray 86), thus, presenting a "carnivalized" view of the world. One cannot deny that traces of Bakhtin are discernible in Kristevan concept of intertextuality. Simply stated, "Intertextuality" to Kristeva refers "to the many and various kinds of relationship that exist between texts, such as adaptation, translation, imitation, allusion, plagiarism and parody" (Gray 152).

The basic model of Bloom's psychopoetics of influence-anxiety is obviously drawn from Freudian Oedipal conflict between father and son. To him strong precursor poet is literary father to his strong, latecomer, poetic son called *ephebe* (*Gk.*), the "new citizen" of the realm of literature. He visualizes *ephebe's* wrestling with his dead poetic ancestors as a struggle for finding a voice, an imaginative space and thereby asserting self-identity. To Bloom influence-anxiety is "a never ending process" and "the affliction of belatedness . . . is a recurrent malaise of Western consciousness . . ." (*Map 77*)

As we know, the author, text and reader comprise three components of the basic model of literary communication, in which the first and third ones form the human components, while the text, the medial one, is a verbal component. The formalist criticism with its linguistic orientation tended to show its preference for 'form' rather than that of 'content' of a work of literature. Anglo-American New Critics, by granting autotelic and autonomous status to the text, also moved on the similar track with their method of 'close-reading' of a literary text, taken as an isolated 'verbal icon' or a verbal discourse. In the decades of 1960s, 1970s and onwards structuralism and poststructuralism, subsequently, held the sway over the literary scenario promoting literary theories, which usually have anti-humanistic stance, showing indifference towards the causal human element of the text.

Harold Bloom is one of the major figures who voice a reaction against the aforesaid anti-humanistic poetics. Bloom affirms the view "there are no texts. There are only ourselves" (Salusinszky 45). Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* formulates his antithetical theory of poetry offering a different version of "intertextuality". He attempts a restoration of the humanist-self as, he feels, is marginalized in the poststructuralist poetics. One need not forget that the Poststructuralist's segregation of the text from its "worldliness" was also criticized by one prominent postcolonial theorist, Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* exposing Euro-centric bias, he finds embedded in Western discourse.

It is common knowledge that the era of Renaissance humanism shows a significant shift in attitude from "other-worldliness" to "this-worldliness". Its anthropocentrism seeks to ennoble and dignify man as the crowning glory of creation. Shakespeare in *Hamlet* articulates this commonly held view through its protagonist Hamlet in the following words:

. . . *what a piece of work is man!* How noble in reason! how infinite in *faculty!* In form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angle! in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! (Act II. sc. ii)

Dr. Johnson accounts for this humanistic perspective in his famous essay "Preface to Shakespeare", in which he argues that Shakespeare is above all the writers, "the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life" (Chopra 300). About his mode of characterization Johnson further comments: "in the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species" (*Ibid.*)

Accordingly, Johnson's view of Shakespeare is that he taught humans how to understand human nature. Bloom fully subscribes to the view of Johnson and moves a step ahead by arguing that it was Shakespeare who invented the human. To Bloom Shakespeare is "simply not only the Western canon; he is also the world canon (*Anxiety* xv). In his ranking Shakespeare stands as the greatest of poets and he metaphorically posits him "to the giant age before the [Biblical] flood". To him the era of the anxiety of influence sets in thereafter and becomes "central to poetic consciousness" (*Anxiety* 11) in Western literary tradition.

Bloom as a theorist of poetic influence projects himself to be "an anxious partaker of Shakespeare", who sets "the inevitable role for us, who belatedly follow after Shakespeare's creation of our minds and spirits" (*Anxiety* xviii). Moreover, it is very unlikely to skip Shakespeare's abiding influence, all the succeeding writers, therefore, are "monumentally over-influenced by him. No strong writer since Shakespeare can avoid his influence They are sufferers of the anxieties of Shakespeare's influence" (*Anxiety* xix). Bloom to dispel doubts about his theory of poetic influence further comments that:

. . . poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not therefore necessarily better. The profundities of poetic influence cannot be reduced to source-study, to the history of ideas, the patterning of images. Poetic influence, or . . . poetic misprision, is necessarily the study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet. (*Anxiety* 7)

