HAROLD BLOOM'S *WESTERN CANON*: WHAT'S THE USE?

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary academics writing on value and the humanities have largely left the frantic and apocalyptic rhetoric of the “canon wars” behind, returning to more nuanced arguments about literature’s political and social utility or readdressing fundamental questions of definition. In the public sphere, however, pronouncements about the irrelevance of the humanities remain constant, and apparently persuasive. This paper revisits Harold Bloom’s 1994 surprise bestseller *The Western Canon*, investigating the possibility that his ideas around the use and value of literature are not inherently apolitical, as he claims, and that they might even be reoriented towards a broadly appealing, positive argument for the study of literature.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* is not written for academics. Published by a trade press with a mass-appeal title, a large font, relatively approachable language, and discussions of contemporary and non-literary matters throughout, the book looks and reads like a departure from earlier work like *The Anxiety of Influence*, *Kabbalah and Criticism*, and *Agon*. In no uncertain terms, Bloom announces that "[t]his book is not directed to academics…What Johnson and Woolf after him called the Common Reader still exists" (*Canon* 518). The book appears as a paradox of sorts: an appeal for a populist rejection of academic radicalism by Harold Bloom, the Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale and MacArthur Fellow who is, as Christopher Clausen notes, "anything but a middlebrow" (18). Certainly, Bloom was not alone. As the canon-defender position began to enjoy public and particularly right-wing appeal, books from both academic and trade presses capitalized on the trend. Titles like *The Closing of the American Mind*, *The War Against the Intellect*, *The Moral Collapse of the University*, and *Tenured Radicals* adorned bookshelves in the years leading up to *The Western Canon*. But Bloom's insistence on his total disinterest in the so-called "canon wars," and the concept of literary uselessness that informed his staunch disavowal of both sides, make him a peculiar case. While combatants in the canon wars elaborated on literature's uses, Bloom declared it all, in Oscar Wilde's phrase, perfectly useless.

Critics and reviewers have struggled with the elitism/middlebrow paradox of Bloom's book, often elevating one aspect of Bloom's arguments above the rest in the process. Daniel J. Silver claims that "the main purpose of *The Western Canon* is not to attack but to defend" (60), while Nick Gillespie inversely proposes that Bloom is "less

interested in boosting Shakespeare's reputation…than in besmirching the current lit-crit scene" (56). David Dooley compartmentalizes, suggesting that "[a]s strong as the polemical sections are, most of *The Western Canon* is devoted to celebrating canonical authors" (336). Such directly opposing interpretations of Bloom's intent are a frequent but unsurprising outcome for what is ultimately an imprecise and perhaps inherently contradictory book. As John Guillory notes in his review of *The Western Canon*:

> the same mass culture that Bloom deplores as all but displacing the Western canon is the condition for the distinctively American relation to high culture favored by Bloom—a love of great literature not founded on social snobbery. This is why Bloom can address those who love literature as 'common readers,' without characterizing this group socially in any way. (87)

Guillory's analysis insists on the importance of taking Bloom at his self-contradictory word, taking the necessary ambiguity surrounding the term "common reader" as a foundational assumption of the book. Surely, given Bloom's apocalyptic insistence on the decline of humanistic study, his "common reader" is an uncommon sort of person. Bloom's sense of commonality derives primarily from the canon itself, and only secondarily from any given society or culture. Because Bloom sees literature as to some extent independently determinate of cultural progression, "common" seems to refer to what a reader has in common not with his or her present context, but with canonical literature. There is a great deal of utility in this appeal to a group without social characteristics, and the undefined and porous boundaries of the group of "common readers" play a key role in Bloom's vision.

The Western Canon, despite drawing on Bloom's enduring ideas from *The Anxiety of Influence* and *Agon*, is not a work of theory, and does not present its arguments in a consistent, ordered fashion. Alexander Theroux calls it "a very subjective book," elaborating that it "attempts to restore the subjective, individual judgment to…the center of the act of reading…[but also] seeks to elevate one particular subject—namely Harold Bloom—to the office of Pope of All Reading. Subjectivity, of course, is one of the wonderful, if maddening, things in autobiography" (66). Perhaps Bloom would say that these "two senses" are, in fact, one and the same, and that they represent his idea of praxis. Along these lines, David H. Wittenberg offers the criticism that "Bloom's theory is itself already an occluded praxis" because of the undiagnosed third position of the critic as mediator of misreading, and the resultant "structural concealment entailed by critical reading, concealment which persists not so much within Bloom's *theory* as within his *practice*" (29-30, original emphasis). Bloom, Wittenberg suggests, is tipping the scale by assuming his own mediating viewpoint is aligned with the universal. So Theroux's choice of the term "autobiography" is apt; Bloom's then-protégé Camille Paglia similarly referred to the book as Bloom's "spiritual autobiography" (qtd. in Begley para. 18). Bloom's particular defense of the canon is inextricable from the autobiographical elements of a mass audience text about high culture by an Ivy League professor who reminds readers that he is "[him]self the son of a garment worker" (23). Even more than being defined by what she has in common with the canon, the reader might finally be defined by what she has in common with Bloom—with the canon of *The Western Canon*.

Wittenberg positions Bloom's rise in public popularity as coincidental with a partially self-caused "backslide within academic theory" (21) arising from "the

ambivalent relationship between literary theory and literary-critical practice that Bloom's *oeuvre* represents and exemplifies" (22-3). Bloom, Wittenberg argues, has abandoned what is important in his own theory with despairingly conservative later-career declarations such as this: "if you can't recognize [literature] when you read it, then no one can ever help you to know it or love it better" (520). Wittenberg does not comment extensively on the unfortunate implication of his initial reading that Bloom's relevance in public discourse seems to bear an inverse relationship to his relevance in academic discourse. In an era when the humanities may (or may not) be (still) in crisis politically, this disparity demands renewed consideration. Does the public's receptivity to *The Western Canon* stem from features unique to it, or is it merely a particularly well-marketed entry in a short-lived publishing trend? If there are uniquely appealing ideas in *The Western Canon*, do they offer anything to contemporary discussions of the humanities, politics, and literature? This essay will consider Bloom's *Western Canon* in relation to the works of "canon-defending" or "conservative" authors with which it is typically grouped, in order to suggest what approaches and assumptions contributed most significantly to the book's success with the public. Subsequently, it will compare Bloom's theories to modern academic arguments for the value of literature and the humanities to suggest what aspects of Bloom's *Western Canon* might have an enduring and unique force for public and academic audiences.

