

ANATOMIES OF INFLUENCE, ANXIETIES OF CRITICISM: NORTHROP FRYE & HAROLD BLOOM

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Canadian literary theorist Northrop Frye in his notebooks remarked that Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* is "an embarrassing book to me, because it's about him & not its subject, & I'm one of the influences he's anxious about" (CW IX: 334)¹. Late in life, Frye's position had not seemed to change: "It doesn't matter how often I'm mentioned by other critics: I form part of the subtext of every critic worth reading" (CW VI: 205). Given that Frye is certainly a central theorist in the twentieth century, it seems necessary to consider how profound his influence may or may not have been. However, what does Frye mean when he refers to *The Anxiety of Influence* as "embarrassing" and recognizing himself "as one of the influences"? This study considers Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* and his own 'anxiety of influence'; accordingly, Bloom's work will be considered in the shadow cast by Frye. This question will, as shall be demonstrated, be mapped out and established through a series of letters and close readings of Bloom's work. Arising out of this analysis is another, and perhaps more profound, question about the nature of the anxiety of having influenced; as such, this study moves to consider Frye's reaction to the influence he had upon Bloom. 137

Harold Bloom has acknowledged that the phrase 'anxiety of influence' is drawn from, at least partially, Oscar Wilde's notion that "every disciple takes away something from his master" (*Anxiety* 9). Bloom suggests that his understanding of it refers to "the study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet" (*Anxiety* 7). Emily Apter summarizes 'the anxiety of influence' as "a theory of psychic poetic engendering and literary father-killing" (179). Indeed, the Oedipal connotations to be found in *The Anxiety of Influence* cannot be ignored and Apter's brief comment seems to function as the basic working definition which will be considered in this paper. The question for this paper becomes: from which master does Bloom take away something? Or, what happens

when one reads Harold Bloom against Harold Bloom? Marjorie Perloff has previously asked this question in her review of *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*:

But suppose we take Professor Bloom at his own word and read *Agon*, not as an exposition of the now famous revisionary ratios or the three crossings, or as his particular version of 'Gnostic catastrophe creation' grafted upon 'Freudian conflicts of heightened emotional ambivalence' (16), but as a belated version of the critic he cites most frequently as loved precursors (although according to his own theory of anxiety of influence, the poet cannot, of course, identify his *real* precursors): namely Oscar Wilde. (432)

Eli Mandel observed that "[m]isreadings of [Frye's work] form one of the fascinating chapters of Canadian literary history" (284), and, in this study, Mandel's observation also applies to the history of literary theory and criticism. Perloff, Mandel, Frye, and Bloom himself all raise interesting questions about the nature of influence studies. Bloom readily recognizes that "[p]oetic influence is a labyrinth that our criticism scarcely begins to explore" (*Yeats* 4) and the question of influence can be extended even further to include criticism itself.

Northrop Frye was a central theoretician of the twentieth century and scholars as diverse as Marshall McLuhan, Harold Bloom, Edward Said, and Fredric Jameson have all turned to Frye at one point, even if later they distanced themselves from his work. Marshall McLuhan had a "gingerly relationship" (Warkentin xxxi) with Frye. McLuhan published *From Cliché to Archetype* in which he writes: "[f]or the literary archetypalist there is always a problem of whether *Oedipus Rex* or *Tom Jones* would have the same effect on an audiences in the South Sea Islands as in Toronto" (324) which openly questions Frye's argument that: "[b]ecause of the larger communicative context of education, it is possible for a story about the sea to be archetypal, to make a profound imaginative impact on a reader who has never been out of Saskatchewan" (CW XXII: 92; *Anatomy* 99). Curiously, one of the oft-cited, at least by Frye Scholars, McLuhan-isms is: "Norrie is not struggling for his place in the sun. He is the sun." (back-cover of *Northrop Frye Unbuttoned*, ed. Robert D. Denham). In a recent preface to *Anatomy of Criticism*, Harold Bloom writes: "I am not so fond of the *Anatomy* now, as I was more than forty years ago, but I probably absorbed it in ways I can no longer apprehend" (in *Anatomy* vii). Edward Said observed that "[w]hat Frye did was superbly ingenious, though, and it will stand as a monument not to the scientific humanistic criticism he believed he was formulating once and for all, but as the last synthesis of a worldview in the American humanities that has been slowly dissolving ever since" (40). Fredric Jameson admits in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), "Any reflection on genre today owes a debt—sometimes an unwilling one—to Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*" (257 n. 3).² Jameson is perhaps the most honest insofar as he recognizes his relationship to Frye though he equally acknowledges it is "sometimes an unwilling one."

