Revisionary Ratios (Bloom)

In the Spring of 1998, Harold Bloom was one of the year's four lecturer's in the Stanford University Presidential Lectures in the Humanities and Arts. A text published on that series' web site explained the six "revisionary ratios" Bloom described in his 1973 book, *The Anxiety of Influence*. These are presented below, with commentary in italics.

1. **Clinamen**, which is poetic misreading or misprision proper ... This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves.

In the Lucretian "flow model," a clinamen or swerve creates its own geometry of turbulence. This can be highly evocative because of the architectural properties of swerves created when parts of the environment get "out of synch" with their surroundings; or in the more normative circumstances of festivals and holidays, where time is altered to reflect the "eternal return" of annual events. Here, Bloom may have missed the point of the Freudian repetition compulsion — that it returns to an "empty place," represented in religious observances and even some secular holidays as un-symbolizable, gestural actions.

2. **Tessera**, which is the completion and antithesis ... A poet antithetically "completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent poem as to retain its terms but to mean to them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough.

The full range of meanings related to tesseræ is extremely broad. Ultimately, the function of the broken edge can be traced to Gnostic theories of genesis, where all creation stems from the shattering of an original crystal, and all clues to this origin lie in the configuration of the fractures and edges that resulted. Tessera also relates to chiasmus and the creation of internal codes that link two parts of a single artwork, "silently" connected in a kind of anamorphosis that plants a work inside a work. Chiasmus, an X or V-shaped design, is an effective way of concealing an internal structure that, instead of signifying directly, "signalizes" to the viewer by being both "there" and "not there."

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, but this ebbing is so performed in relation to a precursor's poem-of-ebbing that the precursor is emptied out also, and so the later poem of deflation is not as absolute as it seems.

If tessera is about fracture, kenosis is about the relation of knowledge to the part, and therefore a "metonymic" means of knowing through "halves." This could be as simple a matter as staging a dialog, as Plato did, and allowing meanings to be dispersed through the process of argument and conversation. Or, knowing by halves could be accepted, more ambitiously, as a paraphrase for Hegelian dialectic.

4. **Daemonization**, or a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in reaction to the precursor's 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, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor. 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.

Bloom misses the opportunity to connect dæmon with Eros in the way that Paul Friedländer found to dominate Plato's thought and work. Eros is not simply love but concealed, displaced, postponed, lost, and falsified love — love in other words under all the usual conditions. Dæmon is also about placement and displacement, about the anxiety of a loss of location or an inability to locate some force or threat. Dæmon characteristically calls for a process of interpolation — a triangulation procedure that attempts to fix locations through inference, or, more accurately, through abduction.

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; he yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor, 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.

Withdrawal has such specific spatial implications that it is impossible to miss the chance to connect it with retreat, disappearance, abjection, defensive fortifications, desert conditions, walkabouts, and other spatial strategies that employ the landscape in a spiritual exercise. Monasteries are the architectural answer to the question "How does askesis relate to kenosis?" Bloom is sometimes abstract in his attempt to correct problems of poetic paternity/maternity, but without his careful discipline in ordering these topics, their symmetry would not be evident in any extended form.

6. **Apophrades**, or the return of the dead...The later poet, in his own final phase, already burdened by an imaginative solitude that is almost a solipsism, 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, where once it was open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work.

The return of the dead is also the "voice of the dead," the "voix acousmatique" of Michel Chion that speaks by halves and through signalizing, the super-ego presence within the dream and other hauntings that pose the question of our relation to, not just the past, but to an ab-original past. This question was taken up by Joyce in his presentation of the Words of the Thunder, multi-syllabic portmanteau assemblages of fragments from myriad languages, based on Giambattista Vico's idea that the thunder initiated human thought by making the first humans imagine that the sky was trying to speak to them. Apophrades is the prophetic, in whatever circumstances it manifests itself.

More Bloom ...

antithetical criticism If to imagine is to misinterpret, which makes all poems antithetical to their precursors, then to imagine after a poet is to learn his own metaphors for his acts of reading. Criticism then necessarily becomes antithetical also, a series of swerves after unique acts of creative misunderstanding.

The first swerve is to learn to read a great precursor poet as his greater descendants compelled themselves to read him. The second is to read the descendants as if we were their disciples, and so compel ourselves to learn where we must revise them if we are to be found by our own work, and claimed by the living of our own lives.

Neither of these quests is yet Antithetical Criticism. That begins when we measure the first clinamen against the second. Finding just what the accent of deviation is, we proceed to apply it as corrective to the reading of the first but not the second poet or group of poets...

Summary: Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem. A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety. Poets' misinterpretations of poems are more drastic than critics' misinterpretations or criticism, but this is only a difference in degree and not at all in kind. There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations, and so all criticism is prose poetry. Critics are more or less valuable than other critics only (precisely) as poets are more or less valuable than other poets. For just as a poet must be found by the opening in a precursor poet, so must the critic. The difference is that a critic has more parents. His precursors are poets and critics. But — in truth — so are a poet's precursors, often and more often as history lengthens.

Source: http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/bloom/excerpts/anxiety.html