

Genius

Harold Bloom

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The World of Bloom is spanned by a firmament, and that firmament is Shakespeare. And no star on it, however, brilliant, will ever be able to compare with the starry sky as a whole, which is Shakespeare. And under this firmament he has on the autumn of his life set a table, a sumptuous feast, with which to satisfy his whims and indulge his passions. The dishes consists of literary geniuses, exemplars to mankind. The choice, he admits is far from canonical, although luminosities like Homer, Cervantes, Dante, Goethe and Tolstoy can never be excluded, there are lesser ones, whose inclusions are more of the nature of personal whims. But a feast should include in addition to the main staples also lesser dishes as a contrast as well as to present the incredible variety of literature. One hundred exemplary individuals, which means that although the book is thick with more than eight hundred pages, each personage only gets a few fluttering pages, allowing only the briefest hints and the focusing of a few aspects. For the great this is clearly inadequate, but even the most marginal achievements of the great are sources for wonder and awe; for the less than very great this could be enough. Bloom is clearly skimming. One game that he plays with gusto is that of comparisons. In a sense he presents a huge graph, the vertices being the geniuses, the edges their relationships. Once in a while a genius is allowed to briefly be reflected in the glory of Shakespeare, the ultimate divinity. Any such comparison, if such a portentous word is even appropriate, inevitably comes out the advantage of the ultimate bard. But even the brief cohabition in the same train of thought is a privilegue not to be dismissed lightly.

Most of the geniuses chosen are known to us all, there are exceptions, mabye ten or so out of the chosen hundred, that are obscure; most of those being taken from Spain and Portugal. The English predominate, more than half belong to that sphere, then there are French, Italian, Russians, and Germans. A few classical Greek, and than of course the Latin tongues and their imperialistic descendants, in addition to a lone Norwegian, a lone Dane and a lone Japanese lady, whose identities should be obvious. Many are poets, some of whom Bloom really personally loves, like Crane, others whom he hates or at least detests, like T.S.Eliot (made rather impossible by his anti-semitic slurs). It is a feast and the conversation is thus not always profound, light chatter is at a premium, frivolous associations, low mumbles and grumbles of the general decline in liberal education. His taste is catholic, including the Hebrew Bible and the Koran of Muhammed, and his treatment of Dickinson and Whitman definitely whets your appetite. He is less felicitious in his treatment of the novelists, at least those generally known, like Tolstoy and Dickens, to which he has really little to add. He is better, or at least more useful, when presenting the little known, like the Portuguese and Spanish bards. Borges is a man to his taste, a dish made out perfect, and so to some extent is Blake, another of his personal favourites. To treat Freud as an essayist might have scandalized the old sage, but clearly, after psychoanalysis has been discredited as a scientific discipline, what remains? True, had Freud not stroven for the

ultimate, he would have been much less interesting.

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