The central argument of this paper is that Bloom is involved in a process of misreading Frye where misreading is understood as the moment when "a poet swerves

from his precursor" (*Anxiety* 14). Bloom contends that "'Misprision' for Shakespeare, as opposed to 'mistaking,' implied not only a misunderstanding or misreading but also tended to be a punning word play suggesting unjust imprisonment" (*Anxiety* xlii). Bloom's misreading of Frye's *Anatomy* can be considered in light of the *clinamen* which Bloom defines as:

poetic misreading or misprision proper; I take the word from Lucretius, where it means a 'swerve' of the atoms so as to make change possible in the universe. A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a clinamen in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves. (*Anxiety* 14)

More completely, Bloom writes that "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" (*Anxiety* 25). The reader will recall that Bloom in his preface to the *Anatomy of Criticism* admits to having "probably absorbed it in ways [he] can no longer apprehend" (in *Anatomy* vii). The clinamen occurs when "the great poet confronting his Great Original must find the fault that is not there" (*Anxiety* 31). Finally, and perhaps most interestingly is Bloom's comment that "[t]he stronger the man, the larger his resentments, and the more brazen his *clinamen*" (*Anxiety* 43). It is as though the poet becomes the Miltonic Satan: "Me miserable! Which way shall I fly / Infinite wrath, and infinite despair" (IV. 73-74). The most obvious example of the clinamen is found in the publication of Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* which is entirely counter to Frye's position that "[a] selective approach to tradition, then, invariably has some ultra-critical joker concealed in it" (CW XXII: 24; *Anatomy* 23) and further that "[t]he odious comparisons of greatness, then, may be left to take care of themselves, for even when we feel obliged to assent to them they are still only unproductive platitudes" (CW XXII: 27; *Anatomy* 27). In his preface to *Anatomy of Criticism*, Bloom openly ponders: "[a]s we turn to the new century, I wonder if I should summon up Frye at a séance, to ask him if he still feels that overt value judgments have no place in criticism?" (viii). This becomes the most obvious example of misreading insofar as Frye was not necessarily against value judgments, but rather that it is not the work of the critic to make these judgments. However, this is not the primary concern of this study; rather, it is to consider the question of influence and relation between Bloom and Frye.

In addition to the matter of influence, it will also be necessary to account for the anxiety of having influenced. In this sense, initially it is important to recall Bloom's "scene of instruction" which "is necessarily a place cleared by the newcomer in himself, cleared by an initial contraction of withdrawal that makes possible all further self-limitations" (*Map* 55). Milton L. Welch argues that "Bloom describes the primal scene as a satisfaction of an extreme inner demand for meaningfulness" (209) and moreover that this "demand for meaning [must be] followed by a reception of mean-

ing" (210). This "reception of meaning" becomes the anxiety of having influenced for Frye. He recognizes the work of Bloom and realizes that his own role has been usurped or at the very least put into question. Welch summarizes that "[i]n the Primal Scene of Instruction the poet as poet is seen as a prior profound yearning that has been waiting to take flight" (210) and indeed, it is, as shall be demonstrated, Bloom's relationship with Frye that allows for this flight; and yet, for Frye this becomes a source of anxiety.

This question of the anxiety of having influenced is necessarily associated with the authority of the teacher. Frye in "The Teacher's Source of Authority" recognizes that "the teacher-student relationship is a mutually embarrassing relationship that both are trying to escape" (5) and nothing could be further from the truth in the case of Bloom and Frye. Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* becomes his flight away from Frye and Frye soon sees the need to distance himself from the student. Of course, they cannot, nor should they, ever be fully divorced from one another. The relationship between Bloom and Frye is an "embarrassing" one; and, as we already know, Frye felt that Bloom's book was "an embarrassing book" (CW IX: 334). Now I shall account for the relationship between Bloom and Frye and work to understand how the anxiety of influence unfolds in this particular case.

There are scholars who have recognized some relation between Bloom and Frye; for instance, Gerald L. Bruns writes "[c]urrently, Northrop Frye and Jacques Derrida are the most illustrious exponents of this mythology of the letter³, and so, in a residual sort of way, is Harold Bloom" (53). Eleanor Cook observes that Bloom's work is "dialectically related to that of Frye" (329) and coins the phrase "the Frye-Bloom axis" which is to be understood as part of logocentric discourses which deconstruction "aims to remove altogether" (329). Thomas Willard speaks of this relationship as "a struggle between the critical father and son" (20). Frank Lentricchia observes that "the archetypalism set forth in *Anatomy of Criticism* dominates Bloom's apprentice books and—and just as the Freudian program stipulates—is unceremoniously and ungratefully dismissed (but not quite evaded) in the tetralogy on influence" (320); however, he also argues that "W.K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren are Bloom's dangerous precursors" (319). Curiously, Lentricchia does not provide a reason for the inclusion of Frye, aside from suggesting that "[t]he observable, programmatic father, after all, is Northrop Frye" (320) as though no explanation is needed. In an interview with Imre Salusinszky, Bloom remarks: "[i]n terms of my own theorizations...the proper precursor has to be Northrop Frye" (62). However, Harold Bloom has most recently written that: "Now, at seventy-eight, I would not have the patience to read anything by Frye" (2009, 27). Robert D. Denham, in his wide-ranging introduction to the University of Toronto Press edition of *Anatomy of Criticism*, observes that Harold Bloom's recent preface to the Princeton edition "is devoted chiefly, not to the *Anatomy*, but to his own anxieties about Frye's influence" (xviii). Finally, Steve Polansky is one of the few academics to move beyond mere recognition; he provides a lengthy consideration of the relation between Frye

and Bloom. Polansky writes: "Frye, although he is cited in Bloom's early work, is nowhere mentioned as an important formative influence" (282). He further notes that "it is in Northrop Frye, most markedly *Fearful Symmetry* (1947) and *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), that we can find the most significant conflation of the various strains of Bloom's critical theory, although frequently presented in a radically different fashion" (228).

