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Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

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Literature as Deathly Exposure. Harold Bloom's Theory of Creative Selfhood

Abstract. Even though Bloom's vision of poetic auto-creation has been widely discussed, it seems that the aspect of bodily existence of the Bloomian belated subject is consistently marginalized in favour of close analyses of the self's figurative projections. In spite of the fact that the physical self in the world is never a direct focus of his pondering, to Bloom the experience of literature, especially in the latter part of his critical career, appears to be closely interwoven with oblique intimations of one's physical death. Indeed, it is bodily death that seems to be the real antagonist of the ephebe as a figure of capable imagination. In the present article, I explore Bloom's theory of man's self-creation through the experience of literature with a view to showing that the process of reading/writing in general is a deliberate self-exposure to the horizon of death that turns into a supreme creative mandate.

Key words. Bloom, subjectivity, Heidegger, Lacan

In late modernity the human subject has come to be stripped of all fixed points of reference that used to guarantee its wholeness, giving it ontological, epistemological and moral stability. It was Nietzsche's insight into the nature of the self that paved the way to the modern dictum that "subjectivity itself is textual" (Hall 2004, 128). In his outstanding reading of Nietzsche's work, Alexander Nehamas (1985, 7) observes that "the self … is not a constant, stable entity. On the contrary, it is something one becomes, something … one constructs … A self is just a set of coherently connected episodes." This premise lies behind a number of radical reformulations of the idea of selfhood that culminate in the notion the self

is entirely the product of language. Building up on Nehamas's study, Richard Rorty (1989, 27), whose views may be taken to fuse some of the points of the debates on subjectivity that are developed here, regards Nietzsche as the pioneer of anti-essentialist theory of the self and its surrounding world.

> It was Nietzsche who first explicitly suggested that we drop the whole idea of "knowing the truth." His definition of truth as a "mobile army of metaphors" amounted to saying that the whole idea of "representing reality" by means of language, and thus the idea of finding a single context for all human lives, should be abandoned. His perspectivism amounted to the claim that the universe had no lading-list to be known, no determinate length. He hoped that once we realized that Plato's "true world" was just a fable, we would seek consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself. more exactly, he would have created the only part of himself that mattered by constructing his own mind.

Rorty summarises Nietzsche's idea that man is an animal capable of self-creation, noting that this self-creation is a task realised only as a necessarily endless pursuit after one's wholeness. Rorty (1989, 27) observes that such self-creation is inextricably interwoven with the constant recreation of one's language, "To create one's mind is to create one's own language." The self (Rorty 1989, 5) is the language it speaks, similarly the "world out there" is only knowable in its descriptions. Therefore (Rorty 1999, 16) the task of a philosopher, just as of any other writer, poet or scientist, is "to free us from the language we presently use by reminding us that this language is not that of "human reason" but is the creation of the thinkers of our historical past." We live in a world that is the product of an infinite number of re-descriptions done over the past ages. In turn (Rorty 1999, 37), we ourselves are "nothing save the words we use," as Rorty notes in his reading of the late writings of Martin Heidegger.

Such a textualist perception of the self and its world leads Rorty to postulate the idea of the ironist. This figure cannot be defined by any positive terms, for she is a radical anti-essentialist and cannot credit any ideas as naturally inherent in the nature of reality or her own

selfhood. Thus she (Rorty 1989, 73) (1) questions the finality of her current descriptive vocabulary, (2) "realises that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts," and (3) "does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others." The ironist is profoundly sceptical of every discourse and this allows her to evade traps of naturalisation set up by ideologues of essentialism. The only criteria against which she tests her vocabularies are whether they serve to enhance the mutual understanding between herself and other people and whether those vocabularies express her being in a new and more insightful way.