The theory of poetic influence, thus, intends to present the story of intra-poetic relationships as visualized by Bloom "between poets seen as parallel cases akin to what Freud called the family romance" (8). In the introductory chapter of *The Anxiety of Influence* we have Bloom's thesis- statement concerning his humanist theory of anxiety-embedded influence on account of indebtedness of strong poetic predecessor on the strong successor *ephebe*, who persistently strives for making a poetic space for his self-identity along with the melancholic sense of his belated arrival on the literary scene. The thesis postulates that:

Poetic history . . . is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves. (*Anxiety* 5)

Shakespeare, above all, occupies the key-position in Bloom's survey of Western canon. Bloom sees in Shakespeare a literary titan, an exceptionally strong poet exemplifying absolute absorption of the strong precursors. His poetic consciousness was unaffected by the anxiety of influence of indebtedness of his predecessors. Shakespeare's supreme standing makes Bloom exclude him for the book's subsequent arguments. He, therefore, examines the battle of anxiety of influence between equally strong contestants, father and son, as mighty opposites like mythical king Laius and Oedipus, his son. He delimits his concerns "only with the poet-in-a poet or the aboriginal poetic self" (*Anxiety* 11).

For his Freudian-inflected poetics of influence Bloom chooses a terminology which is rather arbitrary and, thus, an attempt to have a basic understanding of his vocabulary would be worthwhile.

Bloom coined the catch-phrase "anxiety of influence" to express his notion of a kind of Oedipal relationship between "individual poets to their literary precursors, who fulfill the function of the father in the Freudian family drama" (Cuddon 47). Further, "the artistic development of the great poet", as visualized by Bloom, "is a progress moving from admiration and imitation of the poetic forebear to rejection and displacement", and eventually this leads "to a crucial 'misprision' (misreading) by which the new poet [*ephebe*] deforms and recasts the work of the precursor to make something quite new" (*Ibid.*).

Bloom, thus, sees "the strong originality born in the overthrow of the earlier influential writer in the creative psyche of the nascent later one" (*Ibid.*); and he lists examples of such straggle between strong *ephebe* (belated new comer) and strong precursor, such as "the struggle of Wordsworth with Milton, Shelley with Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens with Whitman (*Ibid.*). The term *ephebe* in Greek means a young citizen. Bloom employs this term in the sense of "the citizen of the poetic realm". His assumption is that "strong poetry begins with a willful act of misreading that allows that *ephebe* . . . to absorb and overcome the influence of his precursors" (Macey 47).

Similarly, by his term "belatedness" Bloom refers to that particular mindset and predicament of the strong *ephebe* poet "who feels that his predecessors have already said anything worth saying, that there is no room for further creativity" (Cuddon 79). The term *agon* to Bloom refers to a kind of "intergenerational conflict" between strong literary ancestors and strong successors. In Western literary tradition, Bloom traces in Plato, the beginning of this conflict "in Plato's fierce rivalry with the ach-poet Homer" (Worton & Judith Still 3). From Bloom's perspective Plato is seen as "asserting the superiority of his form of creation to that of the (his) beloved Homer" (*Ibid.*). Further, Plato's adoption of the form of the 'Socratic dialogue' is also seen as "the striving of Plato the artist-philosopher against the influence of Homer" (*Ibid.*).

To Bloom an *ephebe* is a kind of anti-natural or an antithetical man, for he possesses a will to persistently, "wrestle with his strong predecessor". This strong young belated but new comer poet in the literary realm, from the beginning of his poetical adventure: "quests for an impossible object, as his precursor quested before him" (*Anxiety* 10). The quest involves "misinterpretation" or "misprision" of the poems of his strong predecessor. The simultaneous self-appropriation in the process of re-creation also involves the anxiety of indebtedness as per Bloom's argument.

Vincent B. Leitch comments on the "*ephebe's* (newcomer's) belated arrival on the literary realm as under :

We are all "belated", arriving late into a cultural landscape already created by others, and given a preexisting language to express ourselves. Most people fit themselves into typical roles, using common idioms; many try to make the world better fit their needs. But the "strong poet" attains a heightened individuality through a radical re-vision of tradition (1649).

