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Influence and Its Opposite: Presence and Absence in the Work of Harold Bloom

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INFLUENCE AND ITS OPPOSITE: PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN THE
WORK OF HAROLD BLOOM

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By

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INFLUENCE AND ITS OPPOSITE: PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN THE
WORK OF HAROLD BLOOM

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In the years since he formulated and expanded on it in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), and *Kaballah and Criticism* (1975), Harold Bloom’s theory of the “anxiety of influence” has engendered more ambivalence than serious investigation into his theory and its influences. In part, the ambivalence is due to Bloom’s persona, which irritates the academic “left” and “right” alike. Surprisingly, it is not Bloom’s defense of canonicity against post-structural Marxism, feminism, and New Historical criticism that generates the most resistance; instead, Bloom’s dissenters more often come from the ranks of conservative traditionalists who might be expected to support him.

The reaction of traditionalist critics to Bloom’s work stems from a recognition and rejection of how deeply antithetical Bloom’s hallmark theory really is in relation to the prevailing understanding of literary influence. Taking his cues from Deconstruction, the fiercely revisionistic mystical traditions of Gnosticism and Kaballah, the philosophy of Nietzsche, and the meditations of Emerson, Bloom’s theory is revealed—to one’s delight or dismay—as profoundly agonistic. Nevertheless, a close reading of these influences of Bloom’s reveal a profound life-affirming humanism that ceaselessly quests for “Gnosis” in all literature.
Writing in the preface to the second edition (1997) of his seminal *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold Bloom claims to be “bemused” at the ambivalent response to his theories of poetic influence and misreading in the preceding twenty-four years (xi).

Bloom’s puzzlement at this ambivalence is a bit disingenuous or even ironic; his intrepid forays into the culture wars against “Neo-Marxists, New Feminists, New Historicists, French-influenced theorists [who] all demonstrate their cultural materialism by giving us a reduced Shakespeare, a pure product of the ‘social energies’ of the English Renaissance” (*Anxiety*, xv), comprise the bulk of his popular persona, and a certain amount of assured hostility to his ideas should be obvious even to him. Arguably, more ink has been spilled hectoring his Bardolatry and supposed role as defender of the Dead White Male than on his theory of influence, and the ambivalence to his theory owes something to his frequent attacks on the “Resenters” who so rankle him.

However, what is of more interest about the ambivalent reaction to Bloom’s theory is how often traditionalists, social conservatives, and obviously religious academics take issue with him as well. For the chief public defender of the traditional canon—and canonicity itself—to have detractors among those who share with him a disdain for cultural studies in American universities reveals how lonesome a figure Bloom is in the academy, however much his sales figures attest to his popularity outside of it. Writing in

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1 In September of 2000, Bloom related an incident at Stanford where he dismissed the panel he was on stage with, “including one counterculturalist imported from Berkeley to rough me up” saying to those in attendance, “You know, I’m getting a little old. We’re going to take a five-minute break. And I invite the audience to stay behind, but everybody on this platform must go because I’ve heard only ignorance and abusiveness. I—I will not talk to them. I—I will entertain questions from the group” (Interview, par. 41). Such arrogance—deserved or not—certainly earns one many enemies.
1980, Frank Lentricchia diagnosed Bloom’s enduring condition in the culture with surprising prescience:

Bloom’s exclusive concentration on the titanic willfulness of strong poets has succeeded in reinstating, against every theoretical point he has made, the principle of the author—if not in splendid isolation, then in splendidly isolated dialogue with his strong ancestors. So despite the fact that he has been received as a radical destroyer of traditional methodology, there is a conservative impulse in Bloom’s theory which succeeds in shoring up the institution of literary studies as we have always known it. (343)

Lentricchia makes the compelling case that Bloom is himself an example of his own pernicious theory, and at the heart of his efforts is a problem “most retrograde and anti-intellectual: the desire, articulated frequently in our advanced critical journals and graduate centers of theoretical training, to be an original theorist” (346). In particular, it is Bloom’s resistance, unwillingness, or inability to reckon with the self-abnegating (romantic, metaphysical, or spiritual) aspects of Deconstruction that give Lentricchia pause, and which will be taken up in a subsequent section.

Curiously, if the academic “Left” is unimpressed with influence anxiety because the theory takes no part in social justice, the “Right” might be so for a similar reason, a reason that stretches back to the foundational arguments set out in *The Anxiety of Influence*, arguments that inform comments like the following from Bloom’s *How to Read and Why*:

The pleasures of reading are indeed selfish rather than social. You cannot directly improve anyone else’s life by reading better or more deeply. I remain skeptical of the traditional social hope that the care for others may be stimulated by the growth of the individual imagination, and I am wary of any arguments whatsoever that connect the pleasures of solitary reading to the public good. (22)

Bloom’s notion that the praxis of literature, criticism, reading—the *humanities*—is thoroughly amoral is an argument that finds no relief in a close reading of his theory of
influence anxiety, which is, if anything, a diagnosis of the poet’s deeply immoral psychology. Put another way, Bloom’s theory on influence anxiety and his notions of how we should read are both richly selfish and self-augmenting: “We experience such augmentations as pleasure,” Bloom says of reading (and which he would also say of writing), “which may be why aesthetic values have always been deprecated by social moralists from Plato through our current campus Puritans” (Bloom 2000, 22). For Bloom, the moralizing of literature, especially via critical theory, does great violence to its value, which is finally deeply personal.

In any event, the Resenters’ argument with Bloom comes down to a tired utilitarian one, and whether you pitch your tent with them or with Bloom is foretold by whether or not you’re delighted at Theophile Gautier’s observation that “everything useful is ugly...The most useful place in a house is the lavatory” (758). But it is the dialectic between Bloom and other quarters that suggests a fruitful inquiry. Although Bloom’s theory is deeply and profoundly Freudian, and his invocation of Gnostic and Kabbalistic texts are ostensibly in service to a secular literary idea, recent critical articles argue that Bloom’s writings, particularly The Book of J, Ruin the Sacred Truths, The American Religion, and Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism, conflate religion, mysticism, theory, prose, and poetry in ways that are presumably dangerous to all of them, and that the stakes in Bloom’s conception of influence anxiety are indeed religious. It is this aspect of Bloom’s thought and the critique of Bloom as a perversely sacrilegious figure that suggest an anxiety analogous to that of influence, an anxiety that we may think of as absence, in the same sense that influence anxiety is a theory of presence.
Bloom’s argument in *The Anxiety of Influence* is often couched in temporal terms, and as such, the poet’s anguish is occasioned by his *too late arrival*. Although this idea has a certain affinity to Oedipal angst, influence anxiety is not ameliorated with any Freudian psychoanalytic cure; the poet or “ephebe” cannot be psychoanalyzed out of what is a very real condition of belatedness, for the disturbing conjecture at the heart of Bloom’s theory of influence is that there is *nothing left to say*. Lateness—properly understood as the poet’s sense of there being no space left in which to work—is like being born with the spirit of Magellan in a world where every inch of the earth is mapped, photographed, and catalogued. This problem can be stated as follows: *the occupation of all artistic space by a predecessor is a condition of overwhelming presence*.

Bloom’s revisionary ratios—the various tropes his mode of reading uncovers in poems, and which evince the poet’s resistance to influence—constitute an argument that poems are records of poets contending with predecessors, or with the presence of the predecessor poet in the psyche of the ephebe. “Every major aesthetic consciousness seems peculiarly more gifted at denying obligation as the hungry generations go on treading one another down,” Bloom says in *The Anxiety of Influence* (6), highlighting the antagonism that influence—or presence—engenders. The creation of artistic real estate, so central to the development of a poetic consciousness, is a psychic land war waged within the poet and expressed in poems. And this problem requires even stronger and more clever defenses as time goes on, for each subsequent poet has that many more precursors with whom to deny obligation. Anyone who has tried his hand at fashioning something, anything, *original* should see a measure of truth in Bloom’s theory. The
repressed anxiety at the heart of every attempt to make art, according to Bloom, is the fear that one’s work is derivative, profoundly and finally so.

There is, however, a competing argument against which Bloom’s theory of influence rails—the dominant Western tradition, actually, despite the incursions and insights of post-structural theory—and which believes that Bloom does not properly distinguish the derivative from that which is happily influenced by preceding greatness; this argument says that artists pay their debt to predecessors in the form of good art, art which constitutes the history of an ever-burgeoning aesthetic achievement. In Percy Shelly’s *A Defense of Poetry*, the thinking goes thusly:

A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and unconceived delight. (710)

Although Bloom is a great fan of him, Shelley’s formulation is simply too teleological, too cheerful for him as a theory of poetry. Poetry is a record of influence, not a nifty embellishment or filigree on the great edifice of poetic tradition. But Bloom does not therefore argue that the poems of a late poet like Wallace Stevens, for instance, are not great accomplishments, just that poems are crises too. Just because a poem is an expression of anxiety doesn’t make it less a fountain of “wisdom and delight.” But Bloom believes that the great unreported fact of a poem’s origins is found in a deep

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2 I have found few arguments for poetry’s utility more ambivalent that Shelley’s “Defense.” In arguing that Bloom’s theory is too Self-centered, Lentricchia notes than Shelley’s “Defense” rests on the argument that the poet, “possessed by the power of empathy, is wonderfully capable of making his self capacious and comprehensive—un-unique and un-particular” (330). In an essay on Plato, Bloom believes that Shelley’s praise of Plato as a poet is “sly” and in service of esteeming Homer above Plato (Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? 65). My own view, again, is that Shelley is ambivalent, torn between irreconcilable fathers, Plato and Homer, a position bolstered, I think, by Lentricchia’s and Bloom’s divergent readings.
repression. "A poem begins because there is an absence," Bloom writes in the rich coda to his book, Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate:

An image must be given, for a beginning, and so that absence ironically is called a presence. Or, a poem begins because there is too strong a presence, which needs to be imaged as an absence, if there is to be any imaging at all. So Stevens began Domination of Black, suspended between these dialectics and troping for the first time against Shelley's fiction of the leaves [...]. (375)

Bloom goes on to demonstrate where Stevens' poem tropes against Shelley's, but it is the notion of the play between presence and absence that goes unremarked by critics of Bloom. Perhaps this oversight is because when Bloom talks of absence—often in terms akin to Deconstructionist concepts—it is almost always in service of showing influence anxiety, or presence. However, absence is not only the masking of presence or the clearing of psychic space for artistic creation; inherent in Bloom's conception of influence is its inverse, a psychology, aesthetics—perhaps even a religion, finally—of absence, which must imagine presence, in the same way that influence or presence occasions a need for space or absence.