CHAPTER 2: AN ELEGY IN WARTIME

The canon wars—summarized in one instance as "an intense, decades-long, public soul-searching on the nature, purpose, and future of liberal education in a tech-driven, capitalist, and pluralistic America" (Jayesh 46)—are an important historical context for Bloom's book. Edward Jayne, in his 1991 article "Academic Jeremiad: The Neoconservative View of American Higher Education," offers a summarizing narrative, though with the recognition that even the relative specificities of this debate are far from new. In an elaboration of the typical canon-defender position, Jayne writes:

> the emphasis on diversity has encouraged major changes in the choice of texts taught in the humanities...The relatively flexible selection of texts taught at the college level has been labeled a traditionalist 'canon,' and…the very idea of excellence has been perceived as a threat. Major texts have been jettisoned to make room for sentimental and often barely literate 'discourse' whose study and appreciation depend on the wholesale neglect of qualitative norms. A third-world perspective has encouraged the neglect of 'patriarchal' and 'Eurocentric' authors…The intrinsic value of literature has been challenged by a theory of textual indeterminacy…(32)

In Jayne's account, the defenders perceive their position as tenuous and fought on the enemy's terms. The term "canon" itself, accepted as the defining locus of conflict, seems to be the invention of those who aim to open or destroy it. Here, Jayne has captured both the ideas and the tenor of the defender position; similarly despairing and apocalyptic ideas are on display throughout the essays, books, and interviews of the time. Writing in 1994, then, Bloom was rehearsing arguments that were already familiar to the public, or

at least to the right-wing readership that might have been attracted to earlier such texts. There is little question that *The Western Canon* was published with an eye to the current political climate and a recently established market, even though the bulk of the book is written to satisfy neither. As loudly and as frequently as Bloom disavows the canon wars, it is certain at least that a large segment of readers and reviewers see *The Western Canon* as being intimately connected to this broader context.

Another relic of that cultural moment: on Tuesday, April 5th, 1994, roughly four months before the release of *The Western Canon*, a front-page story in Stanford University's daily newspaper announced "A Humanities and Arts Memorial…to discuss the decline of humanistic studies" (Guinan 1). The event, planned by Professor Emeritus Robert Cohn and retired professor Leo Weinstein, was a proper memorial, featuring speeches on "the betrayal of humanities," an invocation from a Rabbi, and a benediction from a Lutheran Reverend (8). Bloom, who begins his book with a section titled "An Elegy for the Canon" and closes with an "Elegiac Conclusion," had been beaten to the funereal punch. But the Memorial highlights the fact that Bloom was aligned with other canon-defenders in at least two ways: both were expressing concern for the very life and future of literature, and both had a flair for the dramatic.

Two broad factors unite Bloom and the Memorial speakers with the broader group of canon-defenders. First, these thinkers are concerned that a revolution of incoherent egalitarian ideology, inaugurated in the 1960s, has profoundly reshaped and subsequently imperiled education with a force that outweighs any effects of sociopolitical change. Second, they see Western culture, and especially liberal education, as a singular achievement on which the fate of human progress and spirit depends. For his part, Bloom

sees the supposed politicization of literary study as nothing less than suicide, and rejects politicization and instrumentalization as sternly from the defender camp as from the opener camp. Frequently missed in reviews of the book, especially journalistic ones, is that Bloom's punchy and oft-cited phrase "rabblement of lemmings" refers not to one side of the debate, but to all sides (4). The appeal of this apparently iconoclastic position, especially to an audience who might be inclined towards a general distrust of academia as much as a specific distrust of leftist academics, should not be underestimated generally in assessing Bloom's success. He remains, however, firmly in agreement with these two major factors of canon-defender thought.

What is unique about Bloom's perspective? The speeches at the Memorial provide an appropriately varied and manageably-sized selection of canon-defending views to contrast with Bloom's own. From the eight speeches excerpted in print, several of the most common arguments and assumptions can be roughly organized into four claims, as follows. First, the era of the canon wars is a time in which the humanities have already gone disastrously astray, simultaneously threatening the culture on a wider public level and endangering the high culture of the elite. Second, "spirit"—meaning variously the national, public, literary, and individual spirit—is a useful and uniquely expressive term for understanding what is at stake. Third, fundamentally instrumentalist economic rhetoric is effective, if insufficient, in analogizing the public role of literature. Fourth, the public perception of literary experts, and the usefulness of literature and literary study, is at stake. The question of what makes Bloom distinct, then, can be addressed by examining his specific engagements with these four arguments. In the first three instances, Bloom consistently diverges from the defenders by espousing a view of the

literary experience that leads him to reject the notion that the humanities and institutional learning are inseparable from the canon. This, combined with his insistence on the uselessness of literature, leads him in the fourth instance to take a position on expertise that is distinctively—and for many readers, attractively—aligned with values that are often dissociated from the university and the humanities.

Echoing the claims of other canon-defenders about institutionally current and publicly imminent disaster, *The Western Canon* imagines a world on the brink of an extinction. Like Robert Cohn, who intended with the bleak fatalism of his mock funeral to "memorialize the great books as well as great teachers who have been lost" (Guinan 1), Bloom indulges in visions of the canonical authors face to face with death, displaced from the centre of cultural memory by ideologically-driven art, television, and spoken word poetry. In the conclusion that precedes his appendicized canon, Bloom frames his lists as "a modest prophecy as to survival possibilities" (4) for the benefit of "literate survivors" (528). This invocation of potentially imminent disaster is organized around Giambattista Vico's cyclical vision of historical ages. In Bloom's 1994, a new literary Age looms, one that promises irrevocable changes to literature and, most threateningly for Bloom, an end to the reign of the creative individual. He begins by describing the theory that determines the division of his book and its appendixes:

> Giambattista Vico…posited a cycle of three phases—Theocratic, Aristocratic, Democratic—followed by a chaos out of which a New Theocratic Age would at last emerge…Vico did not postulate a Chaotic Age before the *ricorso* or return of a second Theocratic Age; but our

> century, while pretending to continue the Democratic Age, cannot be better characterized than as Chaotic. (2)

Bloom's readers, then, live in a uniquely exciting era of Bloom's own invention. But the defining conflict of this era is convincingly Bloomian: each reader must choose whether or not he has the strength to be counted among the "literate survivors."

Bloom does not bother to define the "Chaotic Age." The clearest explanation comes halfway through the book: "the blessing/curse of poetry in the Democratic/Chaotic Eras…is that poems are 'about' nothing. Their subject is the subject herself or himself, whether manifested as a presence or as an absence" (239). Ten pages later, the clarification that "the Theocratic Age exalts the gods, the Aristocratic Age celebrates heroes, the Democratic Age…values human beings" (249) suggests a possible reading. Here, the Chaotic Age is an era where poetry's subject is the self, but conceptions of self are not defined by the traditional understanding of the human as possessed of a consistent and coherent mind. Bloom declares Sigmund Freud, whose "essence" is "his vision of civil war within the psyche" (377), to be "the major mythmaker of the Chaotic Era" (404). If the imaginative world, animated and shaped by Freudian civil war, is the originator and subject of modern poetry, then the "chaos" of the age is ultimately the result of the chaotic individual mind. In the Aristocratic Age, Dante could demonstrate his ability to "ma[k]e himself universal…by bending tradition until it fitted his own nature" (84) through, for example, a literary "treatment of a universal figure" like Ulysses that ultimately revealed the power and singularity of Dante's vision. In the Chaotic Age, it seems no such use of a universal figure is possible, as the universal figure always collapses into the particular.

