Revision of Syros paper.

The choice to break with a tradition should never be taken lightly. So what factors would need to be taken into account before making such a major decision? This paper explores this question by utilizing two examples, first a case where a break can be shown to be fully justified, then a case where, despite very compelling indications to the contrary, a tradition turns out to have more staying power than initially seems possible.

As the actor who shows the need to break with a tradition (and indeed to adopt another one), the deconstructionist Richard Klein will be discussed. My interest is in how Klein justifies abandoning mainstream American ego psychology in favour of what he broadly lumps together as French Critical Theory. While I have no direct autobiographical evidence of how or why he made this choice, my argument will be that his highly critical, indeed even mocking, account of the tribulations encountered by another devotee of ego psychology, Harold Bloom, as he seeks to apply it to his theory of influence, serves to explain Klein’s break with a tradition.

As Klein points out in his review of Bloom’s book, *The Anxiety of Influence*, according to Bloom, the later figure always suffers in comparison with the earlier one just because he or she cannot avoid supposedly having been influenced by the one who came before. As a particularly nefarious example of how it works, Klein cites the way ‘at a single stroke, and without the hint of an argument, he (Bloom) can dismiss the literary pretensions of, say, Norman Mailer...’ (15)

The dismissal in question is:

Any reader of *Advertisements for Myself* may enjoy the frantic dances of Norman Mailer as he strives to evade his own anxiety that it is, after all, Hemingway all the way. (15, quoting Bloom 28)

Klein remarks that ‘any reader means, namely, Bloom’. (16) Oriented by Bloom and opening *Advertisements for Myself*, one expects to find Norman Mailer desperately
trying but, alas, clearly failing to prove that he is no mere pale copy of Ernest Hemingway. Or, as Klein puts what Bloom leads us to expect, it will be that ‘he can only fatally repeat with diminished energy’. (16) But it is worth examining Mailer’s own words in *Advertisements for Myself*:

Every American writer who takes himself to be both major and macho must sooner or later give a faena which borrows from the self-love of a Hemingway style. (19)

Since Mailer does think of himself as both major and macho, there is no way he is going to be oblivious to Hemingway, simply because the latter was both major and macho and already was writing and well known when Mailer began. However, as both the reference to the self-love so evident in his precursor’s style and the ironic depiction of the kind of ‘dance’ Hemingway induced in him, namely as a ‘faena’, that word being Spanish for how matadors approach their bulls, we already suspect that Mailer is not quite so taken with Hemingway as Bloom (and his theory of influence) would want us to believe. Thus, Mailer’s more definitive assessment of his predecessor surely confirms that Mailer is too aware of Hemingway’s limitations to be no more than a pale copy:

For all his size, and all we’ve learned from him about the real importance of physical courage, he has still pretended to be ignorant of the notion that it is not enough to feel like a man, one must try to think like a man as well. Hemingway has always been afraid to think…and his words excite no thought in the best of my rebel generation. He’s no longer any help to us... (20-21)

It is surely right that Mailer, notwithstanding his excesses, managed to become more of a thinker than Hemingway ever was. Indeed, there is no reason not to accept his own statement that it was back when he was an undergraduate that Hemingway’s sway over him was most pronounced:
In my sophomore year I wrote a great many stories which were influenced by Hemingway. Although I was more excited by Dos Passos and Farrell, it was Hemingway I imitated—probably because he seemed easier. (27)

What is preventing Bloom from a fair-minded assessment of Mailer’s attitude to Hemingway? I suggest we need to look at the core assumption of Bloom’s entire raison d’etre as a critic. Bloom asks, as a strictly rhetorical question: ‘What strong maker desires the realization that he has failed to create himself?’ (5) Mailer, then, simply must be in denial about the extent to which Hemingway has influenced him because he cannot possibly be at all influenced by or perhaps even aware of Hemingway and yet be strong.