Indeed, imagining presence seems to me to be the font of pre-influence literature³—the art of Homer and Hesiod, Shakespeare and Dante, Milton and Spencer. If the landscape is now filled with presence, the world charted, the psychic/aesthetic space filled to the brim with cultural artifacts proving our lateness, it was once empty, and for a long time after, sparsely peopled or, if you will, presenced. What then drove us to fill it? Bloom's critics who agree with his defense of canonicity, but who are anxious about his forays into religion, should be worried and defensive (and they are), for his theory of

³ Bloom's is a theory of Romantic poetry, and although his thinking on influence seems to affect his reading of pre-Romantic literature, belatedness is an historical condition, so that we might imagine such a thing as "pre-influence" literature, which is not to say that there was no influence, but rather, that influence was not an anxiety.
presence brings with it a profoundly devastating absence-making. His invocations of Gnosticism and Kabbalah, his theories of misreading and Nietzschean will, his Bardolatry and Emersonian location of the divine and eternal in the Self, are profoundly hostile to the dominant or traditional ideas of religion and metaphysics. From Nietzsche, Bloom inherited a deep skepticism of Christian mores and a doubt about the ability of language to meaningfully appeal to metaphysics at all. From Emerson, Bloom absorbed a religion of the Self that bears striking resemblance to Gnostic mystical thought. What Bloom’s work reveals is a dialectic of presence and absence: his theory of influence, as a theory of presence, is also a theory of absence. Influence anxiety is but the opposite of an absence anxiety.
Defending Tradition Against the Anxiety of Absence

One way in which absence anxiety finds expression is in the insistence that clear distinctions between religious, literary, philosophical, and mystical texts be maintained. To be sure, the demand that discourses remain identifiable as certain types is to protect us from talking past one another and obscurantism, but there is also the need to be met in rendering unto Caesar what discursive categories are Caesar’s: to mix discourses is to sully prayer, the (religious) canon, and scripture. Put bluntly, theorists who attack Bloom (from the “Right”) are absence-anxious, feeling in Bloom’s theory the same violence done to sacred texts by Freudian, Feminist, Marxist, Deconstructionist, or any Post-Structuralist readings that might elide their understanding of the intent of, say, the Bible. Bloom’s affinity with Post-Structural theory leads to the assumption that Bloom believes the distinction between the literary and the religious, the secular and the sacred, to be arbitrary; but Bloom simply shares in the Post-Structural hostility to traditional metaphysical claims about literary heritage. Such denials of metaphysical presence are sufficient cause to attack Bloom and all Post-Structural theory. Moreover, Bloom’s admixture of Freudian angst, Nietzschean will to power, Deconstructionist slipperiness in regards to intent and meaning, and a thick layer of Gnostic mystical poetry seems rather more a concoction than a theory to most people. Bloom parleys his polymathic capaciousness into a very weird brew indeed, and as such, it is no surprise that few, after catching a whiff, are willing to drink deeply from the cup.
That Bloom is often criticized, not for secularizing religious texts, but for the opposite, reveals both Bloom’s discursive transgressions and the anxiety of his critics. In his article, “Reading Bloom (Or: Lessons Concerning the ‘Reformation’ of the Western Literary Canon),” James Baumlin argues that Bloom’s critical vocabulary “reflects a habit of discourse all too common within English studies—that is, a habit, often unconscious, of sacralizing its discourse and confusing the distinctions between secular and religious texts, traditions, and canons” (par. 5). In particular, Baumlin sees Bloom’s use of Kaballistic models as a sort of devious invocation of religious terminology, noting that “[e]ven when most adamant in making distinctions, Bloom cannot abandon the analogies between religious and aesthetic experience” (n8). Baumlin’s implication that Bloom might subvert religion by using its language towards a literary model in, say, *Kaballah and Criticism*, is reasonable; but Baumlin’s argument is fundamentally more strict: religious and aesthetic language must not mix. Why this should be is presumably obvious to Baumlin; nevertheless, simply asking oneself why this must be does not suggest any immediate and conclusive answers that do not appeal to the sacred as a category.

More overtly Christian critiques of Bloom, such as R.V. Young’s “Harold Bloom: Critic as Gnostic,” argue, predictably (and correctly), that Bloom’s is a religious transgression:

It is a grimly ironic truth that Bloom’s own Gnostic Freudian treatment of literature and, above all, of authors, opened the gates to the postmodern assassins of the Party of Resentment, who now conduct their scornful ritual over the ‘death of the author.’ Finally, it is precisely his hostility to Christianity and his effort to

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4 Baumlin writes: “Bloom knows (a good Gnostic, he) that only a few readers possess the heterodox esoteric traditions underlying his otherwise seemingly conservative arguments, and that a majority of his readers would be unsettled, even shocked, were they to grasp the full import of Bloom’s ‘religion of art,’ as Paul Dean terms it” (par. 7).
displace it, spiritually and intellectually, which has resulted in the most grievous damage to the literary tradition that Bloom claims to love [...]. He is blind to the intimate and indispensable bond between the secular ‘canon’ and the Faith informing its necessary model, the scriptural canon. Western civilization is the cultural embodiment of Christendom; when its cultural heart stops beating, all that is left is corpse. (19)

Asserting that Western masterpieces are “Christian in their spiritual sources and traditional in their moral orientation” (29), Young scorns Bloom’s mixture of Gnostic imagery, deconstructionist reading models, and his agonistic understanding of the poetic psyche as little more than “worship of the self” (21). Again, we see Bloom alone and without allies; in much the same way as Bloom’s leftist critics might hector his stance that literature has no inherent social utility, we see Young in the same snit about Bloom’s moral orientation. This is absence anxiety expressed as the shrill hectoring of moral turpitude on the grounds that advocacy of the self is spiritual onanism, unproductive, sociopathic, the very source of evil.

But Bloom’s theories have shown significant and less ambiguous problems. The most damaging refutation of Bloom’s religious or mystical modes of understanding literature can be found in the critiques of his Hebrew. At issue is whether or not the central conceit in The Book of J—that the Tanakh was written by a woman who routinely challenged Yahweh’s supremacy with her own poetic vitalism (Rosenberg 9-55)—was the result of intentional mistranslation of the “J” text. In Steven Grosby’s “Men Blow Kisses to Calves” and David Stern’s “The Supreme Fictionalist,” Bloom’s theories are not challenged as much as translator David Rosenberg’s renderings of the “J” text, which Bloom used to support his assertions. Lining up Rosenberg’s with the traditional translations, Grosby makes the compelling case that the “problem for Bloom is that [his] understanding of ‘J’ requires a perversion of the Hebrew” (iv). In particular, Grosby
argues that Bloom and Rosenberg aggressively suppress the message of humanity’s necessary submission to God in favor of a reading that “seeks to deny an essential aspect of ‘J,’ of the worship of Yahweh, and of all religion—the distinction between the sacred and the profane, between pure and impure, and the existence of absolute standards presupposed by this distinction” (iv). While not dismissing these suspect translations—and they are suspect—both critics demonstrate absence anxiety in their arguments: Bloom’s reading of “J” denies absolute standards. And where would we be without those?

David Stern praises Bloom for confessing his disinterest in the Jewish “normative tradition,” but that only amounts to a backhanded compliment where we are to understand that tradition is “only to be overcome, to be escaped from” (emphasis added); Stern goes on to conclude that whatever the quality of the translations of “J,” the problem for Bloom is that as a Gnostic or Kaballist his work “represents a tradition that preserves and transmits nothing” (par. 45). Again, the absence at the heart of Bloom’s theory is what damns it. Grosby takes the considerably harsher line in his conclusion, calling Bloom a devil-worshipper, saying, “Bloom’s perspective is a subjectivist, modern version of the worship of Baal” (iv).

These exceptionally damning remarks illustrate the rancor that Bloom’s arguments engender from traditionalists of several stripes,⁵ whose arguments bear a striking resemblance to those made by T.S Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

Young’s rebuttal is virtually Eliot risen from the dead. According to David Stern, Eliot is

⁵ All are professors. Grosby teaches philosophy, Young and Baumlin teach English, and Stern teaches post-biblical Hebrew literature. It seems clear that Young is a Christian, and Stern cites Gershom Scholem—one of Bloom’s guides through the mysteries of Kabballah—as an example of a pious Jew who “was wholly within the bounds of ‘normative’ Jewish tradition. In fact, it is hard to conceive of anything more normative in Judaism than this kind of devotion, the ‘piety’ of the intellect” (par. 44).
the towering critical presence Bloom seeks to overcome, and for whom "[t]he unity of European culture [...] was Christian culture" (par. 7). While he doesn’t accuse Bloom of Baal-worship, Stern’s suspicion is that Bloom is less resistant to Christian culture than to Eliot himself. Likewise, in arguing that Bloom’s theory is essentially a misguided metaphor of power, Adam Kirsch believes that Bloom mistakes the relation of one poet to another with his own relation to Eliot:

[...] what troubles Bloom about Eliot is not simply his authority, or the literary values he used to establish it. Neither is it the immense superiority of Eliot’s prose to his own, or even the obvious fact that Eliot was a great poet as well as a critic, so that his criticism enjoys an immortality that Bloom’s cannot hope to achieve. The real reason Eliot stands as Bloom’s antithetical precursor is that he foretold what must become of a critic like Bloom — a critic who is not a poet, but passionately wants to assert his own personality. (par. 31)

According to Kirsch, Eliot anticipated Bloom and all critics as secondary creatures, dependent on artists for their sustenance, and finally obsessed with power because of their necessary subservience to creative genius. While this observation has some merit as a kind of Bloomian analysis of Bloom, the argument against Bloom’s theory still turns on the assumption that the conflation of literary and creative modes of reading and writing are fruitless. Kirsch’s point is well taken; Bloom probably tells us more about the critic as reader than the poet as reader, much less the poet as writer. However, Kirsch (following Eliot) basically rejects Bloom’s theories based on his lack of poems, which must be revealed for the power play it in fact is; there is no reason to privilege literary texts over critical ones, unless as a defense against them or an assault on them. Put another way, the supremacy of the literary, once advocated, reveals vulnerabilities and anxieties as much as it defends against them.
The anxiety of absence then, follows upon the recognition that these categories are finally arbitrary, which is to say man-made, and therefore metaphysically absent. What these aforementioned critics have in common in their assault on Bloom is an appeal to their own sacredness and quasi-mystical categories of experience that supposedly set such writings apart from all others, an appeal that is finally reductive of all other writings that are put outside of them. Bloom’s mystical ruminations are out of bounds because they do not sufficiently revere these categories. Canonicity must maintain its religious taint.