About the coming Age, Bloom's opinions are very clear, though he similarly refuses to offer explicit definitions. The Theocratic Age is one that "slouches toward us" (263) and one that "we tumble toward" (157); the hellish allusions are no overstatement of Bloom's opinion of a time that may well "cancel the literary canon once and for all" (310). The turning of the Age is a vision of disaster. But even as Bloom invokes an apocalypse in the dissolution of aesthetic standards and the ensuing diminishment of humanity, he challenges the totality of apocalypse. *The Western Canon*'s disaster becomes an act of purification: the "literate survivors" may be few now, and fewer later, but they will survive, and with them survives the memory of the aesthetic spirit. The inevitable cycle that brings on the Theocratic Age means, too, that the Aristocratic Age will return, and with it perhaps a new Milton, a new Dr. Johnson, and so on. There is an echo of salvation-through-faith narratives in this view of history, in which the words of great poets remain constant through cycles of apocalypse that doom all but a clear-eyed and faithful few. But this is also an appeal to the power and centrality of the individual to maintain such clarity of vision—to remain a "common reader" in a time when such people are uncommon.

This promotion of Viconian chaos into a full-blown Age marks an important if distinction from other depictions of disaster in the humanities: a formalized Age suggests an inevitable outcome. Bloom elevates "Chaos" to a "Chaotic Age" because Western culture has "enshrined" it during "our long postponement…of a new Theocratic Era." This postponement is welcome in itself, but has caused the majority to become, in Bloom's metaphor, "only cyborgs…muscular Terminators crowding out the human" (249). When poetry takes as its subject the subject himself, it seems, those who are not

poets or at least poet-readers are in danger of becoming objects (Terminators, in fact—objects that threaten the human subject). Bloom's argument here is distinct from other canon-defender fears in that it implicates every member of society directly. The turn to a new Age will be inescapably egalitarian in its effects, and the task of "postponement" falls to every reader equally, as does the threat of losing one's subjecthood.

It is unclear to what extent Bloom's canonical "Ages" are an ahistorical analytical tool and to what extent they are an assertion of literary history. This lack of clarity points to a key mechanism of *The Western Canon*: self-justification. Bloom's introduction to his canon of the Democratic Age, for example, begins with this statement: "I have located Vico's Democratic Age in the post-Goethean nineteenth century, when the literature of Italy and Spain ebbs, yielding eminence to England with its renaissance of the Renaissance in Romanticism" (540). Bloom's conflicting impulses are apparent here: this is primarily literary history, but the term "post-Goethean" is of a piece with Bloom's tendency to designate individual writers as the primary drivers of historical narrative. Of Tolstoy, Bloom writes that "whatever we take the canonical to be, *Hadji Murad* centers it in the Democratic Age" (349); of Austen, that though her "overt affinities remained with the Aristocratic Age, her authenticity as a writer impelled her, in *Persuasion*, a long way toward the burgeoning Democratic Age" (259). Wordsworth, most decisively, "invented modern or democratic poetry" (249). Where the Viconian Ages are initially presented as a schema applied to an independent literary history, individual references throughout suggest that authors have some level of control over the Ages and their relation to them, just as each reader and poet is somewhat responsible for "our" postponement of the Theocratic Age.

The Western Canon's intractable historical law is this: "As history lengthens, the older canon necessarily narrows" (531), since it is confined to the space of one lifetime's reading. With this in mind, it seems that while individuals can affect the progression of Ages, no particular individual is infallibly representative of an Age: the longer the "Western tradition" exists, the fewer authors will correspond to any one given Theocratic, Aristocratic, or Democratic Age. The Viconian Ages and the Bloomian anxiety of influence are, in fact, the fundamental constituents of this view. Poets may invent the literature of an Age, but not the Age itself, and so the system will outlast its individual components. As will be equally apparent in other aspects of Bloom's argument, the emphasis on the power of the great poet and the discerning individual reader demands an ahistoricism that ultimately suggests that the anxiety of influence itself is more important than the necessarily impermanent contents of the canon at any given moment. The Bloomian canon as self-justifying, ahistorical concept reigns over the canon as historical entity.

CHAPTER 3: THE SCHOOL AND THE SPIRIT

As with his Ages, Bloom's "elitism" is a somewhat ahistorical concept, and his views of the educational institution and the literary spirit emerge as similarly unique among canon defenders. The Memorial speakers, for instance, see the university as a vital hub from which ideas are disseminated. Hershel Parker warns, "[w]e may survive (but not survive 'as a people'?) without the knowledge of a common body of literature" (26). Richard Wilbur argues in his Memorial speech that encounters with the canon are necessary for people "to be truly at home in America" (Cohn et al. 64), and James Q. Wilson laments in his that poetry and philosophy have abdicated their responsibility to "engage the common man" and "teach men and women how to live" (Cohn et al. 66). Wilson makes the shared assumption explicit: it is not just literature, but also the humanistic study and teaching of literature, that plays an imperative role in shaping society. The corollary is that those whom stand to be most effective in rehabilitating society are those with power over and in educational institutions—a claim that those not fitting this description might not find particularly gratifying. Bloom's idea of the Chaotic Age, by contrast, does not emerge from the university as the result of chaos within, but represents an all-encompassing change that, rather than privileging the power of distinct groups to respond, imposes an equal responsibility on each member of society to continue to effect the Theocratic Age's "long postponement." This basic distinction emerges often: where the typical canon-defender focuses on the college and is concerned with the canon in institutional memory, Bloom focuses on the reader and is concerned with the canon in communal memory. The latter is a category that crosses institutional, class, and national

lines. Wilson's "common man" requires an expert; Bloom's "common reader" *is* the expert—a claim reliant, again, on Bloom's refusal to characterize the term.

Bloom's non-exclusionary (in this respect) rhetoric is important. The marketability of the conservative-leaning, sky-is-falling polemic during the canon wars, from Bloom's aesthetic defense in *The Western Canon* to Dinesh D'Souza's anecdotal offense in *Illiberal Education*, suggests that the public, too, felt invested in the state of the Humanities. Bloom makes much of the supposed inversion by which those best suited to literary criticism are now to be found among non-academics, leading to a markedly unusual concept of elitism. Canon-opener arguments generally assume that notions of universal or objective beauty should be understood as merely the universalization of the culturally specific taste of the elite, resulting in an idea of elitism that is inextricable from taste-making institutions like the university. But Bloom's concept, a "common reader" who recognizes or intuitively knows what is best, is different. This concept of what might be called *aesthetic* elitism is linked entirely to the individual. While Bloom recognizes the potential objection that "only an elite can be so educated" as to truly apprehend the "primal aesthetic value" of *King Lear* (65), the education itself is not a marker of elitism; instead, elitism is a matter of taste, such that literary criticism "always was and always will be an elitist phenomenon," while "[c]ultural criticism" will remain "another dismal social science" (17). The fallibility of certain areas of study indicates more broadly the fallibility of educational institutions in reliably cultivating an elite. Bloom's aesthetic elite must cultivate themselves.

