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Harold Bloom: the embattled canon
and the experiential critic

The Western Canon

By Harold Bloom

Macmillan, London 1994, pp. 567

1. Introduction: contemporary criticism's questions and answers

What should be our central question in approaching literature? The celebrated American literary critic Harold Bloom proposes one: What is literature for? This question may sound obvious, but it is not one with which twentieth century criticism has been much concerned. Mostly critics have been content with asking: What is literature? British criticism has usually been literary history - explications of texts and of the relationships between them. In America formalist approaches starting with New Criticism have been concerned with analysing underlying literary structures. This made America open to the successive waves of continental critical theory which have culminated in Deconstruction, the *reductio ad absurdum* of formalism, which holds that literature, being incapable of referring to anything outside itself, is not for anything.

Faced with the ascendancy of such pale-blooded approaches, Bloom has pursued a different path. What he means by his question is: What is literature for, personally and subjectively for me, an individual reader? Following Emerson, Nietzsche and Freud, he suggests that this becomes: What need does this writing fulfil in me? And, especially if the reader is also a writer, it becomes: How may I master it? Bloom describes an intense, embattled, but deeply engaged relationship between the present and the literary past, which forces any later writer to ask: How may I enter the field of poetry, when it is so dominated by Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton - the towering figures of the tradition? And: How may I find the creative space for fresh utterance? From this struggle arise the strongest literary works and their strong relationships which together we refer to as 'the canon of western literature' or '*The Western Canon*'.

In recent years, however, a new and increasingly dominant generation of academics in America (and to a lesser though growing extent in Britain), under the pressure of cultural changes and political ideology, have addressed Bloom's question and come up with a very different answer. What is literature for? they ask. Not for individual edification. A historicist approach, following Foucault, shows that literature has always served political power and that the canon has been constructed for similar ends. So let the canon be deconstructed to reveal this power structure, and let literary value be redefined to serve social goals. This almost invariably means the goals of feminism and multiculturalism. The selection of canonical texts, we are told, has expressed the interests of the dominant class to the exclusion of women, homosexuals and non-Europeans, particularly black people. Like the original Biblical canon, which is 'closed' in that it comprises only those books officially accepted as Holy Scripture, the literary canon has been closed to all but dead, white phallocentrists, and must be forced open. Bloom lumps together the various critical schools which derive from this approach (Marxist, Feminist, Deconstructive, Structuralist, Lacanian and New Historicist) as 'the School of Resentment'. The profession, he informs us, is now crowded by 'professors of hip-hop; by clones of Gallic-Germanic theory; by ideologues of gender and various sexual persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited'.¹ One way of opening the canon has been to bring forward

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, Macmillan, London 1994, p.517

numerous forgotten authors, usually women, for canonical inclusion. But this is really playing patriarchy at its own game and such nominees have tended to founder on the rocks of their implacable mediocrity. A more persuasive stance has been to reject the idea of a canon per se as ineluctably elitist. Let us see, cry the burgeoning New Historicists, that texts are the product of social energies in the cultures that produce them! (And please note that societies create while writers merely 'inscribe', the individual being a bourgeois construct and genius being a reactionary illusion). Let us open the canon to all, cry feminists and multi-culturalists, and walk as noble innocents in the wide pastures of de-centred plenitude!

As with the broader manifestations of 'political correctness', the literary critical version has created a right-wing backlash and so the debate has polarised. For the right, canonical deconstructors are a moral threat - educated Visigoths, Philistines pulling down the pillars of their own temple. So we have seen an angry debate between left and right, between two ideas of what society should be. Both sides agree that art has a moral function in society and that values in art set values in society, but they differ in the values that they uphold. When such bandwagons are rolling, it is quite natural for those with an interest in the arts to feel an impulsion to take sides, from either love of one party or aversion to another. It takes an exceptional individual to remind us of the irrelevance of both positions to the matter of initial concern, which is engagement with the works of the canon themselves. We are fortunate indeed to have such an individual still among us in Harold Bloom, and to have him remind us in so eloquent, learned and wise a book as *The Western Canon*. It is an affirmation of imaginative literature against all the reductionists of left and right who try to enlist or define it for partisan ends.