However, Bloom’s crime—conflating religion with literature with criticism with mysticism in his writing—is still, finally, just writing, and the need to organize and maintain such distinctions becomes something else. It becomes, to one way of reading, the anxiety of absence. To understand how, we must come to insist on this democratization—one that respects no bounds between rhetorics, as in the Deconstructionist mode, of which Bloom is a quasi-practioner—which allows us then to see the rich play of presence and absence. Indeed, what critics of Bloom universally fail to recognize is that to read him properly, or at least for presence and absence, requires, if not an outright abolition of discursive categories, then at least the recognition that such categories are rather more flexible than we might like; our resistance to such flexibility is finally our own. Put another way, Bloom’s work suggests that reading experiences are rather often profoundly religious or mystic, and that the relation between a person—poet or critic—and a text—literary, critical, or what we call religious—is at once the interaction of one mind to another and the rich interplay of presence and absence on as many levels as we admit.
Nietzsche, Derrida, and the Trace: Will and the Absence of Language

One’s response to Bloom is yoked to one’s response to Friedrich Nietzsche, for Bloom’s writing is suffused with Nietzschean influence. The first thing they share, and the first thing we encounter in each of them, is a combative writing style. For both, style directly corresponds to substance; “Every talent must unfold itself in fighting,” Nietzsche wrote in “Homer’s Contest,” a phrase that was the “starting-point” for Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* (*Genius*, 195), and which forms the basis of Bloom’s understanding of poetic influence as the severe troping of one poet in reaction to another, a troping so violent as to be antithetical. “Tropes” in Bloom’s conception are just as likely to turn back against the preceding thesis/poem as they are to turn away. Fight and flight are the only options for poets.

Of course, antithesis is Nietzsche’s philosophy in a nutshell. As a master of antithetical thinking, Nietzsche may well have troped the final trope and set us on the course to impossibility of originality, which allows Lentricchia to observe: “To say that [Bloom] is unoriginal is to indulge a myth that much of contemporary theory has laid to rest. Clearly Nietzsche implied it all; just as clearly, Bloom has made the Nietzschean insights count as no one before him has” (343). As the god-killing high priest of skepticism and perspectivism, Nietzsche is rightly the father of Post-Structuralism, but it is actually the Nietzschean will to power in Bloom’s theory of influence (via Freud) that gives the moralists of all varieties fits. And, although Nietzsche often observes that power results in the unnatural and crippling mental states of the Christian psyche, the very
mention of will to power is more likely to inspire visions of blitzkriegs in the legions of poor misreaders of Nietzsche, readers who consider him the father of nihilism. But Nietzsche, like Freud and Bloom after him, was possessed of a will to truth, which (correctly or incorrectly) led to a diagnosis of human relations that was not as rosily teleological as that of the dominant Christian tradition. One hopes that this is merely bad press, bad readings; Nietzsche’s diagnoses—the death of God, the shortcomings of language, the nihilism at the heart of Christian metaphysics—are too often confused with his prescriptions, prescriptions which are always as self-augmenting as this passage from *The Gay Science*:

> We have left the land and take to our ship! We have burned our bridges—more we have burned our land behind us! Now, little ship, take care! The ocean lies all around you; true, it is not always roaring, and sometimes it lies there as if it were silken and golden and a gentle favorable dream. But there will be times when you will know that it is infinite and that there is nothing more terrible than infinity [...] Alas, if homesickness for land should assail you, as if there were more freedom there—and there is no longer a ‘land’! (207)

To consider oneself on one’s own ship, as fundamentally adrift in an alternately beautiful and violent existence, is to live in danger of solipsism. But it is precisely Nietzsche’s joy at the prospect of self-augmentation that makes his bleak observations of humanity bearable; indeed, the very chance to know a harsh truth is always an occasion for happiness in oneself, an opportunity to respond with will and strength. Bloom’s theory of poetic influence has a similar effect on us; for some it may be too bleak and brutal to accept that the relations between artists are so fundamentally contentious, but such a thing does not trouble those for whom the will to power is a symptom of the human condition and who therefore take Nietzsche’s advice when it comes to sad, hard facts. Poetic influence is an occasion for strength, the fertile ground for troping.
However much Nietzsche’s will to power is identical to Bloom’s theory of the agon between poets, a proper reading of Nietzsche-in-Bloom, must rather come through Nietzsche’s atheism. In fact, it is only by passing through Nietzsche’s observations of what we thought (and continue to think) of God, that we might understand the agony of influence and absence. Although the following is as shrill as any Sunday sermon, Nietzsche’s astonishment at the absurdity of Christian faith is even today astonishingly apt:

> When on a Sunday morning we hear the bells ringing we ask ourselves: is it possible! this is going on because of a Jew crucified 2000 years ago who said he was the son of God. The proof of such an assertion is lacking. [...]. A god who begets children on a mortal woman; a sage who calls upon us no longer to work, no longer to sit in judgment, but to heed the signs of the imminent end of the world; a justice which accepts an innocent man as a substitute sacrifice; someone who bids his disciples drink his blood; prayers for miraculous interventions; sins perpetrated against a god atoned for by a god; fear of a Beyond to which death is the gateway: the figure of the Cross as the symbol in an age which no longer knows the meaning and shame of the Cross—how gruesomely all this is wafted to us, as if out of the grave of a primeval past! Can one believe that things of this sort are still believed in? (Human, All Too Human 169)

While Nietzsche plucks at the fantastic absurdities of Christian faith, his astonishment resides in the proposition that this tale was *made up*, a fiction behind which hides a consciousness (collective or otherwise) no better than one’s own, and by Nietzsche’s lights, demonstrably worse. However, Nietzsche recognized and appreciated the value of the humanities for living, and is not necessarily arguing here against believing in stories. In “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life,” he argues that “history

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6 The following, from Nietzsche’s *The Antichrist*, is quoted in the section on him in Bloom’s *Genius*, and illustrates their shared dismay at the Christian myth, and its nihilism:

> The Christian conception of God—God as god of the sick, God as a spider, God as spirit—is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine ever attained on earth. It may represent the low-water mark in the descending development of divine types. God degenerated into the contradiction of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes! God as the declaration of war against life, against nature, against the will to live! God—the formula for every slander against ‘this world,’ for every lie about the ‘beyond’! God—the deification of nothingness, the will to nothingness pronounced holy! (*The Antichrist* 585-86).
belongs to the preserving and revering soul—to him who with loyalty and love looks back on his origins; through this reverence he, as it were, gives thanks for his existence” (19). Again, his critique is against the specific tale being told, not that it is a tale or that it is believed. But what fuels his dismay is the utter lack of skepticism, the flaccid will (if you can call it “will”) that accepts such fictions as gospel truth, and the unwillingness to contend with these fictions as such, to make new, better stories, histories, truths.

Nietzsche is contemptuous of all who refuse to contest their past, a past which is not of their own design, and yet very well could be if they only had the will to re-read it. It is in this spirit—critical of the Christian message and yet cognizant of myths’ nutrition for living—that I believe Bloom’s aggressive or “strong” misreading of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in *The Anxiety of Influence* is fruitfully understood.

Bloom and Nietzsche would agree that, as a theodicy, *Paradise Lost* is scarcely necessary, let alone successful; that is, Bloom is every bit as skeptical about Milton’s Christian beliefs as Nietzsche, and Bloom’s reading of *Paradise Lost* reflects this skepticism. Bloom’s transformation of the poem into an allegory of relations between poets is vigorously antithetical to the religious content (that is, it is Nietzschean), and quite clearly derived from the poetry of those to whom his theory applies: the Romantics who adored Milton’s Satan. And yet Bloom’s trope on Nietzsche is to reorient the relation between Satan and God in *Paradise Lost* back towards the divine-man relation, in the service of “sacralizing” not only the poetry of the Romantics, but their very relationship to one another. In short, Bloom is writing a myth and theory at once, and again transgressing the religious category—and probably the poetic (as opposed to the critical)—as well.
How does Bloom’s theory blur the distinctions between discourses? How is the relation between poets a divine-man relation? Bloom’s reading of *Paradise Lost*, which opens the *Anxiety of Influence*, inflates the earliest moments in that poem, when Satan realizes that he is falling, to a climax. According to Bloom, poetry begins with the “awareness, not of a Fall, but that *we are falling*. The poet is our chosen man, and his consciousness of election becomes a curse [...] ‘I *was* God, I *was* Man (for a poet they were the same), and I *am* falling, from myself’ (*Anxiety of Influence* 21). In Bloom’s reading, this fall is a self-division, the discovery that one has been created by another—literally the author of one’s truest self—and yet this other is not oneself. As Bloom says:

> When a potential poet first discovers (or is discovered by) the dialectic of influence, first discovers poetry as being both external and internal to himself, he begins a process that will end only when he has no more poetry within him, long after he has the power (or desire) to discover it outside himself again. Though all such discovery is self-recognition, indeed a Second Birth, and ought, in the pure good of theory, to be accomplished in a perfect solipsism, it is an act never complete in itself. Poetic Influence in the sense—amazing, agonizing, delighting—of other poets, as felt in the depths of the all but perfect solipsist, the potentially strong poet. For the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of other selves. The poem is within him, yet he experiences the shame and splendor of being found by poems—great poems, outside him. To lose freedom in this center is never to forgive, and to learn the dread of threatened autonomy forever (25-26).

