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Harold Bloom's Antithetical Stance on Memory as Forgetting

Abstract

The paper sets out to examine the dialectical concept of memory as forgetting presented in Bloom's *Poetry and Repression*. In his speculative investigations, Bloom draws heavily on two of his predecessors: Freud and Kierkegaard. He borrows the notions of trauma and repression from the former and develops them into the concept of the Scene of Instruction, which is a story of the initiation into the realm of poetry. From the latter, he borrows the concept of crop rotation, which deals with the art of remembering through forgetting, and vice versa. Bloom misreads both these concepts to create a theoretical construct of his own. Bloom follows Freud in that he shows how the poetic ego emerges through a reaction to the traumatic event of the Scene of Instruction. However, while Freud claims that it is by recollection that people can work through their traumas and return to sanity, Bloom says that both recollection and sanity are detrimental to human creative capabilities and that it is only through repression that a poet as poet can misread his predecessors and create poetry of his own. Bloom follows Kierkegaard in that he says that repression involves a dialectic of remembering and forgetting that, when put together, create an active faculty that shapes one's individual experience. While Kierkegaard uses his concept to create an aesthetic or contemplative existence that is always new and devoid of any excessive pleasure or pain, Bloom claims that conflict is an inherent part of human existence and that this very conflict is in fact a chance for a poet to individuate from tradition understood as the eternal return of the same.

Keywords: recollection, repression, subjectivity, trauma, individuation.

Ceaseless Activity

In "Wordsworth and the Scene of Instruction", Bloom provides the following definition of memory while launching an underhand attack on Lacan's psychoanalysis:

Dr. Samuel Johnson, who darkly knew that the mind is above all a ceaseless activity, could have taught these psychoanalytic linguistifiers a little more respect for the power of the

mind over itself, as well as over nature and language. But Freud also, of course, knew [...] that memory is active mind, always dangerous, always at work misreading the predicaments of consciousness.¹

This ostensibly triumphalist definition of memory might suggest that it can, very much like Baron Munchausen, pull itself by the hair out of the swamp of nature or language, the latter, as the French mixture of psychoanalysis and structuralism suggests, being the very power that splits the ego from within. Redolent of swaggering Emersonian self-reliance, Bloom's formulations also hark back to the metaphysically-charged vocabulary of Aristotelian psychology. Therein, active mind is the first principle, separate and unaffected and unmixed, compared to a craft, deathless and everlasting.² This untouched and eternal mind is the dream come true of Bloom's belated poets, who are themselves fantasising about exerting influence on their precursors, thus reverting the flow of time and attaining immortality.

On closer inspection, however, one can observe that the line of argument presented above has a dark undercurrent. Memory, says Bloom, necessarily implies misreading – that is, the work of interpretation which is exposed to danger and error. The creative subject, with his desire for omnipotence, is very much akin to the narcissistic and unhappy *ego* of psychoanalysis. And as Freud suggests, it is only through the work of memory that the ego can dispel the demons of the past and the time's "it was", and learn to live its own life.³ The account of Bloom's concept of memory must thus necessarily begin with Freud.

For Freud, memory is more than just a repository for sensations or a cage in which to catch knowledge. Memory in psychoanalysis, as formulated in *Project for Scientific Psychology*, is a system of representations, but also, and more importantly, "the persisting force of an experience".⁴ Freud develops this idea in the subsequent dissertations of his in which he lays the foundations for what is now known as his second topography. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud indulges in a fantastical metapsychological speculation in which he describes the psyche as "the living vesicle provided with a shield against stimuli from the external world".⁵ The psyche is defended by its outermost surface, or consciousness, which receives and binds the stimuli, and as such resembles calloused skin, hardened under the persistent force of incoming excitations. This protection, it must be added, is absolutely necessary for the psyche to survive "in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies".⁶ However, the failure to protect the vesicle causes a trauma.

¹ H. Bloom, *Poetry and Repression. Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*, New Haven–London 1976, p. 54.

² Aristotle, *De Anima*, ed. D. Ross, Oxford 1961 (DA 430a10–17).

³ Cf. Freud's *Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through*. S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, transl. J. Reddick, London 2003, p. 31–42.

⁴ S. Freud, *Project for Scientific Psychology. Standard Edition. Vol. I*, transl. J. Strachey, London 1953, p. 361.

⁵ S. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, transl. J. Strachey, New York–London 1975, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

The traumatic experience emerges when the psyche encounters “any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield”, which in turn is “bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism’s energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure”.⁷ This disturbance, which is also called “breach” or “breaking-in”, provokes a reaction from the psyche that tries to master the energy of the stimuli “by binding them, [...] so that they can be disposed of”.⁸ This reaction is aimed at taming the free-floating energy of the stimulus that penetrates the *ego*, and putting it out, as it were, in order to seal up the breach on the surface of the consciousness and restore the energy balance in the organism.

