



Bloom, Post-Structuralism(s), and Music Theory

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ABSTRACT: A number of music scholars have adapted the work of literary theorist Harold Bloom for their own use. This article examines Bloom's relation to post-structuralist critical theory in general, and then considers how music-theoretical adaptation may slant that relation. It concludes by asserting that music scholarship tends to emphasize the more traditional aspects of Bloom's work. This, in turn, may allow music theorists to believe we are engaging the challenges of recent critical theory, when in fact we are reinforcing mainstream music-theoretical ideologies.

[0] Introduction

[0.1] In recent years, a number of articles in the music-theoretical and musicological literature have taken the work of literary theorist Harold Bloom as part of their point of departure.⁽¹⁾ (Three examples are [Straus 1990](#), [Korsyn 1991](#), and [Yudkin 1992](#).) These, along with a vitriolic review by Richard Taruskin (1993) of Joseph Straus' *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (1990), have foregrounded Bloom's theories as a potential source of work in music scholarship. The adoption of Bloom by music theorists and musicologists concerns not only these particular publications, but also some fundamental issues facing us as music theorists.

[0.2] One aspect of music theory in North America that separates it from most other fields of the humanities is its relative failure to engage post-structuralist critical theories.⁽²⁾ Post-structuralist practices nevertheless do form a substantial part of the scholarship in most other humanities disciplines (even if they efface the notions of "humanities" and "discipline"). By remaining relatively isolated from such a vast and influential group of practices, music theory continues to run the risk of increasing its isolation. That isolation may not bother many music theorists; indeed, it may serve to reinforce desired ideological beliefs, concerning for example, the special status of music as an art. ([Norris 1989](#) traces an interesting philosophical history of this idea, 31–34.) But it may also limit not only points of contact with scholars in other fields, but also opportunities for us to face important challenges that post- structuralism(s) may hold for our premises and methodologies. (I say this with some discomfort that I may be hypostatizing the extremely diverse post-structuralisms into a problematic singular.)

[0.3] In some respects, then, the interest in Bloom could be seen as salutary for our field, offering challenges we too often avoid. Therefore, it is vital that we take stock of Bloom's theories and the use that has been, and that could be, made of them in our field. Although Korsyn's work would provide in some ways an equally useful occasion for this, Straus' book has

captured more attention, in part because of its having won an award from the Society for Music Theory, and in part because of the particularly harsh rebuke it received from Taruskin. Taruskin accuses Straus of misunderstanding (not to be confused with misreading) Bloom and misapplying the latter's ideas. Although one may flinch at the tone of Taruskin's review, his criticisms of miscomprehension are, in my view, correct on many counts, albeit incomplete and profoundly shaped by Taruskin's own ideological goals. Also, it is difficult to sanction Taruskin's insinuations of disingenuousness. But this is not a principal concern, here; misunderstandings of Straus' variety, after all, are easily enough corrected. Further, with the introduction of professional training in critical theory to music-theory curricula, mistakes of Straus' variety could become more scarce.

[0.4] A more central issue for most of us would be: why choose Bloom in the first place? Why has Bloom come to penetrate what otherwise seems to be a nearly impermeable barrier music theory has erected against "recent" critical theory? (I put "recent" in quotations because, after all, post- structuralist work dates back some twenty-five years.) And what could Straus' encounter with Bloom teach us about music theory and critical theory generally? A partial answer to this may lie in the work of Bloom himself, who has always held an ambiguous relation to other literary theorists.

[0.5] Bloom is certainly a post-structuralist, if by post-structuralist one means simply that his publications (at least on the "anxiety of influence" and related topics) post-date the heyday of structuralism: *The Anxiety of Influence* was first published in 1973. His work, though, bears a problematic relationship to many post-structuralist practices (as diverse as the latter are). In some respects, Bloom's work complements and even overlaps the work of other literary theorists since the 1970's; in other respects, though, his theories of influence trace a reaction (increasingly explicit, over the years) *against* what, for better or worse, has come to be regarded as the 'mainstream' of post- structuralism. Bloom himself recognizes this dual situation of his work when he observes ironically that "my own views are regarded as traditionalist by Deconstructors, and as deconstructive by traditionalists . . ." (Bloom 1982b, 39). We will observe later what happens to these opposing aspects of Bloom's work in music-theoretical adaptation; before we do that, thought, it will be useful briefly to articulate Bloom's dual relationship with post-structuralism(s) generally.