Bloom seems to me to be an exemplary guide for Buddhists who are interested in exploring Western culture. We may do this in order to seek inspiration in works closer to home than those we encounter in the Buddhist tradition; we may do it to understand ourselves more fully by understanding our cultural inheritance, or to seek points of contact with the Dharma in Western culture. In each case Bloom is an excellent guide because, while being intensely intellectual, he is also a most intuitive critic whose primary response to literature is to the spiritual force of the writer. He has not merely read virtually the whole of Western Literature, he has experienced it and brooded deeply on his experience. Harold Bloom is not a polemicist; his method is simply to open a door on his own engagement with the literary tradition. In this he is emphatically not to be confused with his namesake, the right-wing social philosopher Allan Bloom, whose *Closing of the American Mind* took up cudgels against academic relativism a few years ago. *The Western Canon* is a very different book. Current academic debates are the context from which Harold Bloom's work has arisen, but it triumphantly transcends them.

2. Harold Bloom and his approach

As Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale, Bloom has reached the top of his profession and his true stature is perhaps beginning to be recognised. He has published more than any other American critic, and so vast is his reading, so extraordinary his powers of recall, so lively and acute his intelligence, that in some ways it is surprising that he has not become a more dominant figure. But Bloom is also a highly individual critic, sometimes eccentric and often arcane; for example, he sometimes draws heavily on sources such as Kaballah and Gnosticism for his ideas. For thirty years he has been an important but

unclassifiable figure standing above the academic fray. The best commentary on this aspect of Bloom's approach is that of Blake, who has to declare that he must create his own system or else be enslaved by another man's.² Bloom wanted to find ways of thinking his own thoughts free from the neo-classical diction of the academy, and to find ways of thinking which made reading poetry a frankly spiritual activity. He comes closest to defining his aims as a writer and teacher in the earlier book *Agon*, where he describes his hero Emerson as 'an interior orator and not an instructor; a vitalizer and not a historian'. I take this to mean that Emerson was interested primarily in speaking to himself and enabling others to do the same. Consequently Bloom is more likely to appeal to poets than to academics; his best known protégé is the equally uncategorisable Camille Paglia who herself describes him as 'a visionary rabbi'. I think that Bloom has read more deeply in Western Literature, with more love and generosity than any other living reader I know, and he seems unassailably our best critic.

The Western Canon will make Bloom's thought accessible to a much wider audience. It centres on a series of essays on the writers whom Bloom takes to be at the heart of the Canon. Most of those that one would expect to see - Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens and Tolstoy - are there, but there are some surprises, such as Borges, Neruda and the Portuguese poet Pessoa among the moderns. But there is little point in quibbling about who's in and who's out; Bloom happily admits that many others might equally have been included. The overall intention is to take a look at the central figures of our tradition with the aim of clarifying what it means for a writer to be central. Thus, *The Western Canon* can be read on one level as an excellent introduction to Western literature, constantly filling one with a desire to read and reread the works it discusses. But it is also far more than a 'guide to the greats': it is a master-class in imaginative engagement with literature. As such it is deeply exhilarating, though at the same time filled with a deep sadness that the capacity for such engagement is being lost. So far, so inspiring - but Bloom is not an easily assimilable master. What is at issue is not simply the effect that literature has; 'imaginative engagement' implies the encounter between a text and a personality, which in Bloom's case is a powerful and turbulent one. *The Western Canon* is, then, a master-class in how to read with the whole self.

3. Theoretical Background

Bloom shares with post-structuralists a refusal to make a distinction between the 'primary' texts of the canon and the 'secondary' texts of critical writing. But while this can lead others to a reductive reading of the canon which lowers it to their level, Bloom attempts to raise himself to the level of the poet. He started in the fifties and sixties as a prophetic voice speaking in reaction to what he saw as the aridity of New Criticism. In his early books, he was a Romantic critic of the Romantic poets and wrote influential work on Blake, Shelley, Yeats, and others. He saw their poetry as an attempt to give form to a 'visionary' perspective which properly eludes expression. The poetry operates through the intuitive medium of figurative language and, if the critic attempts merely to produce a prosified exegesis, he will miss the point. Worse, he will have put a normalised and rationalised image of the poem in place of the original's radical utterance whose force is to subvert the 'normal' and 'rational'.