Klein would not be surprised that Bloom does not even see his association of being strong with being able to make things without any predecessors as a view that could conceivably be in doubt. Klein connects Bloom’s narrow understanding of what a strong maker could be to something else that was equally unquestionable, a particular tradition in American psychology. He notes:

The impasse of a certain, consecrated form of American ego psychology whose hegemony we hardly know how to begin to question. (18)

Clearly, ego psychology would fit with Bloom’s assumption that those who would be strong must make themselves. For example, in Erik Erikson’s version, even by the second stage of infancy, what is said to need to be developing is ‘autonomy’ and by adolescence one is expected to have an ‘individual identity.’ (Erikson, 1950)

But then, as a challenge to ego psychology, there was a new development, a change, at least for those, such as Klein but not Bloom, who became aware of it. A view arrived that offered an antidote to ‘the provincialism and isolation of American academic thought.’ (18) This view undoubtedly
required a break with the tradition in American psychology. It took the form, in Klein’s words, of an ‘early attempt to translate French theory into America.’ (18) Some Americans, not least Klein himself, for the first time had ‘access to a whole line of phenomenological speculation that, since Husserl, had been engaged in radically problematizing the notion of the self.’ (18) In addition they were introduced to ‘Lacan’s rereading of Freud and the directions he opens into other texts, like Heidegger and Saussure.’ (18) Finally, though Klein does not mention him here, there was of course, Jacques Derrida, the figure whose intellectual input was so important that it lead to the founding of the journal, *Diacritics*, to which Klein’s critique of Bloom was submitted.¹

Certainly whatever else this new, to America, tradition was doing, it offered a way of radically questioning ego psychology’s image of a person. A person need no longer be assumed to be, as Heidegger puts it in his objection to the dualism that he sees in Descartes, an ego set against the world. Instead, as ‘Dasein’ I’s are always already in the world. And, as Daseins, at least in the French version of Heidegger, they are also always already Mitseins. i. e. in being with others. (See Nancy, 1993, 67) Instead of being defined by autonomy, for the French, the very possibility of being an I depends on the possibility of other I’s being there as well. Indeed so stark is the difference between an ego psychology view of persons and this one that it has come full circle. Whereas, as we saw, it was once the case that ego psychology was not even subject to question, now at least one representative of the French school, Jean-Luc Nancy, has this to say about ego psychology’s core idea that persons are individuals:

> Is it really necessary to say something about the individual here? Some see in its invention and in the culture, if not in the cult built around the individual,

¹ Submitted but not published for forty years. In its early days, *Diacritics* relied on Bloom for advice and he vetoed publication of this article. It was eventually published as an ‘indulgence’ to Klein upon his retirement. (See the explanation in Klein, 7.)
Europe’s incontrovertible merit of having shown the world the sole path to emancipation from tyranny, and the norm by which to measure all our collective or communitarian undertakings. But the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community. By its nature—as its name indicates, it is the atom, the indivisible—the individual reveals that it is the abstract result of a decomposition. It is another, and symmetrical, figure of immanence, the absolutely detached for it-self, taken as origin and as certainty. (Nancy, 1991, 3)

He means that, as we are all formed in community with others, we are better seen as parts, and so certainly not as having an undivided existence. And while this is not to say that I’s don’t exist, in Nancy’s terms they exist as ‘singulars’ (1991, 32) among the plural, this form of partially separate existence is quite different from being absolutely detached from or even independent of others.

So what we can lump together as French Cultural Theory does represent a major break in how the person can be conceptualized. But how would it help resolve the problem of not being there first? According to Bloom’s conception of the anxiety of influence, Norman Mailer and other makers who must admit that there were others in some way like them there before, are blocked from entering or at least entering comfortably in time. It is as if the sheer fact of when they are born means there is no longer room for them. Just because they have not got there first, there does not seem to be a sufficient place for them.

This overriding and excessive concern with priority does seem to be rooted in the precepts of ego psychology. If one imagines persons as self-contained, atomistic individuals, it would appear that the one who comes after cannot easily fit in. It is true at least of atoms that two of them cannot occupy the same space at the same time.

All differences between Husserl, Heidegger, Lacan and Derrida aside, the input of French Cultural theory would seem to be able to resolve at least this problem. Clearly, if
no one can actually be oneself without there also being others there, then while this is not to deny that someone can still arrive before others, that would not mean that their space is fully occupied. There would always be room for more. The implication is that, for those concerned, at least as Bloom formulates the problem, with the anxiety of influence, the arrival of French Cultural Theory in America really provides an incentive to break with a previous tradition. It allows latecomers such as Mailer or really everyone since, after all, everyone comes after someone, to not be excessively concerned with priority, or in Mailer’s case not to virtually be accused of plagiarism, just because Hemingway was macho and so was he.²

This Klein example is relevant to our topic in at least two ways. First, it suggests when a break is necessary, namely when one can experience how problematic a consequence of the existing tradition is, problematic, I might add in a way that is much more extreme than the ‘anomalous’ outcomes that Thomas Kuhn has famously identified as necessitating scientific revolutions. The way ego psychology forces Bloom to criticize Mailer is not just anomalous, it is downright absurd.