While recognizing the work of these scholars, this study provides a more specific analysis of the development of this relation. I focus my attention on a series of letters between Bloom and Frye which hitherto has not yet been considered in the discussion of "the Frye-Bloom axis" (Cook 329). The letters were deposited in the Northrop Frye Fonds (NFF) at the Victoria University Library at the University of Toronto.⁴ Following the death of Frye, an incredible wealth of resources became available to scholars: letters, manuscripts, diaries, address books, photographs, audio-visual materials, and other personal writings. Over the past decade, the University of Toronto Press has undertaken a project publishing the *Collected Works of Northrop Frye* which will include some thirty volumes. Given these resources, it is now possible to further establish and sustain the argument that Frye was an influence on the critical and practical theory of Bloom. Moreover, these resources will also allow for a reconsideration of the work of Northrop Frye and his overarching influence on literary studies.

The letters between Harold Bloom and Northrop Frye date from January 11, 1960⁵ through February 19, 1969. It must be acknowledged that the early letters written by Frye to Bloom are not available (all correspondence from Bloom is available); the Frye letters begin August 5, 1960. On July 14, 1960, Harold Bloom, at the beginning of his academic career, writes to the already established Northrop Frye:

I delivered a lecture on Blake's Concept of Beulah and its relationship to your theory of myths at Cornell in May, and with some misgiving, have sent it off to the *Hudson* for their consideration. Misgivings because it is not what I thought or wanted it to be. It did provoke a good discussion at Cornell, including an amplification by Prof. Abrams of the position he took in his UTQ [University of Toronto Quarterly] review. I'm afraid it explains nothing in the *Anatomy* that your book doesn't explain better for itself. Whether or not I publish it, it would help my own understanding if you would consent to look at it. If you would, I'd mail you a copy as soon as advised. I'm working towards finishing a book on Romantics which I hope will be better than my Shelley, if only for the structure the *Anatomy* affords it. (NFF: 1990 Box 1, File 1)

This letter is the third letter in the collection and Bloom clearly admits and demonstrates his sense of debt to Frye, especially when highlighting the *Anatomy of Criticism*. Indeed, it is necessary to recall that "Bloom's very first publication was an enthusiastic review of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*" (Sellars 264).

On July 3, 1961, speaking about *The Visionary Company* (1961) which appeared alongside *English Romantic Poetry: An Anthology* (1961), Bloom writes to Frye: "I've just received copies myself, and a brief, painful glance at the book has told me what I

already knew, that fourteen years of being a student of your writing has made me an echo-chamber at worst, and perhaps a good student at best" (NFF: 1990 Box 1, File 1). Bloom had previously told Frye about these books in January of 1961. Frye responded on January 5, 1961: "I am very interested in what you tell me of your approaching book, as I wasn't aware you were being quite so prolific" (NFF: 1988 Box 8, File B13).

A year later, on July 26, 1962, Bloom writes that he has "handed in my Blake book to Doubleday for publication this March" and that "they'll follow my fearful counsel and send you a copy" (NFF: 1993 Box 3, File 5). It becomes evident that Bloom is, at the very least, recognizing his own fear or anxiety when confronted by Frye. However, Bloom would have known that he had also garnered Frye's respect. On September 21, 1960, Frye writes to Bloom that "I am writing you at the moment to inform you that I am nominating you, without your consent, for a Hodder fellowship" (NFF: 1988 Box 8, File B13). As much as Bloom is aware of his anxiety, he is also equally aware of the respect Frye had for his work.

142 Indeed, confirmation of this respect is found in an interesting pair of letters about Blake Studies and curiously, it is Frye who asks Bloom for his thoughts. Frye, after being contracted to edit a collection of essay on William Blake, writes: "Dear Mr. Bloom, I find myself in a somewhat unwelcome position, and your advice, if you feel inclined to give it would be of the greatest help to me" (NFF: 1993 Box 3, File 5). Frye immediately recognizes that any volume on Blake must include something written by Bloom: "First, as to your contribution, the thing I should most welcome would be the Four Zoas section from *The Visionary Company*, but I imagine that Doubleday would take a somewhat dim view of my reprinting that, and perhaps your PMLA article on the Marriage" (NFF: 1993 Box 3, File 5). Ultimately, Bloom's piece on the *Four Zoas* was included which Frye calls a "brief but extremely lucid guide" and further that "the reader will, with Mr. Bloom's help, find it an extremely lovely and profound poem for all its completeness" (CW XVI: 333). Frye's admiration for Bloom seems evident and it is at this point that we begin to see Bloom's recognition of this and the movement towards his own declaration of independence.