These two yardsticks for measuring the usefulness of new vocabularies represent the two main challenges the idea of self-creativity is faced with. Firstly, the fact that man is free to choose whatever self-description appeals to him most is bound up with the necessity to take responsibility for the choice. As Zygmunt Bauman (1995, 43) puts it, "The denizens of the postmodern era are … forced to stand face-to-face with their moral autonomy, and so also with their moral responsibility." For Bauman (1995, 43), such moral freedom is both "a cause of moral agony" as well as "the chance the moral selves never confronted before." Rorty (1999a, 82) sees the path to "moral progress" in the developing vocabularies allowing for "wider and wider sympathy" between irreducibly different individuals and peoples. Secondly, man must perpetually struggle with the existent taxonomies of both the world and his own selfhood. Clinging to Rorty's terminology, taxonomies are "final vocabularies" that are imposed by various authorities, and that become a means to oppressing the individual. Thinkers who sought unifying theories like Kant or Hegel Rorty (1989, 78) calls metaphysicians and pitches them against the ironist. This distinction captures the polarity of the late twentieth century and (possibly) early twenty-first century's theoretical scene, with thinkers such as Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha representing the ironical camp. "Whereas the metaphysician sees the modern [subjects] as particularly good at discovering how things

really are, the ironist sees them as particularly rapid in changing their self-image, in re-creating themselves."

Harold Bloom features prominently in Rorty's writings. It is particularly the idea of the strong poet that appeals to Rorty (1989, 53), who sees the Bloomian figure as an emblem of the revolutionary re-descriptor of the present vocabularies who should be recognised as the culture hero of "an ideal liberal polity." Bloom might to some extent be subsumed under Rorty's category of anti-taxonomists, although it must be noted that he is an avowedly antithetical critic too intellectually elusive to fit in any categorisation, however commodious.

Bloom's theory of anxiety of influence famously assumes that every ephebe, as Bloom dubs a buddying new lyricist, must enter a deadly agon with the precursors of his writing. In an age when (Sellars 2007, 272) "everything is already written, the poet must un-name what has been named in order to begin [writing] at all," as a result he suffers from an overwhelming anxiety of belatedness, subconsciously knowing that his works stand little chance against the great landmarks of literary tradition. However, Bloom's theory applies not only to an inter-poetic strife but also (Bielik-Robson 2011, 237) to the "relation of crippling dependence, which occurs between a late-born poet and his splendid dead ancestor, becomes a general predicament for all participants of modern culture. The 'poet as a poet' is thus, as in all romantic writings, a *pars pro toto* of all humanity: what we all moderns undergo, he or she experiences with exemplary intensity." Every man must struggle with his past if he desires to carve out a space for his own individual self. Even though Bloom's vision of auto-creation has been widely discussed, it seems that the aspect of bodily existence of the Bloomian belated subject is consistently marginalized in favour of close analyses of his theory of the self's figurative projections. In spite of the fact that the physical self in the world is never the direct focus of his pondering, to Bloom the experience of literature, especially in the latter part of his critical career, appears to be closely interwoven with oblique intimations of one's

physical death. Indeed, it is bodily death that seems to be the major antagonist of the ephebe as a figure of capable imagination. In the present article, it is Bloom's theory of man's self-creation through the experience of literature that is explored with a view to showing that the process of reading/writing (both of which according to Bloom work in the same manner) becomes a willing self-exposure to the horizon of death that, as it is here argued, turns into a supreme creative mandate.

Bloom's most sustained analysis of the ineradicable nature of human selfhood is interwoven with his idea of the Scene of Instruction, which he puts forward in *A Map of Misreading*. Taking issue with Derrida's notion of the Scene of Writing developed in the philosopher's analysis of Freud, Bloom proceeds to show that the Scene of Writing cannot be understood as the primary space of meaning creation. "Whereas Derrida privileges the written word over orality and deconstructs all metaphysical as indebted to the irrevocably ambiguous play of signification and written representation, Bloom argues for the primacy of literature as a scene of instruction and transmission, thus attributing to a more active, practical sense" (Spargo 2007, 85). Bloom (1975, 49) identifies Derrida's "keenest insight," that "writing is unthinkable without repression," as using "the daemonizing trope of hyperbole." Bloom's fourth revisionary ratio of *daemonization*, in which (1973, 100) the ephebe undergoes "a Counter-Sublime whose function suggests *the precursor's relative weakness*" emphasis in original), opens the space within the earlier work that calls for the youngling's intervention. As a result, it is the ephebe that reveals himself to be a potent figure by reducing the original vision of the precursor. Thus, according to Bloom, Derrida brings Freud down, and the balance of insight power is reversed, showing Derrida to be a keener thinker than Freud. However, Bloom argues that in his reading of Freud Derrida only enters the sequence of strong misreaders of precursors' oeuvres. He (1975, 49) "relies, as Freud does, upon a more daring trope, a scheme of transumption or metaleptic reversal that I would name the Primal