These metapsychological considerations are extremely relevant in the context of memory. Says Freud:

All excitatory processes that occur in the other systems leave permanent traces behind in them which form the foundation of memory. Such memory-traces, then, have nothing to do with the fact of becoming conscious; indeed they are often most powerful and most enduring when the process which left them behind was one which never entered consciousness.⁹

As he postulates a discontinuity between memory and consciousness, the latter arising “instead of a memory-trace”,¹⁰ Freud suggests that consciousness, though incompatible with memory, can develop only under the influence of the external stimuli preserved as memory-traces. This in turn implies that the ego is not a self-contained entity that enters ready-made into the world. Rather, it develops under the influence of what is external to it — that is, stimuli, excitations and sensations that leave their traces, often painful and not always conscious, in the memory of the subject. What is more, this external influence, which is also a primal injury or a cut sustained by the outer surface of the psyche, becomes necessary for the conscious self to emerge. Hence the conclusion that the origins of consciousness are always marked by a trauma. In other words, the unwitting experience of shock constitutes the *ego*.

Interestingly, the ego can remember something while being completely unaware of it. Freud argues that the stronger the stimulus is, the more powerful memory-trace it produces. This also provokes a more powerful defence to retain the trace in the unconscious. Thus, the more powerful the injury, the less likely one is to recall the traumatic event, as an increasingly strong force is applied to repress the memory to the unconscious. Hence, instead of recollection, or the act of bringing the memory-trace to the surface of the unconscious, Freud postulates repetition compulsion. The latter “must be ascribed to the unconscious repressed” (14),¹¹ and manifests itself whenever the individual stages the traumatic experience by enacting previous action. By repeating an event from the past, the *ego* tries to cushion the blow exerted by the stimuli and accustom to the resulting

⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

⁹ Ibid., p. 18–19.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 14.

injury. This, however, makes the relationship between the patient and therapist all the more complicated:

The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past.¹²

Even though each fresh repetition of the trauma by the patient “seems to strengthen the mastery they are in search of”,¹³ it also pushes them away from understanding the nature of their affliction. Such a recognition is brought only by recollection, which allows a working through of the traumatic event. Recollection helps to bring the traumatic event to the surface of the unconscious, and the trauma ceases to return as symptoms in the “here and now” of the self. Isolated in the past, the trauma can finally be revealed, articulated and understood. The compulsion to repeat relents, and the patient recovers.

Poetry as Repression

This slightly lengthy account of Freud’s repetition, recollection and working through is necessary for the understanding of how Bloom deliberately misuses the whole concept. Memory at work, as described by Bloom, never arrives at recollection in its attempts to preserve the *ego*. It only resorts to repression as the art of purposeful forgetting, which fails to isolate the traumatic scene in the past, and perpetuates the process of repetition in the present. Repression as a primal defence only engenders further repressions, for the repressed content never to resurface by means of recollection. Recollection enables the confrontation with the truth that, inherent in the primal scene, is nonetheless concealed beneath the recurring symptoms. Repression in turn is a ruse that helps the ego to evade or postpone this very confrontation. By insisting on error and misreading, Bloom condemns his poet/patient to repetition compulsion, and refuses him any chance of closure and recovery.

It takes an incredible nerve to prescribe the cause of an affliction as its remedy, and condemn the patient to repeat the primal scene that causes his injury. What Bloom is after, however, is not any kind of patient or any kind of subjectivity. His focus is on the poetic, or – more broadly – symbolic subject, to whom normal rules no longer apply and whose symptoms are their major blessings. Bloom makes it clear that “poetry, despite its publicists, is not a struggle against repression but is itself a kind of repression. Poems rise not so much in response to a present time [...], but in response to other poems”.¹⁴ The above claim, which smacks of ostentatious psychologism, might provoke a big no from Poststructuralist criticism. It is worth treating seriously, however; especially in the light of the observations of-

¹² Ibid., p. 12.

