THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

A THEORY OF POETRY

Second Edition

HAROLD BLOOM

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Harold Bloom

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PREFACE

The Anguish of Contamination

I

Most of the first draft of what became *The Anxiety of Influence* was written in the summer of 1967. Revised during the next five years, the little book was published in January 1973. For more than twenty years, I have been bemused by the book's reception, which remains ambivalent. Rather than attempt an explication, this new preface seeks to clarify and enlarge my vision of the influence process, which is still a dark ground in most areas, whether in the high arts, the intellectual disciplines, or the public sphere. Heidegger, whom I cheerfully abhor, nevertheless sets me an example when he says that it is necessary to think one thought and one thought only, and to think it through to the end. There is no end to "influence," a word which Shakespeare used in two different but related senses. Just before the second entrance of the Ghost, in the first scene of *Hamlet*, the scholar Horatio evokes the world of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, where:

A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets.
As stars with trains of fire, and dews of blood,
Disasters in the sun; and the moist star
Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands
Was sick almost to doomsday with eclipse.

Shakespeare may be thinking back two years, to 1598, when he was at work upon Falstaff's last stand in *Henry IV, Part Two*, in an England much troubled by the melancholy of one solar and two lunar eclipses, prompting prognostications of doomsday in 1600. Hamlet, rather than the Last Judgment, marked that year for Shakespeare, but Horatio, more an antique Roman than a Dane, still broods on the "disasters in the sun," reminding us of the starry theory of influence upon those ill-starred, and the moon's (that moist star) influx upon the waves. The flowing from the stars upon our fates and our personalities is the prime meaning of "influence," a meaning made personal between Shakespearean characters. Shakespeare also uses the word "influence" to mean "inspiration," both in the sonnets and in the plays. The sonnet that influenced me in *The Anxiety of Influence* and its sequel, *A Map of Misreading*, I deliberately refrained from citing in either book:

Farewell, thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know'st thy estimate;
The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing;
My bonds in thee are all determinate.
For how do I hold thee but by thy granting,
And for that riches where is my deserving?
The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,
And so my patent back again is swerving.
Thyself thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing,
Or me, to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking,
So thy great gift, upon misprision growing,

Comes home again, on better judgment making.
Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter:
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

"Swerving" and "misprision" both depend upon "mistaking" as an ironical over-esteeming or over-estimation, here in Sonnet 87. Whether Shakespeare ruefully is lamenting, with a certain urbane reserve, the loss of the Earl of Southampton as lover, or as patron, or as friend, is not (fortunately) a matter upon which certitude is possible. Palpably and profoundly an erotic poem, Sonnet 87 (not by design) also can be read as an allegory of any writer's (or person's) relation to tradition, particularly as embodied in a figure taken as one's own forerunner. The speaker of Sonnet 87 is aware that he had been made an offer that he could not refuse, which is a dark insight into the nature of authentic tradition. "Misprision" for Shakespeare, as opposed to "mistaking," implied not only a misunderstanding or misreading but tended also to be a punning word-play suggesting unjust imprisonment. Perhaps "misprision" in Shakespeare also means a scornful underestimation: either way, he took the legal term and gave it an aura of deliberate or willful misinterpretation. "Swerving," in Sonnet 87, is only secondarily a returning; primarily it indicates an unhappy freedom.

I excluded Shakespeare from *The Anxiety of Influence* and its immediate sequels because I was not ready to meditate upon Shakespeare and originality. One cannot think through the question of influence without considering the most influential of all authors during the last four centuries. I sometimes suspect that we really do not listen to one another because Shakespeare's friends and lovers never quite hear what the other is saying, which is part of the ironical truth that Shakespeare largely invented us. The invention of the human, as we know it, is a mode of influ-

ence far surpassing anything literary. I cannot improve upon Emerson's account of this influx. "Shakespeare; Or, the Poet" in *Representative Men* (1850) remains unique in its accurate estimate of the centrality of the poet, then and now:

> Shakspeare is as much out of the category of eminent authors, as he is out of the crowd. He is inconceivably wise; the others, conceivably. A good reader can, in a sort, nestle into Plato's brain, and think from thence; but not into Shakspeare's. We are still out of doors. For executive faculty, for creation, Shakspeare is unique. No man can imagine it better. He was the farthest reach of subtlety compatible with an individual self,—the subtilest of authors, and only just within the possibility of authorship. With this wisdom of life, is the equal endowment of imaginative and of lyric power. He clothed the creatures of his legend with form and sentiments, as if they were people who had lived under his roof; and few real men have left such distinct characters as these fictions. And they spoke in language as sweet as it was fit. Yet his talents never seduced him into an ostentation, nor did he harp on one string. An omnipresent humanity coördinates all his faculties. Give a man of talents a story to tell, and his partiality will presently appear. He has certain observations, opinions, topics, which have some accidental prominence, and which he disposes all to exhibit. He crams this part, and starves that other part, consulting not the fitness of the thing, but his fitness and strength. But Shakspeare has no peculiarity, no importunate topic; but all is duly given; no veins, no curiosities: no cow-painter, no bird-fancier, no mannerist is he: he has no discoverable egotism: the great he tells greatly; the small, subordinately. He is wise without emphasis or assertion; he is strong, as nature is strong, who lifts the land into mountain slopes without effort, and by the same rule as she floats a bubble in the air, and likes as well to do the one as the other. This makes that equality of power in farce, tragedy, narrative, and love-songs; a merit so incessant, that each reader is incredulous of the perception of other readers.

"We are still out of doors" is the crucial sentence there, as Emerson slyly reminds us of the etymology of the word "foreign," which in Shakespeare means "not of one's own household," hence out of doors. I cannot think, at this bad moment, of a better way to see Shakespeare, since the entire movement of our current School of Resentment is towards eradicating Shakespeare's uniqueness. Neo-Marxists, New Feminists, New Historicists, French-influenced theorists all demonstrate their cultural materialism by giving us a reduced Shakespeare, a pure product of the "social energies" of the English Renaissance. My own favorite joke about this is to add to Lacan, or "French Freud," and Derrida, or "French Joyce," the ultimate triumph of what calls itself "theory": Foucault, or "French Shakespeare." The French have never valued originality, and until a belated Romanticism came to France, they never much cared for Shakespeare's plays. They still esteem Shakespeare rather less than do the Indonesians or the Japanese or the Americans. Real multiculturalists, all over the globe, accept Shakespeare as the one indispensable author, different from all others in degree, and by so much that he becomes different in kind. Shakespeare, as I have argued at length elsewhere, quite simply not only is the Western canon; he is also the world canon. That his appeal is equal to audiences of all continents, races, and languages (always excluding the French) seems to me an absolute refutation of our currently fashionable views, prevalent particularly in Britain and America, that insists upon a Shakespeare culture-bound by history and society. As Emerson rightly concluded, no context, not even the theatrical, confines Shakespeare:

> Some able and appreciating critics think no criticism on Shakspeare valuable, that does not rest purely on the dramatic merit; that he is falsely judged as poet and philosopher. I think as highly as these critics of his dramatic merit, but still think it

> secondary. He was a full man, who liked to talk; a brain exhaling thoughts and images, which, seeking vent, found the drama next at hand. Had he been less, we should have had to consider how well he filled his place, how good a dramatist he was,—and he is the best in the world. But it turns out, that what he has to say is of that weight, as to withdraw some attention from the vehicle; and he is like some saint whose history is to be rendered into all languages, into verse and prose, into songs and pictures, and cut up into proverbs; so that the occasion which gave the saint's meaning the form of a conversation, or of a prayer, or of a code of laws, is immaterial, compared with the universality of its application. So it fares with the wise Shakspeare and his book of life. He wrote the airs for all our modern music: he wrote the text of modern life; the text of manners: he drew the man of England and Europe; the father of the man in America: he drew the man, and described the day, and what is done in it: he read the hearts of men and women, their probity, and their second thought, and wiles; the wiles of innocence, and the transitions by which virtues and vices slide into their contraries: he could divide the mother's part from the father's part in the face of the child, or draw the fine demarcations of freedom and of fate: he knew the laws of repression which make the police of nature: and all the sweets and all the terrors of human lot lay in his mind as truly but as softly as the landscape lies on the eye. And the importance of this wisdom of life sinks the form, as of Drama or Epic, out of notice. 'Tis like making a question concerning the paper on which a king's message is written.