[1] Bloom the Progressive, Bloom the Regressive

[1.1] Bloom intersects with other post- structuralist thinkers by foregrounding revisionism and rhetoric. Like many of his literary-theoretical contemporaries (de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Geoffrey Hartman among them), Bloom takes a great deal from Nietzsche, including a radically skeptical view of truth and language and a (largely concomitant) focus on revisionism.⁽³⁾ This aspect of Bloom's work is central to the famous notion of "misreading" as a constructive artistic force. While the "misreading" of the poet is certainly a central aspect of his thought, the necessary "misreading" of the *critic*, by Bloom's account, is equally central, and provides a link to much other post- structuralist work. Two of his formulations of this will suffice: "This influence-relation governs reading just as it governs writing, and reading is therefore a miswriting just as writing is misreading" (Bloom 1975a, 3). Or, more elaborately, "Reading . . . is very nearly impossible, for every reader's relation to every poem is governed by a figuration of belatedness" (Bloom 1975a, 69). The critic replicates and magnifies the poet's misreading; this, in turn, suggests an indeterminacy of meaning that others of a more 'centrally' post-structuralist bent, like De Man 1983 and De Bolla 1988, find attractive in Bloom's thought.

[1.2] Another important intersection between Bloom and other post-structuralist theorists is his concern with rhetoric and figuration (in principle, inseparable from the emphasis on revisionism). (De Bolla 1988 focuses principally on these aspects of Bloom.) Not only the revisionary ratios, but the entire structure of Bloom's intertextuality depends on the notion of the poems as positioned rhetorically toward their predecessors. By stressing the necessity to read poems as tropes on other poems, Bloom effectively counters traditional notions such as the organic coherence of texts, creating another overlap with some of his contemporaries. In general, by centering tropes and rhetoric, Bloom indicates a focus not altogether discontinuous from those of, for instance, de Man, Derrida, Hartman, and so on. Indeed, de Man's famous review (1983) of *The Anxiety of Influence*, while severely reproaching Bloom on some counts, attempts to rehabilitate that book by singling out its focus on rhetoric (not surprisingly, recommending a shift to the linguistic realm). [1.3] Despite the overlaps just discussed, some aspects of Bloom's principal theoretical work remain radically apart from many post- structuralist practices. In many respects, Bloom's work restores a rather traditional notion of the subject, and several related concepts, "spirituality", "meaning", and "originality": in de Bolla's words, Bloom promotes a certain "nostalgia for the subject" (1988, 77). In *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom states this bluntly:

[1.4] “(A) return to Vico and Emerson should demonstrate that *belatedness* or the fear of time’s revenges is the true dungeon for the imagination, rather than the prison-house of language as posited by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and their heirs [which, for Bloom, means primarily “deconstructionists”] . . . (R)hetoric and psychology are a virtual identity.” (Bloom 1975a, 68–69; emphasis Bloom’s)

[1.5] By positing this subjectivity, Bloom lays the ground for “originality” (for example in Bloom 1982a, 82). “Originality” here retains the positive evaluation it has in common parlance, closely related to the equally evaluative Bloomian terms, “strong” and “weak” poets. Similarly, Bloom fears that, with the subject being effaced by language in post-structuralism, “Criticism is in danger . . . of being excessively despiritualized by the followers of the school of Deconstruction” (Bloom 1975a, 79). Thus, Bloom’s protection of traditional subjectivity against a (largely fictional) “school of Deconstruction” is not merely an attempt at psychological foundationalism: it is also a means of protecting traditional literary-discursive values such as “originality” and “spirituality.” Not surprisingly, Bloom’s championing of the subject as constituted anterior to (if not outside of) language was one of the principal points of contention with de Man (and to a lesser extent, Derrida) over the years. (De Bolla 1988 summarizes these contentions, especially 61–81.)