Scene of Instruction." Derrida's deconstruction of Freud's essay, and more generally of the entire history of Western metaphysics, becomes yet another misprision; strong though it is, Derrida exemplifies not so much a leap beyond the discourse of metaphysics but its latest and so far most radical embodiment.

The Primal Scene of Instruction is a way of reading the history of literature, or the history of humanity's engagement with whatever form of creativity, that, after Vico (Bloom 1975, 55), assumes that "we only know what we ourselves have made." Since (Bloom 1975, 55) "in the beginning was Interpretation," each new figure of capable imagination, seeking to individualise himself from the earlier interpreters" visions, must necessarily follow Los's famous dictum from William Blake's *Jerusalem* (1979, 651), "I must create a system, or be enslav'd by another Man's. / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create." However, a question arises as to when the subject begins to suffer from the anxiety, thus painfully entering the tradition. Bloom provides no clear timing but explains that the moment of realisation is marked by the subject's glimpsing of "a possibility of sublimity in the self." Once that overwhelming feeling sets in the ephebe, he starts on the path to individuality. "The psychic place of heightened consciousness, of intensified demand, where the Scene of Instruction is staged, is necessarily a place cleared by the newcomer in himself, cleared by an initial contraction or withdrawal that makes possible all further self-limitations, and all restituting modes of self-representation" (Bloom 1975, 55). This is the key fragment of Bloom's theory, showing its unmistakeable Gnostic genesis. Every man (Scholem 1995, 260–280), undergoes the withdrawal in a manner resembling the act of *tsimtsum* of Gnostic tradition that leaves the space for the further limitations and restitutions. The moment of primary withdrawal is final, and there is no returning to the initial fullness, what man must thus do is forever seek new restitutive self-projections, in which he cannot regain the original Interpretation but can quest endlessly for another imaginary auto-recreation. This is the

foundation of Bloom's system of anxiety of influence, and rightly enough Norman Finkelstein (1992, 48) asserts that Bloom "longs for the impossible act of *tikkun* that would restore the entire textual cosmos." The six ratios, though forming a linear story, can be arranged into pairs (Bielik-Robson 2011, 231–232) that delineate the limitation-restitution dialectic, and reveal the ephebe's individuation path to follow the model of evasion (*clinamen* and *kenosis*), life enhancement (*daemonization* and *askesis*), and reconciliation (*tessera* and *apophrades*). Each clash that the poetic self undergoes brings it closer to a restitution of the former fullness, a reconciliation with the precursor fathers" strong vision that cannot be achieved for good. For Bloom (1975, 59), it is the final imaginative projection that the ephebe yearns to reclaim in his own manner. "Poetic repetition quests, despite itself, for the mediated vision of the fathers, since such mediation holds open the perpetual possibility of one's own sublimity, one's election to the realm of true instructors." Subconscious though the desire may be, every ephebe ultimately desires to become one of the instructors for the future generations. This can be achieved only on condition that the young poet manages to defend himself against the vision of his forefathers, thereby succeeding in winning originality for himself. It is these two drives (Allen 2007, 134) that lie behind modern poetry, but also behind the formation of every creative, free-thinking individual.

Although it is only won for a brief moment, the victory in the battle for becoming a strong, or influential, poet is delineated in the last ratio of *apophrades*, the return of the dead. In *The Anxiety of Influence* Bloom (1973, 141) explains that what he means is

> the triumph of having so stationed the precursor, in one's own work, that particular passages in his work seem to be not presages of one's own advent, but rather to be indebted to one's own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one's greater splendor. The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, and speaking our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own.