² *Jerusalem*, Chapter 1, 10, l.20

Thus Bloom shared the post-structuralist scepticism regarding 'common sense' views of the meaning of texts or their interpretation according to fixed values. Bloom accompanied his Yale colleague Paul de Man in the exploration of sources such as classical rhetoric and psychoanalysis in order to articulate the underlying structures of language which generate textual meaning. For some time Bloom was spoken of as a member of the 'Yale School' of deconstruction. But whereas de Man considered that texts are imprisoned by language and can do no more than iterate the meanings which language imposes, such an approach is entirely alien to Bloom's concern with the experience of literature. In Bloom's writing, linguistic modes may structure thought but they never determine it. Similarly, while a critic may make use of an account of the mind such as Freud's in order to illuminate the texts he is reading, that account can never be more than a metaphor. The critic is then using one metaphor to illuminate another, but neither can be definitive. Even as psychoanalytic terminology became increasingly fashionable among critics under the influence of Lacan, Bloom started to draw his imagery from increasingly diverse sources such as Kabbalah, Gnosticism and from poetry itself.

This approach contrasts abruptly with the Resenters' view that literary works are called great because they bolster the status quo, or the academic conventions and literary categories of more conventional criticism. In *The Western Canon*, Bloom's romanticism finds expression in his sense that great works of literature are always strange, or, in Freud's sense, uncanny. Sitting down to reread *Paradise Lost*, Bloom is overwhelmed by 'the terrifying strangeness of what is being presented' which seems closer to science fiction or literary fantasy than heroic epic. Bloom's Dante contrasts with the tedious classroom version 'so abstrusely learned and so amazingly pious that he can only be fully apprehended by American professors'.³ Like Milton, Dante has the extraordinary audacity to write latter-day Holy Scripture, indeed, a work 'which prefers itself to the Bible'. For Dante, 'the poem is the truth, universal, not temporal'. Finally Dante takes the 'sublimely courageous' step of enthroning Beatrice, his own innamorata, at the pinnacle of heaven. And so continues the outrageous history of literary hubris, through Wordsworth's creation of a poetic *tabula rasa*, whose blankness he fills with memories of the self, through Emily Dickinson's 'reconceptualisation of everything', and down to Kafka's troubled gnosis.

The canon is the product of the most unusual and individual minds in history, and can only be approached by other strong minds. Bloom too enters into the tradition. Perhaps the core of *The Western Canon* is to be found in Bloom's essays on the great essayists, Montaigne, Samuel Johnson and Freud, for all of whom the immediate subject was always an opportunity for reflections on 'general nature', in Johnson's phrase. More broadly, Bloom is fond of invoking the ghosts of eighteenth and nineteenth century critics such as Leigh Hunt, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, men of letters rather than specialists. In this century Bloom identifies himself with just a few critical peers in the highly individual voices of William Empson, G. Wilson Knight, Northrop Frye, and Kenneth Burke. The critic must be as original and powerful a thinker as the writer he is attempting to comprehend. Engagement with a strong text is always an existential affair which asks searching questions of one's capacity to respond, to think through, and to engage.

³ *The Western Canon*, p.80

From the perspective of a right-wing thinker such as Allan Bloom this emphasis on individual reading might sound like relativism - a denial of the absolutes of the Enlightenment project which has traditionally informed the academy - and Harold Bloom has indeed been accused of fostering 'interpretative anarchy'.⁴ But the religious practitioner will understand the difference between the knowledge which arises from living a tradition and that which is merely knowing about it. It is in this sense that Bloom describes himself as an 'aesthetic critic', in the line of Pater and Wilde. He does not mean that literature should be judged in relation to an ideal, such as disembodied beauty, and still less does he advocate a sybaritic indulgence in art. But in asserting 'the autonomy of the aesthetic', Bloom does suggest that art can never be understood according to external criteria, be they ethical, political, religious or anything else. We have to meet art on the terms which art asserts, terms which are in some sense deeply human.

