[Review of:] John Barth and the Anxiety of Continuance / by Patricia Tobin

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Patricia Tobin's study of John Barth is one of those rare things: a critical study that is genuinely informative on more than one count. This book explores the implications of a single, and very clever, insight: that Harold Bloom's theory of poetic influence is illustrated in an almost exemplary way by John Barth's authorial career. As a consequence, Tobin is able to produce a book that tells us as much about the shape of Barth's career and the shifting motivation of each of his ten novels as about Bloom's theory and its applicability to postmodernist narrative practice.

It is Bloom's work in the ten years from 1973 to 1983, which saw the publication of The Anxiety of Influence, A Map of Misreading, The Breaking of the Vessels, and Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism, together with John Hollander's edition of Bloom's essays, Poetics of Influence (New Haven, CT: Schwarb, 1988) that provides the theoretical context for Tobin's analysis of Barth's fiction. But rather than simply apply to or superimpose upon Barth's work the Bloomian map of misprision, Tobin offers us an interpretation of Bloom's thought which uses the example of Barth's career to identify the limits and constraints of this theory. As Tobin recognizes, Bloom's psychoanalytically motivated theory of poetic influence is closely tied to the Romantic ideology of the exemplary texts from which the theory has arisen. For Bloom, “the creativity of our strongest poets has necessarily been grounded in an antithetical and revisionary stance toward their precursors that involves negation, evasion, and extravagance” (p. 5). For Tobin, the postmodernist fabulator of Barth's kind resists such a gloomy relation with the past and instead revels in the prospect that all of literary history is available for his individual use. And so it is with Barth's controversial 1967 essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion”, that Tobin starts, presenting not a discussion of the despair of a writer who feels that all fictional possibilities have already been used up but of a writer who celebrates the opportunity to resuscitate, fulfil, and, in this way, to exhaust the narrative forms, styles, and genres of the past. The “strong” poet with whom Barth engages in a struggle to prove his literary superiority is not then some dominating literary precursor but his previous self, manifest in his last literary work. What to do next is the question that propels Barth forward, advancing a career that is seen as progressive and always prospective, and not holding at bay the anxieties of influence but counteracting the anxiety of continuance. Career prospects and the fulfilment of a postmodernist intertextual imperative, rather than the freedom of Romantic genius, are Barth's abiding concern.

One could, justifiably, expect that Tobin's analyses of the novels would be programmatic perhaps to the point of transforming the novels into little more than theoretical allegories. Mercifully, this is emphatically not the case. With a keen critical intelligence, Tobin probes conjunctions and disjunctions equally and in the latter part of her study, she shows how in Sabbatical, A Romance, The Tidewater Tales, and The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor Barth leaves behind Harold Bloom's literary topography and embarks upon an exploration of the postmodernist “literature of replenishment”. As Tobin argues, “the comic postmodernism of Barth's Recommencement is a robust and forthright rejection of the psychology of lack inherent in the father's return, of the belated tragic vision that modulates towards cynicism, and of a decadent irony that impels the comic into the depressive position of snide aggression” (pp. 119-20).

Tobin's reading of Bloom generalizes and reveals new areas which can be illuminated by his theory of poetic influence, but she refuses to be intimidated by such a “strong” theoretical influence and, in the process of exploring the limitations of Bloom's map of misreading, she offers us a fresh and exciting interpretation of John Barth's own engagement with the dynamics of literary history.