It is at this point, in this profoundly miserable condition, that the poet begins to write. Satan lands in the fiery lake of not-self “(t)he dismal situation waste and wild, [...]. Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace / And rest can never dwell, hope never comes [. . .].” (*Paradise Lost* I, 60-66), and yet the poet in him possesses something, though he be flung from himself, and so he “refuses to brood upon this, and turns instead to his task, which is to rally everything that remains” (*Anxiety*, 21). “What though the field be lost?” Satan says to his troops, rallying what remains in the Bloomian myth, for
“All is not lost; the unconquerable will [...] And courage never to submit or yield. . .” (I, 106-08). What for Milton was surely the folly of over-reachers, becomes the great trope against history by the belated, those flung from themselves:

Farewell happy fields  
Where joy for ever dwells: hail horrors, hail  
Infernal world, and thou profoudest hell  
Receive thy new possessor: one who brings  
A mind not to be changed by place or time.  
The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.  
What matter where, if I still be the same,  
And what should I be, all but less than he,  
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least  
We shall be free . . . (I, 249-55)

But the freedom of hell is debt-ridden. The discovery in reading poetry—and, by extension, “reading” any art—is self-recognition, but not self-recovery, for the poet is flung from himself. “The alternative is to repent, to accept God altogether other than the self, wholly external to the possible,” Bloom writes (21), and what he means is that the alternative to writing for the newborn poet is to deny that one has seen oneself in the predecessor’s poem, has been created there. It is important to remember that Bloom is talking about the creation of poets; we may all be created in some sense by what we read, but what a poet sees in a poem is himself writing the poem that created him. Of course, this did not happen, but it is no less the case that the poet must now write poems, and those poems—all of them, in some crucial and heretofore overlooked way—are about this event of his creation. In this, Bloom is fruitfully read quite literally. The predecessor poet is God to the subsequent poet in the sense that what the ephebe most is, after encountering great poetry, is a poet; he was not a poet before he discovered himself in the poetry of another—he did not exist.
Of course, the predecessor is also "cultural history, the dead poets, the embarrasments of a tradition grown too wealthy to need anything more" (21), or put another way, *persons and their arts*, and we properly see how influence anxiety describes not only a relation between gods and people, but between consciousnesses, or people, with all of the psychic tensions that that entails; and so the distinctions between gods and men and the literary characters they create and are created by become subject to the crucial problem of absence. To discover a poet as one's God is to lose the God Nietzsche declared dead and absent, and to lose the poet to history is to lose him too, and all of this loss is to have lost the self (to have been flung from the self), which is to feel absence in at least three ways, all infinitely complicated and as personal as can be. The discourses of experience—religious, literary, psychological, and so on—are simply insufficient in themselves to the task of explaining what Bloom is talking about here. All Bloom knows, and wants to say, is that this is where poems come from.

The implications are quite broad. For Nietzsche, the appropriate response to finding an absence behind a poem (or a moral, or a religion, or any idea, really) is to rewrite the poem and place the self there. Bloom's theory is really an exploration of this process as it can be traced in poetry, a process which "includes everything that we could ascribe as motivation for the writing of poetry that is not strictly devotional in its purposes," and "[t]o rally everything that remains, and not to sanctify nor propound." Satan, who is the apt model of this process, "organizing his chaos, imposing a discipline despite the visible

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7 For Lentricchia, this is Satanic, but it is clear he doesn't mean that as favorably transgressive: "It is difficult to say what, outside of the testimony of the devil himself, would sanction [the] view of romanticism as the search for a unique and irreplaceable self which wants to articulate a uniquely original language. The preponderance of testimony of romantic poets and theorists since Wordsworth has claimed rather the opposite" (330), but that is precisely Bloom's point; irrespective of Wordsworth's intent, the Romantic movement is characterized by this transgressive self-augmenting aggression.
darkness, calling his minions to emulate his refusal to mourn, becomes a hero as poet, finding what must suffice, while knowing that nothing can suffice” (Anxiety, 22). The great difficulty for the poet is not discovering an absence behind a poem, but a god. If talent is revealed in fighting, the fight here is against one’s creator and the stakes are as high as can be; as Bloom puts it in A Map of Misreading, “A poet [...] is not so much a man speaking to men as a man rebelling against being spoken to by a dead man [...] outrageously more alive than himself” (19)—which is again a conflation of God and man, for the predecessor poet is virtually immortal. To show talent is to fight against the creator of one’s “profoundest yearnings,” and Bloom knows that this is a battle between a god and a potential god, and—weaned on Freud—a fight fraught with despair.

On this point, Satan’s complaint in Book IV of Paradise Lost is instructive. After Satan notes the image of the sun “high in his meridian tower,” he contemplates his lot and his options (IV, 30). The meridian, or noon, is a critical time of judgment here, a period when no shadow can be cast, where all is illuminated. It seems that at this time and place, Satan cannot lie, and must reckon with his fall in all honesty. He concedes that it was easy to praise God, easier still to serve him, and yet, as one “lifted up so high” (IV, 49) he hated any subjugation whatsoever, despite God being the source of all his gifts and pleasure. It occurs to Satan that, had he been an angel of a lesser order, his ambitions would have been bounded on all sides by weakness. Further, Satan bemoans that he is himself in particular, for other powerful angels did not succumb to temptation, for none aspired as he. Satan’s self-judgment that he is too large is to realize that God has made a creature who cannot bear His presence and yet mourns His absence. He is forced then, by the madness of this senseless choice between “Infinite wrath, and infinite despair” (IV,
to declaim to himself that evil shall be his good (99), to trope antithetically against his creator-precursor. A reading of Bloom’s theory of the divine-man or creator-man relation between poets, as if the predecessor were some sort of Gnostic demiurge to the subsequent poet, allows us to see that the full title of Bloom’s book—*The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*—is at last ironic; influence anxiety is not just a theory of poetic relations, but a theory of how poems are sacred texts of origins, stories of a person’s creation, each one a book of Genesis and a Theogony. The “sacralizing” of texts cannot be gotten away from; it is precisely Bloom’s point.

If it seems too dubious to claim that Bloom is writing more than poetic theory, we must recognize that such transgressions are common, and go back at least as far as Plato, so long as Nietzsche is to be believed in claiming that the “special artistic significance in Plato’s dialogues is [...] a contest with the art of the orators, and the dramatists of his time [...] enabling him to say in the end: ‘Look, I too can do what my great rivals can do; indeed, I can do it better than they [...] and now I repudiate all this entirely and condemn all imitative art’” (*Homer’s Contest* 37). Nietzsche’s insight is this: Plato was first a poet, and Homer was his great predecessor. Again, every talent unfolds itself in fighting, and that fighting reveals new modes of thought; Plato is not remembered to us as a poet or dramatist, but his dialogues are richly dramatic and poetic while they “fight” with poetry and drama by changing the discourse—against writing, to dialogue, and towards philosophy. That we call Plato’s writing “philosophy” is to forget that it is poetry and drama. Likewise, Bloom’s theory of influence flouts categorization, and his version of *Paradise Lost* is richly multivalent, or at least an attempt at such multivalence.\(^8\)

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\(^8\) Lentricchia is aware of this as a transgression: “By calling the poem something that is composed of what the precursor writes, the ephebe’s deliberate misreading of this, and the critic’s deliberate misreading of the
It is at points such as this—when one is, say, making the outrageous argument that Harold Bloom is mythic theorist or some such—that the implications of Bloom’s own notion of misreading are acutely felt. One picks and chooses phrases that augment his chief concern and feels the mischief inherent to misreading, but also a kind of loss, as if the words—those cherry-picked and one’s own—were insufficient to the argument. All reading is misreading according to Bloom, which does not assuage the loss felt in that realization. “Whatever we have words for, that we have already got beyond,” Nietzsche writes in *Twilight of the Idols*, “In all talk there is a grain of contempt” (530). This is one of Bloom’s favorite quotes, and the translation he uses renders it “That for which we find words is something already dead in our hearts. There is a kind of contempt in the act of speaking.” The difference is slight, but “dead in our hearts” seems more mournful of absence, which is probably why Bloom uses it. But all such losses are, again, opportunities for overcoming.

Misreading, “poetic misprision,” or *clinamen*, are all used to describe the same event of reading, a talent that is no less determined by fighting than any other. “Poems are written by men, and not by anonymous Splendors,” Bloom writes in *Anxiety of Influence*, with all awareness that even religious texts are poems or writings, and then turns to the problem of will in reading: “The stronger the man, the larger his resentments, and the more brazen his *clinamen*. But at what price, as readers, are we to forfeit our own *clinamen*?” (43). For Bloom, the requirement of critics and readers is to read the poem as

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ephebe-precursor relationship, Bloom would grab for criticism a piece of the creative action” (338). Lentricchia is, in my opinion, completely correct, as is Nietzsche, whose comment in “Homer’s Contest” seems apt for what Bloom himself is up to with respect to the category of literature: “the core of the Hellenic notion of the contest: it abominates the rule of one and fears its dangers; it desires, as a *protection* against the genius, another genius” (37). Bloom’s grab for the “creative action” is—successful or not—his contest with genius.
"a poet’s deliberate misinterpretation," and again we must look to Nietzsche to properly understand what Bloom means.

For Nietzsche, atheism arises out of his disdain for Christian myth, but he is also astonished at Christian readers and their violence to Judaic tradition; noting in *The Dawn* that “the Bible is pricked and pulled and the art of reading badly formally inculcated upon the people,” Nietzsche observes that “everywhere in the Old Testament there were supposed to be references to Christ and only to Christ, and particularly to his cross. Wherever any piece of wood, a switch, a ladder, a twig, a tree, a willow, or a staff is mentioned, this was supposed to indicate a prophecy of the wood of the cross [...] Has anybody who claimed this ever believed it?” (81).9 As argued earlier, Nietzsche possessed a will to truth, and such dishonest “readings” appalled him, but it would be a mistake to think that “true” readings had any truck with him. Language was no vehicle for truth, any more than matter and energy cloaked the gears and workings of the universe,10 leading him to write towards the end of his philosophic life in the notes to *Will to Power*, “Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying, ‘there are only facts,’ I should say: no it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations [...]]" (458). This is Bloom’s notion of reading as misreading: facticity, meaning, truth are

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9 Harold Bloom finds this “reading badly” to be a prime example of misreading, saying in an interview with the *Boston Globe* in 2005, “I think the Greek New Testament is the strongest and most successful misreading of a great prior text in the entire history of influence. Everything in the New Testament is deliberately lined up so as to serve—so they say—as the ultimate fulfillment of the Hebrew Bible. But, historically speaking, I do not think the treatment Jews have received from Christians is any kind of fulfillment. Rather it’s an endless—I must fall back on the Yiddish here-shandah [shame]” (par. 13).