Leitch, further, argues that the strong poet "in his impossible quest to achieve immortality . . . strives to replace nature with art and previous poems with his own work thereby declaring himself self-created and the master of his own fate" (*Ibid.*)

It is apparent in Bloom's version of intertextuality that it seeks the service of "the psychological struggle to achieve selfhood" as against the poststructuralists marginalization of the humanist-self. He draws his model from Sigmund Freud's 'masculine Paradigm: Oedipal conflict between father and sons and in the poetic realm equates the former with the "strong precursors" and latter "strong ephebes". Like Freud, Bloom "stresses competition,

aggression and self-assertion in ways that seem stereotypically male". He has admiration for those "strong" writers "who most fully gain individuality, and aspires to write a strong, creative criticism that will overcome and outdo his own precursors (Leitch 1648-49).

M.H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1957) insightfully examines Bloom's oedipal model of anxiety-influence on belated ephebe and explains his dilemma in the following words:

The belated poet unconsciously safeguards his own sense of autonomy and priority by reading a parent-poem 'defensively', in such a way as to distort it beyond his own conscious recognition. None the less, he cannot avoid embodying the malformed parent-poem into his own doomed attempt to write an unprecedentedly original poem; the most that even the best belated poet can achieve is to write a poem so 'strong' that it effects an illusion of 'priority' – that is, an illusion both that it precedes the father-poem in time and it exceeds it in greatness (cited in Cuddon 333-34).

According to Cuddon, Bloom draws upon the Freudian model of defensive mechanisms to develop his concept of "six revisionary ratios". They are to Bloom six distortive processes playing functional role in the reading of a precursor poet (334). He denies any possibility of knowing a "poem-in-itself", so, eventually; all interpretation or all reading turns out to be a "necessary misprision" or "misreading".

To some readers, Bloom may vaguely sound like Norman Holland, a significant name in the field of "ego-psychology". Holland in his books *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (1968) and *Five Readers Reading* (1975) develops a kind of reader-text psychology and thereby mainly focuses on the relationship between reader and text. He perceives in reader's aesthetic response to a given text an attempt to satisfy her/his unconscious wishes. That is way, it is, so often, noticed that under the spell of "empathy" and "sympathy" many readers tend to "identify" themselves with a fictional character. Holland has also affirmed the view that "it is the *reader* who does the work *not* the text. The reader re-creates identity" (Cuddon 334).

The reader's role in the act of reading is a significant factor in any literary communication. From this perspective Bloom's *ephebe* is a belated reader, who is in *agon* (an intergenerational conflict) with his strong literary ancestor or precursor. This being the case, *ephebe's* reading and interpretation performed on the precursor text turns out to be a misreading or misinterpretation, which can ensure for him a self identity or an imaginative space in the realm of literature.

Macey views Bloom's theory of influence-anxiety as based upon the notion of intergenerational conflict (*agon*) and his survey of the western canon as giving the impression as if the battle has been lost (47).

The book *The Anxiety of Influence* theorizes the struggle for identity that each generation of poets have compulsively to fight under the apparent "threat" of the greatness of its literary ancestors, and this situation is visualized in terms of an enactment of the Oedipal drama in the field of literature. For Leitch "this striving for originality necessarily involves aggression, but this struggle with the past is disguised in what Bloom leveled "six revisionary ratios". Each represents a strategy enabling the latecomer to revise the previous poet, while either denying influence or professing reverence (1649). A synoptic view of six-revisionary ratios is given below in Bloom's words :