For Bloom, then, the important sense of elitism is not as a socially produced or relational phenomenon, but as an individual quality contingent on one's ability to

appreciate aesthetic beauty. "If 'aristocratic' refers to an elitism of the spirit," Bloom writes, "Goethe is indeed the last great writer" of the Aristocratic Era (232). Distinct from the economic elite, the political elite, and so on, is the aesthetic elite, a category that draws on the naturalized hierarchies of other elitisms without replicating their attendant real-world barriers. Bloom argues that educators "need to teach more selectively, searching for the few who have the capacity to become highly individual readers and writers" (17). This offsets the apparently narrow appeal of his final vision with the broadly inclusive vantage point of its initial assumptions; in Bloom's kingdom, few people *will* be aesthetically elite, but anyone *could* be—regardless of whether or not they can afford an expensive humanistic education. Again, Bloom's vision is uncharacteristic of canon-defenders in not taking the university and other educational institutions as presumed central arbiters of aesthetic value, and again, it is not difficult to see the appeal, for a non-academic audience, of this seemingly inclusionary stance.

This "elitism of the spirit" defies materially-derived hierarchies, at least in principle. But why this phrasing? The typical canon-defender trope is that a "spirit"—national, individual, historical, or some combination of the three—is at stake in the prospect of "opening" the canon. Cohn, introducing his Memorial, declares that ideological changes in universities, and particularly in the humanities, have led to "a spiritual holocaust…the mournful drama of the imaginative spirit" (Cohn et al. 60). Joseph Epstein charges that "the entire enterprise of poetic creation seems threatened by having been taken out of the world, chilled in the classroom, and vastly overproduced by men and women who are licensed to write it by degree if not necessarily by talent or spirit" (20). As in these cases, the spirit is usually treated as something active in creative

work but otherwise passive; by logic consistent with Bloom's insistence on the essential distinction of the aesthetic from other categories, it has the power to enact beauty but not to incite political change. This good-in-itself therefore deserves and demands protection.

The "spirit" is different for Bloom, and his notable precursors, because it is a potentially externalizing force. Ralph Waldo Emerson describes the creatively active spirit when he writes, "the key to the power of the greatest men [is that] their spirit diffuses itself. A new quality of mind travels…in concentric circles from its origin, and publishes itself by unknown methods" (20). Here, the soul's deep inwardness corresponds to the far-ranging outwardness of the spirit. Bloom employs "spirit" as a means of everything from macro-level distinctions like "[the] literary spirit [an] era possesses" (2), to micro-level specificities like "the spirit of Montaigne's skepticism" (159), to individual-level claims like the statement that Dante's "savage and powerful spirit is politically incorrect to the highest degree" (76). Again, Bloom offers no formal definitions. But he echoes the Emersonian view when he writes that Shakespeare is, in world literature, "a spirit that permeates everywhere, that cannot be confined" (52). This view of the spirit reiterates the logic of implication that demands attention to literature from every individual. In his unique depictions of impending disaster and pervading spirit, Bloom downplays the importance of the institution but implies that humanistic engagement with literature is a universally necessary act of self-defense. *The Western Canon*'s world is one of constant competition, in which the individual literary spirit is capable of transgressing borders drawn by mundane and worldly hierarchies in a bid for domination of the canonical or communal memory. It is a world, too, that fits a certain set of political and economic assumptions—a point that merits some further discussion.

CHAPTER 4: BLOOMONOMICS

Emerson's influence in Bloom is notable in consideration of economic analogy as well as religious analogy. In *Representative Men*, Emerson accuses the purportedly anti-competition "friends of 'attractive and associated labour'" of disingenuously alleging that labour "breaks the spirit" (95); for him, the only honest form of society is "great competition of rich and poor…in a market, where is only so much…a man comes to measure his greatness by the regrets and envies and hatreds of his competitors" (13). The Emersonian vision of the self-diffusing spirit of "great men" provides a clear analogy for a particular vision of economic justice, or at least for the set of ideals generally associated with free market capitalism.

For his part, Bloom's insistence on the pure and politically uninvolved category of the aesthetic suggests that readers are generally meant to downplay or ignore the potential of such analogies in his own work. He is willing to indulge on occasion, however, as when he writes of his canon-opening colleagues: "[i]f you worship the composite god of historical process…[o]riginality becomes a literary equivalent of such terms as individual enterprise, self-reliance, and competition, which do not gladden the hearts of Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors" (20). It is worth noting the echoes of William F. Buckley Jr.'s *God and Man at Yale*, if only because that book is sometimes treated as the progenitor of conservative takes on the university in the latter half of the twentieth century. Decades before *The Western Canon*, Buckley wrote, "if the recent Yale graduate, who exposed himself to Yale economics during his undergraduate years, exhibits enterprise, self-reliance, and independence, it is only because he has turned his back upon his

teachers…who assiduously disparage the individual, glorify the government, enshrine security, and discourage self-reliance" (45-6). Bloom, who argues against some of Buckley's central claims, may really only be suggesting the analogy about originality for the sake of a jibe. But most significant, here, is the apparent commonality between Bloomian literary theory and Emerson's "great competition," its environment of fixed scarcity, and its individualized measurement of self in reference to the communal opinion of competitors.

Unlike canon-defenders who argue for the utility of literature, Bloom risks a contradiction in that the more forceful his economic analogies about literary success are, the more humanistic inquiry comes to appear as traditionally useful in the economic sense. Bloom observes throughout *The Western Canon* that "[t]hose who can do canonical work invariably see their writings as larger forms than any social program," that "great literature will insist upon its self-sufficiency in the face of…politically correct enterprises," (28), that Joyce evinced a "ferocious investment in his own autonomy" (428), and that "[a]esthetic salvation is the enterprise" of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (404). Like Emerson before him, Bloom is employing economic analogies that demonstrate, to varying degrees, overlaps with contemporary ideas in economics and politics. While some of these instances are unavoidable or incidental, others are coherent with and relevant to Bloom's argument, which would be unsurprising except that his argument relies on the refusal that such overlaps are meaningful—that the literary can be the political, and vice versa. Bloom is making an avowedly non-economic argument, but, if accepted, his explanation of the nature and place of literature has unavoidable economic ramifications. Only Bloom's declaration that literature is entirely its own

sphere—hardly the most convincing aspect of the book—undercuts such a conclusion. In other words, while Bloom's economic analogies do not represent a complete economic argument, at the very least *The Western Canon* depicts literary hierarchies in a manner easily extrapolated to economic hierarchies. Without the assumption of the peculiarity of literature, Bloom's formulation of innate talent leading to certain and deserved success yields clear parallels to a particular set of economic and political beliefs.

