Precursor and Ephebe: Oscar Wilde, Harold Bloom and the Theory of Poetry as Influence

Noreen Doody
Trinity College, Dublin

Abstract
Harold Bloom has yet to acknowledge his relation to Oscar Wilde as that of ephebe to precursor. Bloom's repression of Wilde would be explained in Bloomian terms as being due to the anxiety of influence and the creative force of repression. Repression, according to Bloom, is an empowering creative defence. The new poem always expresses the repressed poem which gives it its power and its sublime force. It is in this way that Wilde's writings serve Harold Bloom. There are many instances of Wildean insights throughout Bloom's work. However, Bloom incurs his greatest debt to Wilde in his theory of poetry as influence, Bloom's major contribution to modern literary theory. Bloom's concepts follow Wildean precepts, behaving towards them in the very manner which Bloom ascribes to the dialectical relationship of precursor and ephebe. The central principle of Bloom's theory, that of misreading, is not only sourced in a Wildean concept but validates the theory it propounds by misreading this concept. Bloom's debt to Wilde can be traced through all six of the revisionary ratios which Bloom sees as characterising poetic influence; his theory of poetry as influence is empowered by the sublime force of his precursor, Oscar Wilde.

Many times throughout his work, Harold Bloom registers his admiration for the wit or aesthetic stance of Oscar Wilde. Bloom, however, has yet to admit his debt of influence to Wilde, or in his own preferred terms, his relation to Wilde as that of ephebe to precursor.

In the closing chapters of his recent work, *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom ascribes his aesthetic stance, in part, to Oscar Wilde:

> There are, of course, aesthetics and aesthetics, and apostles who believe that literary study should be an overt crusade for social change obviously manifest a different aesthetic from my own post-Emersonian version of Pater and Wilde. (1995, 527)

In this statement, Bloom pays tribute to Wilde's aestheticism, but it is a weakly formulated tribute which effectively disarms any imputation of a more serious indebtedness to Wilde on Bloom's part. This lack of recognition of the role of Wilde as precursor would be explained in Bloomian terms as being due to the anxiety of influence and the creative

force of repression. Bloom describes how repression works in *Agon*:

> Where repression is an unconsciously purposeful forgetting in and by the psyche, a poetic text does curious tricks, odd turnings that render the unconscious only another trope as the poem both forgets to remember and remembers to forget. (1982, 226)

Repression for Bloom is an empowering creative defence which enables the new poem to express the power and sublime force of the repressed work. Bloom maintains that if an ephebe were to allow himself become too aware of the identity of his precursor, it would have disastrous results for his creativity. Bloom has, nevertheless, admitted to several precursors, including Freud and Northrop Frye. These disclosures by Bloom indicate an influence which has become obvious and unproductive and no longer involves any creative anxiety for him. However, his reluctance to name Wilde as his precursor, when measured by the Bloomian concept of repression, indicates an on-going creative energy and a deep anxiety of influence engendered by Wilde. This continuing creative relation is evidenced in Bloom's newly published work (1999) which asserts that Shakespeare is the inventor of human personality. Wilde, towards the end of the last century, had written that the human personality was invented by the artist

In his theory of poetry as influence, Bloom describes the anxiety felt by the later poet at the thought of being engulfed by his precursor. The young poet longs to originate his own word, to capture priority or, at least, some illusion of it, and struggles with his precursor to achieve individuation from him. The process of individuation is accomplished, according to Bloom, by the use of six revisionary ratios of interchangeable psychic defence mechanisms, tropes and images. These revisionary ratios which characterise poetic influence Bloom has named *Clinamen*, *Tessera*, *Kenosis*, *Daemonization*, *Askesis* and *Apophrades*. They describe how he sees the working of the imagination in the creative process, as the later poet, consciously and unconsciously appropriates his precursor. Bloom envisions the enclosed psychic universe wherein the ephebe is lovingly chosen by his precursor text and then sets out to vanquish his precursor by misreading him, emptying him of his sublime and finally establishing his own counter sublime at the precursor's expense.