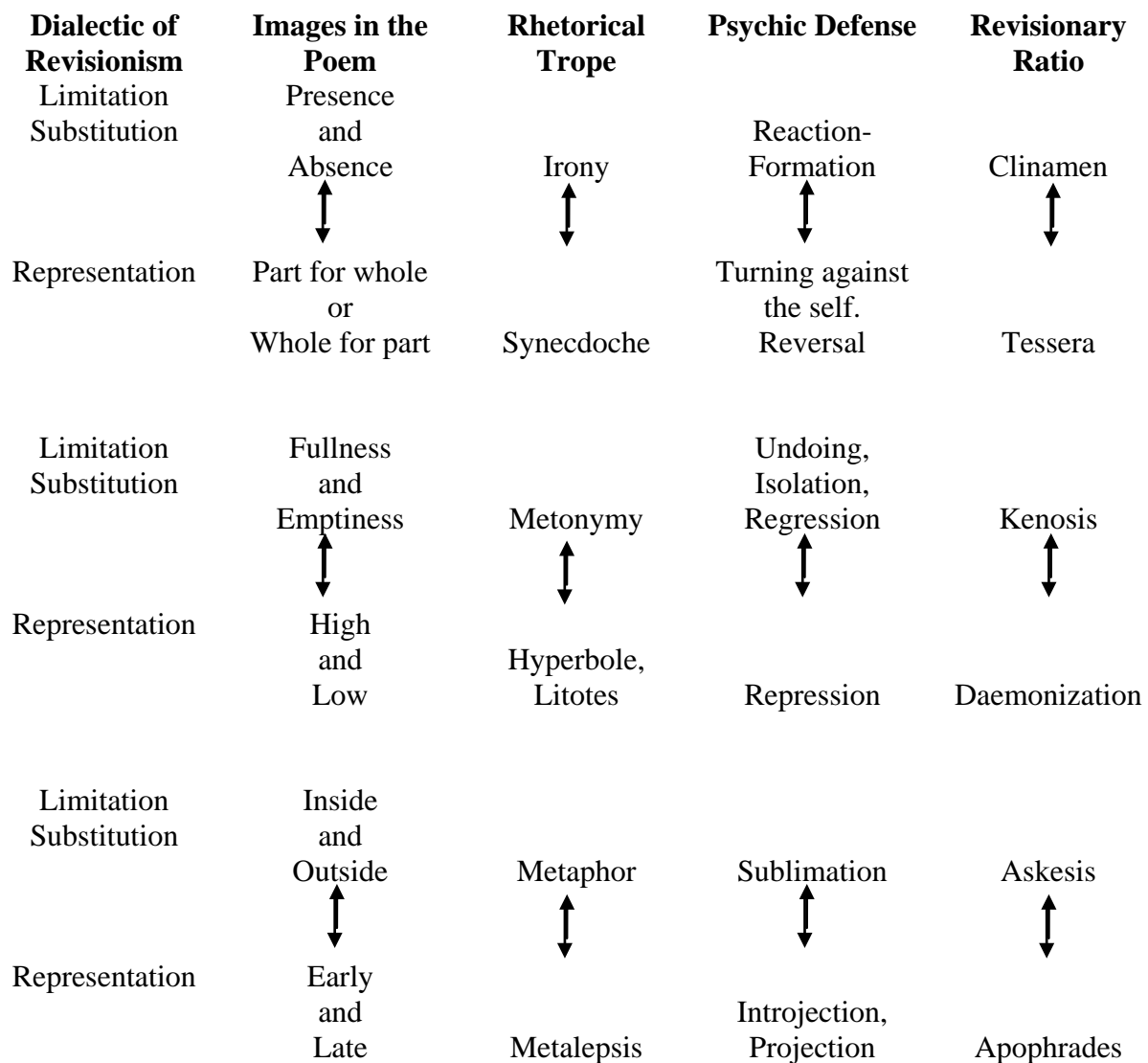
1. *Clinamen*, which is poetic misreading or misprision proper; I take the world from Lucretius, where it means a "swerve" of the atoms so as to

make change possible in the universe. A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it.

2. *Tessera*, which is completion and antithesis; A poet antithetically "completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough.
3. *Kenosis*, which is a breaking-device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions. Kenosis then is a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor. . . . The later poet, apparently emptying himself of his own afflatus, his imaginative godhood, seems to humble himself as though he were ceasing to be a poet, . . . that the precursor is emptied out also, and so the later poem of deflation is not as absolute as it seems.
4. *Daemonization*, or a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, The later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent-poem that does not belong to the parent proper, He does this in his poem, by so stationing its relation to the parent-poem as to generalize away the uniqueness of the earlier work.
5. *Askesis*, or a movement of self-purgation The later poet does not, as in *kenosis*, undergo a revisionary movement of emptying, but of curtailing, . . . and he does this in his poem by so stationing it in regard to the parent-poem as to make that poem undergo an *askesis* too; the precursor's endowment is also truncated.
6. *Apophrades*, or the return of the dead The later poet, in his own final phase . . . holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet's flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself in the revisionary ratios. But the poem is now held open to the precursor, . . . it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself has written the precursor's characteristic work. (*Anxiety* 14-16)

