Chapter 1

The Dialectics of Revisionism

Harold Bloom’s extended meditation on the subject of influence finds its finest expression in his polemical works such as The Anxiety of Influence (1973), A Map of Misreading (1975), Kabbalah and Criticism (1975) and Poetry and Repression (1976). His profound interest in influence runs as an undercurrent in his other works. The central argument that Bloom puts forward is that poets who come late in literary history are caught in an inescapable struggle with their mighty forbears in order to create space for themselves in poetic history. Belatedness compels the latecomers to resist and challenge, to distort and subvert the poetic tradition in order to give vent to their true voice and vision. Such polemics views poetic history as an endless conflict between precursors and ephebes. It also looks at poetic expression as an anxiety for originality and priority which results in interpretative reversal, misreading, Oedipal rivalry, repression and melancholy. The aspiring poets either succumb to past poetic achievement by becoming mere imitators or assert their creative power over the threatening and oppressing presence of their predecessors. Poetic influence which forms and malforms poets thus becomes an anxiety principle. Milton, for instance, was a terrifying father figure admired and envied by the romantic poets, siblings who nursed the dark wish to deface and disfigure, slay and usurp their poetic father. As Bloom says, “poetic influence –
when it involves two strong, authentic poets – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation” (*AI* 130). He sees the history of influences which means the entire tradition of western poetry as “a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist” (*AI* 130). Oppressed and threatened by the overwhelming presence of his precursors, the latecomer poet deliberately revises, displaces and misreads earlier texts. Bloom’s poetics depicts the relation between poets as a struggle between sons and fathers or what Freud terms as family romance. As Terry Eagleton observes:

The Poet, locked in Oedipal rivalry with his castrating “precursor”, will seek to disarm (the latter’s) strength by entering it from within writing in a way which revises, displaces and recasts the precursor poem; in this sense, all poems can be read as re-writings of other poems, and as “misreadings” or “misprisions” of them, attempts to fend off their overwhelming force so that the poet can clear a space for his own imaginative originality (183).

Poetic history in a sense tells the story of relations between poets marked by guilt, envy, love, hate and ambivalences characteristic of Oedipal conflict. Reluctant to reduce the profundities of poetic influence to source study, Bloom sees it as the study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet or as lessons in the
history of revisionism. Poets and texts are caught in an internecine war against other poets and texts. The spirit of combat or agon hovers over the entire literary scene. As Frank Lentricchia observes, “Literary influence is seen as willful misreading; even (and this after Freud) life is seen as an internecine warfare, one huge demonic ‘family romance’” (325).

Bloom has always emphasized the distinction between his concept of influence and traditional source study which traces the transmission of ideas, styles, symbols and images from precursors to latecomers. He expounds a fierce and profound notion of intertexuality. Influence, according to Bloom, means there are no texts but only relationships between texts. It is the dialectics that governs the relationship between poems. It is concerned with the art of knowing “the hidden roads that go from poem to poem” (AI 96). Insisting on the difference between influence as the study of themes and influence as rhetorical spacing, Bloom says that sound patterns or verbal reminders have nothing to do with influence. A poem is a deep misprision of a previous poem when we recognize the later poem as being “absent rather than present on the surface of the earlier poem and yet still being in the earlier poem, implicit or hidden in it, not yet manifest, and yet there” (KC 66 – 7). The theory of the anxiety of influence has radically changed the way we read poetry and understand the relations between poets. Peter de Bolla rightly holds that Bloom’s notion of influence is probably one of “the most widely disseminated concepts at work in literary critical practice today” (8).
Source study is ruled out in Bloom’s formulation of influence and he insists that his motive is to “distinguish once and for all what I call poetic influence from traditional source study” (MM 116). Certainly Bloom gives his own definition to influence:

What I mean by ‘influence’ is the whole range of relationships between one poem and another which means that my use of ‘influence’ is itself a highly conscious trope indeed a six fold trope that intends to subsume six major tropes: irony, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, metaphor, and metalepsis and in just that ordering. (MM 70)

Again he observes that “if we consider influence as the trope of rhetorical irony that connects an earlier to a later poet [. . .] then influence is a relation that means one thing about the intra-poetic situation while saying another” (MM 71). Still again he says “influence is influenza – an astral disease” (95). Bloom’s frontal attack on the over-spiritualization of poetic works canonized by tradition is vehemently articulated in his The Anxiety of Influence which is described by Hartman as a “dense, eloquent and experiential brooding” (War 26). It is a book which casts a spell over the reader and it also defies all generic classifications. Referring to its unique character, Paul de Man observes that the work brings together “ideological, textual and historical criticism, in a combination that is no longer unusual in recent influential essays on literature” (Blindness 267). Bloom claims that there is only interpretation. A
A poem is an interpretation of a precursor poem or poems. A poem is seen as a complex web of turns, swerves, defenses, tropes, imagistic maskings intended to antithetically complete a precursor poem. Clarifying Bloom's concept of misprision, Edward Said in his article "The Poet as Oedipus" comments: "Instead of texts and authors there are wills struggling to overcome other wills, there are patricides and infanticides whose paradox is that poetry is, if not the manifest result of such violence, then the constantly impressive evidence" (23).

As far as Bloom is concerned what is true of poetry is also true of criticism and he believes that all poems are misinterpretations of parent poems. A poem is not to be seen as an overcoming of anxiety, but an expression and embodiment of that anxiety. Revisionism is what operates at creative and critical fields and every interpretation answers to an earlier interpretation. As Bloom claims, "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" (AI 94 – 95).

What he emphasizes is that critics must strive for a widening of critical consciousness. A poem in "itself" is not an autonomous whole; it represents spheres of influence and latent dramatic conflicts. We should not regard any figure of capable imagination as an autonomous ego however solipsistic the poet is. Every poet has a dialectical relationship with another poet or poets.
Closely related to and central to the theory of influence is the concept of misprision which is one of Bloom’s key critical terms and he has appropriated the word away from its normal derivative sense and used it for his own idiosyncratic purposes. Oxford English Dictionary states that “misprision” is derived from an Old French word “misprision” meaning mistake or error and in English legal language it refers to judicial misdemeanor or a failure of duty on the part of a public official. In relation to treason or felony, “misprision of treason” refers to the concealments of a person’s knowledge of treasonable actions. In popular speech, the term has the general sense of mistake or misunderstanding. An obsolete or archaic meaning of the word is malformation of nature. The Oxford English Dictionary also mentions an archaic meaning of the word derived from a French root “mespris” meaning “contempt”, “scorn”, or “failure to appreciate or recognize as valuable.” It is obvious that all these overtones of the word appeal to Bloom who is, as Lass ole Sauerberg claims, “keen on tracing influence as an anxious anti-influence in terms of evasion and opposition; in other words as treason – to contemptuous or not – against a well-protected sense of literary history as a process of imitation and adaptation?” (134). Sauerberg sees Bloom’s polemics as a kind of struggle for survival:

Misprision in literary history is however, a phenomenon with a double edge. On the part of the poet, misprision, the necessary revolt against the precursor, is experienced as a sin, as the rejection of an earlier authority. No wonder that the ephebe or the
newcomer feels at a loss at what must be felt as betrayal of one most dear to him. [...] the commitment of misprision is a sign of health. In a kind of Darwinian process, the survival of the fittest poet is a matter not of adaptability but of the exact opposite: poetic survival is granted to the poet most able to stand out. (135)