We see the execution of the clinamen on April 10, 1963. Bloom writes: "Two comments on the *Excess* essay. One is that I do have difficulty with Blake's identity of art and apocalypse, but only because he also identifies both with prophecy," and moreover, "I haven't ever been able to understand your admiration, however qualified, for Eliot's criticism, or your clear appreciation of Eliot's poetry" (NFF: 1993 Box 3, File 6). Only two days prior, Frye wrote to Bloom: "I have enjoyed reading your Blake book very much, and feel that it is exactly the kind of book that needed to be written and which I had hoped someone—preferably you—would soon write" (NFF: 1988 Box 8, File B13). In the April 10, 1963 letter Bloom acknowledges this admiration of Frye and yet he executes his clinamen. While Bloom recognizes the importance of Frye's work, it is at this point (in which he has been recognized by the precursor) that he is able to question Frye.

Finally, the closest and most definitive execution of the clinamen appears in a letter dated January 16, 1969 in which Bloom writes:

Implicitly that contains a theory of Poetic Influence, and one that is consonant with your work as I know it. I can understand why you do not see Poetic Influence as an anxiety of melancholy, as I do, because of what you call the myth of concern. [...] Anyway, I write this note to enquire if you have printed a recent essay I haven't seen, one that expands on the notion of myth of concern in any way? (NFF: 1988 Box 8, File B13)

Frye in his response writes "I am sending one such paper along with this, because it mentions the myth of concern in passing" (NFF: 1988 Box 8, File B13). The paper that Frye sent to Bloom was "The Ethics of Change" (CW VII: 345-59) which was part of a symposium organized by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and later incorporated into *The Critical Path* in which Frye explores the myth of concern. However, it is at this point that we are able to recognize the 'anxiety of having influenced,' Frye writes to Bloom:

You don't say much about the general direction of scope of your book. If you mean influence in a more literal sense of the transmission of thought and imagery and the like from earlier poet to later one, I should think that was simply something that happens, and might be a source either of anxiety or of release from it, depending on circumstance and temperament. (NFF: 1988 Box 8, File B13)

Four days later, on January 27, 1969, Bloom writes: "I wish that you would write an essay expounding the myth of concern, as I think a good many of us, as well as myself, need to read it," and he closes "perhaps you need to write another essay just on the myth of concern itself" (NFF: 1988 Box 8, File B13). It is at this point that the letters end with a final letter being sent to Bloom; Frye writes: "A large and complicated design for a successor to the *Anatomy* is gradually taking me over. The myth of concern is certainly a part of it" (NFF: 1988 Box 8, File B13).

The early letters between Bloom and Frye indicate Bloom's admiration for the theoretical writings of Frye. Bloom often asks for off-prints of articles or bibliographies. Frye more often than not provides Bloom with the requested material. It is clear at this point that there is a mutual respect between the two. If we are not convinced by these letters alone, we are further convinced by the fact that Frye wrote at least two letters of reference for Bloom; though it seems likely there are more, for instance, the Northrop Frye Fonds lack the letter for the Hodder Fellowship. The letters of reference that are housed in the Fonds are marked by high praise for Bloom's work; Frye writes: "I am confident that any investment in him as a scholar would be more than amply repaid" (NFF: 1991 Boxes 14-18).

The letters between Frye and Bloom demonstrate a theory being born and subsequently a theory being put into practice. As I have already mentioned, Frye found *The Anxiety of Influence* to be an "embarrassing book" because it is about Bloom's relation to Frye (CW IX: 334). Accordingly, it is necessary to consider Frye's observation

in the light of the letters between Bloom and Frye along with the views of critics who have pointed to this relation.

It will be recalled that it is only after four years of letter writing that Bloom openly finds fault in Frye; he 'swerves' from the precursor when he questions Frye's admiration for Eliot and Frye's discussion of apocalypse and art in the work of Blake. The same year marked the publication of Bloom's *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument*. In the preface, Bloom writes: "My specific critical debts are to the Blake studies of S. Foster Damon, J. Middleton Murry, David Erdman, and especially Northrop Frye" (10, emphasis added). Frye writes on April 8, 1963 to Bloom that "I am particularly impressed, as always, by your handling of *The Four Zoas*" (NFF: 1988, Box 8 File B13). There is a recognition on Frye's part that Bloom has become an impressive scholar.

144 Bloom's book on Blake is very much in tune with Frye. Consider the opening lines of the chapter on *The Four Zoas* which "particularly impressed" Frye: "The latent hero of *The Four Zoas* is an archetypal man [...] Blake tentatively completed the mythic structure" (189). Frye in *Fearful Symmetry* had already observed this: "[t]he reason why myths of Albion do become associated with historical figures is that the collapse of every empire, whether Babylonian, as here, or Egyptian as in *Tiriel*, or Tyrian, as in Ezekial, or Roman as in *Apocalypse*, or British as in *Morte Darthur*, repeats the fall of Atlantis" (271). Albion is "a typical or recurring image" (CW XXII: 91; *Anatomy* 99), which is to say an archetype.

