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THE LEGITIMACY OF A WESTERN CANON

Harold Bloom's book *The Western Canon*, published in 1994, is by general consent a vulnerable achievement. Its author was over the hill at the time he wrote it, and one may be tempted to say that it contains very little what the reader could not find in the earlier works of this highly prolific, self-repetitive, and overrated critic. Many comparative scholars would go as far as saying that the distinction between a Western canon and what is loosely called world literature cannot hold at the end of the twentieth century.

Although I have grave reservations about the merits of *The Western Canon*, my intention is not to point to its rather obvious weaknesses but to examine the dangers imminent in a canonical view of literature.

All architects of the canon select their material in reaction against their predecessors. As is well known, Bloom's ambition was to undermine the conception of T. S. Eliot and the New Critics. There are surprisingly few references to them in the pages of *The Western Canon*. One of the exceptions is a statement suggesting Bloom's awareness that the value of his outline history of Western literature could be questioned from the perspective of New Criticism. "My late teacher, William K. Wimsatt, used to take grim pleasure in my accounts of my Dickinson seminars, which confirmed (he said) my status as a monument to what he had termed the Affective Fallacy" (296).

Bloom's position is in contradiction with the legacy of New Criticism at least in four aspects. He seems to value Romanticism more than any other literary current; he often translates verse into prose; he is fond of relying on biography, which he regards as indistinguishable from interpretation; and he never refrains from using his individual and strongly emotional response to literary works as a point of reference. The last among these factors is the main reason why his selection seems vulnerable. His value-judgements tend to be arbitrary, because his arguments are either cryptic or insufficient. On some occasions he talks pure sentiment (or rather, impure sentiment),

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like amateurs. One of the numerous examples of this is his statement that “the rhapsodic fiction of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is now unreadable” (454).

The analysis of the principles underlying his selection can show an obvious self-contradiction. In the chapter on *Middlemarch* it is admitted that George Eliot “is not a great stylist” (320), and a similar ambiguity can be detected in the following generalization about twentieth-century literature: “Except for Neruda and Pessoa, the poets of the era are not here: Yeats, Rilke, Valéry, Trakl, Stevens, Eliot, Montale, Mandelstam, Lorca, Vallejo, Hart Crane, and so many others. I myself would rather read poems than novels or plays, yet it seems clear that even Yeats, Rilke, and Stevens are less fully expressive of the age rather than are Proust, Joyce and Kafka” (447). The point I wish to make is not that Bloom is using a double standard. It is more important to realize that by abandoning the aesthetic standpoint, he comes close to the attitude of the middle-aged T. S. Eliot, which Bloom rejects as conservative. In 1935 the American-born poet-critic gave a definition of the canonical status that is in harmony with the main hypothesis of *The Western Canon*: “The ‘greatness’ of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards, though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards” (Eliot 1962: 617).

All canons are defined from the defensive perspective of preserving values. The architect of the canon cannot help opposing his/her own age. That explains Bloom’s attack on trends influential at the end of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, Bloom finds himself in a situation similar to that of the New Critics: he is defending the autonomy of literature against the spokesmen of social utopia. New historicism and the psychoanalytic approach to literature are harshly criticized: “‘Shakespeare makes history’ seems to me a more useful formula than ‘history makes Shakespeare’. [...] A political reading of Shakespeare is bound to be less interesting than a Shakespearean reading of politics, just as a Shakespearean reading of Freud is more productive than Freudian reductions of Shakespeare” (283). No less clear is Bloom’s distrust of feminism: “Half a century after Woolf’s death, she has no rivals among women novelists or critics, though they enjoy the liberations she prophesied” (436). Any skepticism concerning the legitimacy of a Western canon is condemned as destructive, since it is taken for granted that axiological relativism is dangerous. “The movement misnamed ‘multiculturalism’, which is altogether anti-intellectual and anti-literary, is removing from the curriculum most works which present imaginative and cognitive difficulties, which means most of the canonical books” (422). The tone of the final chapter, characteristically called “Elegiac Conclusion”, is defensive. Emerson, Walter Pater, and Wilde are praised and some German and French critics rejected. Only one of those criticized is mentioned by name. Although the reference to Paul de Man could be explained in terms of the political scandal caused by the publication of the Flemish-born author’s war-time journalism, for our purposes it is more relevant to remind ourselves of the Man’s insistence on the necessity of de(con)structing cultural canons. “Despite its irresistible tendency toward canon formation”, he wrote, “literature is noncanonical, the critique or, if you wish, the deconstruction of canonical models” (de Man 1993, 191).