This theory of an enclosed psychic universe of ephebe and precursor is heavily indebted to Wilde, whose prose poem "The Disciple" is astounding in its perfect encapsulation of Bloom's vision of how poetic influence proceeds and in his preface to the book *Oscar Wilde*, Bloom quotes the poem in full:

> When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came

> weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.
>
> And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, 'We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he'.
>
> 'But was Narcissus beautiful?' said the pool.
>
> 'Who should know better than you?' answered the Oreads.
>
> 'Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirrors of your waters he would mirror his own beauty.'
>
> And the pool answered, 'But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored'. (Bloom 1985, 6)

Bloom expresses great pleasure at the poem which he terms Wilde's "extraordinary" and "best" poem; he then proceeds to a severe misreading of it. He comments, "Narcissus never saw the pool, nor the pool Narcissus, but at least the pool mourns him" (1985, 6–7). The pool may mourn him, but this is rather a lame interpretation—or alternately a very strong misreading—considering the power of the story and Bloom's obvious enthralment with it. What Bloom has omitted to disclose, or what he has repressed, is that the pool, Narcissus's disciple, mourns the loss of his image in his precursor's eyes. He denies having gained anything from Narcissus, saying that he never saw him. He has repressed Narcissus's influence and he has repressed his beauty, or sublime, and admits only to seeing "ever my own beauty mirrored". The self that the disciple had perceived in Narcissus encompasses all that the ephebe takes from his precursor and makes into his own unique poetic stance. The disciple has individuated himself from his precursor. He was born of Narcissus but has undergone the illusion of having originated himself.

This prose poem of Wilde's comes so close to Bloom's theory of the ephebe being born of the precursor and his necessary repression of him, that it has caused Bloom deep anxiety of influence which has resulted in the severe misreading with which he enfeebles Wilde's text and appropriates all that he values most in Wilde's poem. When Bloom states that "all criticism is prose poetry" (Bloom 1973, 95), he may be revealing more than he intends about his creative relation to Wilde's prose poem.

Bloom contends that the meaning of a poem must be another poem—the poem it represses—and that the critique of a poem, if it is not to be reductive, must also be a poem. Bloom is working with a Wildean insight. Wilde perceives the essential similarity between both literary forms. He writes, "[Criticism] works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one say of poetry?" (Wilde

1994a, 1125). Wilde proposes a critical theory of great autonomy, a criticism which allows "all interpretations [to be] true and no interpretation final". It need not resemble that which it criticises, the text need only act as inspiration for a new creative work by the critic. Criticism, he sees as a purely personal art and contends that the mind and vision of the critic is that of the artist. The critic looks at things not as they appear to be but with a fresh creative gaze. A work of art will suggest to him "a thousand different things which were not present in the mind of him who carved the statue" (1994a, 1128). His aim is not to capture the actual properties of the text/work, but to see it in a new suggestive way, "to see the object as in itself it really is not" (1994a, 1129).

Wilde's perception of the non-imitative quality of criticism, its rejection of dependence on the text, is catalytic in the formation of Bloom's concept of misreading, the central working argument of his theory of influence. Bloom's description of this central principle of poetic influence itself reads as a misreading of Wilde's theory. Bloom writes:

> Poetic influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist. (1973, 30)

Bloom believes that the more extremely the poet can see the object as in itself it is not, the stronger is his misreading and consequently the stronger is the poet. Closely following Wilde's precepts, he maintains that the later poet, in order "to avoid over determination", must "forsake correct perception of the poems he values most" (1973, 71).

Unlike Wilde's theory, Bloom's is aggressive and directive. The variation between the two poets, however, bears out Bloom's thinking on how poetic influence proceeds. The influence of Wilde's theory of interpretation on Bloom's central argument is shown to be substantial when measured by this Bloomian concept of poetic influence.

Initially, Bloom is found by Wilde's text. The similarities between Wilde's plea for the critic's subjective, creative interpretation of the text without consideration of accuracy or relevancy, can readily be seen as finding its voice in Bloom's explanation of poetic criticism and creation as a misinterpretation or misprision. Then, in an action he describes as a *clinamen*, Bloom swerves from this position of similarity, dividing himself from his precursor by an act of imaginative revisionism, which Bloom calls a *tessera*. In his misreading of Wilde's text, Bloom's theory takes on a sense

of urgency and necessity which is not at all evident in Wilde's thesis. Wilde offers greater choice; his critic may begin to compose at the prompting of any text; his individualism does not depend on misprision. Bloom's critic/poet always and necessarily misreads the text, he is misreading in order to preserve his own creative life at the expense of the precursor text. Wilde's artist is misreading to express his own individual insight or creation, illustrating the diversity of art. Bloom's artist's misreading is a desperate bid for survival. Bloom diverges from Wilde in his absence of choice, in the inevitability of misprision.