It is in "The Covering Cherub" that the execution of the clinamen can be seen in Bloom's theory of poetic influence. Bloom himself recognizes this: "Frye's influence on me lasted twenty years but came tumbling down on my thirty-seventh birthday, when I awakened from a nightmare and then passed the entire day in composing a dithyramb, 'The Covering Cherub or Poetic Influence'" (2009, 27). While it is true that Bloom speaks of poetry, it must be recalled that Bloom writes in "The Covering Cherub": "[p]oetic influence, as I understand it, is part of the larger phenomenon of intellectual revisionism, a phenomenon not peculiar to our century but probably more endemic among us than it has been before" (82). Curiously, there is no mention of Frye in "The Covering Cherub" yet in the revisions of this essay which later becomes a part of *The Anxiety of Influence*, Frye is included, "the recent transformation of Northrop Frye into the Arnold of our day, with his insistence that the Myth of Concern prevents poets from suffering the anxieties of obligation" (31). It is this 'myth of concern' that separates Frye from Bloom and ultimately is the source for the clinamen, and this can be further recognized by the letters between the two.

Frye in *The Critical Path* (1971) writes that "[t]he myth of concern exists to hold society together, so far as words can help to do this" (36) and concludes the volume observing that: "[m]yths of concern enable members of a society to hold together, to accept authority, to be loyal to each other and courageous against attack" (36). He explains the genealogy of the myth of concern: "it has its roots in religion, but religion has also at that stage the function of *religio*, the building together of the com-

munity in common acts and assumptions" (36) and from here it "develops different social, political, legal, and literary branches, and at this stage religion becomes more exclusively the myth of what Tillich calls ultimate concern, the myth of man's relation to other worlds, other lives, other dimensions of time and space" (36). Indeed, as shall be developed further, the question of religion must be considered because it acts as a vehicle for difference given Frye's Methodist Protestantism and Bloom's Jewish Gnosticism; Frye writes: "[t]he myth of concern which European and American culture has inherited is, of course, the Judaeo Christian myth as set out in the Bible, and as taught in the form of doctrine by the Christian church" (37). While it is admittedly the myth of concern that differentiates, especially in light of the religious overtones, Frye from Bloom, it is important to note that Frye observes that "[c]oncern, so far as it is a feeling, is very close to anxiety, especially when threatened" (37). Frye continues "anxiety of coherence is central: normally, voices of doubt or dissent are to be muted at all times, and silenced altogether if there is a real danger, as in war" (37). This observation becomes the difference, the clinamen, precisely because Bloom does not allow for the silencing of the poet but rather of the precursor. Frye even suggests that "[t]he influence of social concern on literature is to make it intensely traditional" and that "the poet is...not permitted to depart from the received tradition" (37). Bloom's theory in this scenario becomes either a reaction to or a departure from Frye, and thus revolutionary, from Frye's point of view. Bloom is not interested in the democratization of literature so much as he is interested in a dialectic of conquest which is to say: dethroning the precursor. Once again, it as though the Miltonic echoes can be heard: "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (*Paradise Lost* I: 263) for now Bloom has challenged Frye, "He with his thunder" (*Paradise Lost* I: 93). Indeed, the echoes which ring most loud are those from Satan's first speech: "All is not lost; the unconquerable will, / And study of revenge, immortal hate, / And courage never to submit or yield: / And what is else not to be overcome?" (*Paradise Lost* I: 106-9).

145 Conversely, however, there is an interesting question which is provoked by Bloom's idea of 'the anxiety of influence,' and that is: does the precursor ever suffer an anxiety of having influenced? Indeed, as we shall see, Frye seems to be uneasy about his role as precursor. It becomes necessary to look at the years which follow the publication of Bloom's magnum opus *The Anxiety of Influence* and its successors, notably, *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), and *Poetry and Repression* (1976). In each of these volumes, Bloom furthers his intellectual defence of 'the anxiety of influence.' During these years, Bloom's ideas were received and critiqued by a wide range of literary critics and theorists; for instance, Paul de Man writes in his now famous review of the work that

[t]he 'corrective' aspect is not new with Bloom, who has never been inhibited by the orthodoxies that dominate the field and has always shown himself willing to go his own way. He has been corrective in the best sense of the term, not out of vain desire to assert his originality, still less because he wants to set up his own orthodoxy as a centre for

influence, but because he has always tended to be more attuned to the language of the poets than to the reigning academic trends (267).

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their challenge to Bloom's work in *The Madwoman in the Attic* include an acknowledgment of "[t]he encouragement of Harold Bloom" (xiii) even though they argue, "we can be sure that the female poet does not experience the 'anxiety of influence' in the same way that her male counterpart would, for the simple reason that she must confront precursors who are almost exclusively male" (48). However, the source of Bloom's own anxiety, Northrop Frye, remained quiet on the work which reflects the clinamen of Bloom. Perhaps, it is at this point that Frye recognized that his own authority was being openly questioned.