One example suffices to make this point, and to rehearse some of Bloom's major ideas. This does, however, necessitate moving momentarily beyond *The Western Canon*, which does little to explain its underlying theory of poetic anxiety. In his 1982 book *Agon*, Bloom invokes Gresham's Law, the idea that if two commodity monies in circulation have the same face value but a different material value, the bad or lower-material-value money will push the good or higher-material-value money out of circulation as a result of rational economic actors keeping the good and spending the bad. Bloom uses this Law as analogy in summarizing his central concept of misreading:

> A strong poem, which alone can become canonical for more than a single generation, can be defined as a text that must engender strong misreadings, both as other poems and as literary criticism. Texts that have single, reductive, simplistic meanings are themselves already necessarily weak misreadings of anterior texts. When a strong misreading has demonstrated its fecundity by producing other strong misreadings across several generations, we can and must accept its canonical status…
> There is a true law of canonization, and it works contrary to Gresham's law of currency. We may phrase it: *in a strong reader's struggle to master*

> *a poet's trope, strong poetry will impose itself, because that imposition, that usurpation of mental space, is the proof of trope, the testing of power by power*…(*Agon* 285-6, original emphasis)

The more direct if slightly more reductive analogy is this: bad money drives good out of circulation in the national economy, but good literature drives bad out of circulation in the communal memory. Implied in the contrariness of Gresham's law of currency and Bloom's law of canonization is the contrariness of money and poetry, and thereby of usefulness and uselessness. Bloom warns that money cannot and does not determine what society perceives as aesthetic superiority. The comparison of money to poetry, then, underscores one of Bloom's fundamental claims, which is that art is "useless" in the sense that it will not "make us better citizens" or improve our moral outlook (*Canon* 16).

Of course, money is similarly useless in this respect. The difference, a key one between Gresham and Bloom, is that the test of a coin or any commodity currency is explicitly a test of its usefulness. "Bad" and "good" money always represent a judgment of usefulness, because the "usefulness" of commodity currency is precisely to be constituted of that which is valuable. Bloom's comparison hinges on the assumption that poetry does not have a similar commodity aspect. Unlike commodity currency, which is composed necessarily of something valuable, poetry is constituted of words, an inexhaustible common resource. As such, the comparison maintains Bloom's emphasis on individual ability, locating value in the labour performed by an individual writer in combining words—in economic terms, a view not dissimilar from Lockean labour theory.

Gresham's Law assumes a rational actor who weighs the value of two commodities and keeps the "good" money. Bloom's proposed law, on the other hand,

posits a test of power by power, reader by poet, with the prize of canonical status for the poet (as solidified in the reader's memory). The assumption is that no external factors can affect this test and that greater power, or stronger misreadings, will always be recognized as such. An encounter with literature seems to be, simultaneously, a strong challenge to the individual's mind and a fated outcome that tautologically equates canonicity and greatness. Importantly, though, in either formulation the quest to be canonical and "to join communal or societal memory" (19) does not end with the individual. While the materially-derived usefulness of commodity currency necessarily relegates it to an exclusive relationship with an individual owner, the non-material uselessness of poetry necessitates its survival through relationship with a community of individuals. Just as the constituent elements of commodity currency are determinate of its value and its usefulness as currency, the constituent minds of individuals that test and are contaminated by a poet's trope are determinate of poetry's value. The point is not that the economic and literary/theoretical elements align, as they must to make the analogy effective. The question is whether acceptance of Bloom's literary assertions motivates a simultaneous acceptance of the economic assumptions deployed in his analogies. If great literature's "fecundity" is analogous to economic productivity as well as spiritual pervasiveness, engagement with the canon seems to model and improve economic behaviour (perhaps even spiritual behaviour?) in precisely the way Bloom refuses.

Bloom addresses this problem with a distinction early on in *The Western Canon*, and it is here that this paper must turn to Sigmund Freud, one of Bloom's other great influences. Bloom writes: "Without some answer to the triple question of the agon—more than, less than, equal to?—there can be no aesthetic value. That question is framed

in the figurative language of the Economic, but its answer will be free of Freud's Economic Principle. There can be no poem in itself, and yet something irreducible does abide in the aesthetic" (24). What departure there is from Freud, here, must be found in the dubiously but necessarily vague phrase "something irreducible." As Lawrence Birken notes of Freud, "[w]hile the 'economic' principle postulated that mental energy took the fastest possible route to discharge, Freud believed that *all* possible routes in the individual brain were themselves determined by its prior endowments and memories…For Freud, [the] larger context [for the economic principle] was the differentiation of the individual personality" (324, original emphasis). For Bloom, a causal element of differentiation needs to exist outside this context altogether in order for the aesthetic to remain a discrete category, which he here calls "interartistic influence" (24) but which refers more generally to poetic anxiety. This aspect of poetry is rescued from the clash of reality principle with pleasure principle by existing outside both minds: the misreading itself contains the irreducible factor. Bloom's version of Freud's larger context demands that one look past the level of individual personality to the sphere of interaction between (conflicting) differentiations of two individual personalities oriented towards the same object or trope. Bloom's affirmation of the existence of an irreducible factor breaks with the somewhat bleak Freudian perspective. *The Western Canon* offers what seems like spiritual hope: the Economic Principle will not be all-consuming.

And yet, to return to Bloom's reference to encountering literature as "the usurpation of mental space" with this in mind is to approach "the deep terror of annihilation" (Weisman 225) at the centre of *The Western Canon*, a text that conceives of the ultimate end of experiencing literature as "confrontation with one's own mortality"

(30). Karen A. Weisman suggests that the root appeal of Bloom's book is its arousal in readers of "the terror that our very past will be taken from us" (219). In part, Weisman is diagnosing the mainstream success of the book, and she posits that "[i]f Bloom has touched a nerve that resonates beyond the walls of the academy, that is because he is suffering from the same sickness we all already ache with—memories of the past and the urgency to authenticate their veracity as well as their value" (219). She sees Bloom as primarily concerned with the canon as cultural heritage, and his appeal as predicated on a fear of (especially cultural) disorientation and change. In this reading, the book functions as passionate cultural conservatism, a well-worn argument for literature's value that would have fit perfectly alongside speeches at Cohn's Memorial despite the ornamentation of Bloom's various idiosyncrasies.