¹³ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

ferred by Lipszyc, who says that "Bloom postulates tropes and Freudian defence mechanisms as fully interchangeable".¹⁵ This offers several important implications for Bloom's theory, one of them being that rhetorical speech acts manifest as "unwitting will that defines who we really are".¹⁶

In his defence of subjectivity, Bloom takes a Freudian and not Cartesian stance against language in that he focuses on unconscious rhetorical defences. Bloom's poets, who create a delusion of self-reliance, are in fact desperately trying to shield their fragile egos against the influence of their own precursors. Bloom's poets, who are afflicted by the condition of belatedness, are trying to defend against it by repressing the time's "it was", whose other name is literary tradition. These poets repress "by forgetting something in order to present something else".¹⁷ Repression triggers the process of individuation, and determines the poet's condition of belatedness, which is filled with anxiety:

I find useful enough Paul Ricoeur's summary of primal repression, as meaning "that we are always in the mediate, in the already expressed, the already said," for this is the traumatic predicament that results in what I have termed "the anxiety of influence," the awareness that what might be called, analogically, the infantile needs of the beginning imagination had to be met by the primal fixation of a Scene of Instruction.¹⁸

Bloom's account of repression, and primal repression in particular, is directly related to the individuating trauma of poetic initiation into tradition, or the Scene of Instruction. The exhaustive accounts on the latter were provided by Lipszyc and Bielik-Robson, who focus on its philosophical and Kabbalistic implications.¹⁹ I would only like to follow one analogy that seems relevant for Bloom's account of memory.

The key analogy between Freud's primal scene and Bloom's primal scene of instruction is that both the psyche and the poet are exposed to an overwhelming external stimulus. The stimulus triggers defences that repress it to the unconscious. The precursor, however, is not repressed to the *superego*, or the sphere of unconscious cultural prohibitions, but to the *id*, namely the darkest sphere of human subjectivity. Bloom formulates this as follows: "Where my poetic father's *I* was, there *it* shall be", or even better "there my *I* is, closely mixed with *it*".²⁰ By transposing the famous Freudian formula "where *id* was, there *ego* shall be", Bloom takes an antithetical stance to undermine the rational foundations of therapy as recollection.

Bloom places tradition, or the time's "it was", in the *id*, which suggests that the precursor is not something that the poet merely avoids, but also secretly de-

¹⁵ A. Lipszyc, *Międzyludzkie. Koncepcja podmiotowości w pismach Harolda Blooma z nieustannym odniesieniem do podmiotoburstwa*, Kraków 2004, p. 108. Translation mine.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116. Translation mine.

¹⁷ H. Bloom, *Poetry and Repression...*, p. 240.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁹ See: A. Lipszyc, *op. cit.*, p. 91–100. A. Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie. Harold Bloom and Deconstruction*, Evanston, Ill. 2011, p. 291–319.

²⁰ H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edition, New York–Oxford 1997, p. 110.

sires. In doing so, Bloom attributes the death drive to the poet, which compels him to repeat the works of his precursors. The poet can only evade pure repetition by resorting to a number of rhetorical defence mechanisms that allow him to postpone his demise. Primal repression, which shields the poetic ego against the overwhelming and lethal stimulus of the past, triggers a neurotic *agon* in which the poet's ego is always intertwined with those of his precursors. The same *ego* is tempted to dissolve its own individuality in the mediate, in the already expressed, the already said", and yet it also strives to preserve itself by repeating the tradition on its own individual terms.

Defence Against Time

In "Wordsworth and the Scene of Instruction", Bloom also furnishes a comparison between the memory of psychoanalysis and that of strong poets, the latter being able to survive the annihilating experience of election-instruction. One such poet is Wordsworth:

The difference between Wordsworth and Freud is that while both greatly expanded the concept of memory, Wordsworth very nearly made it onto a Kabbalistic hypostasis, a new *sefirah* or magical attribute of Divine Influence, while Freud set it overtly in the context of anxiety, repression, and defense. I revert to my analogical and antithetical principle; a composite trope and a composite defense are different faces of the same ratios of revision. "Memory", for Wordsworth, is a composite trope, and so in Wordsworth what is called memory, or treated as memory, is also a composite defense, a defense against time, decay, the loss of divinatory power, and so finally a defense against death, whose other name is John Milton.²¹

Wordsworth's memory at work is best exemplified in his definition of Romantic poetry, in which he argues that lyrical creation is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity".²² The following definition of poetry serves as a basis for Wordsworth's myth of memory, which Bloom describes in detail and without irony in *The Visionary Company*. The above collection, which contains a number of strikingly non-revisionary interpretations from British Romantics, also focuses on recollection. Accordingly with Wordsworth's views, memory is described as a condition for human symbolic activity, as "the mother of poetry [...] because the poem's half of the act of creation cannot proceed without the catalyst of recollecting the poet's response to an earlier version of the outward presence of Nature".²³

The miracle of memory, as described by Bloom, bestows restorative powers upon the *ego*, and brings the gift of aesthetic contemplation that is necessary to establish a reciprocal relationship between man and nature. Immersed in contemplation, the ego no longer uses things, but begins to see them for what they are.²⁴ Thus, things start to speak to man, and nature transforms from It into You – from

²¹ H. Bloom, *Poetry and Repression...*, p. 53.

