The topic of this paper is breakthroughs. I will be offering two examples. Whatever analysis of breakthroughs will emerge, however, an obvious property is that a breakthrough must amount to a change. Not everything can be the same after one happens. But, unless we are to treat every change as a breakthrough, there must be changes, even considerable changes, which are not best seen as breakthroughs. To clarify the difference between these two types of change, the paper will also examine a clear-cut change that it does not seem at all right to call a breakthrough.

The first example is developed from Richard Klein’s review of a book by Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*. In general, as Klein suggests:

Bloom’s authority as a critic is warranted by his possession of a tradition that provides the hierarchy of values, the criteria of judgment. (15)

This may sound benign but, in fact, Bloom’s hierarchy takes the form of a downhill slope, determined exclusively by accidents of chronology. That is, the later figure always suffers in comparison with the earlier one just because he or she cannot avoid having been influenced by the one who came before. As a particularly nefarious example of how these criteria work, 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 he 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 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 without being influenced as a view that could conceivably be in doubt. Klein
connects this narrow understanding of what a maker could be to something else that was equally unquestionable. 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 who became aware of it. A view arrived that offered an antidote to ‘the provincialism and isolation of American academic thought.’ (18) It took the form, in Klein’s words, of an ‘early attempt to translate French theory into America.’ (18) Some Americans, including Klein, 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 development 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:

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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.)
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, 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 change in how the person can be conceptualized. But if, from the perspective of the issue of influence as raised by Bloom we see it, (as we do) as offering a breakthrough, can that help us to formulate the nature of breakthroughs? It is stimulating that, in the passage about ego psychology quoted above, Klein refers to it as creating an ‘impasse.’ Elsewhere he also refers to it as ‘a dead end’.

(18) The image is of a blockage, and of that blockage stopping entry.

One thing everyone or at least everyone who is born needs to enter is time. According to Bloom's conception of the anxiety of influence, Norman Mailer and other makers who are clear that they have been at all influenced by those who came before them in time, 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 even 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 does look like a breakthrough. It allows latecomers such as Mailer or really everyone since, after all, everyone comes after someone, to breakthrough, in the sense of break through the supposed blockage provided by others already being there. One can be influenced and still enter, in a strong way, time.

-3-

For much of his career, David Markson wrote what can loosely be described as normal novels. But, then, as these almost randomly selected excerpts from one of his very unusual last four books shows, something changed. Vanishing Point consists of separate passages such as:

T. S. Eliot was afraid of cows. (15)

Truman Capote could not publish In Cold Blood until the 2 murderers with whom he had become extremely intimate, were executed.
I am beside myself with joy, he was heard to say when a date was set. (23)

The correspondence between T. S. Eliot and Groucho Marx. Initiated by Eliot. (40)

Brahms has blond hair
As did Mozart
And Saint Thomas Aquinas (32)

Dostoievsksy wrote The Gambler in sixteen days.
Stephen Crane wrote The Red Badge of Courage in ten.
At twenty-one (33)

Shakespeare's Two Gentlemen of Verona in which characters depart Verona by ship-when the city is nowhere near the sea. (24)

James Baldwin borrowed money from Marlon Brando to finish his first novel. (49)

Albert Camus was having lunch in a Paris restaurant when he was informed he had won the Nobel Prize.
By his waiter (133)
For Markson, this way of writing was undoubtedly a change. But was it a breakthrough? As Bloom was having a problem accepting influence, Markson too was having a problem, a crisis even, for someone whose working life was as a writer. At one point, he was pretty much tempted to give up writing. We located the source of Bloom’s problem in a particular intellectual movement that created an impasse. Markson too, though in his case the barrier is a more personal and experiential one, can be seen as facing something that constituted a block. In explaining what was tempting him to stop writing, he says he was ‘weary to the death of making up stories.’ (2001, 1) Certainly this would seem to be as much of a barrier to continuing to write as ego psychology is a barrier to developing a comfortable relation to influence.