But one must ask what to make of a conservatism aimed ultimately at exposing the truth of individual mortality. This is another of many paradoxes, but it can be given a clear analogue and antecedent: "The idea of self-preservation drives," Freud writes, "stands in marked opposition to the hypothesis that the whole of drive function serves to bring about death" (78). Bloom writes that the "quest to be free and solitary" leads the reader "to confront greatness" with the transcendent "desire to join greatness" (524) and achieve canonical immortality through the creation of new and strong misreadings. This echoes Freud again: "gametes work against the death of the living substance and manage to win for it what must strike us as a potential immortality" (79). One explanation of Bloom's paradox, then, is the struggle of the competing forces of Freud's death drive theory. In Bloom, in other words, Freud's "endless struggle…with the demons of one's own phylogenetic past, and with the pasts of other people similarly stricken" (Dufresne

19) is repurposed for the reader's mind, with the literary past substituted for the phylogenetic one. Such a mind encompasses a death drive, characterized by repetition compulsion towards the awareness of mortality that accompanied the original encounter with the "agonistic immortality" (30) of the canonical work. Bloom claims that "the [canonical] text is there to give not pleasure but the high unpleasure or more difficult pleasure that a lesser text will not provide" (30). When, a few sentences earlier, he cites the "ancient test for the canonical" of literary inexhaustibility—the necessity of re-reading—the parallels with Freud again become clear: the re-reading of the canonical text is repetition compulsion. Just as Bloom intertwines "difficult" or high unpleasure with the love of literature that fuels the aesthetically astute reader in her quest for mastery, Freud finds that "doubts arise as to whether the urge to mentally process whatever has made a great impression—to master it completely—can express itself in a primary sense, independent of the pleasure principle" (59). And the mind that Bloom describes encompasses, too, the life drive of the irreducibly differentiated, agonistic mis-reader whose creative impulses aim at canonical reproduction and immortality. For Freud, "the essential thing in the processes sexual life aims for is indeed the merging of two cell bodies. It is only through this fact that the immortality of the living substance is secured in higher organisms" (92). Bloom has co-opted Freud's mistaken biology for a role in literary theory, in the "interartistic influence" that is produced by, but lives independent of, the clash of reader and poet. He has, as Weisman suggests, sounded the chord of annihilation, but he has done so to assert the embattled but resolute power of Eros.

Richard T. Gray closes his analysis of Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* with the warning that "it would be wrong to associate [Freud's] insistence

on energy saving with a capitalist ideology that emphasizes accumulation [because in] the economics of the psyche… any build-up of energy, or any increased investment of tension, is identified with *dis*pleasure" (101). In this suggestion lies the implicit argument that an economically coherent ideology can be extrapolated from Freud's view of the psyche to association with a particular economic system; what is "wrong" with such an association is its inaccuracy, not its underlying logic. Bloom, too, can be associated with economics at least this far, to the point where economic analogy, rather than merely clarifying and strengthening the argument, becomes rhetorically appealing in and of itself. Bloom has offered "competition," "self-reliance," "individual enterprise," and so on as direct associations with his vision of canonical work. But there are three interrelated elements of his thinking on literature that have direct, clear, and forceful economic analogues: scarcity, intellectual property, and meritocracy.

Scarcity, in Freud's thinking, is the underpinning of the reality principle, the originating factor in the psyche's abandonment of the solipsistic infantile life for the delayed gratification of the harmonious life within society. It is also the underpinning of modern economics in the non-Freudian sense. Scarcity in *The Western Canon* is, again, a question of the mental sphere, a spatial and temporal restriction resulting from the fact that "we have now reached the point at which a lifetime's reading and rereading can scarcely take one through the Western Canon" so that it has become "virtually impossible to master" (37). The second and related element of Bloom's economically analogous thinking, following the mention of "individual enterprise," is intellectual property. Trevor Ross, tracing the history of literary style and its relation to copyright law, describes the 18th- and 19th-century uses of the concept of individuation: "Language made ideas public,

but expression always carried with it the possibility of communicating something intrinsic about its author. Copyright, by this logic, encouraged self-determination and the renewal of public discourse through diversity" (764). This, combined with the Emersonian spirit, is the foundational assumption of Bloom's claim that "[g]reat styles are sufficient for canonicity because they possess the power of contamination, and contamination is the pragmatic test for canon formation" (523). "Something intrinsic" is Bloom's "something irreducible," and "communicating" is his contamination. The individual mixes the labour of their poetry with the common properties of language and tropes to create, spread, and profit from an original product or misreading. As in a familiar economic formulation, the solution to scarcity is the empowerment of the self-reliant individual to compete against contemporary and precursor poets to reduce scarcity for the self by reducing the "usurpation of mental space."

The third element in Bloom's thinking with a direct economic analogue is the simplest: Bloom's version of canon formation is a vision of pure meritocracy. The aesthetic elite is organized by *The Western Canon*'s straightforward rule: "All strong literary originality becomes canonical" (25). This is an utter dismissal of the historical-process thinking that goes much derided throughout the book, and an argument for the existence of an entirely isolated sphere capable of maintaining a perfect meritocratic arena. In one remarkable section, Bloom imagines competition itself as a solo activity, declaring that "[t]he literary imagination is contaminated by the zeal and excesses of societal competition, for throughout Western history the creative imagination has conceived of itself as the most competitive of modes, akin to the solitary runner, who races for his own glory" (34). The notion of competition in solitude is somewhat

incoherent on its own terms, but in Bloom's (Freudian) vision of the anxious mind, it becomes the solution to the difficulties that meritocratic purity is faced with in the real world. That is, the claim that *all* worthy writing becomes canonical can only possibly sound convincing in a solipsistic universe that is limited to whatever books a person has read. When "Bloom insists, 'we look back at Shakespeare and regret our absence from him because it seems an absence from reality,'" Weisman repeats incredulously, "To be absented from the literate literary is to be absent from reality?" (225). In Bloom's vision, literature achieves its own sphere, but it is also essentially the *only* sphere, as Bloom does away with not just the historical but also the present material context.

Birken notes that "critics of all stripes have long criticized Freud's tendency to take the conflicts and character of the Viennese upper middle-class as trans-historical law" (317). Similarly, Bloom at least appears to adapt a set of historical conditions that are quite specific and assign them a general relevance; historical and contemporary poets alike might be surprised to learn of the total irrelevance of structural barriers to their work's bids to become canonical. Lise Jaillant, drawing partly on Jonathan Freedman's work, notes that the late 19th century in the United States was characterized by the emergence of a "professional/managerial class" that contained the precursors of the middlebrow, and a new category of "cultural producers who specialized in explaining high art to aspiring middle classes" (8) and were, in many accounts, the precursors of Harold Bloom. The symbiotic relationship of these two groups accompanied the rise of a "middlebrow ethos" founded on an "emphasis on education, the ideal of self-improvement, and the explicit link between culture and social success" (9). In other words, Bloom's version of a literary meritocracy, in which culture and social success

become essentially indistinguishable, is probably a roughly century-old idea abstracted to the mental realm—not so far off his use of Freud. Hardly, in this reading, universal.