[1.6] Bloom battled “deconstructionists” not only on originality and the subject, but also on the status of meaning: “. . . I favor a kind of interpretation that seeks to restore and redress meaning, rather than primarily to deconstruct meaning” (Bloom 1975a, 175). (Ultimately, this point is inseparable from Bloom’s championing of the subject.) Bloom’s re-grounding of meaning is complex, drawing on the Kabbalistic concept of “a Primal Instruction preceding all traces of speech . . . Kabbalah stops the movement of Derrida’s ‘trace,’ since it has a *point* of the primordial, where presence and absence co-exist by continuous interplay” (Bloom 1975b, 52–3; emphasis Bloom’s). Particularly notable here is that the Primal Instruction *precedes* speech: visible here are the linkages among Kabbalah, pre-linguistic subjectivity, and a stable site of meaning. The Kabbalah’s nexus function may explain why Bloom repeatedly cited it, not Freud, as an ultimate source for his work.

[1.7] In an equally significant sense, Bloom restores a rather traditional concept of meaning simply by positing the poem as site of the poet’s psychological strife. Despite Bloom’s insistence that the poem itself, and not the poet, is the location of struggle, the psychological state of the poet—his (not her, for Bloom!) “interiority,” to quote Foucault 1979—remains very much in the foreground. This, in turn, re-centers the author as source of meaning, establishing an interpretive stance typical of not even structuralism or New Criticism, but rather of nineteenth-century literary criticism. In this way, Bloom again sets himself apart from most post-structuralist practices, which tend to focus on language rather than the author as the site of meaning (however indeterminate and infinite “language” and “meaning” may be).⁽⁴⁾

[1.8] In later work, such as Bloom 1982b, Bloom calls upon nationalist notions such as the “American Sublime” to ground interpretation and limit meaning, even going so far as to ridicule the idea of approaching American poetry with “Gallic Post-Structuralism” (30). Other, more notoriously conservative aspects of Bloom’s writing—his stubborn reinforcement of the traditional poetic canon, his acerbic dismissals of feminism—are far from surprising, given his stances on the more abstract, but still (let’s not forget) highly political issues just discussed. None of this is to belittle Bloom’s contributions to the field of literary theory and criticism; it is rather to highlight aspects of his work that set it apart from the work of many of his contemporaries.

[2] Lessons We Can Learn

[2.1] The foregoing greatly simplifies Bloom’s relations to post-structuralist work; for example, his relationship with so-called “deconstructionist” literary theorists is also a productive one. (*A Map of Misreading* is dedicated to Paul de Man.) The books already cited provide a good deal more background. What has been said, though, already indicates that to adopt Bloom’s work (to whatever extent, in whatever form) is already to skew oneself in relation to the bulk of post-structuralist theories. (Young 1981 provides a good introduction to a variety of post-structuralist work.) In particular, Bloom’s resurrection of the subject, and of values such as originality and meaning, presents a ready-made opportunity to reinforce mainstream aesthetic ideologies. On the other hand, the more novel aspects of Bloom’s work also offer opportunities for music theorists to confront true methodological and ideological challenges. The question is: what happens, and what can happen, when Bloom is co-opted for music-theoretical work?

[2.2] In this sense, Straus is a signal lesson, and perhaps a warning. What Straus retains of Bloom, and what he leaves out, may themselves be symptomatic of possible encounters between music theory and this particular literary theory. *Remaking the Past* is explicitly a book of music history, examining aspects of musical “modernism”; the historical assertions are, in turn, supported by extended musical analyses. A remarkable aspect of the latter is their close resemblance to traditional analyses. In the first chapter, Straus announces Bloom’s theory as a remedy for “what has become a virtual dogma in music theory: organic coherence”(16); and yet, Straus’ own musical analyses reflect this “virtual dogma” through and through. He consistently discusses and analyzes pieces according to principles of their internal structural coherence; the Bloomian aspect, to the extent there is one, lies in the commentary that Straus then adds to the essentially structuralist analyses.