Bloom argues that the meaning of a strong poem is another strong poem, a precursor’s poem which is being misinterpreted, revised, corrected and evaded. Poetic influence, according to Bloom, is “poetic misprision, a poet’s making or doing amiss of a parent poem that keeps finding him [...]” (I 9). Influence denotes the relationships between poems and misprision is a fierce process by which an ephebe creates a poem in reaction against a powerful precursor poem. By misprision, Bloom means “literary influence viewed not as misreading whose purpose is to clear away the precursor so as to open a space for oneself” (Agon 64). The psychological dimension of such a formulation is obvious. Bloom’s formulation of influence is centered on the relation between poets analogous to the relation of the unconscious to the ego. As poetry is anarchic and regressive and as the precursor is never absorbed as a part of the superego but as part of the id, it is natural for the new poet to deliberately misread his precursors. The force of such misreading, as Ann Wordsworth maintains, is that its strategies involve “a dense and subtle interweaving of energies both psychic and linguistic” (“Blind World of the Wish” 214–15).

Bloom’s theory of misprision stems from his firm conviction that the New
Critical ways of reading poems like verbal analysis or *explication de texte* have failed to help us in reading poems and so he proposes not another new poetics, but a wholly different practical criticism. The attempt to understand a poem as an organic whole is to be thrust aside and it has to be understood as a deliberate misinterpretation of a precursor poem or poetry in general. Reading poetry is seen not as a refined activity, but as a fierce Oedipal struggle, an internecine warfare conducted between poets and their precursors and, as Handleman remarks, it is "a battlefield in which the combatants are all engaged in trying to create some kind of original space for themselves" (181).

Primary criticism which relates poems to experience or aesthetic rumination is inadequate in helping us read and understand poetry. Such a view of reading poetry has been shared by several Yale critics such as Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman and Hillis Miller, with whom Bloom was also associated in the 70s though he has considerable difference from their critical methods and principles. The Yale critics have been accused of self-absorption, display of a disjunctive, self-reflexive style and a rejection of, what Gerald Graff calls "objective norms of interpretation" (477). It is evident that Bloom has deliberately resisted an empirical, practical, objective and plain style criticism and has offered an antithetical and visionary mode of interpretation. A commonsensical, practical, school masterly criticism is repellant to Yale critics such as Hartman who argues that criticism must be literary and creative. As he claims, "Criticism, in short is not extraliterary, not outside of literature or art
looking in; it is a defining and influential part of its subject, a genre with some constant and some changing features” (“The Recognition” 410). Bloom’s critical practice is a severe condemnation of primary criticism. It is an extension of the creative misreading of a text, a part of the history of the meaning of a text, an act similar to the creative one. It is mere tautology in which the poem is itself or means itself or reduction in which the poem means something that is not itself a poem. Bloom’s contention is that the meaning of a poem can only be a poem: its meaning is that there is or was another poem.

Bloom’s concept of antithetical criticism stresses a poem’s response to another poem, a poem not chosen arbitrarily but a central poem by a strong precursor and he suggests that an ephebe need not have read this precursor poem which he misreads. Bloom asserts: “Source study is wholly irrelevant. We are dealing with primal words, but antithetical meanings, and an ephebe’s best misinterpretation will be of poems he had never read” (Al 70). Bloom argues that there are no right or wrong readings but weak or strong misreadings. To him, primary criticism is weak and antithetical criticism is strong. Denis Donoghue observes that antithetical criticism concentrates upon certain “disruptive moments in the poem and insists on finding there the signs of anxiety, crisis and defense” (Ferocious 138).

Rejecting primary criticism, Bloom has stressed a reading practice based on the relationships between a poet, his poem and the poem’s relations to other poems. Critics have interpreted poetry in terms of presence, unity, form and
meaning. Such interpretations, according to Bloom, reflect the critics’ illusions about the nature of a poem and he has listed four such illusions. The first is the religious illusion, that a poem possesses or creates a real presence. The second is the organic illusion that a poem possesses or creates a kind of unity. The third is the rhetorical illusion, that a poem possesses or creates a definite form. Finally there is the metaphysical illusion, that a poem possesses or creates meaning.

Bloom maintains that poems do not have presence, unity, form or meaning and he argues that presence is a faith, unity a mistake or even a lie, form a metaphor, and meaning an arbitrary and repetitious metaphysics. To Bloom, a poem has nothing and creates nothing. Bloom says:

Its presence is a promise, part of the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Its unity is in the goodwill of its reader. Its form is another version of the inside/outside metaphor of the dualizing post-Cartesian West, which means that form in poetry is always merely a change in perspective. Finally, its meaning is just that there is, or rather was, another poem. (KC 122)

To Bloom a poem is a substitution for a lost first chance, which pragmatically means for another poem. In poetry substitution is primarily a rhetorical device, which returns us to the primacy of the trope.
The function of criticism is to decide the meaning of a work of art and this meaning must be achieved against a prior plentitude of meaning, for Bloom holds that “the freedom to have a meaning of one’s own [. . .] is wholly illusory” (BF 3) and the act of reading and deciding meaning is an act of combat, an agon. Freedom of meaning is wrested by combat, of meaning against meaning. But this combat consists in a reading encounter and interpretive moment within that encounter.

Claiming that a mode of interpretation that seeks to restore meanings to texts is illusory, Bloom formulates his project of antithetical criticism which refuses to distinguish between defenses and tropes, seeing writing and reading as defensive warfare. The two-fold meaning of the antithetical is taken into account by Bloom. The first is “the antithetical as the counter-placing of rival ideas in balanced or parallel structures, phrases, words and there is also the antithetical as the anti-natural, or the “imaginative” opposed to the natural. The first is the antithetical of Freud in his investigation of ‘primal words’, the second is the antithetical of Nietzsche, as developed by Yeats in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, where he insists that “the other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, comes but to those who are no longer deceived whose passion is reality” (88). Freud’s understanding of the rhetorical meaning of the antithetical views tropes as mechanisms of defenses whereas Nietzsche’s psychological meaning of antithetical views defenses as tropes. But Bloom’s antithetical criticism recognizes that tropes and defenses are interchangeable when they appear in poems.
What Bloom calls revisionary ratios are tropes and defenses and they are manifested in poetic imagery. To a rhetorical critic a defense is a concealed trope and a psychoanalytic critic may regard a trope as a concealed defense. But an antithetical critic will learn to use both in turn, relying upon “the substitution of analogues as being one with the poetic process itself” (MM 89).

To denote the disruptions within poetic tradition and to measure the differences between precursor texts and later texts, Bloom has formulated six revisionary ratios and assigned them names from esoteric classical sources – clinamen, tessera, kenosis, demonization, askesis and apophrades. Bloom defines them as “relational events” (AI 28) and they are intended to gauge the “relationships between two or more texts” (AI 65). Revisionary ratios mark the relations between unequal terms wherein the later poet, always magnifies the precursor in the very act of falsifying (interpreting) him (MM 95). To expound his map of misprision, Bloom draws heavily from the Lurianic account of creation, especially the concepts of Zimzum (creator’s withdrawal) Shevirath hakelim (breaking apart-of-the-vessels) and Tikkun (restoration). Kabbalistic notions of limitation, substitution and representation are combined with tropes and psychic defenses. Central to Bloom’s poetics is the interplay of figures and images and he distinguishes between tropes of limitation and tropes of representation. Irony, metaphor and metonymy belong to the first category; synecdoche, hyperbole and metalepsis belong to the second category. These tropes are linked with defenses of limitation and representation. Reaction-
formation and the triad of undoing, isolation and regression are defenses of limitation. The reversal or turning-against the self, resulting in repression, and that of introjection and projection are that of representation.

