

## The Western Canon

*H.Bloom*

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Shakespeare is God and Bloom is his prophet. Shakespeare is the firmament against which the Western literary Canon is judged and set under. To the Canon only the most original authors admit access, and the ultimate in accolades is to be compared to Shakespeare, and invariably will be shown short. Whatever a writer can do, Shakespeare has already done and better, much better to boot. (This has to of course be modified for people chronologically ahead of Shakespeare and who then can earn the rare epithet of being precursors to the great bard, but they are few.) The criteria for Bloom are strict aesthetic ones. Beauty and originality are what counts, politics and moral models are completely irrelevant. Literature has no applications, it does not make you a better individual, pace what many people try to profess in an attempt to plead its cause. Literature is its own reward and knows nothing that justifies it. It is not a bridge to something else, it is itself, only the pleasure of reading is what counts; and Bloom is above all a devoted reader, in fact not only that, but an exuberant one, who over and over again returns and rereads the great works. The contemporary craze for putting literature into some wider moral or political context (and of course politics is ultimately moral as morality is ultimately a matter of politics) be it feminist, (pseudo) Marxist, neo-conservative, is totally beside the point, yet of course, they will no doubt erode the love of literature which justifies its presence in universities of liberal learning and replace it with all kinds of so called multi-cultural studies, something Bloom fears with a mixture of despair and disdain. The present canon may no longer be recognized as such and authors we love to read will fade into obscurity and drown into oblivion. Bloom stands up for canonical values, he believes in God and is not shy of asserting it against this backdrop of the literature of resentment and the academic import of French discursive analysis, the ultimate purpose of which is to deconstruct reading to a futile exercise in meaninglessness. Bloom loves to read and will go on reading until he dies, which he actually did<sup>1</sup>. Yet for all his protestations of purity, when it comes down to it, his appreciation of literature is not as purely aesthetic as he wants to believe. It is not just abstract beauty that motivates his enormous appetite for reading, because literature is not just formal strings of words and letters, but one deeply connected with meaning; and meaning resides in a shared human consciousness, of revealing the deeper layers of the human condition. This is why he is so stricken by Shakespeare, because he more than anyone else before and after him, has been able to create living characters, characters that reveal human emotions and illuminate the human predicament, more than anyone else. Literature is about dipping into a collective unconsciousness. Bloom certainly would not have been happy with such a characterization coming from Jung; although an admirer of Freud, not as a scientist - he holds psycho-analysis to be bogus science - but as one of the great essayists of Western culture. Freud in his opinion is holding up well with Montaigne

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<sup>1</sup> Died a few days after his last class held in October 2019

and both get their dues in his review.

To Bloom authors are his friends and he carries on a continuous dialogue between them in the form of monologues of fancy of which he is the only conscious member. He loves to see connections and how authors invariably are influenced by each other, even when they resent it, fight against it, and try to deny it. This is inevitable, all Western writers share a common culture and awareness and they all live under the sky of Shakespeare. Bloom famous or notorious for his book on the anxiety of influence essentially holds that literature is a case of creative plagiarism.

Literary criticism is often a rather dry and tedious matter, more often than not written in pretentious jargon in a vain attempt to compete with science in technical sophistication. In the case of Bloom we are met with an overflowing exuberance which is contagious and makes you really want to read those authors he describes with such barely contained enthusiasm in an orgy of associations flowing in a stream of consciousness. Literature is about reading and enjoying reading, nothing less nothing more. One imagines that the stage for Bloom is not the small academic seminar but the public lecture hall reaching out to large audiences of liberal arts students eager for instruction and entertainment. Bloom is not so much concerned with reasoning as with performing.

Bloom distinguishes four stages of Western literature namely the Theocratic age, concerned with Classical antiquity and which he basically passes over, followed by the Aristocratic Age, the Democratic Age and finally the contemporary Chaotic Age where judgments are harder to make because of both the proximity in time as well as in production. How to sort the wheat from the chaff? But those chaotic times in which we live will soon end, Bloom prophesies, to be replaced by a new Theocratic age, whatever that will mean and entail.

The book starts with Shakespeare. That makes sense. Every writer of any merit is compared to Shakespeare as noted. He sets the standards. Most of the discussion on Shakespeare concerns Hamlet, the most intelligent fictional character ever. But also Macbeth and King Lear get their fair share of attention. The tragedies are what Shakespeare ultimately is all about, but that does not mean that the comedies are second rate. Nothing about Shakespeare is second rate. No one but Shakespeare created so many memorable characters. One of them is Falstaff who has the privilege of occurring in many different plays. He is a comic figure, but not only that, he might, with the exception of Hamlet, be the most memorable character in Shakespeare. Larger than life. Intelligent and witty and above all petty social conventions, such as heroism and courage. Who cares about such things? Not Falstaff. Just being is the main thing. Who taught Shakespeare to conceive of a character such as Falstaff? Chaucer, is the answer according to Bloom. Chaucer belongs to the canon as well. And the wife of Bath is his supreme creation which showed the way to Shakespeare. Dante is another of the giants of the Canon, almost as great as Shakespeare. Almost, but of course not quite, in fact short by a long shot. When you speak about Dante you speak about the Divine Comedy, a must read, just as Don Quixote is a must read. I have so far read neither, not the Canterbury tales either; but of course Bloom whets my appetite. Don Quixote is a meta book, and had I read it as a child I surely would have been greatly charmed by that. The book comes in two parts, and the second is even better than the first. There is one great Englishman - the Bard, also a great Italian that stands

