

The End of Literature?

Harold Bloom, The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1994

Reviewed by David Parker

HAROLD BLOOM, Professor of English at Yale University and lover of the great canonical books, now adds his own elegaic voice to the chorus sounding the end of literature as a discipline. For Bloom, the cultural centre simply has not held. The electronic age of hypertext and virtual reality, combined with 'universal television and the University of Resentment', all form one 'rough beast' slouching towards a future that will 'cancel the literary canon once and for all' (p.310). The bulk of the students who used to take English, even at an elite university such as Yale, are now ill-equipped to do the reading and are in any case undisposed to make the intellectual effort required to come to terms with the finest and most complex artefacts of Western civilisation. Increasingly, these students will go to Cultural Studies, leaving university Departments of English, havens for those few academics who still love literature, to shrink to the size of today's Departments of Classics.

There is much that is true and admirable in this *cri de coeur*. Bloom's passion for those writers who matter to him, especially Shakespeare and Dante, makes its own argument as to why they might continue to matter for all of us. After reading and rereading these authors for 50 years, Bloom can still demonstrate with much vividness the ways in which they never cease to impress him with their great linguistic energy and power of invention. In doing so, he reminds us why it is reductive to see Shakespeare's plays merely as sites for circulating 'social energies' in the manner of the New Historicists — as if *Hamlet* or *King Lear* could have been written by Shakespeare's contemporaries, Beaumont and Fletcher. Bloom gives a timely reminder that we cannot do without the concept of the genius, the great individual whose creative power is partly responsible for the ways in which we now see ourselves.

It is a mark of what is so resistantly and quirkily individual about Bloom himself that he flings such deeply unfashionable insights in the faces of those who, according to him, deeply resent individual greatness: that is, the various New Historicists, feminists, neo-Marxists and other purveyors of political correctness whose will is to destroy the canon by extending it to include writers from previously under-represented groups and sub-cultures. Against them, and against those who defend the canon as a repository of ethical wisdom, Bloom upholds a view that is at once Nietzschean and Wildean. Writers are ever locked in a competitive *agon* with their predecessors: the weak are merely imitative, whereas the great writer is strong enough to break through into individual vision, by which we are enabled to see the world anew. All that matters about great art is its newness, its strangeness, which is

to say its beauty. Beauty is useless. It simply exists for those increasingly rare individuals with the capacity to appreciate it. In fact, the 'solitary reader' to whom Bloom is addressing himself in *The Western Canon* will have some of the strong individuality of the great writer and of the great critic.

One question that this sort of argument will raise for those outside English departments is why universities and their stakeholders should support such an enterprise at all. Why should the aesthetic matter to most of us? And what, on Bloom's account, would be lost if the teaching of the Western canon ceased, and the solitary reader was simply left to get on with it in private? In other words, the institutional study of literature is brought back to where it was at its beginning late last century, needing to battle against the view that it is a self-indulgence and not a discipline at all. With so many new enemies to fight, Bloom exposes the throat of literary studies to the old ones as well.

Bloom's position is in fact unsustainable, and not simply because it is impolitic. For one thing, it is reductive in the extreme to present feminists, Afro-Americanists, post-colonialists and others as motivated purely by resentment of the great dead white males. As Charles Taylor (1994) reminds us in his recent seminal essay 'The Politics of Recognition', what is at stake for them is that the relative exclusion of certain groups and cultures from the canon implies a demeaning picture of them, as if all creative individuality resided in one gender, race and class. Since identity is dialogical, forged by recognition, then the struggle for freedom and equality must entail, at very least, a very long and hard look at what the traditional literary canon includes and excludes. The argument that the aesthetic realm is autonomous, or an individual rather than a social concern, is not simply unfashionable but almost wilfully misconceived.

Of course, wilful misconception, or 'strong misreading', is what Bloom's brand of competitive individualism is all about. At best, it makes a neglected side of the truth stand out. But at worst it comes across as a mere anxiety of influence: a determination to be individual at any price, even if it means cutting potentially strong ground from under his own feet. Throughout the book, Bloom is caught up in his own agonistic struggle to differentiate himself from those who have argued that the great authors matter because their work is in some sense wise or morally profound. This school is represented by a wide spectrum of recent commentators ranging from that other Bloom, Allan, author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, to much more substantial figures like Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth.

Instead of expressing a degree of fellowship with these labourers in the same vineyard, Bloom studiously ignores them. Insofar as he represents the drift of their thought, he is dismissive and reductive. To say that reading 'the very best writers . . . is not going to make us better citizens' (p.16) is to distort the issue beyond recognition, as if someone were seriously claiming that reading Shakespeare, Dante and Tolstoy would make us more inclined to pay our taxes.

The same kind of preoccupation with strong individualism colours Bloom's account of individual canonical writers. Dr Johnson is presented as the greatest critic in the language, but it is a Johnson stripped of some of his defining character-

istics. There is little in Bloom's account about the neo-classicist who was so much focused on the power of literature to instruct. For Johnson, the ethical dimension was fundamental: 'We are perpetually moralists', he once said, 'but we are geometricians only by chance'. Instead, Bloom's readers are offered an embattled individualist who presents himself 'as a kind of general challenger, whom everyone has a right to attack'. Johnson thus exhibits a 'canonical sense of literature as *agon* . . .' (pp.185-6). This is not untrue, but leaves a feeling that the needle has got stuck again in the familiar groove.

What I found myself longing for in Bloom, in fact, is one of the very canonical qualities he upholds in Dr Johnson, the capacity to 'push aside his own ideologies' (p.197) as Johnson does when he confronts Falstaff in Shakespeare's play, a figure of whom he should disapprove: 'But Falstaff unimitated, unimitable Falstaff, how shall I describe thee?'. Here Johnson shows the capacity to be so arrested by the sheer strangeness and otherness of this created human being that he himself breaks through his habitual neo-classical cast of mind. I would call this quality in Johnson a moral one. It is closely allied to the capacity to leave the preoccupations of ego behind and to attend intensely to another human being, in the way Iris Murdoch so memorably describes in *The Sovereignty of Good*. Where the capacity for such attention is lacking, creative writing becomes mere grist to the critic's solipsistic mill, and criticism itself becomes a form of endless autobiography. But then this is something that a Wildean may not be troubled by.

Reference

Taylor, C. (1994), 'The Politics of Recognition', pp.25-73 in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

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