In an attempt to expose and clarify the revisionary ratios, Bloom points out that they are central to a thorough understanding of intra-poetic relationships as influential anxiety and claims that “the history of modern poetry would be the accurate recording of these revisionary swerves” (AI 44). Clinamen is described as poetic misprision proper which refers to the ephebe’s swerve away from his precursor. A corrective movement which makes change possible, it represents the poet’s reaction-formation against and misprision of the precursor text through the trope of irony. Clinamen is marked by dialectical images of absence and presence which are conveyed by the trope of irony. This corresponds to the primary defense of reaction-formation and is similar to the Kabbalistic contraction/withdrawal. Explaining the ratio of clinamen, Bloom observes that influence in this stage is an initial error because nothing can be in its proper place. We might phrase this as a conscious state of rhetoricity, the poem’s opening awareness that it must be mis-read because its signification has wandered already. An intolerable presence (the precursor’s poem) has been voided, and the new poem starts in the illusion that this absence can deceive us into accepting a new
presence. The dialectic of presence and absence becomes on a psychological basis the primary defense that Freud termed reaction-formation, the ego’s prime protection against id. (MM 71)

After this initial ratio of limitation, the poem evades its precursor to arrive at tessera, a ratio restituting representation which consumes the defenses of turning-against the self and reversal and the rhetorical trope of synecdoche. The term refers to completion and antithesis and it is borrowed from ancient mystery cults where it denotes a token of recognition. In tessera the ephebe retains his precursor’s terms and uses them independently and thus antithetically completes his precursor’s poem which he had failed to finish. The movement from clinamen to tessera results in a turning-against-the-self, a process in which instinct as an activity is changed into instinct as passivity, an aggression against the self in which the threatened “instinct replaces another by the subject’s own self, as though the microcosm had to suffer precisely because it represented the macrocosm.” (MM 98)

The ratio of kenosis refers to a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor and it subsumes the trope of metonymy and the images of fullness and emptiness and it is similar to the defenses of undoing, isolation and regression. In this phase, the ephebe empties himself of his own imaginary divinity, empties of his poetic self. Explaining the psychic defenses matched with kenosis Bloom remarks:
Undoing [...] is an obsessional process in which past actions and thoughts are rendered null and void by being repeated in a magically opposite way deeply contaminated by what it attempts to negate. Isolation segregates thoughts or acts so as to break their connecting links with all other thoughts or acts, usually by breaking up temporal sequences. Regression, the most poetically and magically active of these three obsessional defenses, is a reversion to earlier phases of development frequently manifested through expressive modes less complex than present ones. (MM 99)

*Tessera* represents a totality whereas *kenosis* denotes discontinuous fragments and an endless search for origins which results in repetition. *Kenosis* breaks into daemonization which denotes the latecomer’s attempt to set up a sublime counter to that of his precursor. In this phase the psychic defense of repression is matched with the rhetorical trope of hyperbole and the images of heights and depths. Bloom spells out the characteristics of the ratio of daemonization:

Influence conceived as an hyperbole takes us into the realms of sublime representation, restituting for the emptying out of metonymy. The accent of excess here is allied to the defense of repression, for the high imageries of hyperbole conceal an unconsciously purposeful forgetting, or not becoming aware, of
those internal impulses that tempt us towards gratifying objectional instinctive demands. Hyperbole as the trope for influence seems to me the most important of my six ratios for high romanticism, hyperbolical in its visions of the imagination, and so here the process of influence is identical with all belated visions of the sublime.” (MM 73)

The next ratio *askesis* is one of limitation and it is a movement of self-purgation which aims at achieving solitude. In this stage, the ephebe yields up part of himself and separates himself from others including his precursor and thus effects an *askesis*, a truncation of the precursor’s poems. *Askesis* subsumes the trope of metaphor – the defense of sublimation and the dualistic imagery of inside consciousness against outside nature. Though metaphor is a highly praised trope, Bloom finds it one of the most failing and most limiting of western tropes as it “drives the poem into hopeless dualistic images of inside as opposed to outside” (108). Likewise sublimation too, though highly praised by the Freudians, is a defense very incoherently described.

The ultimate poetic resource of belatedness is the final trope of *apophrades* which means the return of the dead. Bloom has taken it from the Athenian unlucky days when the dead returned to inhabit their former homes. In this final phase, the ephebe returns from his solipsism to open his poem to the precursor but does so out of strength and the effect is that the ephebe appears to have written the earlier poet’s work. Bloom observes that this ratio
is dependent upon the Freudian defenses of "projection (which can manifest itself as jealousy) and introjection (which can manifest itself as identification"

\( (MM \ 101) \). It tries to establish some kind of balance between the earliness and belatedness of poems. An extreme version of \textit{tessera}, it allows the poet to incorporate or absorb the precursor's past vision and, through the trope of metalepsis or \textit{transumption}, "the illusion of having fathered one's own father" \( (MM \ 20) \), to project this vision as if it has not yet occurred \( (MM \ 74 - 75) \). With this ratio, the ephebe's work appears to realize what the precursor's vision longed to express but could not itself realize. The trope involved here is metalepsis or transumption, one word for another in earlier figuration. Bloom has given a cogent account of this revisionary ratio:

Influence as a metalepsis for reading tends to be either a projection and distancing of the future and so an introjection of the past, by substituting late words for early words in previous tropes, or else more often a distancing and projection of the past and an introjection of the future by substituting early words for late words in a precursor's tropes. Either way the present vanishes and the dead return, by a reversal, to be triumphed over by the living. \( (MM \ 74) \)

Bloom quotes Angus Fletcher who describes transumption as a process in which the poet goes from one word to another that sounds like it, yet to another, developing a chain of auditory associations getting the poem from one image to another remote image. Bloom agrees with Kenneth Burke who
considers metalepsis and daemoniac hyperbole as heightened versions of synecdoche, some kind of transcendentalized versions of eros in Plato. Bloom, however, is free from hyperbolic illusions about his model for he says that this is a model for the reader as critic. He endorses Burke’s description of his rhetorical mode as a machine for criticism but believes that poetry transcends formulas and critical tools.

