



Bloom, Harold. The Western Canon [review]

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book that has not had the impact it might have had, in large part because of the complexity of the editorial presentation of Whitman's bewildering profusion of manuscripts leading to the 1860 *Leaves*. Scholars who have puzzled over Bowers's transcriptions and explanations will appreciate the straightforward presentation of the facsimiles in the *Archive*, where we can actually witness the astounding transformations as Whitman shapes the "Calamus" and "Children of Adam" clusters.

A good portion of the *Archive* is dedicated to the reprinting of Whitman's corrected proof sheets and printer's copies for various editions of *Leaves*. These are generally of less interest than the manuscripts, but they do document Whitman's obsessive reworking of punctuation in his poetry, including his shifts of dashes to commas and (in 1881) his widespread deletion of semicolons. In the printer's copy for the 1881-82 *Leaves*, for example, we can see Whitman's careful fine-tuning of the remarkable punctuation in "A Noiseless Patient Spider," as he removes commas and gives his lines a more seamless flow.

The Walt Whitman Archive is a fine addition to the resources for study of Whitman. Garland Publishing, through its facsimile series, has for years been making available to all libraries the research materials previously accessible only in one place. Myerson's large selection of Whitman materials finally whets, rather than satisfies, the scholarly appetite: I find myself wanting more of the materials from the libraries included, and I would like to see more collections represented. But it is wonderful to have these two thousand pages where before there was nothing. It is impossible to tell just what effect these volumes will have on Whitman scholarship, but it is safe to say that their impact will soon be felt and will be significant and long lasting.

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HAROLD BLOOM. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York, San Diego, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994. 578 pp. \$29.95.

The title is deliberately combative: *The Western Canon*. There are enemies out there, and Professor Bloom knows who they are: "Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians"—all of whom Bloom gathers under the contentious epithet, "the School of Resentment." (Another version of the list includes "Afrocentrists" as well.) In this age of multicultural pluralism, Professor Bloom finds degeneracy rampant and loss pervasive. "We are," he asserts, "destroying all intellectual and aesthetic standards in the humanities and social sciences, in the name of social justice."

Bloom admits defeat. Ideology has triumphed, and the glories of great literature are becoming rare pastimes for the fortunate few. Nevertheless, Bloom defends aesthetic values even as they succumb to ideological attack. Asserting "the autonomy of imaginative literature and the sovereignty of the solitary soul" against those "who believe that literary study should be an overt crusade for social change," Bloom, following his master, Emerson (and after him, Pater and Wilde), puts the individual firmly at the center, arguing that

“the individual self is the only method and the whole standard for apprehending aesthetic value.” Thus it follows: “to read in the service of any ideology is not . . . to read at all.”

While Bloom’s contentious comments will attract attention, they should not obscure the true nature of *The Western Canon*, which is elegiac rather than polemic. At age 64, Bloom surveys a lifetime’s vast reading and chooses for discussion twenty-six authors from Dante to Beckett who have enriched his days; he calls them back on stage for one last bow before the curtain falls and the theater darkens. An eloquent testimony to the power of literary art in one man’s life, *The Western Canon* is a work of loving enthusiasm and lively intelligence, filled with flashes of illuminating insight. It might better have been given a title like *My Great Books*; but then it would not be selling so many copies.

Of the twenty-six authors featured in *The Western Canon*, many of the choices are obvious and unexceptionable (Dante, Chaucer, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, etc.), but there are a few oddities, such as the inclusion of only two poets of the twentieth century, Neruda and, more controversially, Pessoa. (Borges is on the list, but as a writer of fictions rather than as a poet.) Thirteen of the twenty-six wrote in English; two are American: Whitman and Dickinson. They join Wordsworth as the only post-Miltonic poets of the English language to be included.

Both Whitman and Dickinson are accorded high praise. “No Western poet,” Bloom asserts, “in the past century and a half, not even Browning or Leopardi or Baudelaire, overshadows Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson”—a claim so apparently important it is rephrased on the following page, where Bloom writes, “Nothing in the second half of the nineteenth century or in our now almost completed century matches Whitman’s work in direct power and sublimity, except perhaps for Dickinson.” The repetition is symptomatic of the problems with the Whitman chapter in *The Western Canon*. It seems to have been done in haste; the need for further revision is felt throughout. While the chapter is, like the book itself and Bloom’s work in general, well worth reading, if only for its isolated perceptions, it nevertheless provides a telling example of that classic genre of freshman composition, the essay in search of a theme.