The defensive tone is perceptible from the very beginning in Bloom's work. "I wish to explain the organization of this book," he writes in the "Preface and Prelude", "and to account for my choice of these twenty-six writers from among the several hundreds in what once was considered to be the Western Canon" (1). The value judgement which serves as the basis for the selection is not made from some international perspective but from the perspective of national cultures, which is tentatively supplemented by generic considerations: "I have tried to represent national canons by their crucial figures: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Dickens for England; Montaigne and Molière for France; Dante for Italy; Cervantes for Spain; Tolstoy for Russia; Goethe for Germany; Borges and Neruda for Hispanic America; Whitman and Dickinson for the United States. The sequence of major dramatists is here: Shakespeare, Molière, and Beckett; and of novelists: Austen, Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoy, Proust, Joyce, and Woolf. Dr. Johnson is here as the greatest of Western literary critics; it would be difficult to find his rival" (2).

Few would quarrel with Bloom's assumption that Shakespeare is the central author of the canon, but the treatment of most national literatures is coloured by the fact that at the end of the twentieth century English has the status of the language of international communication. Bloom seems to regard French as the second most important national literature. In his view its relative inferiority is caused by the lack of a central figure. "There appears to be no single figure in French literature who is at the center of the national canon: no Shakespeare, no Dante, Goethe, Cervantes, Pushkin, Whitman" (146). Even more puzzling is the handling of German letters. Chapter 9 starts with the following reservation: "Of all the strongest Western writers, Goethe now seems the least available to our sensibility. I suspect that this distance has little to do with how badly his poetry translates into English. Hölderlin translates poorly also, but his appeal to most of us dwarfs Goethe's" (203). After such an unfavourable remark the reader may find somewhat surprising not only the statement that "*Faust, Part Two* is the central work of European Romanticism" (220) but also the exclusion of Hölderlin from the Western canon.

Similar inconsistencies abound in the rest of the book. In the Appendices long texts of the ancient Near East and India are included, while the justification of the absence of Chinese literature from the list of recommended readings is rather questionable: "The immense wealth of ancient Chinese literature is mostly a sphere apart from Western literary tradition and is rarely conveyed adequately in the translations available to us" (531). The provincialism of such a conception becomes apparent if we remember that *The March of Literature*, a book by Ford Madox Ford, comparable in scope and length to *The Western Canon*, published in 1938, gives a respectful analysis of the texts associated with the names of Lao-Tsze and Confucius, the poetry of Chu-Yuan, Li-(T'ai)-Po, and Po-Chu-I, with the help of translations by Arthur Waley and Ezra Pound. It is difficult to understand why Bloom failed to acknowledge the influence of Chinese and Japanese culture on the literary avant-garde.

This last example is of special importance in view of the critic's insistence that canonicity depends on influence, an argument made in such earlier books by the same critic as *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *The*

Strong Light of the Canonical (1987), and *Poetics of Influence* (1988). The statement that “really strong poets can read only themselves” (Bloom 1972, 19) is repeated in the opening section of *The Western Canon*: “There can be no strong, canonical writing without the process of literary influence [...]. Any strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts. [...] Strong writers do not choose their prime precursors, they are chosen by them” (8, 11).

Among the manifestations of canonicity is the impact of Dante on Chaucer, the influence of Chaucer on Shakespeare, and the interest taken by Dostoevsky in Shakespeare. *The Borderers* and *The Prelude* are interpreted as rewritings of *Othello* and Milton. George Eliot’s canonical status is explained in terms of intertextuality: “*Silas Marner* returns us to *The Ruined Cottage*, ‘Michael’, ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’ – to the vision of pastoral man and woman as a primordial good” (321). The same criterion is used in the selection of twentieth-century works: Kafka relies on Dickens, *Ulysses* gives an interpretation of the *Odyssey* and *Hamlet*, and *Finnegans Wake* is viewed as a recreation of works by Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll, Swift, and Richard Wagner. Quotation goes together with anticipation: Dickinson’s forty-one-word-long text *From Blank to Blank...* borrows from Milton’s sonnet on blindness and Coleridge’s *Dejection: An Ode* and foreshadows poems by Stevens and Celan. Inspiration also involves alienation: Beckett decided to write in French to escape from the influence of Joyce. Parody is regarded as a possible constitutive rule of canon formation: the first part of *Faust* parodies Shakespeare, the final choruses of the second part of the same tragedy represent an ironical reading of Dante’s *Paradiso*, whereas *Peer Gynt* is a rewriting of *Henry IV* and a parody of *Faust II*.