Critical attention has been given to Bloomian revisionary ratios. Christopher Norris remarks that Bloom presents an exotic terminology and system of revisionary ratios by which “to plot the labyrinthine ruses of imaginative reason” (118). Hartman finds them “exuberantly eclectic which sound like an apotropaic litany” (“War” 28) and Paul de Man describes the Bloomian ratios as “an eye-catching, flamboyant terminology” (Blindness 274). Cynthia Ozick rhapsodizes on the ratios:

The glossary is the girandole – the scaffolding out of which the Bloomian fireworks erupt. The jeweled diversity of Bloom’s expanding self-paraphrasing glossary is the consequence of an intoxication with the beauty and persuasiveness of the bewitchment it serves – a bewitchment by force, power, seizure, rupture, the dream of storming, looting, and renovating heaven. (Judaism and Harold Bloom 36)

A full understanding of revisionary ratios is required for any discussion of Bloom’s formulation of the poetics of influence. Designed to map an
interaction of tradition, revisionary ratios are viewed as intra-poetic and inter-poetic. An internalization of tradition occurs only when the ephebe takes a total stance towards precursors which can function at many levels of consciousness and between negation and approval. As Bloom observes, ratios are at once text, poem, image and model. As a text, a ratio denotes intertextual differences; as poem it marks a total relationship between two poets, earlier and later; as model, it functions as a paradigm; as an image it marks the positions of freedom or the true position for a poet. Bloom’s strategies and dense mechanisms create a typology of evasions by which the latecomer enters into a tense relationship marked by aggression and co-operation with his forebears. To Bloom revisionary ratio marks a specific type of “misreading” which helps poets to overcome the influence of previous poets. Influence is understood as dangerously preemptive (hence the anxiety), as an inflowing that tends to become flooding, so that for the later poet to survive means to willfully revise (euphemistically, “correct”) his precursor [. . .] Bloom seeks a wholly different practical criticism which would “transfigure source study by revealing in each poem, or in the poet’s corpus as a whole echoings of a precursor, imitations as complex as those by which the child wrests his life-space from parents” (War 24 – 26).

To clarify and extend his notion of misprision Bloom has formulated the theory of agon which illumines his concept of revisionism. Agon is a Greek word which refers to gathering, assembly, contest, a derivative of agein is to
lead, or bring. Mirriam Webster identifies two principal literary uses of the word: first, a contest or conflict, specifically, the dramatic conflict between the chief characters in a Greek play. In Attic comedy, debate or contest between two characters, "constituting one of several formal conventions of Old Comedy. Second, the word agon refers to the struggle between protagonist and antagonist in a literary work" (20 – 21). Agon means contest and it refers to the Greek idea of striving to be first in everything. It is the struggle for the greatest evidence. As Bloom claims it is "the desire to surpass others and then to pass one's own area of achievement" ("The Man" 400). Agon certainly underlines the inevitable struggle between the ephebes and precursors, a doctrine which views the belated poet as an agonizing contestant or combatant or an agonist. Literature is viewed by Bloom as a scene of internecine battle between heroic vitalizers and he claims that agon is the iron-law of literature. Agon is another version of the anxiety of influence, the desire to free oneself from a benumbing literary tradition and to achieve one's strength, voice and sublimity. In a sense, it refers to agon with past sublimity and Bloom holds that the central and the principal subject of his entire critical oeuvre is "agon" or what the ancients called "the sublime" (Ruin 5). Belatedness compels every strong poet to wrestle with his mighty ancestor and it inevitably becomes revisionistic. As Daniel T. O' Hara remarks, "Bloom's theory is a kind of literary judo intended to turn the formidable strength of one giant of the imagination after another to one's own advantage" (56).
The most important subject of Bloom’s book Agon is revisionism, and revisionism, in personal life, in society and its institutions, in religion, and in arts and sciences and all the academic disciplines is “a fierce process, however, that process conceals itself in the codes of civilization” (viii). Revisionism demonstrates agonistic power and Bloom claims that it unfolds itself only in fighting: “The spirit portrays itself as agonistic, as contesting for supremacy, with other spirits, with anteriority, and finally with every earlier version of itself” (viii).

Bloom presents Freud as the prophet of agon and its ambivalences; Burkhardt, Nietzsche, Huizinga are the cultural theorists of the agonistic spirit; the first theologians of agon were the gnostics of Alexandria and its final pragmatists were Emerson and his followers. The central subject of the book is “the American religion of competitiveness which is at once our glory and [...] our inevitable sorrow” (viii). Outlining the important thematic concerns of his book Agon Bloom observes that he wants to extend the study of misprision to Freud who made revisionism into a negative theory, to Emerson and Whitman and their American tradition and literary arenas that include the genre of fantasy and the sublime. It also deals with the American Jewish cultural dilemma. To quote Bloom, “From its first chapter on the concept of ‘agon’, to ‘its penultimate, on the dark cultural prospects of American Jewry’, this book searches for the revisionary gift that Emerson called ‘self-reliance’ and made into the American religion, a purified Gnosis” (viii).
Agon has been condemned as an exercise in theology and Bloom’s major interest in it is described not as literary critical, but religious. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, says that “Bloom makes it clear that his fundamental motive is philosophical and theological, not primarily literary” (“The Primacy of the Reader” 476 – 77). Brooks is deliberately misrepresenting a critical work that obviously challenges the critical tenets of new criticism. Though the book has a religious intention, Bloom states categorically that he is neither a historian nor a scholar on Gnosticism, but it is a personal mix of his individual religious experience, literary theory and criticism. He says that he is not interested in Gnosticism as a religion in the sense that Christianity, Judaism and Islam are religions. Expressing his doubt whether Gnosticism can be considered a religion, Bloom claims that polemically it is not a faith, whether in the Christian sense, pistis, a believing that something was, is, and will be so; or in the Hebraic sense, emunah, a trusting in the covenant” (4). Fundamental to Gnosticism is the belief that the world was created by a Demiurge and that those who possess secret knowledge or Gnosis can strive for reunion with the benign God or the Light World. Another aspect of Gnosticism is the desire to change or re-create the world in accordance with one’s esoteric knowledge. Every visionary poet possesses such a Gnosis, a personal, esoteric knowledge, his pneuma which he expresses in his works. Gnosticism favors Gnosis, but there can be a Gnosis without Gnosticism which has been demonstrated by Blake, Shelley and Emerson. Bloom stresses this point while speaking of his
intention in writing the book *Agon*: “I write this book as a Jewish Gnostic, trying to explore and develop a personal Gnosis and a possible Gnosticism, perhaps even one available to others” (4).

Bloom believes that religion is a binding whereas Gnosticism guarantees freedom. As he claims,

Gnostic freedom is a freedom for knowledge, knowledge of what in the self, not in the psyche or soul is Godlike, and knowledge of God beyond the cosmos. But also it is a freedom to be known, to *be known*, by God, by what is alien to everything created, by what is alien to and beyond the stars and the cosmic systems and our earth. (4)

As far as Bloom is concerned Gnosis is not rational knowledge, but it is like poetic knowledge. It is more than rational knowledge which alters both knower and known without binding them into a unity. The Gnostic contrast between psyche and pneuma leads itself to a distinction between an orthodox concept of being, the *psyche*, and a Gnostic concept of happening, the *pneuma*. Being is static; happening, or movement, leads to a difference: “The knowledge is of a history, in which it is itself a critical event” (*Agon* 8). Bloom argues that in the deep reading of a poem what you come to know is a concept of happening, a realization of events in the history of your own spark or pneuma, and your knowing is the most important movement in that history. The knowledge we find in poetry is a Gnosis or can become one. Bloom makes a precise analogue
between a true poem and reader’s pneuma. As Bloom observes, “The Gnostic’s spark or spirit or inmost self is absolutely alien to the cosmos, to everything natural. Even so the reader’s pneuma transcends what is known and knowable by nature, or more simply, something unknown but supremely valuable in the reader’s quests for a knowledge that the poem can give” (8). Bloom attempts at an exposition of Emerson’s Gnosis and his sense of the reader’s sublime. He also holds that poetic knowledge is a Gnosis which is different from philosophical knowledge. Trying to elucidate the Gnosis present in Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Sail of Ulysses”, Bloom remarks: “Ulysses ‘symbol of the seeker’, reading his own mind, states the Emersonian manifesto. ‘As I know, I am and have. The right to be’. Stevens’s is not rational or religious knowledge but a profound knowledge of the self” (11). Gnosis is not produced by strenuous effort. It need not be a mystical or a visionary experience, “since in Gnosis the knowledge is neither of eternity nor of this world seen with more spiritual intensity. The knowledge is of oneself” (12).