"He wrote the text of modern life" is the heart of this matter: Shakespeare invented us, and continues to contain us. We are now in an era of so-called "cultural criticism," which devalues all imaginative literature, and which particularly demotes and debases Shakespeare. Politicizing literary study has destroyed literary study, and may yet destroy learning itself. Shakespeare has influenced the world far more than it initially influenced Shakespeare. The com-

mon assumption of all the Resenters is that state power is everything and individual subjectivity is nothing, even if that subjectivity belonged to William Shakespeare. Frightened by their irrational social order, the English Renaissance playwrights, in this account, either became time-servers or subverters or a mixture of both, while being caught in the irony that even their textual subversions helped to enhance state power, a power rather surprisingly held to be reliant upon theatricality. I return to Emerson for an antidote to all this power-mongering. Who wrote the text of modern life, Shakespeare or the Elizabethan-Jacobean political establishment? Who invented the human, as we know it, Shakespeare or the court and its ministers? Who influenced Shakespeare's actual text more, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, the First Secretary to Her Majesty, or Christopher Marlowe? What we once used to call "imaginative literature" is indistinguishable from literary influence, and has only an inessential relationship to state power. If any standards of judgment at all are to survive our current cultural reductiveness, then we need to reassert that high literature is exactly that, an aesthetic achievement, and not state propaganda, even if literature can be used, has been used, and doubtless will be used to serve the interests of a state, or of a social class, or of a religion, or of men against women, whites against blacks, Westerners against Easterners. I know of no more dismal contemporary comedy, either in Great Britain or the United States, than the revolutionary pretenses of our academics, who persuade themselves that they speak for the insulted and injured of the world by denying the aesthetic primacy of Shakespeare, or by insisting that aesthetic eminence of any sort is merely a capitalistic mystification. Our Trinculos and Stephanos have arrived, they say, to free Caliban from bondage to Prospero. Here also Shakespeare has anticipated them, and teaches us that what the Resenters truly resent is not state power but

Shakespeare's power, the power of invention. Unable to be Nietzsche, who has made them all belated, our Resenters do not wish merely to re-proclaim the Death of God, so they turn instead to proclaiming what only can be called the Death of Shakespeare.

Coleridge spoke of the ever-living men and women, the canonical writers, a most archaic way of speaking in this present age, when students are taught to scorn the Dead White European Males, or again, most simply William Shakespeare. The largest truth of literary influence is that it is an irresistible anxiety: Shakespeare will not allow you to bury him, or escape him, or replace him. We have, almost all of us, thoroughly internalized the power of Shakespeare's plays, frequently without having attended them or read them. When the German poet Stefan George called *The Divine Comedy* "the Book and School of the Ages," he was speaking only about the education of great poets. All the rest of us inescapably learn that Shakespeare's plays constitute the Book and School of the Ages. I am not speaking as an essentialist humanist, which I do not pretend to be, or as a theorist of criticism, which is also not my role. As a theorist of poetic influence, I am an anxious partaker of Shakespeare, the inevitable role for all of us, who belatedly follow after Shakespeare's creation of our minds and spirits. Literature, that is to say Shakespeare, cannot be thought of in terms only of knowledge, as if all his metaphors pertained only to knowing. Shakespeare's pervasive terms are metaphors of willing, and so they enter the domain of the lie. Most of our understandings of the will are Will's, as it were, because Shakespeare invented the domain of those metaphors of willing that Freud named the drives of Love and Death.

Our true relation to Shakespeare is that it is vain to historicize or politicize him, because we are monumentally over-influenced by him. No strong writer since Shakespeare

can avoid his influence, again excluding the recalcitrant French, who probably will not accept even the shrunken or pygmy dramatist I have called "French Shakespeare." Frank Kermode speaks of "the fantastic range of possibilities" that are explored by Shakespeare's tragedies, and that seems to me precisely right. Who can defend herself or himself, if that self has any literary possibilities whatsoever, from what truly is a fantastic range of possibilities, larger than any single one of us can hope to apprehend. Resenters of canonical literature are nothing more or less than deniers of Shakespeare. They are not social revolutionaries or even cultural rebels. They are sufferers of the anxieties of Shakespeare's influence.