[2.3] Chapter 4 (“Triads”) provides as good an example as any. There, Straus shows how superficially triadic sonorities in some post-tonal music may be interpreted as arising from non-triadic post-tonal processes. (Straus’ own claims are more essentialist than my wording “may be interpreted” indicates, but let us leave that issue aside, at least for the moment.) In doing so, he employs analytic methods steeped in the same tradition of “organic coherence” for which he, in the first chapter, had cited Bloom as a potential remedy: pitch-class-set analysis, a method designed to maximize the coherence of an interpretation; and inversional symmetry, an analytical premise that creates a coherence of pitch-class (or, sometimes, pitch) space. If the pieces he discusses are relational structures (as he argues in the first chapter), then they are relational structures only by being self-contained structures in the first place—the reverse of Bloom’s view.

[2.4] This is not to say that Straus’ analytical methods are “bad” or “naive” in some sense (whatever those words could mean in this context). Rather, it is to point out that the Bloomian anti-organicism does not penetrate very deeply, here. The Bloomian aspect of this chapter is left implicit: the composers discussed must misread tonal sonorities in order to become “strong” composers. Fair enough. But it is only the extremely traditional—in other words, highly structuralist and organicist—analytic work of the chapter that supports that thesis. (Compare this to Bloom’s discussions of poems, discussions which, for all their frequent vagueness and hyperbole, never, to my knowledge, resort to organicist, structuralist methods.)

[2.5] We should add that this ideological tension could hardly be laid at the feet of Straus. Here is where Straus’ encounter with literary theory may reflect on all of us as music theorists: to a great degree, the problems of *Remaking the Past* are the problems that all of us may experience when we try to integrate any post-structuralist theory to our work. The very premises of our field—inventing models of musical structure and analyzing pieces as exemplars of structure—dissonate with that which recent critical theory has to teach us. (Tomlinson 1993 and Kramer 1993 rehearse this conflict instructively.) Creating, then, a work (a book, an article, a course) of music theory that draws on post-structuralist theory always creates a conflict of which that work will be a trace. In the case of Straus, organicist premises must return in order for music-theoretical discourse to take place. This is not Straus’ fault, if one wants to consider it a fault at all: it is an uneasy confrontation between ideological systems that offer their own resistances to each other.

[2.6] Equally instructive for music theorists are the elements of Bloom’s work that simply do not appear in the book. We saw earlier that Bloom regarded misreading as an activity not only of poets (in Straus: composers) but also of critics (in Straus: music theorists and/or historians). In fact, critics, for Bloom, are even more subject to misreading, since their predecessors include both poets and other critics. As mentioned before, the critic’s misreading creates the gap between reader and text that makes reading “very nearly impossible.” And yet, this gap, so characteristic of post-structuralist views of reading, does not exist in Straus’ version of Bloom. The analyses are glimpsed and discussed as if in ‘full view’; the analytic statements that are made are not presented as problematic—Straus is not a misreader of the pieces he discusses. Again, the ideological grounds of music theory and critical theory are in conflict. As music theorists, we are still accustomed to attributing a certain ontological status to our analyses and theories—this IS the structure of atonal music, this IS a five-piece, and so on. This status is incompatible with the critic as misreader—we must, as music theorists, be capable of divining the essences of music in a more traditional subject/object relationship. Bloom’s stance, though, despite the many traditional aspects of his work, comes more by way of Nietzsche, positing the reader as a revisionist fully as much as the composer. This more typically post-structuralist aspect of Bloom disappears, almost by necessity, in its confrontation with music theoretical work.