Bloom claims that Gnosis is uncanny, in the Freudian sense of unheimlich, for what is called to and answers the call, however new it seems, is precisely “what is oldest in oneself” (12). He argues that Stevens is friendly both to body and to world, which shows that he is no Gnostic. But his attitude to time and history reveals an Emersonian Gnosis which emphasizes that transition is more real than being. The psyche belongs “to experience, to time
and history, to what is moment-to-moment; but the knowing of Gnosis is momentary and beyond experience” (13). Bloom claims that Gnosis is performative knowledge and it is pragmatic and particular and it is not cognitive knowledge but performative knowledge that can be seen in Stevens’s poem “The Sail of Ulysses”. Poetic knowledge is revealed as a Gnosis, reliant upon evasion and not substitution as its idea of order.

To Bloom Gnosis is power as well as a persuasive rhetoric. It is a language of desire and possession. He claims that it is repressive discourse, but purposefully in flight from the obsessive universe of human repetitions, and from the necessities of sublimation. Gnosis is therefore, considered merely as literary language, both an early and a belated chapter in the history of the sublime.

A juxtaposition of Gnosis or poetic knowledge and the sublime inevitably centers upon the ideas of the negative and negation, for what belated poetry and Gnosticism always shared and share is that they were and are, two extreme manifestations of what historically has been termed negative theology. *Of Mere Being* is a purified Gnosis, because in it Stevens is most himself, that is to say, his *pneuma* speaks, and what it says is not philosophic but evasive, evasive of all philosophy and of every other circumscribed mode of cognition:

"In writing this book, I seek an alliance between the traditions of poetic knowledge and of Gnosis, and such an alliance may help to make possible a
new purified Gnosticism, a kind of American Gnosis prophesied by Emerson and still to be realized among us” (15). What he recommends here is a powerful myth of struggle in which creative genius indulges for strength and he names this myth as revisionism. It is an attempt to correct, evade, change, refute, refine or revise the past myth and make it into one’s own. Writers who are obsessed with revising or are forced to do so are fixated on rivalry, misreading, parricide and agon. Bloom’s critical project relying on revision, Oedipal struggle and agon has been severely condemned by his detractors who argue that he has only one story to tell and that it does not throw much light on nature or life or literature. To Bloom poetry appears as a series of defenses and all tropes then become ways of not saying the literal truth, but defending against it. Bloom’s attempt here is to rename his conflict between ephebes and precursors or what he calls anxiety of influence, as a cultural motive larger than the intergenerational poetic one; he renames it “revisionism”.

Outlining the central concern of his *Map of Misreading* Bloom says: “This book, as a study of creative misreading or the belatedness of poetic reading, is also a prolegomenon to further studies of revisionism, and to the ambivalences of canon-formation that rise from revisionism” (4). Revisionism for Bloom denotes a deamonic, tense and inescapable process which belatedness demands. He holds that it is a renaming or looking-over again, leading to a re-esteeming or a re-estimating. The revisionist strives to see again, so as to esteem and estimate differently, so as to aim “correctively”. In
the dialectical terms that Bloom employs for interpreting poems, re-seeing is a limitation, re-estimating is a substitution, and re-aiming is a representation. Bloom states that he has borrowed the terms from Lunanic Kabbalism which he thinks is the ultimate model of Western revisionism from Renaissance to the present.

According to O’Hara the subject of *Agon* is a revision of “Bloom’s dialectic of revisionism” first formulated in *A Map* and most fully explained in *Poetry and Repression*. Bloom in his earlier theoretical tetralogy on influence argues that the belated poet ironically limits himself, in order to substitute his own image of the precursor for the established one. The revisionary dialectic of limitation, substitution, and representation has become in *Vessels* as in *Agon*:

The three full-scale paradigms of poetic originality – catastrophe creations, family romance, and transference. The consequence of such self-revision is that Bloom’s dialectic of revisionism appears now to be less indebted to contemporary continental versions of the Hegelian dialectic. In fact, [ . . . ] Bloom’s dialectic is less of a reductive system of interpretation and more of an imaginative revisionary paradox. (63)

The reason that Bloom’s kind of criticism must end in a deamonic celebration of self-parody, of radical and interminable self revision, lies in his operating assumption that poetry speaks the language of the will, and that the
will is an apocalyptic antithetical force at odds with all that is not its anti-
natural self even with its own earlier representations – since this antithetical
will desires the impossible above all else to be itself alone, the great original to
top all great originals, like that Alien God the Gnostics relentlessly attempted to
criticize as joyfully lost in the beauty and power of the pleroma (63 – 64).

Bloom argues that in post-enlightenment poetry one can discern endlessly
recurring cycle of three phases: an initial moment of limitation or ironic self-
reduction, a second moment of substitution in which the writer develops his
sense of identity by reinventing the beloved masks of his precursors and a final
moment in which the writer produces a sublime representation of himself as the
only begetter of his father’s and so of himself and his textual world as well. In

*Agon* the dialectic of limitation, substitution, and representation (or restitution)
becomes the antithetical triad of negation (or cancellation) evasion (or self-
preservation), and extravagance (or exaltation).

Bloom wages a three-fold critical struggle first with all kinds of
orthodox criticism, second with new criticism and thirdly with new-fangled
critical theories which he describes as the “school of resentment”. Orthodox
criticism reduces interpretation of the meaning of a poem or a work to mere
tautology. It often speaks of the poem as about something and Bloom says that
“about” means “outside” the poem. Primary criticism depends either on
paraphrase or evaluative and background commentaries from other fields. It
tries to relate poems to experience or to philosophical and aesthetic meditation. Exasperated with primary or formal criticism and its method and procedure, Bloom has embarked upon formulating what he calls “antinomian”, “antithetical” or “dialectic” criticism.

Bloom’s critical theories reveal his profound and lively interest in rhetoric and he has extensively appropriated rhetorical tropes in his formulation of the dynamics of poetic misprision and influence. There is clear evidence in his work of the impact of classical rhetoric as well as the theories of tropes propounded by Vico, Burke, Nietzsche and de Man. A belated strong poet is threatened by his precursors, by time, the world and death and against these he employs certain defense mechanisms which are demonstrated by the tropes he uses. What is central to an understanding of the agonistic relations between precursors and latecomers is that tropes are defenses and *vice versa*. A strong poet recognizes his belatedness in relation to the literary tradition he inherits and subverts it by troping his precursors. He thus becomes a troper, endlessly troping previous tropes and revising precursor texts. As Norris observes, the ephebe’s will to expression is pursued through cunning forms of displacement, or defensive tropes, which at the same time disguise and elaborate “the will to be self-begotten, to acknowledge no previous authority or influence” (117).