II

Oscar Wilde sublimely remarked that "all bad poetry is sincere." Doubtless it would be wrong to say that all great poetry is insincere, but of course almost all of it necessarily tells lies, fictions essential to literary art. Authentic, high literature relies upon troping, a turning away not only from the literal but from prior tropes. Like criticism, which is either part of literature or nothing at all, great writing is always at work strongly (or weakly) misreading previous writing. Any stance that anyone takes up towards a metaphorical work will itself be metaphorical. My useful (for me) decades-long critical quarrel with Paul de Man, a radiant intelligence, finally centered upon just the contention stated in the previous sentence. He insisted that an epistemological stance in regard to a literary work was the only way out of the tropological labyrinth, while I replied that such a stance was no more or less a trope than any other. Irony, in its prime sense of allegory, saying one thing while suggesting another, is the epistemological trope-of-tropes, and for de Man constituted the condition of liter-

ary language itself, producing that "permanent parabasis of meaning" studied by deconstructionists.

When is Shakespeare sincere? That absurd question returns us to the curious fiction that Shakespeare and nature are everywhere the same. I myself was a victim of that fiction when I denied, in this book, that Shakespeare ever experienced any anxiety of influence in regard to his prime precursor and rival Ovidian, Christopher Marlowe, only two months or so older than Shakespeare but the dominant London playwright from 1587 until his violent death in 1593, aged twenty-nine. In 1587, Shakespeare went up from Stratford to London, and perhaps began as a printer's apprentice. This may have given him an aversion for proofreading (having held such a job, in my early youth, I have been a dreadful reader of my own proofs in consequence). Certainly Shakespeare seems never to have read proof even for "authorized" quartos, except for *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, both dedicated to his patron (some think also his lover), the Earl of Southhampton. After being a printer's devil, Shakespeare may have begun in the theater as a prompter's assistant, and went on to become an actor before writing for the stage. Marlowe, though like Shakespeare the son of an artisan, had a university education and doubtless would have scorned acting, a socially ambiguous profession at that time.

Ben Jonson, the other great playwright of the era of Marlowe and Shakespeare, abandoned acting after he became established, but Shakespeare certainly did not, though we have only limited information as to his actor's career. Neither a clown, nor a hero, nor a villain in his roles, Shakespeare seems to have been respected as what we now, rather oddly, call a "character actor." We know that he played the Ghost in *Hamlet*, and old Adam in *As You Like It*, and several kings, and we can suspect that he acted the Player-King in *Hamlet*, a natural doubling. Shakespeare

perhaps gave up acting when he was forty, about the time that he composed *Measure For Measure* and *Othello.* Meredith Anne Skura's remarkable *Shakespeare the Actor and the Purposes of Playing* (1993) centers upon the plays' awareness of the pride and degradation of being an actor, an overt, narcissistic ambivalence that may not have been entirely Shakespeare's own but that appears crucial to his art. Christopher Marlowe certainly was crucial to Shakespeare's art from the early tetralogy of the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III* (1589–93) through *Titus Andronicus* (1594) until Shakespeare surmounted Marlowe's *Edward II* in *Richard II* (1595), two years after Marlowe was murdered in a tavern brawl, probably by orders of the government, whom Marlowe had served as what we now call an intelligence agent.