Professor Bloom has much to say—perhaps too much. He races around the warehouse of his well-stocked mind, rapidly pulling items off the shelves in no apparent order. One wishes that he would pause and look carefully at the object in hand. For example, he writes that “Whitman’s canonicity depends upon his achievement in permanently altering what might be called the American image of voice.” The topic might be worthy of development, but we never know, because it is abandoned almost immediately. Bloom mentions Hemingway and Wallace Stevens as examples; and the mention of Stevens brings to mind the characterization of Whitman in “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” (“the most magnificent tribute to Whitman that our literature affords,” Bloom comments), and the next half page discusses Stevens’s lines, and then we turn, rather abruptly, to Emerson. We hear no more of “the American image of voice.”

The unpolished quality of the essay is everywhere apparent. Bloom writes, for example, that “Whitman centers the American canon because he changes

the American self and the American religion by changing the representation of our unofficial selves and our persuasive if concealed post-Christian religion." This is a large claim, and one would like to know more about it; the topic, however, is left hanging. The next sentence—the first in a new paragraph—begins, "A political reading of Shakespeare is bound to be less interesting than a Shakespearean reading of politics," and the paragraph, two sentences long, concludes by telling us what we've heard before, that Whitman "compares very powerfully with any Western writer from Goethe and Wordsworth to the present."

At all points Bloom tosses out assertions and walks away. He comments that "we have never got Whitman right, because he is a very difficult, immensely subtle poet who is usually at work doing almost the precise opposite of what he asserts himself to be doing"—a claim that offers potentially productive ground for exploration, but it is not explored. The paragraph immediately following turns to matters of influence, with a listing of the usual suspects; and the paragraph following *that* has to do with an assertion about Whitman's originality, which, Bloom states, "has less to do with his supposedly free verse than it does with his mythological inventiveness and mastery of figurative language." Although Bloom goes on to comment about "mythological inventiveness," with particular concern for Whitman's "mythology of the soul and two selves"—but without explanation of why Whitman's divisions of soul and self should constitute a *mythology*—there is no discussion of figurative language; and "supposedly" is never explained.

While it may be true that "we have never got Whitman right," the essay has its own troubles putting this poet into focus. Bloom argues, for example, that Whitman is "the American shaman," and asserts: "We begin to read Whitman adequately when we see in him a throwback to ancient Scythia, to strange healers who were demonic, who knew themselves to possess or be possessed by a magical or occult self." Not all readers will be content to go to ancient Scythia for their Whitman; but in any case, when Bloom comments a few pages later that "As in Tennyson, what frequently matters most in Whitman is the quality of his anguish, upon which so much of his poetry's power depends," his Whitman seems to have become distinctly human, possessed only by powers of deep emotion—not a strange healer at all, but a man in need of healing. It is possible, of course, to find both, and more, in Whitman, but conflicting claims should be recognized and, if possible, reconciled.

In the closing pages the essay continues its wanderings, as Bloom discusses four major poems in six pages, with excursions into such matters as a listing of "the major American writers," Whitman's influence (again), D.H. Lawrence and the American critical tradition, and other concerns. Attention flags; but patience is eventually rewarded, as the reader comes at the end to an unexpected personal revelation. The omniscient critic suddenly vanishes, and an all-too-human being stands before us. "I remember," Bloom writes, "one summer, in crisis, being at Nantucket with a friend who was absorbed in fishing, while I read aloud to both of us from Whitman and recovered myself again. When I am alone and read aloud to myself, it is almost always Whitman, sometimes when I desperately need to assuage grief." Whitman's words leap to mind: "O despairer, here is my neck, / By God! you shall not go down! hang

your whole weight upon me.” One may also recall Emerson’s noble assertion of 1855 that *Leaves of Grass* “has the best of merits, namely of fortifying & encouraging.”

Professor Bloom’s ultimate claim for his great books is both grand and modest. “All that the Western Canon can bring one,” he states, “is the proper use of one’s own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one’s confrontation with one’s own mortality.” If indeed literature serves no cause higher than the individual, still, that is not insignificant.

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