[2.7] We have seen, so far, two of Bloom’s more post-structuralist stances—the figurative intertextuality and the critic as misreader—either compromised or eliminated in Straus’ reading. In that sense, the more traditional methodologies of music theory win out. But what about the more conservative, traditional aspects of Bloom’s work? Specifically, what about the restoration of the subject, originality, and the composer as the site of meaning? Perhaps not surprisingly, these survive very

well not only in Straus' work, but more generally in the work of other music scholars who, in one way or another, have adapted Bloom for their own purposes, such as [Korsyn 1991](#) and [Yudkin 1992](#). In each of these, a canonically 'great' composer's struggle against the past becomes the site of meaning for the piece(s) in question; the originality (and, similarly, the 'strength') of the composer(s) is commended because of his successfully negotiating the various (and varying) revisionary ratios; and documents from the composer's life are marshalled to back up the claims and concretize the posited subjectivity. In other words, values from traditional music theory and musicology are reinforced by the versions of Bloom being used here, not challenged. In this sense, Taruskin's polemics get out of hand when he claims that "Bloom is simply irrelevant to Straus' methods and purposes" (126); Straus' version of Bloom, although certainly a selective one (as he himself seems to acknowledge in), is by no means entirely removed from the ideological strains of the original theory. (What stock one should put in the value of "fidelity to the original theory" is itself another, and much bigger, question.)

[3] What We Can Do

[3.0] A lesson we can take from Straus, then, is the surprisingly high degree to which Bloom may be fitted to mainstream music-theoretical ideology. This in itself may also account for the proliferation of scholarship based on his work: certain aspects of his influence theory can be embraced wholeheartedly, without a great deal of discomfort, while others (the more characteristically post-structuralist) can be effectively side-lined. Otherwise put, Bloom allows us mainly to continue what we are doing, changing the slant of our discussion a bit, but not questioning (or transforming) the very premises of our activity. This is not to impugn the motives of those who use Bloom's theories. Straus, for example, has never claimed that his work is post-structuralist; so the basic conservatism of *his* Harold Bloom is not necessarily a reproach to him.

[3.1] At the same time, critical theories, especially the post-structuralist ones, have often carried with them a aura of prestige (or vogue). Bloom is in the field of literature—which we all know to have provided much impetus for critical theory. And his influence theory, invoking Nietzsche and Freud and being published post-1970 (by a Yale professor, no less), may carry with it the implication of more 'progressive' work.

[3.2] Because of this, it is possible for us to convince ourselves that by adopting his ideas, we are coming to terms with post-structuralist literary theory generally. This would be a mistake, and a potentially costly one. The more semiotic-informed post-structuralist work (including but not limited to the various "deconstructions") may provide some of the greatest challenges to us as music theorists, as unsettling as those challenges may often be.

[3.3] This is not to say we have an innate obligation, as music theorists, to adopt uncritically some of the central tenets of post- structuralism(s). We may, if we wish, choose to prefer the more comfortable and traditional stances of Bloom; or we may choose to ignore critical theories altogether, in the belief that we are embarked on a project (or projects) to which they bear no relevance. We should simply be careful *not* to believe that by adopting (and adapting) Bloom's influence theory we are necessarily coming to terms with the bulk of the challenges that post-structuralist theories hold for us. We may, instead, be producing work-as- usual, with the belief that we are doing otherwise.

[3.4] On the other hand, as long as we are aware of what we are doing—as long as we do not convince ourselves that using Bloom will bring us face to face with the vast bodies of post- structuralism—then why not incorporate his work? Certainly, if we are to talk about influence, notions of rhetorical evasion and misreading will be invaluable to our work. And, indeed, if we wish to rest securely with mainstream music-theoretical ideologies, Bloom can easily be adopted to our use. There is room for applying Bloom's ideas, so long as we do not allow ourselves to believe that thereby we have grappled with most of the critiques that recent critical theory holds for us. To begin the latter, more daunting project, we will have to consider not only Bloom, but also those whose names may far more disquiet us.

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Footnotes

1. I am grateful to David Gramit, Henry Klumpenhouwer, and Richard Littlefield for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

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2. There are some exceptions, among them [Kramer 1984](#) and [Kramer 1990](#), [Krimms 1994](#), [Littlefield and Neumeier 1992](#), [Littlefield \(1994\)](#), [Street \(1989\)](#) and numerous projects borrowing from feminist theory.

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3. [O'Hara 1983](#) relates Bloom to a Nietzschean tradition.

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4. [Barthes 1977](#) and [Foucault 1979](#) provide classic formulations of early post-structuralist rejection of the “author function.”

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