It is hardly possible that Marlowe and Shakespeare did not know one another personally, since they shared four years of rivalry in writing for the London stage. Shakespeare, much more impressive in his early comedies than in his first histories or his first tragedy, emerged into an aesthetic realm sublimely beyond Marlowe's when he began to fashion the great roles that owe nothing to Marlowe's superb caricatures, such as Tamburlaine, and Barabas, hero-villain of *The Jew of Malta.* Richard III, and Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus,* are altogether Marlovian. Richard II is somewhere in between Marlowe's Edward II and Hamlet; but Juliet and Mercutio, Bottom and Puck, Shylock and Falstaff began to make Marlowe seem rudimentary. Compared to mature Shakespeare, Marlowe is still an extraordinary poet, yet no dramatist at all. But to say, as I did in this book, that Shakespeare swallowed up Marlowe the way a whale scoops up a minnow was to ignore the extraordinary case of indigestion that Marlowe caused the Moby-Dick of all playwrights. Marlowe never developed, and never would have, even had he seen

thirty. Shakespeare was an extravagant developer, experimenting down to the end. The Bible and Chaucer taught Shakespeare some of his secrets in representing human beings, while Marlowe had little interest in what Dr. Johnson was to call "just representations of general nature." And yet Marlowe haunted Shakespeare, who defensively parodied his forerunner while resolving that the author of *The Jew of Malta* would become for him primarily the way *not* to go, whether in life or in art. He must have known, though, that Marlowe had emancipated the theater from overt moralities and moralizings, and opened the way to pleasing enormous audiences, who were not trying to become better or wiser through attending a play. Russell Fraser, in his *Young Shakespeare* (1988), rightly says that, with Marlowe, "Shakespeare's story begins," and adds that Shakespeare's *King John* is too wounded by Marlowe to be a success, which may be true. *Titus Andronicus* I can read only as a deliberate send-up both of Marlowe's friend, Thomas Kyd, and of Marlowe himself, but most Shakespeare scholars argue otherwise. Yet what is Aaron the Moor if not a monstrous blow-up of Marlowe's Barabas? Even Shylock, despite Shakespeare's equivocal anti-Semitism, is a reaction-formation to Marlowe's cartoonish Jew of Malta, who hardly could say "If you prick us, do we not bleed?," just as Shylock would not cry out "sometimes I go about and poison wells."

I never meant by "the anxiety of influence" a Freudian Oedipal rivalry, despite a rhetorical flourish or two in this book. A Shakespearean reading of Freud, which I favor over a Freudian reading of Shakespeare or anyone else, reveals that Freud suffered from a Hamlet complex (the true name of the Oedipus Complex) or an anxiety of influence in regard to Shakespeare. Since I have argued this matter at some length in a recent book (*The Western Canon*, 1994), I need say little about it here, except to murmur

again how weakly misread *The Anxiety of Influence* has been, and continues to be. Any adequate reader of this book, which means anyone of some literary sensibility who is not a commissar or an ideologue, Left *or* Right, will see that influence-anxiety does not so much concern the forerunner but rather is an anxiety achieved in and by the story, novel, play, poem, or essay. The anxiety may or may not be internalized by the later writer, depending upon temperament and circumstances, yet that hardly matters: the strong poem is the achieved anxiety. "Influence" is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships—imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological—all of them ultimately defensive in their nature. What matters most (and it is the central point of this book) is that the anxiety of influence *comes out of* a complex act of strong misreading, a creative interpretation that I call "poetic misprision." What writers may experience as anxiety, and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the *consequence* of poetic misprision, rather than the *cause* of it. The strong misreading comes first; there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work. That reading is likely to be idiosyncratic, and it is almost certain to be ambivalent, though the ambivalence may be veiled. Without Keats's reading of Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth, we could not have Keats's odes and sonnets and his two *Hyperions*. Without Tennyson's reading of Keats, we would have almost no Tennyson. Wallace Stevens, hostile to all suggestions that he owed anything to his reading of precursor poets, would have left us nothing of value but for Walt Whitman, whom Stevens sometimes scorned, almost never overtly imitated, yet uncannily resurrected:

> Sigh for me, night-wind, in the noisy leaves of the oak.
> I am tired. Sleep for me, heaven over the hill.
> Shout for me, loudly and loudly, joyful sun, when you rise.

