



Vishvapani

Bidding Farewell to Harold Bloom

The sadness I feel at learning of the death, aged 89, of the great literary critic Harold Bloom, is softened only by my incredulity that he was living at all; that is, living in a modern world to which he seemed so alien. Bloom felt the same way about himself: he often wrote of the sense of belatedness that haunts modern poets, and considered himself a Jewish gnostic who found the greatest truth in the gnostic myth that we have been separated from a great source of meaning and wander bewildered through the world into which we have been thrown. I felt a similar disbelief when Sangharakshita died a year ago having immersed himself in his latter years in the same gnostic volumes. Both men had their faults, no doubt, but they absorbed themselves so completely in the greatest works of literature (and, in Sangharakshita's case, Buddhism), and absorbed those great works into themselves so fully, that each of them became joined to those works – at least in my mind. Their own books – and both men wrote a great many – open doorway for me to the worlds those works disclose.

I won't bother you with an account of Bloom's life and career as many such pieces are being published. My reflections are more personal. I met Bloom once properly, and once briefly. The proper meeting was at his house in New Haven, close to Yale University where he was Sterling Professor of Humanities. As editor of Dharma Life magazine I had realised I had the chance to meet and interview just about anyone I wished who I thought was relevant to western Buddhists. Bloom was top of my list, and I travelled to the US, Dhammarati joining me to take the photos, largely for the sake of meeting him.

I read some of Bloom's work on the Romantic poets from the early part of his career, when I was studying literature at university, and recognised a quality which I found in only a few other critics (I would include Wilson Knight, Helen Vendler and Northrop Frye) that chimed with a question I was asking in the course of my studies. I loved the literature I was reading, to the extent that I could absorb it, but what was I trying to achieve through studying it? I learned how to analyse a novel, a play or especially a poem; but what had I added when the poem already said exactly what it wanted to say in exactly the right words? What was the value of translating a poetic or dramatic way of thinking into an analytic one?

I learned to see literary works as milestones in intellectual and cultural history, to interpret them through a framework such as Freudian psychoanalysis and to deconstruct a poem's efforts create meaning by revealing the hidden assumptions it concealed or expressed. But was the result more valuable than the original, or did the analysis simply reduce the poem to a lesser mode of thought?

Bloom's project as a critic is showing readers how they might approach literature in the belief that they have something to learn from it at the deepest levels of experience and that great literature is better able to challenge our intellectual frameworks than the other way around. For example, Bloom disputes Freud's belief that Hamlet had an Oedipus complex by suggesting that Freud had a Hamlet complex. If this last sentence is lost on you, or if you understand it but think it is nonsense, then Bloom might not be your man. He was, nonetheless, the great champion of an approach to reading and studying literature that starts with a faith that a work of art, if it has real quality, opens up fresh ways of thinking, feeling and experiencing ourselves. We turn to art, in other words, to understand ourselves in terms that come from art, and we find there a language that is not reducible to concepts, however many it many contain, and a depth and subtlety we cannot find in any other way.

From this perspective, the task of the critic is to raise him or herself to the level of the poem – Pater’s idea of aesthetic criticism hovers behind Bloom’s writing and that of the modern poets he loved best – or at least to engage with and communicate the imaginative energy that animates it. His principal method is to explore the poet’s relation with other poets, the precursors who had mapped out what is possible to think and say in a given genre, challenging the later poet to absorb their lessons at the deepest possible level and then find a way past them.

In my view, Bloom’s best works were written in the 1970s, especially his monographs on Yeats and Wallace Stevens, not the later works which are better known, which have many virtues but are all too easy to parody. These earlier works have a revelatory quality, and Bloom’s prose often rises towards the level of his subjects as he traces the imaginative currents that enabled their verse to come new-minted, even after several hundred years of English poetry, and to be both traditional and modern in a culture where these modes had diverged. He theorised this as ‘the anxiety of influence’, a phrase and concept that have entered the language.

I find these monographs rather subtler than Bloom’s books on the High Romantics which he wrote in the 1960s, though these have their own prophetic intensity and revolutionised the field. They showed that beyond the emotionality and lyricism of Wordsworth, Coleridge and the rest (which had made them unpopular with TS Eliot and the New Criticism) was a mode of poetic prophecy that is still important. Bloom’s work on the Romantic poets has much to offer to western Buddhists as guides to seeing in them as the greatest resource for any post-theistic spirituality, including our own. Bloom’s later books expand his scope to the whole of western literature (notably in his best known book, *The Western Canon*, centring his discussions on Shakespeare and, in the context of American literature, on Emerson and Whitman).

I read Bloom’s books as a vast exploration of the spiritual resources the western literary tradition has to offer, and if we bear this in mind, Bloom’s opposition to Marxist, feminist and New Historical approaches to literature becomes understandable. These approaches are designed to deepen our understanding of society in the light of Marxism, feminism and so on, using literature as a resource. But doing so will not enable us to learn on a human, existential or spiritual level from great works of art, regardless of whether their creators were dead, white European males, or members of marginalised groups. His animus stems from the likelihood that approaching works of art with a political or sociological agenda will obscure their capacity to offer these lessons.

Bloom’s idea of the anxiety of influence affected the way I think about my own family relationships and intellectual influences. But it has a particular relevance for anyone who has a spiritual teacher by illuminating the tensions that inevitably arise for the aspiring student. A teacher at the same time opens up the territory of spiritual life, defines its contours and populates it with his or her personality, and that prompts ambivalence. As students or disciples we want both to be receptive and to be independent, devoted and yet autonomous, and perhaps it is inevitable that, for many, a teacher’s influence eventually starts to feel oppressive. Focusing on the teacher’s undoubted flaws then present a way to resist their influence, but Bloom, following Nietzsche, taught me that rejecting others’ strength only makes one weak. True strength, spiritually speaking, comes from exposing oneself to the strongest influences – the strongest presences and most powerful ideas – loving them deeply, and embracing the tensions that follow, even if they

feel threatening, or overwhelming. This seems to me a more realistic account of teacher-student relations than either the traditional idealisations, or the contemporary debunking.

[My discussion with Bloom in New Haven](#) ranged widely, including such questions as the nature of the imagination and the spiritual resources to be found in both literary and religious traditions. As we said goodbye, he took my hand and said 'Bless you' and there followed a moment of embarrassment in which I think we both felt that what was perhaps meant as a pleasantry inadvertently expressed a truth. I felt a sense of blessing or benediction that seemed to me a gift of the highest order.

Before and after our meeting I have continued to constantly read Bloom's many works and I love them all. Even the bad ones.

\*\*\*

[Read an interview with Harold Bloom by Vishvapani](#)

[Read Vishvapani's review of 'The Western Canon' by Harold Bloom](#)