Can we also say that what Markson was blocked from was some sort of entry? One way to put it is that, given his story, if he really did stop writing it seems right to say that he would feel out of it. Furthermore, while it would be too much of a stretch to argue that the ‘it’ in his case would be his place in chronological time, it does seem right that, were he to not continue to ‘make up stories’ he would be losing his place in something that certainly takes its shape and develops over time, namely a tradition.

A first clue that his new books could indeed constitute a breakthrough is just the fact that they exist. It is highly unlikely that he could have managed to produce four new books were it true that he remained weary of writing. But it is by identifying the likely reason for Markson’s new-found energy that we can gain a firmer sense of how what has changed could have removed what was blocking him. Simply put, at least as far as he knows, he is no longer making up any of these stories. T.S. Eliot really was afraid of cows. Camus really did first learn from a waiter that he won the Nobel Prize. Baldwin really did borrow money from Brando to write his book. And so on.

Equally crucial to the sense that this change could be a breakthrough is that while it does feel that it frees Markson from needing to make things up, besides giving him a kind of liberation, it also feels as if it lets him enter or, perhaps better, re-enter a place from which he was, during the period when he was too weary to write, excluded. I would suggest that two properties of the change are responsible for it feeling like a re-entry into a place from which he temporarily felt excluded.

Firstly, while it is right to depict what he is doing now as listing surprising facts, this is no random list in the manner of Ripley’s Believe It Or Not. Though he is no longer himself making things up, virtually everything he discusses in one way or another pertains to the tradition of making up (or related activities such as painting
pictures or composing music.) Thus, at least in the examples I
selected, the anecdotes tend to be about one or another aspect of
made things, e. g. how they are produced or received, the nature,
such as it is, of whoever produced them, connections between
various producers, etc. The point here is that the change lets
Markson see that it is not that there is anything fundamentally
wrong with making things up. Instead, because there is a huge
amount of material connected in one way or another with the entire
legacy of previous making up, he can contribute, i. e. belong-enter
that tradition-via a new way of utilizing all that material and so
without, himself, making anything up.

But the second, and equally crucial, reason the change lets him enter,
i. e. be a part of a tradition, becomes apparent if we endeavour to
slightly change Markson’s prose without in any way changing the
factual content. If he had written:

Thomas Aquinas had blond hair
As did Mozart
And Brahms

it would not have had quite the same (dramatic, comic) effect. He
saves the somehow least likely of the three blondes for last.

Or if he had written:

Marlon Brando loaned money to James Baldwin to finish his first
novel.

there is the danger that all he would be showing was what a nice guy
Marlon Brando was rather than, managing to provide, as arguably he
does, an illuminating example of the contingencies surrounding the
production of a book.

Or if he had written that:

Camus did not realize he had won the Nobel Prize until the waiter in
a café told him.

it could have sounded like the point was how clueless Camus was
rather than that Paris is a kind of literary Mecca in at least the sense
that there is more mutual appreciation between writers and waiters
than perhaps anywhere else in the world.

In general, it can be said that, while Markson has stopped making things up, the
change has enabled him to not stop writing, if by writing we mean not just putting
words on the page or even writing a report but exercising artfulness. In this
sense, as well, he has broken though an impasse and, in doing so, kept his place.
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, at least 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 change 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 needed a breakthrough or, in other words, that she has broken with Austen. Instead, she is keeping in the same place- the same tradition-that Austen is in.

-5-

If our first two cases show that it can be necessary and desirable to make a break, in the first case with ego psychology, in the second with having to make everything up, our third one suggests that there may be cases where this would be a mistake. While physical places do not stay the same and times change, that per se is unlikely to be sufficient reason to break with certain lessons that define traditions, lessons that, as one discovers, thanks to someone’s or even one’s own inventiveness, do not need to be unlearned.

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