²² S.T. Coleridge, W. Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, New York–London 2005, p. 307.

²³ H. Bloom, *The Visionary Company. A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, Ithaca 1971, p. 173.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

the object of vision into a partner in a conversation – which brings a desired impulse of “powerful feelings”, or creative inspiration. In brief, the whole process can be reflected in the following schema: past emotion – recollected emotion – contemplation, or dialogue with nature – poetic creation. With recollection at work, the poet can put to use the external stimulus that comes from nature, listen into what nature whispers to man, and respond in the inspired language of poetry.

One may risk anachronism by saying that Wordsworth re-enchants Bloom's schema of influence: influence of the precursor – repression of the influence – attempt at repeating the precursor – creation using tricks that render literal repetition impossible. However, where Wordsworth postulates reciprocity between man and nature, no such reciprocity exists for Bloom, both between people (poets and their precursors) and man and nature (by depositing tradition in the id, Bloom in fact treats nature and the repressed poetry of the precursors as one). For Bloom, nature and tradition are the same de-individualising force that is very much akin to language as it is presented in by Poststructuralism.

However, Bloom also offers a revisionary reading of Wordsworth in which he argues that the restorative power of memory and a dialogue between man and nature are but a defence against the lethal influence of the past.²⁵ Accordingly, what Wordsworth as an emblematic Post-Enlightenment poet desires most is not so much to recollect the Divine Influence of nature, but to forget the human influence of other poets and his own condition of belatedness. This type of forgetting is never a fully successful one due to the paradoxical nature of the remedy that the poet tries to apply in his attempt to forget his precursors. This remedy for a deadening sense of belatedness is of course repression, which Bloom defines as follows: “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”.²⁶

Book of Oblivion

The above understanding of repression has two inspirations. One is obvious and its name is psychoanalysis. In *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud shares an observation on a peculiar state of mind that is very much akin to what he will later develop into the concept of the uncanny. This state of mind is astonishing in that “one knows and does not know a thing at the same time”, which Freud himself paradoxically defines as “the blindness of the seeing eye”.²⁷ In his account of repression and memory, Bloom also draws upon one of Kierkegaard's dandy-like pseudonyms with which he signs “Rotation of Crops”, an essay to be found in the first volume

²⁵ Cf. H. Bloom, *Wordsworth and the Scene of Instruction* [w:] H. Bloom, *Poetry and Repression...*, p. 52–82.

²⁶ H. Bloom, *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, Oxford–New York 1982, p. 226.

²⁷ J. Breuer, S. Freud, “*Studies on Hysteria*”. *Standard Edition. Vol. II*, transl. J. Strachey, London 1953, p. 117.

of *Either/Or*. In the text, a jaded hedonist develops an eccentric speculation on the art of enjoyment in which a major role is attributed to memory. His memory at work is formulated thus: “the more poetically one remembers, the more easily one forgets, for to remember poetically is actually only an expression of forgetting”.²⁸

Poetic remembering, which Kierkegaard relates to childhood, aims at eliminating anything that causes pain, but it can also be developed into the art of erasing memories at will:

[...] To forget is an art that must be practiced in advance. To be able to forget always depends upon how one remembers, but how one remembers depends upon how one experiences actuality. [...] (293) forgetfulness is not identical with the art of being able to forget. What little understanding people generally have of this art is readily seen, for they usually want to forget only the unpleasant, not the pleasant. This betrays a total one-sidedness. Indeed, forgetting is the right expression for the proper assimilation that reduces experience to a sounding board.²⁹

Kierkegaard’s aesthete gambles high, as the stake in his game is enjoyment that does not lead to boredom and, in effect, suicide. For him, the art of forgetting is necessary to create an active form of experience, one that no longer accommodates to sensations but reshapes them in order to turn the repetitive life of a sensualist into a parade of ever new impressions. This in turn brings diversion, which is necessary to save the *ego* against the lethal return of the same and re-enchanted life in the way poets do: “When we speak of writing something in the book of oblivion, we are indeed suggesting that it is forgotten and yet at the same time is preserved. The art of recollecting and forgetting will also prevent a person from foundering in any particular relationship in life – and assures him complete suspension.”³⁰

Purposeful forgetting, as postulated by one of Kierkegaard’s personas, is not about merely erasing something from memory. Rather, it aims at repressing certain memories from consciousness and being ready for their return, in an anxious defence against anything that transcends the self. By forgetting to remember and remembering to forget, the sensualist tries to evade shock as he shears off sensations that are too powerful to be experienced as pleasure. However, he may just as well discard/preserve anything that is agreeable but not in tune with his soul’s own music. In so doing, he reveals his true solipsistic colours, since he makes an attempt at what he calls total suspension, or taking complete control over his life. Through successful repression, the sensualist/solipsist elevates his existence as a work of art. At the same time, he also represses any novelty or the future, which grinds his existence to a terrible and timeless halt.