In this movement Bloom (1975, 85) delineates his figurative response to the condition of belatedness in that strong poems, those that achieve the transient *apophrades*, "cannot restitute, and yet they can make the gesture of restitution. They cannot reverse time, and yet they can lie against time." The poet can only figuratively and for a fleeting moment win against his precursors, still (Bloom 1973, 152) "what the strong poet truly knows is only that he is going to happen next, that he is going to write a poem in which his radiance will be manifest." The manifestation of his own radiance (Bloom 1982, 124) is intrinsic to his ability to defend himself against the power of earlier visions, "Defense, for poets, always has been trope, and always has been directed against prior tropes. Drive, for poets, is the urge for immortality, and can be called the largest of all poetic tropes, since it makes even of death, literal death, our death, a figuration rather than a reality." This is the most radical perception of the trope of metalepsis that Bloom proffers, for he suggests that the defence against the precursory visions is not only a way of poetic maturation, but it is a ruse against death itself. Bloom (1982, 136) posits that "literal meaning, by a metaleptic leap, is therefore death, while figurative meaning is Eros. Reverse this Freudian formula, and you have part of the context in which the poetic will must operate. Death, time's [Nietzschean] "it was," is literal meaning; Eros or figuration becomes the will's revenge against time." What the ephebe encounters in his precursors is a language so powerful and persuasive that it is tempting to assume that it denotes the literal truth. Putting that idea in a broader context, it appears that we all come to inhabit a world constructed by various people's vocabularies that vie for our attention. If we succumb to the appeal of some of them, as beginning poets do to the vision of a Stevens or a Yeats, we enter the universe of death, for we become imitators of somebody else's system, thus meekly denying ourselves our own individuality.

Bloom's man desires ever more figurative freedom that can be won from the precursory vocabularies, since this hard-won freedom opens the space for individuality. Although he

cannot reverse time, the ephebe can so nuance the earlier vision that it gains a new meaning, and in the rhetorical appropriation of the seemingly dead language he portions out a place for novelty wherein he beholds himself in a previously unknown guise. "*Apophrades,* when managed by the capable imagination, by the strong poet who has persisted in his strength, becomes not so much a return of the dead as a celebration of the return of the early self-exaltation that first made poetry possible" (Bloom 1973, 147). What returns in *apophrades* is the flowering of one's vision, the inner exaltation of the subject that for the first time beholds itself as an individual. However, such glimpsing of a new visionary power is brief and, as Rorty asserts, never brings in the final vocabulary of self-description. Bloom suggests that the process of man's individuation is an endless pursuit after metaleptic leaps over the precursory visions or, applying Rorty's broader terms, the extant "dead vocabularies." The literalised figurations represent the universe of death as the only truth of our being. Here Bloom engages Heidegger together with the later strain of thinkers who see death as the sole fact of our existence that eventually terminates all our auto-creative fictions.

Heidegger (1996, 232 emphasis in original) states that death "is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of *Da-sein*. Thus *death* reveals itself as "the *ownmost nonrelational possibility not to be bypassed*." There is only one true modus of the self's existence, and (Heidegger 1996, 235 emphasis in original) it is its own possibility of dying, but this aspect of existence is clouded in the self's everyday preoccupations.

> [I]n the entangled flight *from* death, the everydayness of *Da-sein* bears witness to the fact that the they itself is always already determined as *being toward death*, even when it is not explicitly engaged in "thinking about death." *Even in average everydayness, Da-sein is constantly concerned with its ownmost nonrelational potentiality-of-being not-to-be-bypassed, if only in the mode of taking care of things in a mode of untroubled indifference* toward *the most extreme possibility of its existence*.