10 From *The Gay Science*: “What is ‘appearance’ to me now! Certainly not the opposite of some kind of being—what can I possibly say about being of any kind that is not a predicate of appearance! Certainly not a dead mask placed over an unknown ‘x,’ which could, if one wished, be removed! Appearance is for me the active living itself, which goes so far in its self-mockery as to allow me to feel that there is nothing here but appearance and will-o’-the-wisp and a flickering dance of spirits” (206).
all lost, and all that reading distills down to is an opportunity to be strong or weak in the wake of that loss.

Nietzsche is the eminent forerunner or father figure of post-structuralism in noting how metaphysically unmoored language truly is. His greatest essay on the topic, "On Truth and Lying in the Non-Moral Sense," is astonishingly rich for its brevity on a topic that would consume and vex literary studies and philosophy. "We believe that when we speak of trees, colours, snow, and flowers, we have knowledge of the things themselves, and yet we possess only metaphors of things which in no way correspond to the original entities" he writes (877), and the modes of thought that would characterize Deconstruction come spilling forth:

What then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer coins. (878)

Again, we feel absence (expressed here as old money!), this time a lack or gap in language that is severed from truth; that is, we feel—after Nietzsche—to have lost something, to realize again as we did before that what stands behind our existence—as a poet, a reader, a Christian—is not just a person or even an idea, but a now-diminished discourse, a slippery relation between signifier and signified, a metaphor, a ghost, a trace. The implications are startling and troubling, and lead inevitably to the kind of discussion of presence and absence found in the work of Jacques Derrida, and in particular his book, Of Grammatology.
Derrida’s goal in the essay is of a piece with that of Deconstruction: the endeavor of reading *deconstructively* is not to arrive at meaning, but to find the places where contradictions or double binds reveal the very problematic metaphysical claims made by any piece of writing. But in doing so, Derrida cleaves closely to the problem of presence and absence, using the tension as a metaphor for what language does *most*. Embellishing on Nietzsche, Derrida is aware that texts fight themselves, in some sense, by failing to be what they claim; for instance, Derrida takes issue with Rousseau’s notion of his wife as a mediatory force in his thinking and writing, arguing that Rousseau’s wife, in this example, could serve no such role because nothing outside language can mediate what is closed within language, which *are* words: “The intermediary is the mid-point and the mediation, the middle *term*, between total absence and the absolute plenitude of presence […]. The play of substitution fills and marks a determined lack” (emphasis added 1824).

It is significant that Derrida is not simply parroting the Nietzschean line that language is problematic in its empty appeals to metaphysical foundations. Derrida tropes on Nietzsche by arguing that reading is not just an act of will—interpretation—but crucially trapped within the text; an interpretation cannot appeal to anything outside of the text, even the Self. Indeed, the Self is absent:

What we have tried to show […] is that in what one calls the real life of these existences of ‘flesh and bone,’ beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau’s text, there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’ supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, *in the text*, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like ‘real mother’ name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence. (1826)
What emerges from this rumination on Rousseau is a notion that writing—all writing—seeks to hide itself by appealing to that outside of the text, so that “effacing itself in the face of the signified content which it transports and in general teaches” (1826) is an essentially transcendent act, or an attempt at one. For Derrida, our reading should be aware that writing has “lent itself to this transcendent reading, in that search for the signified which we here put in question, not to annul it but understand it within a system to which such a reading is blind” (1827). To Derrida, what writing fundamentally claims to do—to refer to a reality outside itself—it cannot support or evince. Language is not just the play of interpretations; such “writing that is yet reading” is at once presence-making in hiding itself, and absence-yielding when its depths are plumbed. At most, Derrida finds what he calls a “trace,” which is what one feels to be a thing behind language—Self, say—but is also a clever wordplay suggesting partially erased text, absence, and the primacy of language even in our sense of a ghostly Self that has flitted out of language. The full import of Nietzsche’s notion of words as things already dead in our hearts is realized.

Harold Bloom, as part of the “Yale School” where Deconstruction first engaged the American literary scene, is well versed in this development of Nietzsche’s skepticism. But in this Bloom again confounds discursive categories, arguably more so than Derrida. In some sense, Bloom’s notion of misreading is a clinamen or swerve from the Derridean criticism of reading as the mistaken sense of presence: misreading is just as apt to lead to a very significant psychic presence, which is influence. Seen this way, Bloom and Derrida are figures of presence and absence, respectively. Couching presence in terms of the struggle for artistic freedom, Bloom observes in his essay, “Breaking of the Forms,”
[F]reedom, in a poem, must mean freedom of meaning, the freedom to have meaning of one’s own. Such freedom is wholly illusory unless it is achieved against a prior plenitude of meaning, which is tradition, and so also against language [...] which can be conceived in two valid ways, as I have learned, slowly and reluctantly. Either one can believe in a magical theory of all language, as the Kabbalists, many poets, and Walter Benjamin did, or else one must yield to a thoroughgoing linguistic nihilism, which in its most refined form is the mode now called Deconstruction. (4)

Bloom’s stance towards Deconstruction is finally dismissive; in large part, it is Derrida’s notion of trace, which we may read here as the Self, that Bloom finds so repugnantely nihilistic. Lentricchia believes that Bloom’s position towards Deconstruction is based on an objection to the way Derrida “situates” the subject within language, which means to subvert the traditional Western humanist perspective on the theme of free subjectivity, to place the subject as a function within a system of writing. There is no prelinguistic ontological subject; no meaning-authorizing inner space of the self; no ground for expression outside of an expressive medium itself. What we find ‘inside’ [...] is not a spirituality, or presence that evades the flood of textuality, but a sort of protowriting which he calls the ‘trace’: the subject is seen as essentially text, caught and engulfed by the truly authoritative forces of écriture. (333)

Arguing, rightly, that Bloom is deeply resistant to such a “situated” Self, Lentricchia comes to the conclusion that “Bloom’s critique of Derrida becomes anxiety ridden rhetoric, not argument; assertion, not analysis” (335). To this critique, one might add Bloom’s own revelation as “valid,” a “magical theory of all language”; what, after all, could be less analytic? Lentricchia, for whatever reason, is finally more moved by Derrida’s profundities than Bloom’s, but it is a mistake to judge, as he does, that “both Bloom and Derrida present, the former unintentionally but as formidably, antihumanist theories of the self” (336). To properly “situate” the subject in language, as Derrida does, is judged by Bloom to make life meaningless or nihilistic, to be trapped by the language that creates us (in that it cannot be got behind or beyond), and to violate its real utility,
according to Nietzsche, “as an aid and remedy in the service of growing and striving life” 
(*The Gay Science* 132). If anything, Bloom’s theory of the Self crosses into the divine, as 
in the relation between creator/precursor and created/ephebe, and is the transmission of 
that secular divinity, which practically means a religion of self-augmenting presence in 
the imagination of William Shakespeare:

Bardolatry, the worship of Shakespeare, ought to be even more a secular religion 
than it already is. The plays remain the outward limit of human achievement [...]. They abide beyond the mind’s reach; we cannot catch up to them. Shakespeare will go on explaining us, in part because he invented us. (*Shakespeare: Invention of the Human* xvii)

This notion of Shakespeare’s “invention of the human” is as literal as anything Bloom 
has ever written, and set against Derridean absence in language that hides only itself, 
makes the only argument left: language is magic and writers are gods. In this, Bloom’s 
 writings are indebted to Emerson and Gnosticism, to which we now turn.
Friedrich Nietzsche’s vision of the little ship cited earlier—on an infinite sea where one realizes “there is nothing more terrible than infinity” and where “there is no longer a ‘land’!”—is a fantasy and, as such, an anxiety. Few writers seem more resistant to “the embarrassments of a tradition grown too wealthy to need anything more” (Anxiety of Influence 21) than Nietzsche, and this dream of space, of absence, betrays a great anxiety of influence. This is not to overlook how we profit from Nietzsche’s critique of tradition and its manufacture, but there is no denying what need a vision of absence meets: psychic space. Although Bloom credits Nietzsche’s argument that “talent must unfold itself in fighting” for sparking his theory of influence, it is Nietzsche’s very antithetical orientation to tradition, and the anxieties that underlie such an orientation, which also must constitute Bloom’s debt to Nietzsche.

There is a corresponding dream in another of Bloom’s great influences, Ralph Waldo Emerson. According to Bloom, Emerson seems relatively free of influence\(^1\), but like Nietzsche’s little ship, Emerson’s great imaginative symbol—the “transparent eyeball”—is also a fantasy and an anxiety. Appearing in his first book, Nature, the transparent eyeball

\(^1\) Save in Emerson’s effusive praise of Shakespeare in his Representative Men essays, which for Bloom is a case for Bardolatry. See 342-44 of Bloom’s Genius.
eyeball is Emerson’s great image of an infinite capaciousness. After observing in the introduction that his place in history is “retrospective,” and that “foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face,” he asks, “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (9). Emerson feels precisely the belatedness that Bloom describes, the kind of spiritual anxiety about the “Father” that Valentinus describes in the epigram introducing this section; but Emerson quickly moves, or tropes, on this anxiety towards a vision of solitude so total that the Self all but disappears:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. (11)

As a fantasy of unlimited capacity for experience (the eyeball sees, is not itself seen, and never fills), this dream belies a great anxiety of absence. The Gnostic Valentinus describes such an anxiety as a “fog,” which seems aptly troublesome to the metaphor of a transparent eyeball, for if there is one thing that turns Emerson’s metaphor of infinite capacity into a powerless nullity, it is the nightmare of fog.