146 In a letter dated May 20, 1975 to John E. Grant, Frye writes: "I am disappointed with Harold's book: it seems to me such a perverse application of quite a sound critical principle. You are quite right in using the word 'anxieties' about him: I'm afraid they're almost on the point of taking him over" (NFF: 1988 Box 12, File G14; Frye, *Selected Letters* 176). In 1978, Frye writes to Morton D. Paley: "I hope it isn't too arrogant for me to think that I represent Bloom's chief anxiety of influence, in any case he seems to me to be increasingly isolating himself from the general critical tradition, and I find his book progressively less rewarding" (NFF: 1988 Box 43, File 12; Frye, *Selected Letters* 201). Frye is, at this point, distancing himself from his acolyte—Harold Bloom—who has now battled his precursor and perhaps begun to complete the Oedipal cycle: the death of the father. Finally, in 1988 Frye writes to Thomas Willard: "Bloom took the word [canon] from me, and then proceeded to apply it in a context which I had condemned explicitly" (NFF: 1991 Box 13, File 2; Frye, *Selected Letters* 276).⁶

Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* argues that poetic influence "involves two strong, authentic poets,—[which] always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation" (30). If this is true and it is conceded that Frye and Bloom are the critical equivalents of "strong, authentic poets" than one can begin to ask: where does misreading stop? That is, is misreading a monologic discourse or is it possible that like the dialectic there is a constant revisionary process? As such, is it possible for the precursor to rebel against the poet so as to maintain his dominance? Bloom further contends that "[t]he 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" (*Anxiety* 30). Perhaps in Frye we can find the "self-saving caricature" through his distancing from Bloom, but it is because of Frye that Bloom is able to produce his work. However, this does not yet answer the question of Frye's anxiety of having influenced Bloom which must surely be a part of the dialectical structure of the anxiety of influence.

In "Literature, History, and Language" (1979) in *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* (and later published as "Literary History" in *New Literary History*, 1981), Frye begins to exhibit his own swerving away from Bloom. In the closing paragraph, Frye writes: "[i]t seems to me that the central conception involved in the historical sequence of literary works is the conception of recreation" (CW XVIII: 178). It will be recalled that Bloom opened *The Anxiety of Influence* noting "strong poets make that history by misreading one another" (5). This initial similarity seems fair enough and hardly seems to be a profound statement in the history of literary theory and criticism. However, Frye continues and observes that "[i]n all recreation there is a son-father relationship" (CW XVIII: 178), a remark which has strong resonances with Bloom's anxiety of influence; consider Bloom's remark in *A Map of Misreading* that "[t]o live, the poet must misinterpret the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father" (19, Bloom's emphasis). Steve Polansky summarizes Bloom's theory as a family romance: "[f]or Bloom, the strong precursor-poet assumes the role of the father-figure in his rather simplified Oedipal-poetic process, and thus acts as a prime inhibitor or blocking agent. The belated or new poet, like Freud's son is interested in becoming his own progenitor" (235). But, something strange happens in Frye's article for it is now the father who is *misinterpreting* the son. Frye explains that his son-father relationship "has a double aspect: an Oedipus relation where the son kills the father, and a Christian relation where the son identifies with the father" (CW XVIII: 178). It is at this moment that Frye executes his clinamen and he does this by misreading Bloom.

147 Frye, at the time of the article, is working on his Bible book, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. He acknowledges this at the start of the article: "I have lately begun to turn my attention to the Bible, not so much as a work of literature as what Blake calls the 'Great Code of Art,' a kind of model for the reading and the study of literature" (CW XVIII: 173). This Christian requirement that Frye has incorporated into literary history is important and needs to be further considered. In an interview, Imre Saluszinsky asks Frye: "Can you understand Bloom, and other Jewish scholars, becoming uncomfortable with what has been, after all, a very Christianizing tradition of English literary criticism?" (CW XXIV: 756). Frye responds: "I think Bloom was certainly uncomfortable with what he found at Yale at the beginning, the New Criticism there. But that, of course, was in a line with Christianity that I don't have a great deal of interest in myself" (CW XXIV: 756). Frye, in 1950, seems surprised by a group of critics "called the 'New Critics' who are supposed to ignore historical criticism & concentrate on texture, whatever texture is" and he openly muses: "I asked Abrams if being in the Kenyon Review would make me a new critic" (CW VIII: 288-9). The Christian aspect of the New Criticism which seems to have made Bloom uncomfortable was the presence of a return to the Catholicism of someone like T.S. Eliot. But like Bloom, Frye himself would become uncomfortable with New Criticism writing that "New Criticism, of course, is a half-assed development of Hopkinsian Scotism" (CW IX: 218). Thus while Bloom and Frye seem concerned

about the Christian aspect of New Criticism, it is Frye who returns to Christianity when he begins to consider the problem of literary history. In particular, Frye turns to the Christian idea of “double aspect” of the “son-father relationship” which thus becomes a movement away from Bloom’s theoretical tradition. In a letter of recommendation written in 1970, Frye notes that Bloom is “an outstanding scholar, one of the best and most original now working in the Romantic period” but he further observes that:

Although not a person of any formal religious commitments, he has a deep spirituality, founded in the traditions of Judaism, and his approach to the great Romantic poets is of the Evangelical kind of which they would have most approved, and which indicates how genuine his understanding of them is. (NFF: 1991 Boxes 14-18).