This is where Bloom departs from the precepts of crop rotation, as there is no such thing as successful repression, or in Bloom’s own idiom, “successful repression is a contradiction in terms”.³¹ Diverse as it is, purely aesthetic existence is devoid of conflict, which in turn is an inherent part of Bloom’s poetic subjectivity.

²⁸ S. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, transl. H.V. Hong, E.V. Hong, Princeton 1987, p. 293.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

³¹ H. Bloom, *Agon...*, p. 97.

Strong poets are similar to Kierkegaard's sensualist/solipsist in that they resort to the ruse of purposeful forgetting in order to hold sway over their past. These repressive tricks, to quote Freud, who turns out to be less paradoxical this time, consist in "simply turning something away, and keeping it at a distance from the conscious".³² The trouble is, however, that the stimuli they are trying to turn away are too powerful to be committed to the book of oblivion.

Unsuccessful repression sets in motion a relentless conflict that Freud discovered between the *ego* and the *id*. Bloom locates the same agonistic strife between the aspiring poet and tradition he has internalised. The conflict constitutes the very essence of Bloom's dynamic model of memory, in which the mind at work practices a paradoxical art of remembering to forget. Repression, which is always unsuccessful, breeds another repression, and requires constant struggle from those who repress, with no prospect of suspension or equanimity. Thus, Bloom turns out to be a faithful disciple of Freud's, who suggests that "the process of repression is not to be regarded as an event which takes place once, the results of which are permanent, as when some living thing has been killed and from that time onward is dead; repression demands a persistent expenditure of force".³³

Admittedly, a question arises as to why Bloom never lets his poets relax a little, and is keen to sustain repression by mounting another repression, and so on. It would certainly be wiser to recollect the trauma and articulate it. However, if Bloom is right in his claims that, in order to emerge, the poetic ego must necessarily be exposed to the influence of others, then repression turns out to be a necessary step in the poetic strife for individuation. Recollection can, of course, offer respite and recovery to Bloom's poets, but the recognition it offers is in fact quite depressing. The poet learns that he is not self-begotten and that there are other poets where should be his origin. Thus, he is not unique, and all that he has to say has already been expressed.

This bitter wisdom, which derives from the realisation that individual ailments are part and parcel of human condition, might work with "normal" people to restrain their megalomaniac tendencies. For the same reason, it fails to work with poets, who, against their better judgement, must learn to believe in their own uniqueness and join in an unequal strife against tradition. By confining the precursors to the *id*, Bloom also suggests that belated poets have to forego what they instinctually desire. For Bloom's poets, the Satanic mills of tradition and nature are one.

The above conclusion is perhaps best expressed by the Dutch psychoanalyst Jan Hendrik van der Berg, whom Bloom directly quotes in *Poetry and Repression*: "The theory of repression is... closely related to the thesis that there is sense in everything, which in turn implies that there is nothing new".³⁴ When referred to theory of poetry, this also suggests that by repressing his precursors, belated poets take a stand against the time's "it was". In the name of the particular, they join in a strife against tradition as the levelling and eternal return of the same.

³² S. Freud, 'Repression'. *The Freud Reader*, ed. by P. Gay, New York-London 1989, p. 569-570.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 572.

³⁴ H. Bloom, *Poetry and Repression...*, p. 63.

Repression, always unsuccessful as it is, is their anxious way of breaking free from tradition, which, quite surprisingly, takes on naturalistic properties. The ruse of purposeful forgetting is also their way of leaving the vicious circle of life and death. As they mount one repression upon the other, they set out on, what Bloom himself calls, a slanting or diagonal movement of interpretative creation.³⁵ This in turn as an ever open interplay between the past and the future, the old and the new, the others and the self, tradition and its misreadings.³⁶

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³⁵ See: Bloom’s essay on “The Sublime Crossing and the Death of Love”. H. Bloom, *Agon...*, p. 224–245.

³⁶ This article is a modified version of a text published originally in Polish: B. Sowiński, *Poeta pamięta? Harold Bloom o pamięci i zapominaniu*, “*Źródła Humanistyki Europejskiej*” 2016, vol. 7, p. 193–207.