This very problem in Emerson’s thought, like Bloom’s, has many contact points with Gnosticism. Hans Jonas’ *The Gnostic Religion* is an excellent guide to this lost religion, and lays out the historical situation that allowed for Gnostic mysticism to flourish. Jonas explains how Gnosticism developed out of the syncretism of middle and near eastern mystical cults, Greek theoretical thought (in the wake of Plato and Aristotle), and dualistic religions of salvation—Christianity, of course, but also messianic Judaism—which were ascendant in the centuries immediately before and after Christ. Jonas
describes a rapidly and variously mutating religion that made use of every handy tradition, but with decidedly strange results.

Much of what survives of Gnostic thought is preserved in the writings of early Christian apologists, but the main tenets derive from a dualism so complete that “[t]he transcendent God Himself is hidden from all creatures and is unknowable by natural concepts. Knowledge of Him requires supranatural revelation and illumination and even then can hardly be expressed otherwise than in negative terms” (Jonas 42-43). In brief, the Gnostics seem to have believed that the God of Judaic and Christian tradition was Himself a secondary (or tertiary) being who created the world we inhabit, and, depending on the Gnostic sect, was to some degree hostile or malevolent to his own creation. Central to this hostility was absence; the Gnostics believed that the ultimate God was far removed from our reality, a reality created by an “archon,” usually identified with the God of Genesis, the Fall, the Flood, and Job’s torments. Among Christian Gnostics, Jesus Christ was seen as a messenger from the true highest God, come to enlighten and liberate mankind by making us aware of the “pneuma” or divine spark that inhabits each person. “In its unredeemed state the pneuma thus immersed in soul and flesh is unconscious of itself, benumbed, asleep, or intoxicated by the poison of the world: in brief, it is ‘ignorant.’ Its awakening and liberation is effected through ‘knowledge’, ” Jonas writes, in summarizing Gnostic thought on reality (44); what is most eternal about us is of the Father but also terribly remote from him. Moreover, only by coming into knowledge of one’s own pneuma can this separation be bridged.

The striking parallel between Gnosticism and Emerson’s thought is the problem of an absent God, and the troping or defense against the anxiety of absence or anguish
concerning the Father in Gnosticism. While his *Nature* shows Emerson's troping, the
absence anxiety itself is most evident in Emerson's "Divinity School Address."

Essentially Emerson's letter of resignation from the Unitarian church, the address reveals
Emerson's defense against absence expressed as a claim of Gnosis. Ostensibly a critique
of the church that has "fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate
religion" (78) the address is quite a bit more than a criticism of the church's rhetorical
approach; Emerson, like all apostates, must contend with what he loses, a lost god, which
he must replace or refute, but in any case, cannot keep.

Emerson opens the "Divinity School Address" with the lustrous image of nature:
"Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under
them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy [...]. The mystery of nature was
never displayed more happily" (72). But quickly, an existential angst creeps in as he asks,

> What am I? What is? asks the human spirit with a curiosity new-kindled, but
ne*ver* to be quenched. Behold these outrunning laws, which our imperfect
apprehension can see tend this way and that, but not come full circle. Behold
these infinite relations, so like, so unlike; many, yet one. I would study, I would
know, I would admire forever. (73)

An apprehension of nature inspires angst, but Emerson suggests that such a sense of
nature clues us in to "the presence of certain divine laws [that] refuse to be adequately
stated. They will not be written out on paper, or spoken by the tongue [...]. They elude
our persevering thought; yet we read them hourly in each other's faces, in each other's
actions, in our own remorse" (73). By stating that divine law has no place in words,

Emerson claims a knowledge not unlike that of the Gnostic. Such knowledge is internal

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12 The remarkable receptivity here is classical in scope; as Bloom notes in several places in his own work,
the root of "influence" originally described the idea that stars imparted some substance through the ether to
inspire people. "Influenza" has the same root, though Bloom doesn't choose to remind us of that.
and secret and cannot be spoken, but it is there, nonetheless. There is presence, though it cannot be fixed by words. And yet, Emerson notes a curious condition: we seem to be hourly in a state of remorse. If there is a sense of the Fall in Emerson, it is here.  

Greater assertions of presence emerge in the “Divinity School Address,” where absence and Otherness are simply denied. Emerson argues that there is no necessary separation, that there was no Fall: “The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul […] If man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God do enter into that man with justice” (74). This idea probably upset a good number of his audience for the audacity of claiming that God enters one, as opposed to his grace. In particular the phrase, “then in so far is he God,” seems designed to be misread; it can mean the extent that a man’s heart is just is the extent of God’s presence in the man or, more outrageously, it can mean the man with a just heart is God. That Emerson keeps the meaning ambiguous necessarily leaves the distinction between man and the divine ambiguous; moreover, the similarity to Bloom’s precursor-ephebe relation as a divine-human relation is curious. Strikingly, Emerson insists on using Christ’s humanity as an exemplar of this presence: “One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World.” The implication of Emerson’s Christ is that a human can take possession of God once he perceives the divine law, law that is plain in so much of nature and in humanity. This conception of

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13 It isn’t too hard to imagine Emerson as more often sad than happy, despite the general cheer in his writing; not long after his first wife’s death, he wrote in his journal, “I visited Ellen’s tomb & opened the coffin.” Three years before this address at Harvard, he wrote, “After thirty a man wakes up sad every morning excepting perhaps five or six until the day of his death.”

14 Surely there were gasps when Emerson said, “the fear of degrading the character of Jesus by representing him as a man;—indicate with sufficient clearness the falsehood of our theology” (87). Yet, by the 1880s, his view on Christ was accepted Unitarian doctrine.
Christ is practically identical to the pneuma-revealing figure of Christian Gnosticism. But again, the curious thing is that the distinction between the divine and the human is diminished, and as such represents a trope against absence.

Once one examines the address closely, another parallel with Gnosticism emerges: as a statement of mystical Gnosis, and as argument, the address doesn’t hold. In part, Emerson’s trope to merge man and God depends on words that cannot be said, cannot be wrenched into sense; it is simply impossible to accept his notion that the divine law cannot be stated, and yet fault the church that “the Moral Nature [...] is not explored as the fountain of the established teaching in society” (81). How the church is to teach what cannot be put in words is not clear. Emerson further complicates matters, saying, “[a]lways the seer is a sayer. Somehow his dream is told; somehow he publishes it with solemn joy: sometimes with pencil on canvas [...] but clearest and most permanent in words” (81). Such contradictions evaporate any sense that might have accreted to his argument against the church, and what is left is an assertion of presence that is pre-lingual and mystical, and yet somehow permanent in words.

Read for presence and absence, what one sees in Emerson’s address is far more ironic than he intended. In his lack of argument, passages rife with absence anxiety leap forth, passages that preach something just short of solipsism as a kind of cure. Interestingly, one of Bloom’s revisionary tropes—askesis, the move a poet makes to purge the self of a precursor, and which results in a strong self-estrangement from all traces of that precursor—ends at the verge of solipsism. It is plausible that the “Divinity School Address” shows a similar trope (but one of gathering rather than purging, for Emerson’s dream is always of gathering), which ends on the verge of solipsism as well. Bloom could
be writing of Emerson when he says, “Elaborating ourselves, we become both
Prometheus and Narcissus; or rather only the truly strong poet can go on being both,
making his culture, and raptly contemplating his own central place in it” (Anxiety of
Influence 119). Emerson’s trope to identify God with the Self—over and over in his
writing—seems to meet the terms of Bloom’s askesis, and the dominant psychic action in
“The Divinity School Address” is just such troping against absence. Read for it, the
following all suggest a terror of separation from ultimate presence:

- “All evil is so much death or nonentity” (75), speaks to the nothingness outside
  of God.
- The man without God “bereaves himself of power, or auxiliaries; his being
  shrinks out all remote channels, he becomes less and less, a mote, a point, until
  absolute badness is absolute death” (75); such a man shows the wages of absence.
- All existence verily depends on presence, for the “absence of this primary faith
  is the presence of degradation [...]. Let this faith depart, and the very words it
  spake and the things it made become false and hurtful. Then falls the church, the
  state, art, letters, life” (77).
- Finally, to not have God within is itself a killer, for “that which shows God out
  of me, makes me a wart and a wen. There is no longer any reason for my being.
  Already the long shadows of untimely oblivion creep over me, and I shall decease
  forever” (79).

Evil is absence. Losing divine presence is to shrink into a mote and death. God’s
presence must be within. While the anxiety of absence abates in subsequent writings, it is
important to recognize in this early address in his career as a Transcendentalist,
Romantic, essayist, and poet—a non-denominational Christian or Christian Gnostic, in any case—the stresses caused by absence, and the tropes employed to overcome them.

But it may also to be doubted that the sage of Concord ever suffered an absence anxiety, or was a Gnostic in any way. As transcendental poet and philosopher, Emerson’s affinities with Romanticism—a recognition of the sublime in nature, a Wordsworthian value of plain speech, and a sense of the divine laws of the universe apprehendable through pure experience—don’t suggest an anguished and terrorized Valentinian Gnostic. Indeed, the whole of Romanticism is hard to read as late Gnosticism. Making just this point about Bloom’s theory of influence, Frank Lentricchia argues that

the primary movement within the romantic consciousness is toward linkage and mooring of the self in the natural world; […] the great dread, in other words, is just this gnostic severance from things, a severance which leads to the apocalyptic casing out of nature […]. [G]nosticism is the inevitable fear of romantics, not their inevitable religion. (340-41)

As in other instances, Lentricchia’s analysis of Bloom seems correct, but as Valentinus suggests, ignorance about the Father—who is figure for, among other things, origins, or God—causes terror. Lentricchia has it backwards here: Agnosis—the absence of knowledge—is the “great dread” of the Romantics, and all their “linkage and mooring of the self” is itself a claim of Gnosis, an anxiety of absence, or the play of presence and absence; that is, mooring the self in nature is to “presence” oneself and nature, and is in some sense a trope against the limitations of language, a denial (and overcoming?) of the traps of language that Derrida points out. Or it is to fall into just such a trap as Derrida warns us about.