4. The Case of Shakespeare

All this becomes clearer if one considers the case of Shakespeare. He is at the heart of the canon and so many thousands of books have been devoted to him that even specialists find it hard to keep up with the literature relating to just one aspect of his work. But for all this writing, we seem to be no nearer a consensus on how to interpret those thirty eight plays. After all these years, critics still cannot decide whether Shakespeare was a radical republican or a reactionary royalist, a neo-platonist or a materialist, a Christian, or a sceptic. How is it that Shakespeare, who is so accessible that he is performed incessantly across the world, is so impossible to pin down? Surely this mystery at the heart of our culture is worth our full reverence.

Bloom's answer is partly epistemological, deriving as it does from his question: what is it to know literature? But in *The Western Canon* he is also more specific. He starts with the observation that Shakespeare's greatest achievement is the creation of uniquely compelling characters who not only change in the course of the plays, itself an innovation, but have the capacity to change themselves through the power of their inward and reflexive consciousness. Such characters, who are 'free artists of themselves', do not appear as props to a narrative, nor as rhetorical figurations, nor as reflexes of Shakespeare, but as independent beings. We never know what Shakespeare thinks, only what the characters say. Where we may feel inclined to identify characters such as Hamlet or Prospero with Shakespeare, because they possess an authorial shaping consciousness, we often encounter the greatest ambiguity. Herein lies the generative fecundity of Shakespeare, a spiritual force which is stronger than our own ability to interpret.

*Shakespeare... suggested more contexts for explaining us than we are capable of supplying for explaining his characters... (he) so opens his characters to multiple perspectives that they become analytical instruments for judging you.*⁵

⁴ *The Western Canon*, p.4

⁵ *The Western Canon*, p.64

Whatever standpoint we choose from which to understand the greatest Shakespearean characters, we find that, through their capacity for self-investigation, they have got there before us. Critical and theatrical attempts to construct a 'useable' Shakespeare notwithstanding, Bloom insists that 'Shakespeare invented us' through his creation of a new kind of psychological reflexiveness.

Shakespearean inward selves seem to me different to Luther's in kind and not just degree, and different indeed in kind from the entire history of consciousness up to Luther. Hamlet's self-reliance leaps over the centuries and joins itself to Nietzsche's and Emerson's then goes beyond them to their outermost limits and keeps on going beyond ours.⁶

Bloom's approach to Shakespeare is summed up by Emerson who said: 'His mind is the horizon beyond which at present we do not see'.

5. The Anxiety of Influence

The consequence for criticism is that, because we are operating within modes of thought which Shakespeare invented, we cannot find a place to stand from which we can interpret those modes. The consequence for imaginative writers is that they must work within the Shakespearean penumbra. The modern condition is therefore one of belatedness, of coming late in history, at the end of tradition. Belatedness poses intractable questions for the writer. How does one find the creative space to make something new in the world when the halls of imagination are so densely crowded? How can one hear one's own words when the voices which rouse new generations to consciousness sound so loud and so deeply within one?

Bloom describes the consequent perplexities of the aspiring writer as 'The Anxiety of Influence', the title of his most famous theoretical book. The primary project of his career has been to show how, perhaps consciously but certainly unconsciously, new works arise out of an ambivalent relationship with their precursors.

Great writing is always a rewriting or revisionism and is founded on a reading that clears space for the self, or that so works as to reopen old works to our fresh sufferings.⁷

Bloom's critical method seeks out the psychic currents which connect precursors, writers and readers in order to clear fresh space in the tradition for himself, and by extension, for others. We are all belated, coming at the end of as many histories as we have the capacity to imagine, European, American, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or whatever we will. We must fight to make them, in some difficult sense, our own.

The central theme of *The Western Canon* is the effect of the Shakespearean penumbra on all later writers. Bloom describes Milton's Satan as an attempt to come to terms with the imaginative strength of Iago and Edmund. Then again, in the face of the Lacanian

⁶ *The Western Canon*, p.179

⁷ *The Western Canon*, p.11

tradition of Freudian readings of Shakespeare, Bloom offers a Shakespearean reading of Freud in which the elaborate structures of Freud's theory are represented as a conceptualised version of the structures of Shakespearean drama. Pace Freud, Hamlet did not have an Oedipus complex; rather, Freud had a Hamlet complex. Joyce's *Ulysses* is convincingly read virtually as a parable of the whole canonical process: an agon with Shakespeare.

