

The Anxiety of Influence outlines a complex, arcane, and highly controversial theory of poetry. Harold Bloom's work is an implicit response to several aspects of mid twentieth-century literary and cultural criticism in the Anglo-American tradition: 1) the techniques and aesthetics of source study, 2) the analytical techniques of the New Criticism, 3) the imperatives of post-structuralism and particularly deconstruction, and 4) late 1960s / early 1970s feminism.¹

I read *The Anxiety of Influence* as a work that creates its arguments against the above four traditions. Bloom argues throughout his book that his theory has nothing to do with the techniques and aesthetics of source study; Bloom asserts that

[s]ource study is wholly irrelevant here; we are dealing with not primal words, but antithetical meanings, and an ephebe's [poetic latecomer who must struggle against predecessors] best misinterpretations may well be of poems he has never read (Bloom 70).

Bloom implicitly distances himself from New Criticism by suggesting that “[l]et us give up the failed enterprise of seeking to ‘understand’ any single poem as an entity in itself” (Bloom 43). Bloom's dismissal of post-structuralism and deconstruction is implicit in the following sentiment: “I am made aware of the mind's effort to overcome...the anti-humanistic plain dreariness of all those developments in European criticism that have yet to demonstrate that they can aid in reading any one poem by any poet whatsoever” (Bloom 12-13). I cannot objectively document my claim that *The Anxiety of Influence* is an indirect response to late 60s / early 70s feminism; Bloom might well have written his book had late 60s / early 70s feminism not happened. But currents of defensive explorations of masculinity on many levels in *The Anxiety of Influence* run all the stronger against the backdrop of the power of feminist discourses that were forceful, focused, and quite audible in major universities at the time of the composition of Bloom's book.

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).