In any case, Bloom’s observation in Kabbalah and Criticism about the futility of an over-rational kind of critical reading and writing seems apt; he argues against the True
and False as a “too-large vista,” urging that we seek instead “the narrower and more poetic area of love/hate relationships, for psychic ambivalence is the natural context in which the reading of poetry takes place” adding, “it would be a hopeless quest for criticism to follow philosophy in its benighted meanderings after truth” (124). Bloom wants us to read for the tensions of presence and absence, Gnosis and Agnosis, the ratios of psychic stuff to psychic space, played out in very personal contexts of “psychic ambivalence,” also known as poems. According to Bloom, reading for “psychic ambivalence” is to pursue the central problem in poetry: “an honest acceptance of an actual dualism as opposed to the fierce desire to overcome all dualisms” (*Anxiety of Influence* 33), and this problem is one of presence and absence. To honestly accept “an actual dualism” is to accept separation or absence, and “to overcome all dualisms” is to take the extreme position that there is no separation or absence, it is to moor the self psychically with God, or in nature, or, in the case of poetry, to do all kinds of violence to poetic forebears in imagining a need for one’s own poems.

Bloom’s theory unfolds or expands outside of the literary when he argues that the problem of originality becomes a crisis of origins, observable in poem after poem. In *Kaballah and Criticism*, he writes that “there is a general principle to be extracted; so many strong poems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries open with dialectical images of presence and absence […] because of the hiddenness of their immediate origins” (68). Of course, those origins are other poems, but these dialectics of presence and absence speak to the profound agony of Agnosis with respect to *ultimate* origins; we doubt now that burning bushes ever spoke, but we must remember that we *always doubted*. Indeed, the very existence of such fictions (which is to include all scripture and to know them in
the Nietzschean sense as perspectival) speaks to absence anxiety and serves the psychic need (or defense) to write down God and thereby fix our lives with presence. Emerson, accepting that bushes spoke to our forebears—"foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes"—begs the wherefore of belatedness: "Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" Emerson, much less a poet than an essayist, knows that this question is not only for artists.

An interesting dialogue between Bloom, Emerson, and Nietzsche on the troping against belatedness emerges. As stated earlier, Nietzsche argues in "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life" that history has the power to justify us, and to make us thankful. Elsewhere in that short work, Nietzsche observes the benefit of a forgetful soul:

> What such a nature cannot muster it knows how to forget; it no longer exists, the horizon is closed and whole, and nothing can serve as a reminder that beyond this horizon there remain men, passions, doctrines and purposes. And this is a general law: every living thing can become healthy, strong, and fruitful only within a horizon; if it is incapable of drawing a horizon around itself or, on the other hand, too selfish to restrict its vision to the limits of a horizon drawn by another, it will wither away feebly or overhastily to its early demise. (10)

It is perhaps to be expected that Nietzsche would extol the virtue of such a wonderful space-making skill as forgetfulness. Curiously, Emerson seems passionately unhistorical as well—in *Self-Reliance*, in particular—and he seems to crave a state of eternity, or the absence of history altogether. But for Emerson the absence of history is not forgetfulness, and the forgetful soul of Nietzsche indicts the transparent eyeball as a fantasy of infinite capacity, a fantasy that succumbs to the despair of absence; in Nietzsche's judgment, it would seem, Emerson draws no horizon and is therefore

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15 "There is no history, only biography" is one of Bloom's favorite Emersonian aphorisms.
condemned to wither away. For Bloom the differences between Emerson and Nietzsche are not as dire, and the ways in which they trope against influence are at least interesting:

On the one hand, there is Nietzsche’s parodist rhetoric and his bewildering perspectivism. On the other, there is Emerson’s subtle antinomianism of rhetoric, and the outrageousness of his general advice [...]. Still, the difference can be defined, and it is this: for Nietzsche, the trope is an error, albeit necessary and valuable; for Emerson, the trope is a defense, a life-enhancing defense. (Kabbalah and Criticism 118)

Nietzsche, aware that behind every perspective is a person, asserts that every trope is a fight, and no trope arrives at anything like a correct perspective. But for Emerson this troping is something else. Bloom says of Emerson that “every trope burns away context, and when enough context has been dissolved, a pragmatic fresh center appears” where he “cheerfully concedes the final reliance of the self upon the self, its condition of perfect sphericity” (Kabbalah and Criticism 121). Putting this another way in A Map of Misreading, Bloom writes, “Emerson had come to prophecy not a de-centering […] but a peculiarly American re-centering” (176). It seems, then, that Bloom finds both men troping strongly—Emerson by insisting on his own centrality, and Nietzsche by having the psychic brawn to move from perspective to perspective without losing the self. In some sense, the strong troping of both Emerson and Nietzsche become the same thing: strong tropes, and the metaphors for describing it—the little ship, the transparent eyeball—become versions of the same psychic event. For example, Nietzsche’s demystification of history observes the necessity of an unhistorical or Emersonian re-centered state for creativity, which, it seems, redeems Emerson by overcoming

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16 Nietzsche was rather fond of Emerson, but among the scant comments Nietzsche made on Emerson, this remark from a letter to Nietzsche’s friend Overbeck seems to capture Nietzsche’s ambivalence about Emerson’s work: “I don’t know how much I would give if only I could bring it about, ex post facto, that such a glorious, great nature, rich in soul and spirit, might have gone through some strict discipline, a really scientific education. As it is, in Emerson, we have lost a philosopher[…].” (440)
belatedness in another metaphor of consumption, not terribly unlike the transparent

eyeball:

[The unhistorical condition] is the most unjust condition in the world, narrow,
ungrateful to the past, blind to dangers, deaf to warnings, a little living whirlpool
in a dead sea of night and forgetting: and yet this condition—unhistorical, contra-
historical through and through—is the cradle not only of an unjust but rather of
every just deed; and no artist will paint his picture [...] without first having
desired and striven for it in such an unhistorical condition. (11)

This anticipates Bloom's revisionary ratio of askesis; the little ship in Nietzsche's
metaphor becomes a whirlpool—the only living thing—in a dead sea, and like the
transparent eyeball or the little ship, the whirlpool is a metaphor free of any living Other.
Everything—history, matter, Other, God—is within, dead, or forgotten. In the end, the
difference scarcely matters.

It is perhaps clear now how Emerson, Nietzsche, and Bloom all speak to the necessity
of the "almost-solipsism" of askesis. But Bloom, curiously enough, tropes again.

Observing Emerson's "perfect sphericity" in Kabbalah and Criticism as an "ultimate
defense or trick, which is that it must be misinterpreted by [any] other self whatsoever,"
Bloom goes on to argue, along with Nietzsche, that presence is so much illusion, quoted
here at length:

1. There is the religious illusion, that a poem possesses or creates a real presence.
2. There is the organic illusion, that a poem possesses or creates a kind of unity.
3. There is the rhetorical illusion, that a poem possesses or creates a definite form.
4. There is the metaphysical illusion, that a poem possesses or creates meaning.
The sad truth is that poems don't have presence, unity, form, or meaning.
Presence is a faith, unity is a mistake or even a lie, form is a metaphor, and
meaning is an arbitrary and now repetitious metaphysics [...] Alas, a poem, has
nothing, and creates nothing. Its presence is a promise, part of the substance of
things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Its unity is in the good will 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. A poem is a substitution for a lost first chance [...]. (Kabbalah and Criticism 122)

It seems that Bloom’s meditations on Emerson and Nietzsche finally fold back to his own theory of influence: all poems are lost first chances, too late, too burdened with a presence that isn’t really there. However, in the passage just cited, the harshness of the rhetoric, the insistence that poetry creates “nothing,” and the conclusive sadness of a “lost first chance” is devastating. While Nietzsche’s shrillness finally serves his great wit, this passage from Bloom has no wit; we must turn to Gnostics like Valentinus to find such anguish as this passage reveals. And it is via Gnosticism that Bloom himself finally overcomes the sadness of the lost chance, and partakes in a theory of language as magic or divinity, a vehicle for awakening the pneuma called Kabbalah.

In Kabbalah and Criticism, Bloom explains how the vision of God in Kabbalah—the mystical Jewish offshoot of Gnosticism—was unknowable and without end, literally without attributes. For Bloom, Kabbalah is a useful model of literary theory, but Kabbalah’s inheritance from Gnosticism is essential to understanding what kind of model it is, and at its center is the problem of a distant God—a metaphor of absence.

Parallels between Bloom’s own thinking and what we know of Gnosticism emerge. The syncretistic element of Gnostic thought bears resemblance to Bloom’s discursive transgressions; both Gnosticism and Bloom appropriate what modes suit them. As Jonas notes, Gnostic thought found use for Greek theoretical modes of thinking to unlock what abstract concepts were buried in Oriental symbols and images, and had learned “to bring its ideas into the form of theories and to employ rational concepts, instead of sensuous imagery alone, in expounding them” (21). That such an observation can be applied to Bloom should not be terribly surprising; his vigorous misreading of Paradise Lost is not
just an application of Freudianism to a literary work. As previously argued, Bloom’s approach is at once sacralizing and theoretical; to say that Shakespeare invented us is to have a totemic and generative view of literature, to say that art invents life, as strange as that sounds. And yet all that Bloom does in this regard seems less strange the more one learns of Gnosticism. Bloom is clearly attracted to Gnostic thought for its syncretism.

The use of *Paradise Lost* by Bloom is also transcendent. Noting that in Gnostic thought a “pre-cosmic fall of part of the divine principle underlies the genesis of the world and of human existence” (63), Jonas could also be describing Bloom’s misreading of *Paradise Lost*. Indeed, in Bloom there is no mistaking the dualistic Gnostic influence, for when the poet “comes crashing down in the Creation-Fall, he swerves, and this parody of the Lucretian *clinamen*, this change from destiny to slight caprice is [...] the Urizenic equivalent of the hapless errors of re-creation made by the Platonic demiurge” (*Anxiety of Influence* 42). Although the Platonic and Gnostic demiurges are not identical, what they share is an intermediate status between the heavenly Father/eternal order and humanity. What is important to Bloom is that this fall, “the central working concept of the theory of Poetic Influence” (42), is, in Gnosticism, “a voluntary element in the downward movement of the divine” resulting in the “world itself” (*The Gnostic Religion* 63, emphasis added). Clearly, Bloom’s theory of Poetic Influence trades on the transcendent (or descendental) rhetoric by which Gnosticism describes the very creation of the universe; but it also links Poetic Influence with the very energies that Gnosticism describes as creating the universe, energies that are downward- and upward-tending. The relation between poetic influence and Gnosticism is this: the Fall is the anguish and terror of separation from the Father, what Bloom calls in *The Anxiety of Influence* the awareness
that one has fallen away from himself—profoundest absence anxiety—and the upward-tending is the recognition of the archon or predecessor poet, or the anxiety of influence.