148 However, Frye was not alone in considering the question of religion, Harold Bloom remarks: “In later years, whenever I lectured at Toronto, Frye would introduce me with considerable polemic fervor, making clear that his Methodist Platonism was very different from my Jewish Gnosticism” (in *Anatomy* vii). This religious question cannot be ignored, at least insofar as Frye recognizes this difference. In his paper “The Meaning of Recreation,” Frye goes further and confirms Bloom’s observation:

Certain elements of criticism which have preoccupied Harold Bloom, the conception, for example, of the ‘anxiety of influence’ and the fact that every poet misreads and misunderstands his predecessors, and has to if he is to speak with his own voice, depend again on this matter of recreation. The archetype of all that is in the Bible, at least in the Christian Bible, where the New Testament’s conception of the Old is, from the point of view of Judaism, a preposterous and perverse misunderstanding. (CW IV: 31)

Frye, as a student at Emmanuel College, in an essay titled “The Jewish Background of the New Testament” observed that “[n]ow this complicated problem, of an old moribund culture with a new fertile cycle in humanity pushing up through it, makes this period of history at once the most baffling and mysterious, and the most critically important, in the life of mankind” (CW III: 146). As would be expected, Frye recognizes the primacy of the New Testament at the expense of the Old Testament. Moreover, Frye writes:

The seven centuries or so between Zoroaster and Jesus represent the coming of our historical tradition, that is, that of the occidental world, to full awareness, an advance from consciousness to self-consciousness, from a knowledge of the outer space-world of appearance to an experience of the inner time-world of reality. The transference of a tradition from one culture to another resulted in a genuine evolutionary ‘lift,’ which is as important to us as the access of intelligence itself at the close of the Tertiary age, and is the only one that man has had in historic times. And it does not take the auto-suggestion of our system of chronology to see how it revolves around the figure of Jesus (CW III: 146).

It is evident that Frye is privileging the Christian vision of time, history and being itself in this essay; however, Frye is quick to note that “[t]he Christian’s point about Jesus is not that he advanced a new theory, but that he brought a new strength” and

further “that Christianity claims to be a fulfilment rather than a divagation from the Jewish tradition” (CW III: 147). It is precisely this notion that provokes Harold Bloom, as might be expected, to observe that: “[b]ut Frye’s Bible is the Protestant Bible, in which the Hebrew Scriptures dwindle down to the captive prize of the Gentiles, the Old Testament” (*Book of J* 14). Frye does not depart from his vision of the Bible; on July 14, 1986, in his lecture “The Bible and English Literature” Frye says,

The Bible is a narrative which starts where time starts and ends where time ends. It is long of reading, as you turn the pages from Genesis straight through to the end, but you note that the last book of the Bible, a book which is explicitly called Revelation, is a book which presents you with a simultaneous understanding of the entire pattern of the Bible up to that point, in the form of an identity of all possible metaphors and images in the natural world with the body of the Messiah. (CW IV: 148)

Indeed, as with the myth of concern, the difference between Frye’s Methodist Protestantism and Bloom’s Jewish Gnosticism becomes paramount insofar as it cannot be overcome by either. At this point, it should hardly come as any surprise then that Frye re-creates (or misreads) the anxiety of influence by adding this Christian requirement. Frye’s clinamen, like Bloom’s, is deeply personal. Frye, after reading Bloom’s Cornell lecture “The Covering Cherub,” writes: “I have read the latter with great interest and think it is quite one of the best things you have done. A very personal statement of the kind you make all too rarely” (NFF: 1988 Box 8, File B13). Perhaps, it seems we can suggest the same is true of Frye’s conception of literary history as having this “double aspect” joining the archetypal Oedipus with the Christian relation of son and father.

149 Outside of Frye’s article and his process of Christianizing “the anxiety of influence,” Frye’s engagement with Bloom continues he observes that “[t]he personality of the poet may enfold us as disciples, or it may cause the revolts and deliberate misreadings chronicled in Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, but in any case it is inescapable” (CW VI: 501). Yet, only pages later, Frye writes: “[e]very poem in the meantime is an expression of ideology or secondary concern, and this is the real ‘anxiety of influence,’ not Bloom’s psychological Freudian kind” (CW VI: 505). Frye, it seems, was convinced by the idea of the anxiety of influence up until a point; indeed, this becomes even more obvious when in *The Secular Scripture*, Frye writes: “[w]ithout going in the same direction that some critics have done, I think it is true that this is how the recreating of the literary tradition often has to proceed: through a process of absorption followed by misunderstanding, that is, establishing a new context” (CW XVIII: 106; *Secular* 163). But what is most telling is the note: “this passage was written before the appearance of Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*” (CW XVIII: 501 n. 171; *Secular* 193). However, Frye does appear to rebel against or react to Bloom’s idea of the anxiety of influence, but, paradoxically it seems as though he is rejecting a theory that he has in fact validated by putting into practice. The question which remains unanswered, of course, is: why does Frye rebel against or react to Bloom? Is it necessary to now acknowledge an anxiety of having influenced?

