

## Alistair Heys, *The Anatomy of Bloom: Harold Bloom and the Study of Influence and Anxiety.*

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<sup>1</sup> This 218-page book with additional pages of 437 notes and 3 pages of index (author and title) appears to have required a great deal of research or wealth of background knowledge, as it refers to an unusual number of authors and works on almost every page. If a reader starts to understand the book from the title, s/he expects an analysis, almost medical in tone (an ‘anatomy’) of the famous literary critic, perhaps with regard to his theory about literary influence; since Bloom did use the word ‘anatomy’ in his title *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (2012), Heys’s title might claim to explain the critic and/or his work, meaning to provide a deeper understanding than the critic had. The advertising blurb on the top of the paperback’s back cover promises a survey of Harold Bloom’s “life as a literary critic, exploring all of his books in chronological order, to reveal that his work, and especially his classic *The Anxiety of Influence*, is best understood as an expression of reprobate American Protestantism and yet haunted by a Jewish fascination with the Holocaust. Alistair Heys traces Bloom’s intellectual development from his formative years spent as a poor second-generation immigrant in the Bronx to his later eminence as an international literary phenomenon.” Although a reader may expect the success story of a Dickens’ novel, s/he does not learn much about Bloom’s personal life, nor about his professional life in the sense of the steps taken for his quick rise to academic stardom; and the reader also does not find Heys’s study to be organized in the chronological order of Bloom’s numerous books, which would lead readers to anticipate some ideas about the career development, and the table of contents does not show such an organization either. This blurb, perhaps not written by Heys, does promise a religious explanation for Bloom’s literary views, this view being supported obliquely by the placement of the chapter “Bloom and Protestantism” as the last. The author’s work cannot be judged by its blurb, a marketing description; however, it raises the question of what Heys promises to accomplish and what he does – for the value of his

work depends both on its design and its result. Is the project worth doing? For whom? Does he succeed?

<sup>2</sup>This study is valuable for students, both undergraduate and graduate, and non-specialists on Bloom's work or even in the field of literary theory and criticism; I do not think there are enough works on Bloom's work by itself to call 'Bloomian studies' a separate area of research, despite the fact that he has been one of the most referred to critics in Modern Language Association statistics about articles. The following discussion explains this positive review with some limitations placed on the study's value for specialists.

<sup>3</sup>University students would find Heys's *Anatomy of Bloom* valuable because of the unusual wealth of references to books and authors (effervescent and overflowing), the academic level of discourse, and the argumentative or more accurately 'opinionated' character of the discussion. It is overflowing with ideas and suggestions, and it expresses opinions. The numerous critics and topics are important in contemporary literary debate. Students would be able to find references to look up or include in their research or to find ideas to agree or disagree with. Heys's study may not be able to explain Bloom's theory to students who did not understand it, if indeed they would read Bloom's most theoretical works, since Heys gives a religious explanation for a literary theory.

<sup>4</sup>Above all, *The Anatomy of Bloom* seems valuable to students for its distinctive success as a 'performance utterance' both of academic-critical discourse in general and of scholarship on Bloom in particular. Heys's discourse could be called 'acadamese' for the appropriate level of diction, the types of syntactical connections (such as many bound clauses stating with 'that' and subordinate clauses giving reasons), the authoritative tone, and the constant need to refer to other scholars, whether to demonstrate his own wide-reading or show origins or borrow ideas or show originality.

<sup>5</sup>This study also performs what critics tend to do: to illustrate or even become examples of the thinking process of the figures discussed by them. Literary critics are expected to convey the true 'spirit' of the author. Very often, Heys sounds like Bloom, writes like Bloom, and uses similar phrases; Heys has probably not gone so far as to speak, dress, and act like Bloom in the way that followers of Jane Austen, called 'Austenites' do. Like Bloom, Heys writes in a flamboyant, prophetic tone. On the one hand, doing so can make the style colorful, and it can suggest the importance of being authoritative and argumentative; on the other hand, in such a tone Bloom and his performing critic/representative (Heys) use broad generalizations to make pronouncements without a clear explanation of their meaning, understood in common with the reader, and without clear indications of the process by which they can be justified. Here is an example of Heys' Bloomian style of 'academes' (when Bloom's name is made into the adjective 'Bloomian', it may mean 'something done by the person named Bloom', or it may mean 'something done by someone else as Bloom would have done it'):