The ultimate origin of poet and Gnostic is obscured; all that remains is this rich play of presence and absence.

Another shared attribute of Gnosticism and Poetic Influence is the complaint that comes with having attained Gnosis; in terms of Bloom's theory, Gnosis is the moment one is created as poet in reading a poem, and the newly "knowing" soul, according to Jonas,

far from being appeased by the awakening and the reminder of its origin, is powerfully stirred up by them and becomes a main concern of the gnosis just initiated. This query is even called 'the lawsuit concerning the world' which Adam is to present directly to the First Life itself. (88)

Satan's complaint in *Paradise Lost* (that God made him strong enough to contend but not strong enough to win out—which is the complaint of the ephebe against the precursor in Bloom) is found in the "lawsuit concerning the world" of the Gnostics. The Gnostics, like Satan, take a defensive position against the God of Genesis, the kind of defense that Bloom argues is necessary for ephebes to overcome their great predecessors.

The defensive tactic of the Gnostics most interesting to Bloom (and analogous to his theory) is textual, a fiercely ironic revisionism or antithetical troping that, according to Jonas, "tries, not to demonstrate agreement, but to shock by blatantly subverting the meaning of the most firmly established, and preferably also the most revered, elements of tradition" (92). Among the examples of this troping that Jonas points to is the Gnostic version of the story of Cain, which imagines that God disdained Cain's sacrifice for not being bloody enough, virtually driving him to slay his brother (93-96). Again, the parallel to Bloom should be clear; Bloom's *Paradise Lost* is completely antithetical to Milton's
poem. Indeed, Jonas’ description of Gnostic revisions is practically identical with
Bloom’s own notion of misprision:

Perhaps we should speak in such cases, not of allegory at all, but of a form of
polemics, that is, not of an exegesis of the original text, but of its tendentious
rewriting. Indeed, the Gnostics in such cases hardly claimed to bring out the
correct meaning of the original, if by ‘correct’ it meant the meaning intended by
its author—seeing that this author, directly or indirectly, was their great
adversary, the benighted creator-god. Their unspoken claim was rather that the
blind author had unwittingly embodied something of the truth in his partisan
version of things, and that this truth can be brought out by turning the intended
meaning upside down. (The Gnostic Religion 95)

It was inevitable that Bloom would eventually turn to Kabbalah, which for him is not
just a model for literary theory, but a very religion of irony. Bloom observes, “Genesis
had said that God created the world out of nothing. Kabbalah took this over as a literal
statement, but interpreted it revisionistically as meaning just the opposite of what it said”
(Kabbalah and Criticism 25). According to Kabbalah, God is only conceived in
language, which is expressed in the Sefirot. “The Sefirot are complex figurations for God,
tropes or turns of language that substitute for God when he is at work in creation,” Bloom
explains (25), which is not to say that they are allegorical, but rather something else. The
question of exactly what the Sefirot are, with relation to the “real” God, is an ongoing
debate. Bloom notes that the Kabbalist Moses Cordovero believed them to be both His
vessels and essence, which is somehow not to conceive of God and language, or the
specific language of the Sefirot, as the same, yet “the conceptual difficulty remains […]
and has its exact analogues in certain current debates about the relationship between
language and thought” (26-27).17 Again, Bloom finds parallels between
mystical/religious and critical/artistic categories of experience.

17 Presumably Bloom means the debates surrounding Deconstruction and high semiotic theory.
For Bloom, the important insight of Kabbalah for literary influence is how the *Sefirot* and subsequent elaborations on them are processes or tropes that do not move in a single direction, and yet are ordered in some way such that they can be apprehended by language and thought, a notion that might bear some resonance with Emerson’s argument that the seer/sayer’s dream is always “clearest and most permanent in words.” In any case, Kabbalah inherited this important conception of God and reality as a *happening* from Gnosticism, and eschewed the focus on *being* from its other forerunner, Neoplatonism. It is in this way that Bloom’s argument that poems create *nothing*, least of all presence, is properly understood. Presence is always in motion, becoming.\(^{18}\)

Accordingly, absence can *become* too. Bloom sees in sixteenth-century Kabbalist Isaac Luria’s thought a great leap in an understanding of creation that is not teleological, but rather a “startlingly regressive process, one in which an abyss can separate any one stage from another, and in which catastrophe is always a central event. Reality […] is always breaking apart, and mending, a rhythm continuously present in time even as it first punctuated eternity” (*Kabbalah and Criticism* 39). Set against Christian Gnosticism, which Bloom notes was anti-Jewish in its conception of a hostile and alien God, Luria’s explanation of creation accounts for God’s absence as a sort of necessity due to the very character of God, traits that bear striking resemblances to the revisionary tropes of poetic influence. Luria’s creation myth explains a process by which God withdraws to make space for creation, and says the first word, a word that culminates in the creation of the universe and that is also a violent collision of lights, which results in something called the “breaking of the vessels.” Like all mystical explanations, this is difficult to parse, but it

\(^{18}\) It would be proper, perhaps, to see the problems of presence and absence as the result of a (Neo)Platonic myth of eternal forms; Gnosticism, and especially Kabbalah, are not committed to metaphysics of “being”; presence and absence *happen.*
seems that the first word was too strong for language, and the breaking of the vessels is a metaphor of the simultaneity of coming-into-being and shattering; accordingly, the vision of capacity inherent in the vessel corresponds to the Emersonian transparent eyeball, and the shattering corresponds to a dream of space as in Neitzsche’s boat, and we see that the “breaking of the vessels” is the simultaneity of both visions, anxieties, or tropes, a metaphor of presence and absence.

But Bloom’s attraction to the myth is that it goes on, and shattering turns to retraction and withdrawal. An aspect of Luria’s creation story important to Bloom is this notion of withdrawal, God’s withdrawal, which returns us to a central concern of Gnostic thought: God’s absence. In the myth, much of the light returns to God, and some remains to create the evil in the world. Within the evil forces reside some part of the pattern or design of the universe; “sparks-of-light,” called the pneuma, inhere.

Bloom notes that Luria appears to have thought that the violence of creation, God’s apparent absence, the existence of evil, and the descent of the pneuma into individual humans are all the result of a richly internal stress in God, an overabundance of the Sefirot trope of Din, or “rigorous judgment.” According to Bloom, Luria “saw the whole function of creation as being God’s catharsis [...] not unlike Freud’s extraordinary explanation as to why people fall in love, which is to avoid an over-filled inner self” (Kabbalah and Criticism 41). What is striking here is how, in Kabbalah, all creation is the consequence of ratios of psychic material to psychic capacity. Whereas influence anxiety is the sense of another over-occupying one’s psychic space, absence anxiety is the horrible echo of one’s self in psychic space. The super-abundant Din in God is
analogous to the same self-crowding of psychic space that Freud says leads one to love another. Absence anxiety is the surfeit of love, too much self, or lonesomeness.

Bloom’s own position as a critical figure, as an “Emersonian Gnostic” (Blume par. 15) is a lonely one. In part, the ambivalent reaction to his critical output within the academy (he is wildly successful outside of it) is analogous to the popularity of Deconstruction, Transcendentalism, Gnosticism, and Kabbalah; all of these movements withered into obscurity, and some of that was due to their strangeness, and what is strange about all of them is how each attends to the *dynamic* of presence and absence. Lentricchia and so many others correctly observe how Gnostic thought creates a “severance,” but this reveals more about the kind of privilege given to presence in the Western tradition and thought than to a Gnostic (or Bloomian) obsession with absence. Gnosticism and influence anxiety imply presence and absence, not as fixed states of being, but as movement. Bloom writes:

> Whether one accepts a theory of language that teaches the dearth of meaning, as in Derrida and de Man, or that teaches its plenitude, as in Barfield and Ong, does not seem to me to matter [...]. Theory of poetry, as I pursue it, is reconcilable with either extreme view of poetic language, though not with any views in between. Either the new poet fights to win freedom from dearth, or from plenitude [...]. (“Breaking of Form” 5).

Dearth of meaning is absence, its plenitude is presence, and the poet is in constant motion between these two poles. It should be clear that influence anxiety is all about reaction against overstrong presence, but Bloom argues against interpreting this as a theory of absence, or specifically the “negative thinking” as expressed by Herbert Marcuse: “‘The absent must be made present because the greater part of the truth is in that which is absent’” (*Kabbalah and Criticism* 79). Bloom observes that the final phase of Luria’s tripartite creation story, *tikkun*, or “representation” is that of redemptive restitution, a task
that falls to humanity. The vessels have been smashed, but the "lifting up and gathering in of sparks, the basic image of tikkun, can remind us that the Latin repraesentare [...] meant to bring something absent into presence" (78). And to make presence is to trope against lonesomeness, to love.

There is one thought left to think, and that is of Bloom's theory as his own elaborate defense or explanation of why he is not a poet. Belatedness, influence anxiety, a theory of poetic creation that has at its center Bloom's own great skill of reading; all of these constitute Bloom's defense against the fact that he is not a poet, specifically a Romantic poet. But the gift of Bloom's writing is how such an elaborate defense shelters us, the vast and forever belated, from all anxieties. If to make presence, to create art, is akin to loving, so too is reading, and readers can love—literally trope against absence, death, dearth of meaning—as fiercely as any poet. It is finally the case that every poem, which is to say, every agon or fight, is also a record of fantastic love. "[O]ne of the major reasons why we do read and should read is because we cannot possibly know enough people or know them closely enough," Bloom says, and this is a humanism of the highest order; it may not be the case that reading well makes us any better, but to read well is to represent (tikkun), to gather the sparks, find the Emersonian eternal divine, the pneuma, to achieve Gnosis.
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