In our mundane life, we hardly ever think about death, in fact the exact opposite is the case: we desire to forestall even the most remote intimations of our passing away. Nonetheless, according to Heidegger, it is death that lies at the core of all our projects, for only death, as our "*ownmost nonrelational possibility not to be bypassed*," can found life, which becomes a domain of fictions that lose all meaning in the face of the final fact of being. The subject needs to continue spinning its auto-creative fictions insofar as they are part of ontic being, which goes on in blatant unawareness of the truth of Being; but, regardless of their imaginative strength, all self-creative visions terminate in the exposure to death, which thus becomes the only true horizon of our being that cannot be shifted or alleviated in any way. "The problem of the possible wholeness of the being which we ourselves actually are exists justifiably if care, as the fundamental constitution of *Da-sein*, "is connected" with death as the most extreme possibility of this being" (Heidegger 1996, 239). If there is any unity to be achieved by the subject, it lies in the prospective demise. "It is the imminence of death as something immediately invalidating ordinary illusions of selfhood that gives *Dasein* an intimation of its highest truth, that is, an insight into the essential futility of its *Entwürfe* (projects), in which it also projects itself as a separate being" (Bielik-Robson 2011, 148).

Heidegger"s structure of *Da-sein* as being-toward-death, which alone guarantees a prospect of the subject's fulfilment, is taken up by Jacques Lacan. Lacan, who to some extent shares Bloom's insight into the frame of the self as an imaginary figure, recognises that the subject, at an early stage, is rent. The mirror stage (Lacan 2002, 6) marks the introduction into the symbolic order of socially elaborated situations; it is

> a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation – and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns our fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an "orthopedic" form of its totality – and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure.

Lacan identifies a dialectic of insufficiency and anticipation intrinsic to the subject that resembles Bloom's idea of limitation and restitution. In both cases the self is primarily marked by a splitting, to use Lacan's term, that forces it to seek compensatory, or orthopaedic, auto-projections. Furthermore, to both thinkers, this splitting results in the subject's need for linguistic fantasies that can dress up the wound left by the intervention of what Lacan denotes by the term Name-of-the-Father that signifies the inevitable introduction of every self into the symbolic order. Such general similarities notwithstanding, Lacan emphasises the false nature of all subjective self-imaginings that can only be seen through if the self (Lacan 2002, 67) realises its essential constitution of being-toward-death.

> Symbols in fact envelop the life of man with a network so total that they … bring to his birth … the shape of his destiny; so total that they provide the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he is not yet and beyond his death; and so total that through them his end finds its meaning in the last judgement – unless he reaches the subjective realisation of being-toward-death.

Lacan radicalises Heidegger's insight into the mode of human being in that he suggests that we are fully engulfed in the symbolic order of language. There is no escaping the symbolic (Lacan 2002, 84), for "I identify myself in language, but only by losing myself in it as an object." According to Lacan, the self is fragmented from the moment it enters the language, and then it seeks to reclaim its former unity through linguistic fantasies, as a result creating endless self-projections, none of which can fit the alienated subject back together, for there is only one true path to imaging forth one's restitution. "When we want to get at what was before the serial games of speech in the subject and what is prior to the birth of symbols, we find it in death, from which his existence derives all the meaning it has" (Lacan 2002, 102). Only in being-toward-death can the subject retain the possibility of wholeness, and no fiction of auto-creation will alleviate the pain of fragmentation.

Lacan's idea that man's birth into language marks the point when he loses his unity, becoming fragmented and alienated, accounts also for Bloom's vision of the ephebe entering the Scene of Instruction. The moment of fall and loss is strongly present in both cases, but whereas Lacan, after Heidegger, looks to death as the horizon that may guarantee the reclamation of wholeness, Bloom opts for the force of life that he identifies with Eros. Freud's explication of man's principle drives towards life and death, which he delineates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is a founding idea both in Lacan and in Bloom. However, Bloom regards Eros not as a weakening principle, which must yield to Thanatos as man comes closer to his end, but as a disturbance within the simple chain of repetitions. While Lacanian death is a comeback of the originary unity of the self before the Name-of-the-Father intervened, Eros refers to an imperfect recurrence, a return with a difference. Bielik-Robson (2011, 144–45) suggests that this force of life in Bloom may be called Erros, for it errs in its quest for continuous "disturbance within the *arche* itself, a chance for deviation (*clinamen*, swerve) from the arche-truth." Death as fact of existence offers truth only as a possibility-not-to-be-bypassed, but still (Bielik-Robson 2011, 145) a possibility that cannot be repeated, and so remains only an orientation, a promise.