According to Bloom trope is derived from a Greek word which means to “turn” or to ‘swerve’ and he defines it as a “willing error”, a turn from literal meaning in which a word is used in an improper sense, “wandering from its
rightful place” (*MM* 93). As every trope is an interpretation and a mistaking, it is a kind of falsification. To Bloom, poems are defensive process in constant change, one trope answering to another to produce a multiform falsification or lie against time. Bloom links rhetorical tropes with his revisionary ratios and argues that a ratio exists between “human ignorance making things out of itself, and human self identification moving to transform us into the things we have made” (*PR* 8). Ignorance here denotes repression and identification stands for the making of a new poem. The ratio is represented either as a psychic defense or as a trope, and Bloom sees trope as a defense and *vice versa* and both take the same phenomenal markings as poetic imagery. Bloom remarks:

It is worth noting that the root-meaning of our word ‘defense’ is ‘to strike or hurt’ and that “gun” and “defense” are from the same root, just as it is interesting to remember that tropos meaning originally “turn, way, manner” appears also in the name Atropos and in the word entropy. The trope-as-defense or ratio between ignorance and identification might be called at once a warding off by turning and yet also a way of striking or manner of hurting.

(*PR* 10)

A formidable theoretical battle has been waged by Bloom to counter the deconstructionistic stance of de Man who argues that poetry is “conceptual rhetoric and nothing more” (*WS* 386). Challenging de Man’s concept of
rhetoric as the epistemology of trope, Bloom represents rhetoric as persuasion and contends that diachronic rhetoric transcends the epistemology of tropes and stresses the will-to-persuasion. A deconstructive reading of a poem must treat the poem’s urging of us as the poem’s own questioning of the language of urging. The issue of the limits of deconstruction will be resolved only if we attain a vision of rhetoric more comprehensive than the deconstructors allow, that is, if we can learn to see rhetoric as transcending the epistemology of tropes and as re-entering the space of the will-to-persuasion. Such a vision is a necessary prelude to what we never have had and what theories of deconstruction are not attempting to give us – a diachronic rhetoric.

An important feature of diachronic rhetoric is that it views every synchronic concept of trope as another trope. Bloom argues that trope is a figure of the will and not a figure of knowledge. He maintains that a trope is either the will translating itself into “a verbal act or figure of ethos” or the will failing to translate itself and so abiding as “a verbal desire or figure of pathos” (WS 393). He holds that the trope is animated by the will and it is viewed as the anteriority of language in which language acts as a figurative substitution for time (WS 393). Trope is understood as a reader’s sense of a poet’s willed error and results from a reader’s will to be lied to. Bloom claims that rhetoric considered as a system of tropes yields more readily to analysis than rhetoric considered as persuasion which takes us into “a realm that also includes the lie” (WS 386). His misreading of the trope takes into account the sign and the will-
to-power, the concept of time and lie. Stressing this point, Anne Wordsworth observes: “poems are made to lie: against themselves, against other poems, against Time and death. Poems therefore inhabit the blind world of the wish not the indifferent space of language only” (“An Art” 213 – 214).

Bloom attempts to challenge de Man’s definition of rhetoric as text and his contention that in a poem we are governed by linguistic rather than natural or psychological models. Against de Man, Bloom asserts the psycho-creative energies of a poet and his will and drive. Poetic texts are not merely linguistic structures but instances of the will to utter within a tradition of uttering. Bloom’s stance proclaims that deconstruction, which is basically a linguistic mode, cannot effectively deal with a literary mode which includes the domain of pathos, ethos, drives, wills and substitution. Bloom refutes de Man’s insistence on the rhetoricity of all language and his privileging of rhetoric over psyche. De Man’s contention is that “the entire construction of drives, substitutions, repressions and representations is the aberrant metaphorical correlative of absolute randomness of language prior to any figuration or meaning” (Allegories 299). Bloom resists de Man’s theorizing and argues that language is a figurative substitution for time. Instead of deconstruction’s rhetorical ironies, Bloom proposes ratios and stances by which “the significations of language can be trooped upward into the meaningful world of our will-to-power over time and its henchman, language” (WS 394). This stance is certainly intended to celebrate a poet’s other than verbal needs and desires.
Part as self-revision and part as the desire for elaborating the theory of influence, Bloom has formulated the theory of crossings. A crossing within a crisis poem is defined as a process of disjunction, a leaping of the gap between one kind of figurative thinking and another. Bloom has charted three crossings: the first is called the Crossing of Election which is situated between irony and synecdoche, or psychologically between reaction formation, where one defends against “one’s own instincts by manifesting the opposite of what one both wants and fears” and turning against the self, which is usually an exercise in sado-masochism (WS 403).

The second crossing termed the Crossing of Solipsism takes place between metonymy and hyperbole or defensively between “regressive and isolating movements of one’s own psyche, and the massive repression of instinct that sublimely augments one’s unconscious or inwardness at the expense of all the gregarious effects” (WS 403). The third and final crossing, named the Crossing of Identification, takes place between metaphor and metalepsis, or psychoanalytically between sublimation and introjection that is between substituting “some labor for one’s own prohibited instincts and the psychic act of so identifying oneself with something or someone outside the self that time seems to stand still or to roll back or forward” (WS 403). Each of these crossings marks a creative crisis: the crossing of election marks fear of losing poetic strength; the crossing of solipsism marks the fear of rejecting love
for self-love; the crossing of identification marks the confirmation with death. These three crossings correspond to three new ratios of ethos, logos, and pathos, or in Emersonian terms fate, freedom and power. What is dominant in Bloom's theories is his concern with poetic origins and as Joseph Riddel maintains, "his formulation of crossings is a reworking of the allegory of family romance" ("Juda" 23). His theory of tropological ratios is a rhetorical erasure of the dangerous postulates of deconstruction.

In any reading of Bloom one recognizes his obsession with literary tradition. Influence denotes the relationship between one poem and another, a six fold trope that subsumes six major tropes – irony, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, metaphor and metalepsis. To Bloom influence itself is a trope of poetic tradition and his revisionary ratios mark six stages of one larger tropological turn. What he offers through six tropes are six interpretations of influence: "six ways of reading/misreading intra-poetic relationships, which means six ways of reading a poem, six ways that intent to combine into a single scheme of complete interpretation" (MM 51). Such a concept of tradition accounts for the internalizing of psychic forces which result in anxiety and also the creative energy and agonistic spirit of the individual poet and it recaptures "rhetorical, psychological, imagistic and historical, though this is an historicism that deliberately reduces to the interplay of personalities" (MM 71). Influence thus is a complex trope which determines the poetic tradition and a complex of psychological, historical and imagistic relation.
Out and out iconoclastic about academic traditions, Bloom regards tradition as context which generates creative and critical act and he even points out that it is impossible to think of literature without the sense of tradition:

You cannot write or teach or think or even read without imitation, and what you imitate is what another person has done, that person’s writing or teaching or thinking or reading. Your relation to what informs that person is tradition, for tradition is influence that extends past one generation, a carrying over of influence. (MM 32)

Referring to the etymology of tradition, Bloom defines it as a handing over or a giving over and argues that the concept deeply derives from the Hebraic Mishnah, “an oral handing over, a transmission of oral precedents, of what has been instructed successfully” (MM 32). Kabbalah itself is tradition, that which has been received and it denotes something that is revisionistic. As Kabbalah revises and misreads earlier texts it can be regarded as a model for strong poetry and criticism.