out, as well as a great Spaniard. What about a German? There is an obvious answer namely Goethe. No one cares about Goethe outside of Germany any longer Bloom claims, but he is unable to ignore him. Goethe is more charming than his books. The pleasure of reading a book by Goethe, he seems to indicate, lies in knowing it is a book by Goethe. It has been noted that there is hardly any human being of whom more is known than that of Goethe, Bloom quotes a biographer - Nicholas Boyle - yes everything Goethe wrote was autobiographical. And Boyle seems to know everything about Goethe; and all of it seems to matter, Bloom sighs. Goethe loved himself, and no one else of course. He created a culture, but not as a beginning but as an end. He lives on through those scholars who feast on the dead. Goethe a perennial autobiographical writer. Including Faust too?

The second half of Faust is one of the most peculiar books there is. It better be, admission to the canon is only allowed by being strange and like no one else. To make a mathematical metaphor, literature is a convex set, and those in the canon are those who span it. The extremal points so to speak which have something to offer that no one else has. Faust was the life work of Goethe. He spent at least sixty years of his life writing it. Bloom devotes a lot of attention to it. He may not be a fan of Goethe, but as noted he cannot ignore him, and Faust II (forget about Faust I) intrigues him. But of course Faust is good because it is Shakespearean in scope. Maybe written as a parody, although Goethe would never have admitted that. He has an obvious Shakespear complex and would rather not admit of his influence.

Samuel Johnson was the foremost critic, in fact the most canonical critic, who ever lived according to Bloom, who gives him high marks for having realized the greatness of Shakespeare and contributed to his revival. To Johnson, the fidelity to nature was the great gift of the bard. His characters are general, however individual and idiosyncratic they may appear, because they embody some universal features to whom audiences can relate. Johnson was obsessed with death, of the prospects of annihilation. The idea that annihilation was a dreamless sleep was not for him.

[Death] *is neither pleasing, nor sleep, it is nothing. Now mere existence is so much better than nothing, that one would rather exist even in pain, than not exist.*

Yes, some of us can sympathize, yet Johnson eventually ended up dead, in spite of his intense aversion to the state.

Freud is a master essayist, as noted, but a Freudian take on Shakespeare is rather uninteresting, far more interesting to make a Shakespearean reading of Freud. The style of Bloom is to make continual cross-references between the authors he admires and adores, and then every so often make yet another reference to Shakespeare that seems just to have popped up in his mind.

Emily Dickinson and Jane Austen are hailed as the most intelligent writers. In the case of Austen for her wit, her irony and and subtle observation of social mores. Nothing escapes the penetrating eyes of that sharp mind. Dickinson too, is lauded for her insights presented in terse poems, to which Bloom brings his utmost ingenuity to decipher and unfold. Love is not a feeling, Dickinson once remarked, it is continually put to the test. We do not say about pain, that it was not true pain, because it passed away so quickly. The kind of poetry written by Dickinson seems to be almost entirely without any rhetorical

flourishing, but present the reader and interpreter with technical challenges, as far as I can see. Poetry as crossword puzzles.

Whitman is no Shakespeare, who is? Neither is he a Dante nor a Milton, but compares well with Goethe and Wordsworth and belongs to the center of the American canon. As to Victorian novels of the 19th century we have Dickens and Eliot. Dickens creates a universe of lively characters, second to none but the canonical Shakespeare. Bloom puts Dickens above Tolstoy, much to my (and other readers?) surprise. The central work by Dickens is 'Bleak House' and as to Tolstoy, he dwells on neither on 'War and Peace' nor on 'Anna Karenina' but on the short Caucasian novel 'Hadji Murad' in which his mastery is most pronounced and which surprisingly has had renewed relevance due to the instability of the region and terrorism. In particular he brings up the death scene. Both Goethe and Tolstoy are egotists, but with a difference. Goethe was in love with himself, while Tolstoy was full of himself (is there really such a difference?). Bloom brings up Gorky's wonderful book 'Reminiscences dealing with his encounters with Tolstoy and Chekhov which I read a long time ago and which made quite an impression on me. In this Tolstoy wants God to make one single exception to the inevitable death, and the exception should be to him of course.

Ibsen is not a social moralist, even if he is often depicted as such, but very weird. Bloom makes striking parallels between the characters of Ibsen's plays and Shakespeare, and warns against taking characters as Hedda Gabler as victims of social mores. Whatever society, someone like her would be strange. Bloom does not spend very much time on the modern plays, for which Ibsen is known, but on Peer Gynt, as probably being much more original and strange than the others.

Kafka is not a religious writer but turned writing into a religion. Kafka is best at fragments, he could not sustain an epic like Joyce and Proust. The center of Kafka is the notion of the 'indestructible' which resides in every human being. Proust is to be remembered for his penetrating study of jealousy. Virginia Woolf, his nodding to feminism, is above all a passionate reader and Bloom is somewhat taken by 'Orlando'. Borges ambition was to destroy reality, but that was too tall an order even for Shakespeare. Bloom finds that the work of Borges lacks variety, but, one presumes, what he does, he does well. But maybe he was too calculated in his writing. Incidentally Borges had a poor view of Freud and preferred Jung. His precursor was de Quincey.

More writes passes review, but the above may be a representative sample of those treated and how they are treated, namely constantly being pitted against each other, emphasizing contrasts and similarities.

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