> Life may be a latecomer, a late compromise formation between Thanatos and its erring offspring, Erros, but this condition of belatedness does not compromise life as a new quality: since it cannot be deduced from one single truth, which cannot maintain itself as truth, it cannot be reduced to it either.

Erros is no longer a principle of truth, but rather, thwarting the smooth transition from birth to death, it asserts the swerve as the only "true" basis of life. Thus Bloom differs from Lacan not so much in the orientation of thinking as in the choice of where to lay emphasis; throughout his life, man perpetuates auto-creative fictions, for he has no access to the antediluvian unity, but to Bloom it is these fictions that represent the subject's strength and liveliness.

Provided they manage to transume the extant vocabularies, the self's fictions indicate its energetic potency. Here we return to the difference in the idea of language that sets Bloom clearly apart from Heidegger and Lacan. Heidegger (1982, 124) persistently claimed that "language speaks in that it, as showing, reaching into all regions of presences, summons from them whatever is present to appear and fade," adding that "we hear Saying [of language] only because we belong within it." To Lacan the symbolic is what turns us into objects as we enter it. But Bloom (1982, 29) never acquiesces in the view that language is a pre-human phenomenon.

> What the language of Emerson and of Whitman knows then is something about adequacy or inadequacy, something about agon, about the struggle between adverting subject or subjectivity and the mediation that consciousness hopelessly wills language to constitute. In this agon, this struggle between authentic forces, neither the fiction of the subject nor the trope of language is strong enough to win a final victory. There is only a mutual Great Defeat, but that Defeat itself is the true problematic, the art of poetry and the art of criticism. In that defeat, there are no losers, only intrepid agonists who never yield up their own recalcitrance.

At first, Bloom seems to endorse the premise of Heidegger and Lacan (and the later representative of that line, Paul de Man), writing that "language … knows … something about adequacy or inadequacy;" but by no means is this an enthronement of the symbolic as pre-human, for the language is that of two strong poets, Emerson and Whitman. Moreover, what their language knows is that the entire history of literature and philosophy (and every kind of linguistic production, as Rorty would add) is a tradition in which the ephebe clashes with the tropes of language. Still, this is not to say that the young poet is faced with a tidal wave of "language itself" because that would echo Lacan's remark that, on entering the symbolic, the self is objectified by language. The tropes of language are to Bloom the vocabularies created through swerve by the earlier strong poets. He perceives language as the product of outstanding poets, who have each managed to further nuance the languages, or visions, of

their precursors, as a result becoming precursors themselves. Again, the existent language is represented here as having derived from the Scene of Instruction that is more fundamental than the notion that we are created by the symbolic. The poet (Bloom 1982, 30) enters agon with language understood not as a "Demiurge" but as the latest outgrowth of the precursory visions; what he strives to achieve is even a slightest swerve from the extant mode of idiom. Having entered the Scene of Instruction, the youngling exposes himself to the force of Erros.

In his recent work, Bloom pushes further the premise that writing and reading are manifestations of agon with the former strong writers on which the liveliness of the ephebe hinges. In *The Anatomy of Influence*, he (2011, 4) states that "any distinction between literature and life is misleading. Literature for me is not merely the best part of life; it is itself the form of life, which has no other form." If there is life, it is all contained in literature. This point may be taken to summarise the entire project of Bloom's theoretical tetralogy. However, in his latest book, Bloom asserts more clearly the distinction between life as literature and bodily dwelling in the world. "The psyche," he writes, "is the empirical self or rational soul, while the divine daimon is an occult self or nonrational soul." The daimon, a notion Bloom (2011, 12) takes from W. B. Yeats, is "the poet's genius," his "poet-in-a-poet," by which Bloom means the ephebe's "potential immortality as a poet, and so in effect his divinity." The daimonic poet-in-a-poet is what the readers of Bloom have already known under several guises such as Wallace Stevens's internal paramour, or Blake's Real Man Imagination. Milton L. Welch (2007, 202) explains the figure in reference to the Scene of Instruction:

> The poet as poet is internal and external to the poet himself or herself: radically internal because the poet as poet is the well-spring, the fountainhead, what Bloom calls the *daimon* and flame, of poetry that makes the poet a poet. the poet as poet is radically external because as well-spring, fountainhead and flame it bursts and is discovered due to its having been brought forth and recognized in encounters with other poets.