The canon consists of those texts which are cannot be escaped by later generations. You cannot be a creator of characters and pay no heed to Shakespeare. You may not like Shakespeare - as Tolstoy did not - and you may seek to define yourself against him, but his presence demands engagement. The canon is, then, the history of such engagements, and canonical works are those which succeed in absorbing or evading the influence of their precursors. In this way they achieve their own strength and pose a similar challenge to those who come after. Every poet of ambition, every 'thinking soul', must engage with Shakespeare, Dante and Milton - and just a few others - as well as with whichever more recent figures loom nearest and largest. To assert this, Bloom considers, is simply to attest a fact of literary history. We do not choose the canon, and Resenters cannot make it vanish; the canon chooses us.

6. The Experiential Critic

In this engagement one may find oneself. And this is as true for the critic as for the poet. On this subject Bloom has a favourite quote from Wilde's Critic as Artist.

That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul. It is the only civilised form of autobiography as it deals not with the events but with the thoughts of one's life... the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind.

Bloom is now in his sixties and the former, tangled brilliance has given way in mood and style to an autumnal eloquence. *The Western Canon* is haunted by death and by the shortness of time. In an appendix, Bloom lists several hundred books which are his Western Canon. Journalists have diverted themselves with the trivial game of asking 'why did he choose this book, and how could he ignore that one', and so on. But Bloom says clearly that he is not trying to impose his taste on others. His primary concern is the ordering of a life-time's reading. But Bloom engages only in mediated meditations. He contemplates mortality by reading Hamlet and reminds us, and our materialist contemporaries, that we might have occasion to do the same.

'The study of literature, however it is conducted, will not save any individual any more than it will improve society. Shakespeare will not make us better and he will not make us worse, but he may teach us how to overhear ourselves when we talk to ourselves. Subsequently he may teach us how to accept change, in ourselves as in others and perhaps even the final form of change. Hamlet is death's ambassador to us...'

Bloom shares in Tolstoy's celebration of *Hadji Murad* as an 'escape from solipsism'; George Eliot reminds him that selfhood, for all his celebration of it, is never autonomous;

Kafka teaches him grim, paradoxical patience; Montaigne and Dr Johnson are read as 'Wisdom Literature'. In his book-length studies of Yeats and Wallace Stevens, Bloom showed a capacity to engage with astonishing intensity with a poet's mind. That same intensity is to be found here in a diffused form in engagement with a host of minds and with the pattern which they together create.

When English critics follow such an approach, they remain jovial amateurs. Bloom's Jewish intensity and American professionalism have made him its theoretician. A poem cannot be read objectively because it is not an object, and neither is the reader. It may be a metaphor for an object and a metaphor for a mental state, but it cannot be either. For Bloom, a poem is neither an autonomous text existing free of authorial intentionality, nor is it the expression of a state of being which happens to have been transferred to an artistic form. A work of art is a state of being in itself. It is not its expression, but its achievement - a form of gnosis. Poems, plays and novels are like people, whom we may not truly possess, although we may feel that they possess us. To create the figurative language of which literature is comprised is to desire to be greater; it is an expression of the writer's will to power which has designs on the reader. The reader's own desires and own struggles for identity are deeply implicated. We cannot possess a work of art; we can only meet it in an 'intimate and expensive encounter'. It is intimate because it is personal and profound - and expensive, because of the cost to selfhood of exposure to selves so much greater than one's own. And yet to read in the fullest sense is to partake of the literary gnosis:

The self in its quest to be solitary and free ultimately speaks with one aim only: to confront greatness. That confrontation scarcely masks the desire to join greatness to greatness, which is the basis for the aesthetic experience once called the sublime: the quest for the transcendence of limits. Our common fate is age, sickness, death, oblivion. Our common hope, tenuous but persistent, is for some version of survival.⁸