III

In ways that need not be doctrinal, strong poems are always omens of resurrection. The dead may or may not return, but their voice comes alive, paradoxically never by mere imitation, but in the agonistic misprision performed upon powerful forerunners by only the most gifted of their successors. Ibsen loathed influence more perhaps than anyone else, particularly since his authentic forerunner was Shakespeare, much more than Goethe. This horror of contamination by Shakespeare fortunately found its best Ibsenite expression in the multiple ways the Norse playwright discovered for evading Shakespeare. Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts* seems at first to have nothing Shakespearean about her, but her extraordinary capacity for willing changes in herself is nothing if not Shakespearean, relying as it does upon a Shakespearean and very subtle mode of foregrounding. Hedda Gabler, as much as Dostoevsky's Svidrigailov and Stavrogin, finds her ancestors in those pioneer nihilists, Iago and the Edmund of *King Lear*. Still intoxicated by the High Romantic poets when I wrote *The Anxiety of Influence*, I tried to confine the phenomenon of creative misprision to post-Enlightenment writers, a false emphasis that I corrected in *A Map of Misreading* and subsequent books. The irony of one era cannot be the irony of another, but influence-anxieties are embedded in the agonistic basis of all imaginative literature. Agon or the contest for aesthetic supremacy was very overt in ancient Greek literature, but this has been a difference of degree rather than of kind between different cultures. Plato's contest with Homer is the central agon of Western literature, but there are many rival struggles, down to the parodistic matches between Hemingway and his precursors, and the followers of Hemingway with the master.

Cultural belatedness is never acceptable to a major writer, though Borges made a career out of exploiting his secondariness. Belatedness seems to me not a historical condition at all, but one that belongs to the literary situation as such. Resentful historicists of several persuasions—stemming from Marx, Foucault, and political feminism—now study literature essentially as peripheral social history. What has been discarded is the reader's solitude, a subjectivity that has been rejected because it supposedly possesses "no social being." Tony Kushner, the dramatist of *Angels in America*, generously assigns his authorship to many others, a curious literalization on his part of Brecht's plagiaristic stance. Peculiar as this may be, it is clarity itself compared to the "French Shakespeare" that now dominates the ruined shards of the Anglo-American academic world. Shakespeare's solitude has vanished, and has been replaced by a playwright whose work is supposed to overthrow the power-systems of the Renaissance world, whether based on class or gender. This peculiar, rather desperate view of Shakespeare purports to be revolutionary but pragmatically amounts to substituting highly selective contexts for the actual Shakespearean text. We know nothing authentic about Shakespeare's politics, or his religion, or his social outlook, and heaping up extraneous contexts has served mostly to enhance the resentments of the already resentful. Our belatedness evidently exceeds Shakespeare's by more than the burden of our four centuries of additional history.

An awareness of the anxiety of influence—our own, in regard to Shakespeare—might partly cleanse us of the resentments of a scholarly belatedness. Historicizing, politicizing, even feminizing Shakespeare—all are redundant operations: Shakespeare always was there before us. He emancipated no one (that we know of) from the power-

structures of his own day, and cannot liberate us from any societal enclosures in our current squalor. If you quarry Shakespeare for ultimates, you emerge with nothing, and you are in danger of pragmatically equating him with his own superb nihilists. What are his energies? Was his relation to Marlowe, beyond that of aesthetic rivalry, somehow part of the social energies of their shared era? I would venture that, far more than any other writer since the pre-Socratic sages, Shakespeare's energies so fuse rhetoric, psychology, and cosmology that we cannot distinguish them from one another in his greatest plays. They are one entity for him, as they were for Empedocles and the Sophists who followed Empedocles. A purely rhetorical criticism, a psychological reductiveness, a cosmological perspective—none of these alone can hope to comprehend Shakespeare, or any other writer who begins to approach his eminence. More than any other purely secular author, Shakespeare makes history far more than history makes Shakespeare. Returning Shakespeare to history is a disheartened endeavour, and to a considerable degree an ahistorical adventure. What is literary history, or social history for that matter? Perspectivism, with all its entrapments, dominates "history," as Nietzsche eloquently indicated in his essay on the use and abuse of history for life, one of my starting points for what became *The Anxiety of Influence.*

Emerson, who chose his essay "History" to lead off *Essays: First Series,* memorably advised us that biography is always the prior mode:

> We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience, and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no history; only biography. Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself,—must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know. What the former age has epitomized into a formula or rule for manipular con-

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