The possible solution to this question is found in the point of difference between Bloom and Frye: the myth of concern. Frye argued, as I have cited previously, that “[t]he anxiety of coherence is central: normally, voices of doubt or dissent are to be muted at all times, and silenced altogether if there is a real danger, as in war” (*Critical Path* 37). It is precisely here that Bloom challenges the social order of Frye, and now Frye must work to mute the “voices of doubt or dissent,” and, of course, paradoxically, the very muting is itself an anxiety. This new anxiety is one in which the poet has now overcome the precursor and yet the precursor is still very much alive and not quite ready to surrender his place in the literary pantheon. Indeed, Frye’s undated, and oft-quoted, statement for the day of his death reads:

The twentieth century saw an amazing development of scholarship and criticism in the humanities, carried out by people who were more intelligent, better trained, had more languages, had a better sense of proportion, and were infinitely more accurate scholars and competent professional men than I. I had genius. No one else in the field known to me had quite that. (CW VI: 725)⁷

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Northrop Frye, it would seem, faced a formidable challenge in Harold Bloom. While *The Anxiety of Influence* may well be a misreading of Frye, it would also be misread by Frye. The intellectual community at large is greatly benefited by the history of misreading and it hardly seems possible to consider the theory of poetic influence formulated by Bloom without considering Frye. However, it now seems equally necessary that a scholar considering the work of Frye will have to pay attention to the influence of Bloom on Frye. While this may invalidate Bloom’s theory of the poet battling his precursor; it can also be argued that this entirely validates Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence. The anxiety of influence clearly runs both ways – for the poet as much as the precursor. And this becomes the paradox of Harold Bloom’s *Anatomy of Influence* and Northrop Frye’s *Anxiety of Criticism*⁸.

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ENDNOTES

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1. Throughout this essay CW refers to *Collected Works of Northrop Frye* followed by the appropriate volume.
 2. Indeed, it could be argued that Jameson, like Bloom (as we shall see), suffers from an anxiety of influence insofar as he wants to revise Frye's theory of literature; Jameson writes: "what we would want to observe about Frye's account is that it fails to come to grips with the conceptual categories which inform and preselect the attributes and quality by which those states are characterized" ("Magical Narratives" 139-40).
 3. Bruns explains that "One theme [of the grammarian's mythology] is that the letters of the alphabet contain the universal range of words, and these in turn harbor or conceal all that can be said about all that God has created. To write is to penetrate the system of letters and to disclose some portion of the truth that lies hidden therein as though behind a great veil of words or within a Great Book of the kind imagined by the alchemists. Writing is thus always in some sense hermeneutic, which means that it is never an original activity but is always mediated by texts that provide access to the system. To write is to intervene in what has already been written; it is to work 'between the lines' of antecedent texts, there to gloss, to embellish, to build invention upon invention" (52-3).

4. All correspondence cited from the Northrop Frye Fonds (NFF) have been cited with the permission of Victoria University Library at the University of Toronto. Additionally, Professor Harold Bloom granted permission to cite his letters from the Northrop Frye Fonds.
 5. It seems likely that the communication starts in 1959 as there is a letter which is simply dated October 7; given the content of this letter and the response it would have received which is made evident in Bloom's January 11, 1960 letter, it seems plausible to confirm its date as October 7, 1959.
 6. My thanks to Robert Denham for pointing out these letters that Frye wrote to colleagues.
 7. This is perhaps one of the most cited passages from the *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*. Indeed, Harold Bloom at the open of his preface to the Princeton Edition of *Anatomy of Criticism* remarks, "[t]he publication of Northrop Frye's Notebooks trouble some of his old admirers, myself included. One unfortunate passage gave us Frye's affirmation that he alone, of all modern critics, possessed genius" (vii). The idea of genius itself seems to have been a problematic concern for Frye: "[t]he whole romantic conception of genius is balls to start with: there is no such things as a great man; it's only that some men can do jobs well that we think important, & greatness always relates to the job & never to the man" (CW XX: 113). It could be argued that this is consistent with Frye's statement of his own genius insofar as it is not about 'being' a genius but rather 'having' genius.
- 154** 8. In 2010, Harold Bloom will publish "[his] final version of [his] reflections upon the influence process" (<http://www.writersreps.com/book.aspx?BookID=442>; February 19, 2010). The book has had various titles and the current title, to be released with Yale University Press, is *The Anatomy of Influence* which, of course, bears testimony, perhaps ironic, to his debt to Northrop Frye. An earlier title, which was the title as of December 2009 according to the New York Review of Books (<http://www.nybooks.com/authors/1343>; February 19, 2010), for the book was "The Living Labyrinth: Literature and Influence."