Second, this specific break frees us to be less anxious, more relaxed about the whole realm of influence since without the narrow view imposed by the ego psychology tradition, just the fact of being influenced, even being much more obviously and thoroughly influenced than is Mailer by Hemingway is no sign of weakness. In short, this particular break with a tradition can make breaks with tradition as a whole less necessary. We move now to our second example, and this is a case where there is no question that the later author has indeed been influenced by a predecessor.

² I owe this particular formulation of the consequence of Bloom’s way of thinking to Alan Blum.
In the novel *Eligible* by Curtis Sittenfeld, set in present day Cincinnati, Ohio, it would be an understatement to say that the tall, dark, and handsome man and the woman who at the climax of the novel finally are firmly in love get off on the wrong foot. Their ‘introduction’ consists of her overhearing him disparage her looks and her then making a point of going up to him and telling him, in no uncertain terms, what she thinks of him.

Then, when after various mishaps and misunderstandings, he realizes that he loves her, the way he expresses it is so gauche as to lead only to a series of further setbacks. He does begin with ‘I’m in love with you’ but then proceeds to completely spoil it by adding ‘It’s probably an illusion caused by the release of oxytocin during sex’. (283)

After many more ups and downs and misunderstandings, and especially both of them coming to see that their respective personality flaws have lead to a wrong headed, and really the opposite of the truth first impression, she gives him to understand that he can speak freely. This time he rises to the challenge, explaining his previous gaucheness as due to the fact that he:

> Thought I needed to be rude to overcompensate for being in love with you. I was afraid I was chasing you like a schoolboy and you’d find me corny. But I went much too far in the other direction. (469)

And then adding:

> And all the mushy things I was too cowardly to say before, they’re just as true now. You’re different from any woman I’ve ever met. Even when you’re arguing with me, you’re easy to be around. And those times you came over to my apartment-those were the most fun I’ve ever had. (469)

Fans of Jane Austen will probably not need to be told that the tall, dark, and handsome man we have been observing is called Fitzwilliam Darcy to realize that Curtis Sittenfeld would be unlikely to agree with Harold Bloom’s idea that
to be a strong maker she would need to create herself. Any reader of *Pride and Prejudice* must see that it is Sittenfeld’s purpose to provide, not something totally or even particularly original but what can only be called another and a totally respectful version of what Jane Austen has already made.

Sittenfeld’s first scene reprises what Elizabeth Bennett overhears when his friend first points her out to Darcy. He ‘coldly said, she is tolerable but not handsome enough to tempt me.’ (12) While there is the difference that, in the Austen case, she does not exactly confront him with what she just heard, she does do what amounts to the next best thing. ‘She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous.’ (12)

Turning to the botched declaration of love, the Austen version is:

> In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how much I admire and love you. (219)

In both cases, the Darcy figures manage to make it sound like they wish it was not happening, the only difference being that the feelings that Sittenfeld’s Darcy says he can’t repress are overtly sexual ones.

Turning to the scene when all is finally resolved, in Austen’s version:

> Darcy expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do. (417)

The only difference is that, unlike Sittenfeld, Austen must feel that, just at this point, it is more proper to leave what Darcy actually would say to the reader’s imagination.

Indeed, that her Darcy and Elizabeth are just that little bit more proper than Sittenfeld’s imaginings of who seem
basically the same sort of people can stand as a fair
description of the only significant difference that we are
seeing between the two books. I suggest what Sittenfeld is
trying to do and indeed has done is to demonstrate-show
us-how little she needs to break with to make Austen
relevant still.

More minor aspects of the plot also fit into this pattern. For
example, it does at first seem impossible that Sittenfeld
could keep intact in an contemporary setting the character
of Elizabeth’s and her four also currently single sisters’
mother. She is described by Austen as ‘devoting the
business of her life...to get her daughters married’. (4)
Sittenfeld solves the problem, first by making her Mrs.
Bennett as comically hyper-conventional as Austen made
hers but also by adjusting the ages of the girls so in Eligible
the two oldest girls are pushing 40 and finally by finding a
plausible modern alternative to the additional
circumstance that is driving the Austen character. It is true
that there is no way the modern Mrs. Bennett could share
the original’s worry that she will be evicted from the family
home unless at least one of her daughters cannot just
marry but also manage to produce a son. Still it is very
plausible that her modern equivalent will be driven by
financial concerns since her husband, who has recently
spent months in hospital being treated for a serious illness,
unfortunately never took out medical insurance.