A rejection of the genteel classical concept of literary tradition championed by Eliot and Frye can be seen here in the words of Bloom and it is appropriate to compare and contrast the formulation of tradition by Eliot and Frye on the one hand and Bloom on the other. Tradition is a crucial concept in Bloom’s critical project, it informs the relations between poems and poets, how
a later text challenges an earlier text, how the poetic act is controlled and directed by priority and belatedness, by the act of misprision. Bloom claims: "No one 'fathers' or 'mothers' his or her own poems, because poems are not 'created', but are interpreted into existence, and by necessity they are interpreted from other poems" (Agon 244). Influence here necessarily becomes a substitute for "tradition" – "a substitution that makes for a sense of loss, since 'influence', unlike 'tradition', is not a deemonic or numinous term" (KC 103).

Bloom presents poetic history as a thoroughgoing warfare between precursors and belated poets who overshadowed by the greatness of the past swerve in desperate ways to escape the burden of the past. Walter Jackson Bate has problematized this issue in his book on the impact of poetic tradition on romantic poets where he refers to the melancholy of poetic influence.

To Bloom influence is a trope for tradition and he has always resisted the over spiritualization of poetic tradition and is violently opposed to Eliot's views on the subject of tradition. Matthew Arnold's humanistic vision of tradition has been qualified and elaborated by Eliot. Arnold adored poetry and idealized the study of poetry. His concepts of the nature of poetry and poet are idealistic. He thought that religion would be replaced by poetry. The serious study of poetry and criticism has been highly influenced by the views of Arnold who expressed the wish that as religion died it would be replaced by poetry. To de-idealize the study of poetry and poetic tradition has been one of the overriding concerns of Bloom.
Bloom's views invite comparison with Eliot's formulation of tradition. Vincent Miller argues that Bloom's true precursor is T.S. Eliot on whose view of tradition he is attempting a "serious and intelligent misprision" (122). Problematizing the relations between poets and poems, Eliot points out that tradition is a matter of great significance which involves not only the pastness of the past but of its presence. Eliot's concept of tradition is explicitly anti-romantic and it stresses a poet's surrender of his personality and individuality to the past tradition. The progress of an artist is "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Sacred Wood 49) to the mind of Europe which is the whole literature of Europe from Homer to the present time.

Eliot overlooks the dialectical struggles, Oedipal agonies, will to power and the inescapable agon between precursors and ephebe. Bloom has denounced Eliotic conception of tradition characterizing it as a "fiction" and a "noble idealization and a lie against time that will go the way of every noble idealization" (MM 30). As Eliot has idealized the process of poetic transmission, his concept of tradition has a malign influence on current discussion of poetic tradition.

Roger Sharrock argues that Bloom's theory of influence is an embodiment, "with a great deal of posturing and neologism," (171) of what Eliot stated in his essay on Massinger: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something
better, or at least something different” (*Sacred Wood* 49). Such a contention is misleading as Eliot and Bloom are speaking of different things. Eliot does not see influence as oppressive and limiting, causing the burden of anxiety but speaks of a young poet’s integration within tradition. An ephebe may acquire self-confidence, a sense of identity from an awareness of his relation to the tradition. Bloom sees influence as an anxiety principle, an ephebe’s feeling of belatedness and the consequent battle against past achievement. Tradition, to Bloom, is not something to be inherited or obtained by “great labour” (*Sacred Wood* 49) but to be battled and joined. One of the most radical statements in Eliot’s essay on tradition and individual talent is:

> We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his predecessors, assert their immortality most vigorously. (48)

This postulate of Eliot and his concept that we cannot understand and appreciate a poet and his work in isolation, but must compare and contrast him with dead poets and their works have been problematized by Bloom in his theoretical utterances on tradition and influence.
Eliot, like Frye, has also idealized the relation between the past and the present. He charts the archetypes, myths and symbols of the literary universe and presents a concept of literary tradition as an "ideal order" which has been derived from what he terms the "very fundamental criticism of T.S. Eliot" (Anatomy 18). Bloom rejects this formulation of tradition by Eliot and Frye:

Northrop Frye, who increasingly looks like the Proclus or Iamblichus of our day, has platonized the dialectics of tradition, its relation to fresh creation, into what he calls the myth of concern, which turns out to be a Low Church version of T.S. Eliot's Anglo-Catholic myth of Tradition and the Individual Talent. In Frye's reduction, the student discovers that he becomes something and thus uncovers or demystifies himself, by first being persuaded that tradition is inclusive rather than exclusive and so makes a place for him. The student is a cultural assimilator who thinks because he has joined a larger body of thought. Freedom, for Frye as for Eliot, is the change however slight, that any genuine single consciousness brings about in the order of literature simply by joining the simultaneity of such order. I confess that I no longer understand this simultaneity, except as a fiction that Frye, like Eliot passes upon himself. (MM 30)
Bloom feels that by endorsing Eliot’s view of tradition Frye has transformed himself into the Arnold of our day, with his insistence that the myth of concern prevents poets from “suffering the anxieties of obligation” (AI 31). Bloom has debunked the humanistic view of the individual talent within tradition and has resisted the over-idealization of literary tradition positing his theory of influence as a radically subversive one which views the relations between poets as an agon and a savage misprision.

One of the major critical influences on Bloom is Frye and he has acknowledged his debt to Frye saying that he wrote his early works directly under the shadow of Frye. Frye’s book on Blake Fearful Symmetry and Anatomy of Criticism had a direct impact on Bloom who described Frye’s Anatomy “A New Poetics” and said that Frye’s is an imagination whose “power and discipline are unique in contemporary criticism” (“New Poetics” 2).

Bloom and Frye are stylized critics who deliberately tried to shape a distinctively original critical voice. Anatomy and Anxiety are works that are intricately structured, resonant, rhythmic and poetic. Both stress art, the primacy of the critical act and the creative element in it. Both of them examined and theorized upon Romantic poetry. Frye has argued for a value-free criticism whereas Bloom is militantly evaluative. Both stress the humanistic element in literary critical activity. Speaking of Anatomy, Frye writes: “the present book assumes that the theory of literature is as primarily a humanistic and liberal pursuit as its practice” (8). Bloom’s poetics of influence as Hartman comments
“is a humanist attempt to save art from those who would eliminate mind in favor of structure or would sink it into the mechanical operation of the spirit” (MM 59). Their differences can be traced to their religious background: Bloom’s that of orthodox Judaism and Frye’s that of classicized Christianity.

Besides Eliot and Frye, Bloom has been influenced by a host of writers and thinkers in formulating his theory which stresses a poet’s combat, agon and embattlement with his precursors. He has appropriated the ideas of Paul Valery who argues that influence is distinguishable from imitation for what “a man does either repeats or rejects what someone has done, repeats it in another tone, refines or amplifies or simplifies it, loads or overloads it with meaning or else rebuts, overturns, destroys and derives it, but thereby assumes it and has invisibly used it” (241).