The emphasis on intertextuality involves a focus on translation. All texts are quoted in English, but translators are always mentioned by name. No text written in other languages can belong to the canon which has not found a significant English translator. Such poets as Shelley, Celan, Borges, and Neruda are given special attention because of their translations of Dante, Dickinson, and Whitman.

One of the remarkable features of *The Western Canon* is Bloom’s reluctance to restrict the definition of influence to a literal sense. “Molière evidently knew nothing of Shakespeare, yet *Alceste* in *The Misanthrope* evokes Hamlet. Ibsen most certainly knew Shakespeare, and *Hedda Gabler* is a worthy descendant of *Iago*” (187). This observation suggests that the canon is considered to be an institution of historical nature. A similar flexibility characterizes the following observation: “There is a sense in which ‘the canonical is always the ‘intercanonical’, because the Canon not only results from a contest but is itself an ongoing contest” (54). The problem is that this principle is not observed consistently. Whenever Bloom draws inspiration from such critics of international perspective as Auerbach, Curtius, Hugo Friedrich, Ortega y Gasset, Spitzer, Ramón Fernández, or such Anglo-American scholars as Kenneth Burke, Empson, Northrop Frye, and Wilson Knight, he succeeds in making valuable comparative remarks. On other occasions, however, he seems to give up the ideal formulated in the title of his book and resorts to a double standard. The assessment of the significance of Whitman can be taken as an example: “I suspect that to center a national canon is to guarantee a perpetual currency within a language, but that an

eminence beyond a particular language is very rare as a permanent phenomenon. Whitman may yet fade abroad, though never, I think, in these states" (284). A similar inconsistency can be felt in the overall assessment of the American legacy; the ambition to establish an international canon is thwarted by parochialism: "there is no question who has had the largest influence, at home and abroad. Eliot and Faulkner may be Whitman's nearest rivals in their effect upon other writers, but they are not of his almost worldwide significance. Dickinson and James may have an aesthetic eminence equal to Whitman's, but they cannot compete with his universality. American literature abroad is always, in the first place, Whitman, whether it be in Spanish-speaking America, Japan, Russia, Germany, or Africa. Here I want only to note Whitman's influence on two poets, D. H. Lawrence and Pablo Neruda" (288).

There is a fundamental contradiction in Bloom's approach: on the one hand, he views all other literatures from the angle of the English-speaking community, on the other hand, he tries to look at his own culture from the outside. The two perspectives undermine the teleology borrowed from Vico.

There are two conclusions one can draw from the failure of the American critic. First, it is almost certain that no architect of the canon can escape from the spatial limitations of his situation. For Bloom those works are of lasting value which are available in some English translation that he believes to be acceptable. It is highly improbable that the linguistic division of the world can be ignored in such a simple manner. The other reason for the questionable legitimacy of a Western canon is the constant revaluation of works. The defender of the canon intends to raise his present to the rank of the eternal. The mutability of values belongs to the mode of existence of all art. It affects even fields which lack the diversity of languages. One of the versions of *Christ Before Pilate*, painted by Mihály Munkácsy in 1881, was bought by John Wanamaker for 150,000 U. S. Dollars, the equivalent of nearly 2 million one hundred years later. In 1988 the same painting was sold for 60,000 (Lukacs 1988, 6–7). Within less than half a century the painter(s) known as Van Eyck has/have been the cheapest old master(s) and very nearly the dearest. In 1872 the price of *The Three Mairies At the Sepulchre* was 336 British pounds, in 1940 it was 225,00 pounds (Reitlinger 1982, 306). Numerous other examples could show that it is a misconception to believe in the constancy of aesthetic values.

All canons lose their legitimacy at the moment they are established. Although the reception of works of art is inseparable from canonicity, understanding means the destruction of the existing canons. This ambiguity is closely tied to the historical nature of art and literature. Reading involves the rejection of the canons we have inherited from our predecessors. That is why literary history has to be constantly rewritten. As a Portuguese critic wrote in a recent article, "Nations, history, and literature alike appear, like ghosts, literally *by mistake*, that is, through revision" (Tamen 1998, 304).

The fundamental weakness of *The Western Canon* resides in Bloom's outmoded approach to history: his chronological, linear, and Eurocentric concept of progress fails to do justice to the heterogeneity and discontinuity of cultures. The long list of works, presented as an appendix, has a hit-or-miss appearance, because the criterion

underlying the selection, the accessibility of English translations, is insufficient if we have not a source- but a target-oriented view of intertextuality. Bloom seems to ignore the difficult yet fundamental questions whether national literatures are equivalent, and whether the classifying concepts (those of genres and periods or movements) used by Western scholars are applicable to non-Western cultures. These two questions have to be answered by comparative scholars in the future.

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