This notion of inevitability is not something with which Bloom is comfortable. Wilde's theory of interpretation suggests that a text is but the impulse for the creation of a new work of art. Bloom's version of this theory has the critic obligated to seeing the text as in itself it is not and powerless in giving an accurate reading. It is a darker, more forbidding perception than Wilde's and it calls into question the autonomy of the individual—a position alien to the aesthetic stance of Wilde and of Bloom for whom the unique quality of individuality is a necessary concomitant of art. Bloom comments on the position in which he finds himself:

> Part of the cosmological, psychological and rhetorical joke of the tetralogy [*The Anxiety of Influence, A Map of Misreading* and *Poetry and Repression*] was my own shock, my own feeling that these are intolerable truths. (Salusinszky 1987, 62)

Bloom is referring here not only to the limitations of the individual's autonomy but also the determinist elements present in the inter-poetic relationships in the savage struggle he envisages as characterising poetic creation. Bloom would explain his position by the fifth revisionary ratio activated by poetic influence—*Askesis*—through which the later poet confronts and antithetically converts elements of his own and of the precursor's work. The final achievement of *askesis* is the forging of a poetic will. In denying the autonomy inherent in Wilde's theory and his own predisposition towards the freedom of the individual, Bloom has truncated his own stance, denying some of his imaginings and those of his precursor, so as he might further his individuation and capture his unattainable desire of priority.

Bloom's object is to survive as a poet and, with this in mind, he attempts to humanise his precursor and daemonise himself. His third and fourth revisionary ratios, *Daemonization* and *Kenosis*, enable him to do this. One of Bloom's most frequent personal techniques in applying these revisionary ratios to his own precursor, Oscar Wilde, is by quoting passages from Wilde which immediately pertain to the subject of his discourse, but without mentioning any connection between them and often making deflectionary remarks. The effect of this technique is to isolate Wilde while

his sublime accrues to Bloom enabling the construction of his counter sublime.

Bloom employs this technique in stating Wilde's critical position on interpretation as though it were something quite separate from anything of his own, and not the central force of his own theory of poetry as presented in the concept of misprision. Bloom writes:

> Wilde's unique gift is the mode of wit by which he warns us against falling into careless habits of accuracy, and by which, he instructs us that the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not. (1985, 5)

There is a certain levity in Bloom's delivery. He praises "the mode of wit" by which Wilde posits the concept of misreading, distracting the reader from the import of what is being said and directing our attention towards the ingenuity and cleverness of the man. In stating Wilde's theory in this way, without consideration of its depth or its vitality to his own thought, Bloom successfully distances Wilde, defusing his priority.

The final aim of the ephebe, empowerment through the appropriation of the precursor's sublime, is achieved by Bloom through the trope of transumption by which the strongest poets develop a style which "captures and oddly retains priority over their precursors" (1973, 141), so that time seems to be overturned and the precursors appear to be imitating the later poets. Thus the ephebe has achieved an illusion of priority and is therefore, according to Bloom's criteria, a strong poet.

Bloom successfully executes this practice in relation to Wilde by use of allusion which Bloom denotes as one of the most powerful means of transumption. Illustrating this accomplishment in *Agon* he alludes to Wilde:

> Oscar Wilde ... reminds us ... how important it is that the critical imagination never fall into careless habits of accuracy. We must see the object, the poem, as in itself it really is not, because we must see not only what is missing in it, but why the poem had to exclude what is missing. (1982, 18)

What Bloom reads in Wilde is the beginnings of his own antithetical mode of criticism. He interprets Wilde as meaning that we must see what is missing in the poem, in other words, we must discover there the precursor text. Bloom's theory states that it is the excluded text which gives the later poem its strength and he insists that to read a poem we must see "why the poem had to exclude what is missing", where the deviation occurs from the precursor text.

According to Bloom's elaboration of Wilde's words, it would seem that Wilde is illustrating Bloom's theory rather than positing the doctrine

which has suggested it. The chronology between Wilde's conception and Bloom's later theory has been suspended. Wilde's theory of interpretation has been successfully transumed by Bloom, resurfacing as the central force in his theory of influence. Bloom has succeeded in creating an illusion of priority over his precursor who now seems, at least in part, to illustrate Bloom.

Wilde's influence on Bloom has been substantial and pervasive. The dialectical relationship between these two writers, as instanced in the workings of the six revisionary ratios which Bloom believes characterise poetic influence, discloses the empowerment of Bloom in whose work Wilde's sublime is manifest.

Bloom's theory of poetic influence ensures the eternal progression of creative ideas and implies everlasting life, in some form, for great artistic works, as one artist's creative achievement becomes the new material for the further creative activity of another—precursor becoming ephebe, ephebe precursor in an endless continuum of poetic discourse. The dynamic driving this process is what Wilde terms the "disturbing and disintegrating force" of individualism, each misreading necessarily depending on individual consciousness (1994b, 1186). It is Bloom's privilege to be chosen by his precursor texts to re-write Wilde into the next millennium.

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