The figure of the poet-in-a-poet is part of the dual nature of man, and Bloom is no longer so eager to consign the empirical self to obscurity. He (quoted in Bloom 2011, 22) quotes from one of his heroes, Walter Pater:

> We have an interval and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among "the children of this world," in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us … For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments" sake.

There is no mistaking the allure that he holds for Bloom, since Pater cherishes the essential power of literature to quicken our sense of life, and so fictively extend our interval in this world. However, what proves even more striking is that Pater severally underlines that the function of art and literature is so vital to us because our lives are short. Although it is true (Bloom 2011, 22) that "we live by and in moments raised in quality by aesthetic apprehension," the aesthetic life is an intervention in the bodily existence. Why we appreciate beauty, Pater implies, is because we are finite beings, whose spell on this earth is greatly limited. Therefore we could situate Bloom's recent suggestion in the context of Odo Marquard's idea of "compensation." Marquard (2011, 29) maintains that our world has undergone a process of objectification and has lost its stable magical nature, this "destitution, unfortunately, is a curse, but, fortunately, it is made up for by a simultaneous creation of methods of new magical restitution which becomes a problematic compensation for the loss of the old order; this is an inherently modern nature of aesthetic art."[1] In Bloom's case, death is such a curse in that it, unfortunately and ineluctably, puts an end to our brief earthly

[1] Since there is no English version, I pivot-translate from the Polish edition of Marquard's book.

interval; but death is equally a blessing because it opens the space for a deep and heart-felt appreciation of literature that endlessly compensates for our finiteness.

Throughout Bloom's criticism the bodily self is implicitly regarded as the cause of all anxiety. This anxiety may take two principal forms. On the one hand it is the "writerly anxiety" of belatedness, of literally being too late brought forth into this world; on the other, it is the "readerly anxiety" that stems from the fact that our interval, to hold on to Pater's apt word, is so short that we will not have read all the great works that comprise the Western Canon. "What shall the individual who still desires to read attempt to read, this late in history?" asks Bloom, and rather gloomily explains (1994, 15 emphasis added):

> The Biblical three-score years and ten no longer suffice to read more than a selection of the great writers in what can be called the Western tradition. Let alone in the world's tradition. Who reads must choose, since there is *literally* not enough time to read everything, even of one does nothing but read … Overpopulation, Malthusian repletion, is the authentic context for canonical anxieties.

As readers, we stand before the overwhelming plethora of books to choose from, and it is not just as well what we select, for our selfhood depends crucially on the books we read. Perhaps, as some critics (Allen 2007, 53–59) tend to argue, the idea of "anxiety of choice" is the real problem with which Bloom grapples throughout his entire life, but what proves of immediate interest to us is the use of the word "literally" in the above excerpt. It is *literally* our problem that we will not be able to read all the canonical works. The context of death returns, for we are not only belated but also live too short to be able to even familiarise ourselves with the basic literary pantheon. Bielik-Robson (2011, 7) explains that the Bloomian self seeks to die its own death, rather than melt in the horizon of death as yet another object passing away. However, this point seems to bypass Bloom's profound insight into man's psyche and his experience of literature through both reading and writing.