7. Conclusion

In his earlier theoretical work, Bloom, in rethinking our ways of understanding literature, was forced to use a language of arcane concepts and sometimes tortuous vocabulary. But in *The Western Canon*, he writes with a Johnsonian cadence and with the immense gravity and elegance which that implies. Bloom has never wasted time writing about things he did not value, but it is most curious that towards the end of a prolific career, he should reveal himself to be so ardent a Shakespearean. He has, after all, spent that career writing principally about post-Romantic poetry. Perhaps this is because Shakespeare has been the focus of so much feminist, deconstructionist, historicist criticism that he therefore provides the battlefield. Perhaps it is also because Shakespeare himself provides the sturdiest defence. Perhaps the reasons are more purely autobiographical, Shakespeare now providing the most adequate mirror for an ageing man. Perhaps Shakespeare offers the best mirror in which to perceive the canon, or perhaps Shakespeare's consciousness is the one with which Bloom, like the canonical writers, has to reckon, because it has played so great a role in defining his own. However this may be, there is a sense in *The Western Canon*, albeit an elegiac one, of completion, and of return.

⁸ *The Western Canon*, p.524

Another of Bloom's favourite quotes comes from Emerson, who says 'In the greatest writing we recognise our own forgotten thoughts. They return to us with a certain alienated majesty'. Bloom's elegy is a triumph of sorts, for in it he finds himself. Joyce's Stephen says 'We walk through ourselves meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-law, but always meet ourselves'. Joyce quotes Maeterlink, who said 'If Socrates leave his house today he will find the sage seated on his doorstep. If Judas go forth tonight it is to Judas his steps will tend'. A Buddhist thinks of Dogen, who tells us that the self is arrayed as the whole world. But Bloom condenses Stephen's apophthegm to 'I walk through myself meeting the ghost of Shakespeare, but always meeting myself'. As Bloom walks through *The Western Canon*, he meets ghosts and giants a-plenty, but always they turn out to be Shakespeare and always they turn out to be Bloom. How could they be anything else? So greatly does he give himself to his reading, that in his explorations Bloom reveals his own depths. He becomes like Dante, walking through the halls of memory which are simultaneously the halls of eternity, until finally his own imagination is apotheosised in beloved Beatrice at the pinnacle of Paradise. And in engaging with this Bloom's Day journey, one is continually reminded of one's own reading and one's own forgotten thoughts.

Bloom's avowed critical aim is to achieve a form of Criticism which is also a form of Gnosis; and after a week of reading *The Western Canon*, I felt possessed by his cadences, so magisterial and so sad, and the landscape which he reveals had entered my dreams. There is Shakespeare, always forging ahead of us; beside him is dazzling Dante, his own greatest creation, and, all around, the finest company in the world, whose conversation means deep communion with oneself. Bloom's ambition is to enter their ranks alongside Dr Johnson, who, being the ideal reader, often seems like a cipher for Bloom himself:

(he is) everything a great critic should be: he confronts greatness directly with a total response to which he brings his complete self.⁹

Bloom strides beside them with an ancient grandeur, peering anxiously into the encroaching gloom. He walks inside the mind of Freud, which is the mind of our time, just as Freud walks inside the mind of Shakespeare, which is the mind of *The Western Canon*.

I suggest that we could do infinitely worse than follow in the path of Bloom, tracing his course back from *The Western Canon* to his earlier works. What a magnificent irony it would be, if, following Bloom, Western Buddhists, who have looked outside their own culture for guidance, were to become the rightful inheritors of its aesthetic riches by virtue of their powers of resistance to its materialist pre-occupations and its technological distractions. Perhaps Bloom's ideas may even help us to master the traditions we have inherited and to understand the inner logic of their development. What is the Buddhist tradition if it is not a sequence of deeply interconnected creative geniuses? I do not think Bloom will betray our trust, for he is a generous teacher, an interior orator and a vitalizer in the Emersonian mould. Thinking of Bloom, as I often do, I could (perhaps sparing the hyperbole) echo Whitman's tribute to the sage of Concord:

⁹ *The Western Canon*, p.185

The best part of it is, he breeds the giant that destroys itself. Who wants to be any man's mere follower? lurks behind every page. No teacher ever taught that has so provided for his pupils setting up independently - no truer evolutionist.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Walt Whitman, *Specimen Days*, quoted by Harold Bloom in an essay on Emerson in *Agon* (1982, no page reference).