As for *A Map of Misreading*, it is, in fact, acknowledged as a manual in practical criticism. Bloom in the book works out and elaborates upon his theoretical view of the struggle of the *ephebe* poet with tradition striving to make space for him in the realm of imaginative literature. *Ephebe's* striving is conditioned by the dialectics of influence – anxiety and defense mechanisms. As per Bloom's argument "no poet, *as poet*, can wish to die, for that negates poethood" (*Map* 91). The composition of a poem, therefore, tantamount to a poet's striving to escape dying. In the situation, as Bloom makes us believe, "to live, the poet must *misinterpret* the father by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father (*Map* 19).

The extent of applicability of the "Map" as tool in literary interpretation has been successfully demonstrated by Bloom. It opens up a new perspective for the questing reader as to how to read a poem. In Bloom's formulation "influence" becomes a trope of tropes acquiring the status of his master-trope, which subsumes his typology of six-tropes: irony, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, metaphor and metalepsis. In a way, his six fold tropes are "six interpretations of influence, six ways of reading / misreading intra-poetic relationships" (*Map* 71). The theoretical model of "Map" of "misprision" as developed by Bloom is given in the figure below for ready reference.



(Map 84)

What's more, interpretations to Bloom always involves interpretation of a poem's interpretation of other poems, therefore, a belated, new poem necessarily becomes interpretations of its difference from other poems. Moreover, about the language of poetry Bloom argues that "the language of poet is his stance, his relation to the language of poetry, you therefore measure his stance in regard to his precursors' stance" (Map 76). Bloom argues that the poet – in poet is strengthened by responding to the never ending process of influence: ". . . strong poets become strong by meeting the anxiety of influence, not by ignoring it no poet can write a poem without, in some sense, remembering another poem" (Map 199).

To sum up, Bloom foregrounds the humanist-self in his version of "intertextuality" by seeking "the service of the psychological (Oedipal) struggle to achieve selfhood. He obviously admires those "strong" writers who must fully gain individuality" (Leitch 1649). Moreover, "the burden of Bloom's argument is that we are belated sons who will never be as great as our fathers, but it is death for us to admit that we are inferior" (Leitch 1648). It is an inescapable fact, Bloom tells us, that the "tradition of great writers is both a blessing and a curse" (*Ibid.*). His vision of "anxiety of influence" is original and it depicts an ongoing

tension between tradition and innovation and, thereby, it highlights our necessarily ambivalent relation to our literary ancestors.

Bloom is criticized for his Freudian psychological model which seems stereotypically masculine and also ahistorical, in the sense that "oedipal complex" is presented as something held "true for all families at all times and in all places." (Leitch 1649). Bloom defends his theory of influence by arguing that "it should be read as a series of tropes, not a patriarchal application of Freud" (Lane 40).

Showalter voices a feminist reaction when she contends that "Bloom's theory is so reliant upon an Oedipal struggle between fathers and sons that it can scarcely be applied to women's writing" (Macey 18). Notwithstanding that, Gilbert and Gubar in their book *Madwomen in the Attic* defend Bloom by arguing that Bloom's theory "can be modified to explore the way in which women writers from Jane Austin to Emily Dickinson have always struggled, against the image of the 'women writer' produced by male authors and male texts" (*Ibid.*).

Moreover, Bloom through his "revisionary tropes" attempts to align "the creative 'will to figuration' that is literature with the creation of new language via figures of speech." (Lane 38). By going through the companion volume *A Map of Misreading* it can be ensured that Bloom's antithetical model of criticism goes beyond the patriarchal root. Finally, Lane argues that Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* is a significant attempt to synthesize "some of his most powerful arguments about literature and subjectivity to date." (38). In Bloom's scheme of complete interpretation his six revisionary tropes are also psychic defenses, which are assimilated into his master trope "influence", which again for him is "a figuration for poetry itself" (*Map* 71).

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