Bloom's answer to Derrida turns on his speculation that Derridean discourse substitutes the Judaic word *davhar* for the Greek *logos*. My treatment of de Man suggests that the detergent of deconstructive irony attempts to bleach clean the sins of misspent youth by scourging the philosophical fabric of totalitarianism. Such a reading implies, but cannot be sure, that de Man experienced deep feelings of guilt with reference to the Holocaust. The ticklish subject of resentment casts Bloom as an Abdiel refusing to join what he figures as the rebel hordes of deserting angels. Here I again ponder the aftermath of Puritanism and the question of free speech: whether we are over-determined by societal energies and historical

background, or whether it is possible to express dissent and speak one's mind freely without fear of reprisal. All in all, Bloom's criticism is read as a form of spiritual autobiography that I recapitulate as dialectic between Christian and Jewish civilizations. (xiv)

- 6 The colorful active language is the continued metaphor of cleaning, perhaps a pedagogically motivated simplification of Aristotle's *Katharsis*: 'detergent', 'bleach', 'clean', and 'fabric'. Heys's writing can show students how language can become more forceful through metaphor as well as controversial even provocative, which might promote increased references to Heys's work – this value of the quantity of references to a scholar's work is called 'impact' and it is used by universities to judge the value of publications; a work is "good" if it refers to those of other scholars and if they refer to it. *The Anatomy of Bloom* performs some survival techniques in a very competitive academic marketplace.

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Heys's use of generalizations makes him sound authoritative and prophetic, like Bloom; implicitly, Heys teaches student readers to present, perhaps imitate, the intellectual style of their patron-figure. Although flamboyance can put a scholar on the stage of public discussion, it may make the performer more important than the message. The use of several broad generalizations does not allow the reader to share in the process of validating the conclusions, because it is not clear if writer and reader use the terms in the same way, nor how they can be connected. For example, Heys refers to the "subject of resentment:" would readers have read Bloom's discussion in *The Western Canon*? And, even if they had, is Heys's understanding of it the same as the readers' understanding, or for that matter the same as Bloom's? There are many loose, unexplained generalizations: Derrida's whole thought as well as Bloom's and de Man's; Puritanism; and the Christian and Jewish civilizations. Heys's writing (and often Bloom's) denies the readers the common basis for judging the issues and the authors' (Heys's and Bloom's) views. At some levels of understanding, this limit to the discourse as systematic thinking is not experienced as a problem or even noticed.

8 As an additional benefit to students, *The Anatomy of Bloom* could be used in third and fourth year undergraduate courses in literary criticism or in technical writing, to show not only positive but also negative features from which students can learn.

9 Though some of the comments so far may have seemed ironic or even cynical, they are realistic about the profession and the value for students. I do not think Heys's study would be very helpful for scholars who have studied Bloom's works for years or for most experts in literary theory. To return to the initial question about the design of Heys's project, it is important to ask if literature can be "explained" by religion, if Bloom formed his views because of religious influences. Many publishing scholars would not object to the "explanation" of literature according to the principles of another field or of the society in which it is read, but the acceptance of the practice does not make it the best, as Bloom discusses in "An Elegy for the Canon," his introduction to *The Western Canon*, where he laments the conversion of literary studies into cultural criticism. Despite the probably unwitting imitation of Bloom's style, Heys's study is a demonstration of what Bloom is strongly against and it does not permit readers to judge Bloom on his own – on literary terms. Critics who dismiss Bloom's call for literary honesty about quality, considering it to be elitism or a denial of diversity by an esthete, might read Carl Jung's essay "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry," in which the famous psychoanalyst explains

why literature has its own principles so that it cannot become a subfield of psychology; psychology may discuss literature but in terms of its creative processes that other fields of learning would also have. Its most disconcerting feature for specialists on Bloom or literary theory, Heys's *Anatomy of Bloom* does not judge the theory by evaluating it in relation to literary works, nor does he evaluate it by using its own terms to reveal their limitations, as scientists do when empirical data show limitations of theories or when the theories themselves cannot be united into a coherent whole. Heys "explains" Bloom (not his theory?) by subordinating literature to religion.

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Heys's *Anatomy of Bloom* is valuable for students, both undergraduate and graduate, and for those scholars not specializing on Bloom or literary theory, providing a wealth of references to scholars, works, and ideas, while also providing a model of academic discourse, both positive to be imitated and (equally valuable) negative to be avoided. The study would not be very valuable to specialists who believe, like Bloom and unlike Heys, that literature is a field in its own right: it raises problems and finds solutions according to its own literary principles.

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If Heys can explain Bloom's contribution, shouldn't this situation mean that Heys has become a better literary critic? Does he think he has become better, or does he think explaining Bloom (or his theory) can be done in non-literary terms?

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