Bloom's work, then, builds on specific historical ideas that still inform—and as the success of *The Western Canon* shows, appeal to—the public readers of today. The uniqueness of this appeal has been described so far as follows: *The Western Canon* emphasizes the individual to the exclusion of class and other historical barriers; it displays a comparative lack of emphasis on the university and on the institutional in general; it denies the impact of social barriers, like those between groups marked by different levels of cultural capital, and denies the impact of material hierarchies, like those between classes; in the final analysis, it presents a problem and an opportunity that implicates and encourages every reader, and it takes an apparently iconoclastic position that allows readers to identify with an (aesthetically) elitist view that is ostensibly separate from an (economically) elitist institution. This departure from both sides of the canon wars is characterized by two interrelated factors: the focus on "elitism" as a social category defined by "something irreducible" and understood independently of institutional boundaries, and the positioning of a love for literature as a non-instrumental endpoint for the instrumental process of humanistic study. *The Western Canon*, then, imbues elitism with a populist appeal and literature with a spiritual appeal. The final section of this paper considers what of Bloom's arguments might operate independent of these dubious foundations.

CHAPTER 5: BLOOM AGAINST USEFULNESS

Bloom's insistence on the irreducible (and irreducibly non-economic) diverges from many of the canon-defenders, who straightforwardly embrace on one hand the force of economic analogy applied to literature, and on the other hand the potential economic benefits of literature. Unlike Bloom, these thinkers insist on literature's usefulness. The entire project of E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* is emblematic of this approach, with a thesis incidentally summarized when Hirsch writes, "[t]he fact that middle-level executives no longer share literate background knowledge is a chief cause of their inability to communicate effectively" (9-10). Instrumentalism takes precedence in this sort of defense of the canon in a way that often seems at odds with the simultaneous assumption of universal truth, beauty, and so on. If "the idea of 'creative' or 'imaginative' literature emerge[d] for the first time in the late eighteenth century as a form of resistance to an increasingly prosaic, utilitarian social order" (Eagleton 90), Bloom represents a continuity with such "resistance" that arguments based on the economic or social value of Humanities study do not. It should be noted at the outset, too, that the anti-instrumentalist position really has no firmer ground to stand on than the Kantian disinterestedness, the "pleasure without individual profit, advantage or gratification" (Connor 34), with which it began. The anti-instrumentalist argument will always arrive, finally, at "something irreducible," and in Bloom, as elsewhere, the argument has only as much force as the reader is willing to subjectively grant to it. But whether Bloom is convincing here may be irrelevant; the concept of literary uselessness will continue to exist in all its unverifiable glory, with or without Bloom's help.

Some frame resistance to the instrumentalizing view of literature as merely the desire to retain control of the cultural capital associated with elitist or "high" art. As Guillory wryly remarks: "In our society the name of Proust can circulate as a signifier of high culture without much consequence for the reading of Proust, because wealth is no longer at stake…It is now necessary for figures such as Harold Bloom to create the anxiety that is absent from the yuppie dinner table" (87). If Bloom and Hirsch are both selling an ostensibly aesthetic or spiritual anxiety that ultimately reifies familiar and mundane class anxieties, though, Bloom differs in offering a vision of literary experience as an end in itself, rather than as a means to social cohesion and economic success. Unlike canon defenders who see the university as the necessary site for revitalization of humanistic study, Bloom's focus is the individual reader. Guillory again implicates both Bloom and those like Hirsch when he suggests that the former speaks to the middlebrow through an "attempt to settle the place of high culture by massifying it" (91). But the nature of this massification is precise. Hirsch's foundational claim that the importance of traditional, "specific, communally shared information" is an "old truth, recently rediscovered" (xv) implies a conserved cultural wisdom that is accessible and potentially beneficial to all. By contrast, Bloom has been clear that true reading is only possible for a small aesthetic elite. Hirsch wants massification of the *understanding* or *use* of high culture; Bloom wants massification of its appreciation.

This is one crux of Bloom's divergence from the canon-defenders, because the emphasis on appreciation rather than understanding raises an implicit challenge to Bloom's own institutional roles as professor and critic. Taking a broad view of evolving ideas about literature's function through different historical eras, Terry Eagleton has

noted that "when literature is dislodged from such formal functions [as celebrating aristocrats, the military, and so on]…its apologists may seek to compensate for this lapse of status by claiming either that literary works are precious in themselves, or that, having come loose from one particular social purpose, they…serve a plurality of them" (74). His main point is that claims for a non-pragmatic or non-instrumental aspect of literature are a historically contingent and currently recent phenomenon, despite their contemporary popularity and the tendency of those making such claims to present them ahistorically. But his characterization of the "apologist" arguments as potentially disingenuous invites questions about the nature of actual motives, and clearly there is at least one group for which literature will always have an instrumental function: paid teachers in Humanities departments. Eagleton is writing about literature, but his sentiment holds for the humanities, which are currently in a state of estrangement from their most recent formal function as "a recognizable tradition of great works functioning as a uniting cultural heritage" (Shaw 158).

Then-Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities William J. Bennett exemplified the position of many canon-defenders in his 1984 report *To Reclaim A Legacy*. The report claims that "[i]t is simply not possible for students to understand their society without studying its intellectual legacy. If their past is hidden from them, they will become aliens in their own culture, strangers in their own land" (30). This is an echo of, for example, Memorial speaker René Girard's understanding that for literary works, the "only chance of survival lies in…being adopted by the humanities," such that "[a]ll the really good books ultimately belong to us…the literary canon comprises the best in our culture" (Cohn et al. 62). But the emphasis should be just as strong on

Bennett's claims that students must "study" and that the past must not be "hidden" from them. This is, again, the self-justification of the expert educator, the third party to the citizen and literature. The community of citizens cannot merely encounter their legacy, but must approach it as students prepared to study. Likewise, the threat is not a legacy lost, but one actively hidden by those experts with the unique power and position to do so. Ricardo J. Quinones is explicitly fearful for the public perception of the experts. In his version of the crisis, academics have become "the laughing stock of the generally sensible and literate public," who have given up "faith in the validity of the literary imagination and in the value of literary studies" (Cohn et al. 63). This implies a necessary connection between mediated literary study and literature's ability to be a positive force.

Here, too, Bloom's lack of institutional allegiance is apparent. In a frequently quoted passage, he writes,

> [i]t was a mistake to believe that literary criticism could become a basis for democratic education or for societal improvement. When our English and other literature departments shrink to the dimensions of our current Classics department, ceding their grosser functions to the legions of Cultural Studies, we will perhaps be able to return to the study of the inescapable, to Shakespeare and his few peers. (17)

This argument has often been interpreted as straightforward pessimism, especially by those unsympathetic to the concept of a narrowly exclusive aesthetic elite. But George Myerson identifies *The Western Canon* as presenting a "twofold argument" with a negative fold ("people no longer listen") and a positive fold ("they don't know what they are missing"). As Myerson summarizes, "[t]he losing side has its own authority" (107),

an accurate description of Bloom's so-called "literate survivors". Where traditional defenses of the canon aim to support literature's public role by bolstering Humanities departments, Bloom suggests that engagement with the canon will be closer to its ideal formulation once the institution has acceded to the laws of aesthetics—that is, once the department has shrunk to a size commensurate with the number of true literary critics, as the unworthy are drawn to different specializations. In Bloom, in fact, the (currently) losing side has the *only* authority. English departments are meant to shrink, because they were never meant to appeal to any other than the elite few.