But no matter how conventional she is, it is unlikely that
the Sittenfeld character could approach the level of
consternation that Austen’s Mrs. Bennett achieves when
her youngest daughter, without being married, runs off
with a soldier. But this is not to reckon with what her
namesake in the later book does. She shacks up with a
weightlifter who, as Mrs. Bennett discovers one day to her
horror, turns out to be a transgender person who has only
recently become male.

Finally there is the dilemma posed by the huge change in
sexual mores since Georgian times. On the one hand, given
that Austen makes the chemistry between them apparent
from the beginning and ever more obvious as the book
goes on, could a modern Darcy and Elizabeth really go through a whole book without having sex? On the other hand, how can they given that their affection for one another does not get to receive full expression until the novel’s ending. Sittenfeld’s Elizabeth solves this problem around half way through the book in a way that is so modern that even the Darcy character in the book does not know it existed. This scene is worth quoting in full:

At last-surely thinking he was thinking something similar and she was simply the one giving voice to the sentiment-she said, “Want to go to your place and have hate sex?” Darcy squinted. “Is that a thing? The bravado filling Liz—it wasn’t infinite, it could dissipate quickly. But while it existed, she said grandly, “Of course it’s a thing. “Is it like fuck buddies?” “This isn’t a sociology class. A simple yes or no will do.” She added, “It’s similar, but without the buddy part. “I take it you mean right now” He didn’t seem flustered or even all that surprised “Yes” Liz said “I mean now” this was his last chance to accept the offer, though she didn’t plan to tell him so. But perhaps he sensed the door closing, because he said, “Okay. Sure” (238)

Certainly, then, Eligible is not the same book as Pride and Prejudice but all the changes can be attributed to time, or better the times and place. Thus, though not mentioned yet, Sittenfeld has great fun in replacing Austen’s bemused treatment of the attitudes, both of long-term residents and recent arrivals, toward the provincial town in which Pride and Prejudice is set with equivalent attitudes toward Cincinnati, part of the fun no doubt stemming from the fact that Cincinnati is her hometown.

Notwithstanding the fact that it is undeniable that Sittenfeld is and has needed to be an inventive writer, it surely seems wrong to say that she has broken with Austen. Instead, she is keeping to the same tradition that Austen is in.
With regard to time and place, these being the phenomena that clearly exercise Sittenfeld, the question of whether a break is necessary and desirable is whether a tradition is still applicable in spite of even the most substantial changes that have occurred. Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet is a self-respecting, confident, even, as the book's title indicates, proud woman and that means that nowadays she would inevitably be a committed feminist. Therefore, the biggest test of the continued applicability of the book, and the tradition it represents, is whether a feminist could fall in love with Darcy.

Sittenfeld does manage to make this result plausible but, as we have seen, not without considerable ingenuity. That not breaking with Austen requires such high level reflection on the potential, both of Austen and of modernity, is further indicated by the existence of another, far more popular, book that also makes use of the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*. Like Sittenfeld, Helen Fielding, the author of *Bridget Jones' Diary*, invents a heroine who gets off on the wrong foot with a character called Darcy. However, although she does manage to produce an at least mildly plausible way for Darcy and her heroine to get together in the end, what Fielding clearly cannot imagine is that this character could be a feminist. Instead, this ending seems to her to require a character who is basically the opposite of Elizabeth Bennett: self-pitying, weak willed, anything but proud. So while the bare bones of the story are retained, Fielding thinks so doing requires what can best be described as a break with the tradition that Austen probably founded and that, we argue, Sittenfeld is maintaining, indeed enlivening, for modernity.

Though they lead to different results, both main examples suggest the same underlying principle. Only when a relevant outcome, in the first case Mailer being accused of something akin to plagiarism, in the second case a modern day Elizabeth marrying Darcy, seems absurd, does it become necessary and desirable to abandon a tradition. And the Bridget Jones case also proves the rule in that it is the fact that she cannot imagine a modern day Elizabeth marrying someone like Darcy that appears to make it
necessary for Fielding to invent a heroine who is not in keeping with the Austen originated tradition, a tradition in which a strong woman and strong man will certainly not manage love at first sight but can still eventually come to love one another.

Also, as suggested above, we see how the break that does seem truly necessary, the break with ego psychology can have the function of making further breaks unnecessary. Thus, while I would not go so far as to claim that Sittenfeld is familiar with French Critical Theory, still the effort she puts into not breaking with Austen suggests she understands its point that there is no reason to assume that the main test of one’s strength is in the extent to which one can make oneself rather than in being able to follow, inventively, in the footsteps of others.

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