Speaking of Baudelaire’s literary forefathers such as Lamartine, Hugo, Musset, Vingy and their influence on him, Valery writes:

He has been brought up on artists whom an impassioned instinct commands him to blot out. His literary vocation has been awakened and nourished by them, inspired by their glory, shaped by their works, yet his survival necessarily calls for the denial, overthrow, and replacement of the same men who appear to him to occupy the whole expanse of fame. (195)

W.J. Bate’s work The Burden of the Past and the English Poet problematized influence as anxiety as a post-Enlightenment phenomenon. It
examines influence as discontinuous relations between past and present literary texts and points out that it was in the eighteenth century that the poet first suffered "the burden of the past": only then did he experience a "loss of confidence about what to write and how to write it" (7) as he compares what he feels able to do with the rich heritage of past art and life. A great deal of modern literature is haunted by this sense of accumulating anxiety:

We could, in fact, argue that the remorseless deepening of self-consciousness before the rich and intimidating legacy of the past, has become the greatest single problem that modern art (art, that is to say since the later seventeenth century) has had to face and that it will become increasingly so in the future. (7)

Freud’s psychological theories, especially about Oedipal conflict have a profound impact on Kabbalistic notion of revisionism which has an overwhelming presence in Bloom’s argument and Kabbalah provides the perfect precursor text for Bloom’s revisionist interpretations. Nietzsche’s argument that there is only interpretation and nothing else has gone a long way in shaping Bloom’s critical thought. The impact of ancient and modern polemicists of classical rhetoric is clearly evident in Bloom. Frye suggests in *Anatomy* that poetry can only be made of other poems; novels out of other novels. Its echo can be found in Bloom’s argument that “poetry begins, always, when someone who is going to become a poet reads a poem” (*KC* 107). Frye’s claim directly refers to Virginia Woolf who claims: “Books descend from
families. Some descend from Jane Austen, others from Dickens. They resemble their parents, as human children resemble their parents, yet they differ as children differ, and revolt as children revolt” (163).

The metaphor of the struggle of children with parents reminds us of Frye’s contention that “the new poem, like the new baby, is born into an already existing order of words, and is typical of the structure of poetry to which it is attached. The new baby is his own society appearing once again as a unity of individuality, and the new poem has a similar relation to its poetic society” (Anatomy 97). Christopher Beach admits that Bloom’s parricidal model can explain personal and poetic anxiety of certain poets, but not that of Pound and his ilk:

The final problem with Bloom’s agonistic model is that, it presents an unrealistically negative or conflictual picture of poets’ relationships to their predecessors or to the past in general. Does a poetic relationship to the past have to be defensive, as Bloom suggests, or can it be positive and enriching, as it was for the poets of the Pound tradition? (479 – 80)

Bloom’s polemics of agon has radically transformed the way we read literary texts, the relations between writers, the concept of tradition and criticism. Creating a profound interest in literary history, Bloom has taught us that tracing the lineage of a text need not be a dull and pedantic work but an exciting critical enterprise. Frank Lentricchia says “Bloom has put forth bold
and important ideas which threaten to make the moribund subject of influence
the pivot of the most satisfying historicism to appear in modern criticism” (344). But the import of Bloom’s singular achievement has not been properly
appreciated by a host of critics who find his theories repugnant and his critical
terms quite revolting. Susan M. Schultz’s observation stresses the same point:
“His rather straightforward Freudian theory of the ‘anxiety of influence’,
bolstered by arcane vocabularies borrowed from mystical religious texts, may
sound to the ear of today’s critics tinny and out of touch with, social and
historical concerns” (24).

Bloom’s poetics has mainly been accused of its indifference to socio-
political and cultural concerns. Denis Donogue, for instance, argues that Bloom
tells only one story, the struggle of gods and demiurges, fathers and sons and
their struggle issues from a primal scene of objection, trespass, defense and
revenge. He holds that “the story Bloom tells is indifferent to time, history,
society, manners, morals, beginnings, or endings and that Bloom’s practical
criticism is indifferent to the structure, internal relations of the poem, or to its
diction, syntax, meter, rhythm or time” (*Ferocious* 10). Endorsing Donoghue’s
argument Edward Said remarks: “Bloom’s polemics of influence conceals a
radically mythologized conception of the individual determinants of culture and
a total disregard for cultures anonymous and institutional supports” (“The Poet”
34). Brent Garner observes that Bloom is indifferent to non-poetic forces and
that he seems to “restrict the poetic to the influence of text, in a way that makes influence more important than the texts themselves and erects a grand family romance of poets” (99).

One of the usual charges levelled against Bloom’s poetics is that it has redirected attention from the text to the drama of the critic. Gerald Graff says that it dramatizes the critic’s heroic but “futile struggle against Sisyphean obstacles” (“Fear” 469). Bloom’s theory is self-referential and he has not exempted his own interpretations, as M. H. Abrams claims, from the assertion that “all readings are misreadings” (466). Hartman admires Bloom’s work as “a heroic argument, a severe poem which refuses to treat poets as friendly competitors intended to bear burdens lightly. He observes, “it is revelatory and apodictic, a severe poem [. . .] a Paradise Lost transformed into Satanic scholarship. The eternal Hell revives” (“War” 24). In spite of the diatribe, Bloom’s polemic has received, it has been extolled by a number of eminent critics who find his theories giving a new fillip to the barren field of literary criticism. A new vitalism, rather a new militancy, has been introduced into critical discourse by Bloom. What animates his polemics is his heroic attempt to make literary discourse human and to establish the centrality of man. M.H Abrams has described the poetics of agon as “human, all-too human” (466). Hartman too has emphasized the humanistic concern of Bloom’s theory:

    The concern with influence, now seeing a revival, is a humanistic attempt to save art from those who would eliminate mind in favor of
structure or who would sink it into the mechanical operation of the spirit, to save it from both structuralist and spiritualist, in other words. For influence in art is always personal, seductive, perverse, imposing [. . .]. (MM 59)

Certainly his theory of influence is subject-centered and Cleanth Brooks suggests that Bloom presents “a renewed emphasis on the author in its most striking form” (“Primacy” 475). Elizabeth Wright also emphasizes Bloom’s giving primary importance to the agonistic energy of the artist as well as the critic:

He has provided a virtuoso critical practice which is workable and which makes room for the critic as brother poet. This practice gives access to the tradition in renewed form, for it is to be won, in the Faustian sense, by effort and struggle. Most ingeniously, there is always an author-in-crisis, belated wounded and mortal, and there is always a prior plentitude of meaning to struggle against. (155)

It is the return of the author with all his personality and creative strength that we find in Bloom’s critical project. Bloom suggests that poetry is not merely a mode of knowledge but it is a scene of psychic forces where the poet expresses his personality, will, imagination and desire and a critic too exercises his will upon a work of art, converting its meaning to his desire, need and force. The visionary element in Bloom’s polemic has been hailed by a number of critics.
O’Hara has described Bloom’s criticism as “visionary”. Thomas McFarland contends that “like Blake’s system, Bloom’s is apocalyptic, increasingly oblique as he continues to construct midrash on it, and like Blake’s it chews up and digests public and external materials and recasts them into visionary forms dramatic. Like Blake’s, too, it is uttered in prophetic tones” (424).