The dialectic of limitation and restitution, which has been delineated above, seems to run not only from the precursory vision to new figuration, but also from bodily limitation to imaginative compensation. Approaching a literary text we seek the Paterian quickening of the sense of life, which otherwise consists in a mundane movement towards death. For Bloom, what happens when the reader encounters a poem, or more precisely a strong poet's vision as a certain manifestation of language, is that he may either accept it as a literalised vocabulary, or he may seek to appropriate the poem, forcing on and out of it a new vision. Irrespective of which one is the case, the experience of the text may be brought down to two dialectically-bound possibilities. On the one hand, as literalised language, the text represents an encounter with death; on the other, it offers a chance for the reader to transume the deadness and bring in *not so much a return of the dead as a celebration of the return of the early self-exaltation that first made poetry possible*. It is in this self-exaltation that the reader as an auto-creative subject may, only figuratively and only briefly, regain the lost wholeness, that is to say, he may reclaim a figuration of his gone divinity, thus experiencing a quickened sense of potency of life. Yet, the text, of itself no longer offering the flame for the subject, does not relinquish its association with death, whose shadow forever hovers above the Scene of Instruction.

The clash between the reader and the precursor's text he engages is underpinned by the archetypical agon in Bloom's history of anxiety, Jacob's struggle with the Angel of Death. While the text is represented by the Angel, the reader is Jacob, who desires the Blessing of more life; "for himself and his progeny, Jacob dares everything, and is rarely far from danger, loss, and the constant work of mourning … He also must know humiliation, since his progress and survival are marked by fraud or tricksterism, by heel-clutching" (Bloom and Rosenberg 2005, 210). Although he knows that he cannot come out victorious, Jacob enters combat with one of the infinitely more powerful Elohim. What he sacrifices in the battle is his physical fitness, and it is in this maiming that he wins the Blessing of more life, which, as Bloom

(Bloom and Rosenberg 2005, 211) is quick to point out, "awards [him] a time without boundaries, and makes a name into a pragmatic immortality, by way of communal memory." In rhetorical terms, the Blessing stands for one's acceptance in the Scene of Instruction, for the moment Jacob wins eternal remembrance of his people, he becomes an instructor for the next generations of agonists. Furthermore, himself becoming an instructor, Jacob advances to the level of the Angel, even if he is necessarily one degree weaker than his precursor.

Each ephebe, having proved his capable imagination, produces a strong text that casts forth an ominous shadow over the future generations. Therefore it transpires that every strong literary work carries a twofold implication. It is an angel of death and, at the same time, it holds a possibility of bestowing the blessing of more life. The reader-as-Jacob approaches the angel of precursory text, knowing the bleak truth of agon. He must sacrifice his body in order to attempt to win the blessing that in itself is uncertain and transient at best. On the one hand the body represents the condition of death, the limitation of one's fantastical potential in a placid acceptance of an earlier literalised vision of a powerful precursor. On the other hand the blessing is a figure of imaginary extension and quickening of life, it is a restitution that comes to respond to bodily decrepitude. In *appophrades* the preternatural lie against one's belatedness is a momentary victory over the condition of death inherent in one's bodily existence, in which a sacrifice must be made. Jacob is injured, but it is this injury that represents the prize he has to pay to gain the blessing.

The text may be experienced bodily, as a book in hand that fills in the "free" time in one's life, thereby symbolising the inevitably drab fact that life is subservient to death. However, it may also be imaginatively appropriated and internalised, as a result helping one recall, albeit transiently, what is earliest in man, his capacity to experience the wonderful and the divine that is his self. In reading/writing we expose ourselves to a close brush with death because only in this way can we hope to win the blessing of more life. Every engagement with

literature is an evocation of our finiteness, our physical entrapment in too late a time; this is the ultimate curse of text that makes us realise our "ownmost nonrelational possibility," against which all fictions are mere figments of alienated imagination. Yet literature also offers us this one form of life that has no other form. Finally, these two engagements with the textual world are dialectically bound. Unfortunately, we are finite, so we are plagued by the double anxiety: of belatedness and of choice; but, fortunately, partly due to our bodily frailty, we have developed an ability to perform endless imaginative restitutions. This is the blessing in disguise of Bloom's vision, and a foremost expression of a belief in the Romantic humanism that (Bloom 1971, XXV) always tries to locate "a final good in human existence itself."

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