Guillory's further observation is that *The Western Canon* ultimately affirms the beliefs of a middlebrow culture that insists on appreciation to the neglect of any other forms of interaction with a text, which is likely true. But, committed to the paradoxical, the book also presents the opposing position that the realization of self on which a truly self-consistent appreciation must be based is a process of struggle against the psychic tyranny of the "great poets," the objects of appreciation themselves. It is these competing threads in Bloom that can lead Jerome Rothenberg to write that "Bloom's aim…has been to maintain the process of canon-formation & the mastery of critic over poet" (33), even as they lead Karen Weisman to argue that "Foucault's twinning of power and knowledge—though rejected out of hand by Bloom—in fact becomes in his hands the very mechanism of reader response: to read a text is to encounter its tough love, its implicit, often subtle cries of mastery over its own lineage, over the reader, over our own claims to self-knowledge" (220). These are opposing interpretations of who holds power in Bloom's universe, but neither writer sees Bloom as committing himself to a simple or pure form of appreciation. Rothenberg posits simple appreciation as cover for a drive to

mastery, as means rather than end; Weisman rightly acknowledges that appreciation is necessarily fraught in Bloom's world, and that simple appreciation would represent a capitulation to the strength of the poet.

Bloom himself is clear on this point, explaining that "readings of precursor writings are necessarily defensive in part; if they were appreciative only, fresh creation would be stifled" (9). Implicit in this explanation is the (perhaps unsatisfactory) response to Guillory: middlebrow culture is right to focus on mere appreciation because it represents the majority of the population who are, as it were, defenseless—who have no role except to appreciate, and be created by, the great poets. The high/massified paradox of Shakespeare is resolved by the assumption of two different classes of people, namely, the high-culture aesthetic elite and the massified everybody else. For the aesthetic elite, participants in the tradition by which "[g]reatness recognizes greatness and is shadowed by it" (10), Shakespeare is the highest of high art because he casts the largest shadow and therefore demands the fiercest commitment to defining oneself beyond that shadow. For everybody else, Shakespeare is the greatest because he is the most recognizable, in two senses: first, he is the best known figure of literature, which places him at the centre of communal memory and at the centre of Bloom's meritocratic canon; second, Shakespeare is recognizable in the sense that Bloom evokes when he writes of "an originality so perpetual that we can scarcely recognize it" (6). Perhaps the best form that appreciation can take for the aesthetic non-elite is the discernment of how much of one's world, one's psyche, and one's senses is the "original creation" of Shakespeare.

This dynamic is the root of *The Western Canon*'s apparent disinterest in universities and institutional learning. Steven Connor remarks on "the claim of

progressively more specialized disciplines such as literature, art history and even philosophy…that they alone [can] provide the competence to recognize and reproduce these forms of intrinsic value"; he finds "something paradoxical about the idea of such institutionalized access to the differentiated sphere of the aesthetic" (10). Bloom's choice to demote the central importance of the institution can be read as a decisive solution to this problem. But at the same time, Bloom is espousing what Sacvan Bercovitch terms the "'Romantic-democratic concept of art," which demands a 'dual commitment both to 'high' literature (as the expression of transcendent personal genius) and to a literature that represents 'the people' at large'" (Bérubé 72). In Bloom's thinking, literature belongs to everybody, but the majority cannot appreciate it in any meaningful way; the role of the many is as vessels for the ideas of the few. And yet *The Western Canon* attempts, at every turn, to appear as representative of "the people."

Bercovitch warns that ideology can simultaneously draw on and conceal history in order to falsely suggest that "the ideals promulgated by a certain group or class (in this case, individualism, mobility, self-reliance, free enterprise) [are] not the product of history but the expression of self-evident truth" (636). Bloom's rejoinder, that "the source or origin of the freedom to perceive, while hardly irrelevant to aesthetic value, is not identical with it" (24), merely returns readers to his "something irreducible." Bloom refuses significant attention to the role of the university and its relation to cultural perceptions of literature to position the book's perspective closer to that of the idealized "common reader," and to justify the writing and the reading of *The Western Canon* "as though [one is] free of ideology, unfettered by limits of time and place…the sort of freedom…Emerson [felt], announcing the 'transcendent' prospects of the American

Scholar" (Bercovitch 636). Recalling the matter of economic analogy, one might add to this the transcendent prospects of the American underclass, a group often narrativized as uniquely free in terms of social and economic mobility. The school, then, is stripped of its historical and especially class context, and the reader understands the school as a sign of exclusion much like the executive boardroom. The point is that the Western canon—and *The Western Canon*—can make one exclusive. At its worst, this can be read as a sort of "bootstrap myth" for literature, a uniquely American fable of the self-made critic.

In closing, a comparison between Bloom and a contemporary thinker with a definitively academic audience will serve to highlight what may be most worth carrying forward from Bloom's book—what is, in other words, the use of *The Western Canon* and its insistence on literary uselessness. Jacques Rancière offers an argument about literature, function, and universality that might be read as the antithesis of Bloom's. Where Bloom proposes literature as modeling the radical openness of meritocracy, in which readers enjoy equal access to literature but are ultimately organized into a hierarchy of psychic strength, Rancière proposes literature as offering a radical openness for the modeling of perception, something he equates to the radical openness of a true democracy. For him, "[t]he democracy of literature is the regime of the word-at-large that anyone can grab hold of, either to appropriate the life led by the heroes or heroines of novels for themselves, or to turn themselves into writers, or to insert themselves into the discussion of common affairs" (*Politics* 13). This is a different view of equal access, an equality of condition rather than opportunity: here, "the triple question of the agon" is entirely beside the point, and literature is not useless but instead, fundamentally, a matter of use. Where Bloom essentially suggests that the formation of literature from words has

a single function-less function—the expression of the self through a written misreading—Rancière suggests that the importance of literature is the fact that it *is* the use of words, "speech that is not offered by anyone, that does not answer to any desire for meaning but expresses the truth of things the same way fossils or striations in rock bear their written history" (14). These two views are antithetical at least in their perceptions of the role of the word and the role of the human.

But *The Western Canon* does share some common features with Rancière's *Politics*, despite apparently oppositional foundations. Rancière's key insight is that "[e]quality must be seen as a point of departure, and not as a destination" (Guénoun, "Approaches" 3), while Bloomian anxiety is founded on the perpetual impossibility of equality. But when Rancière "theorizes how art governs the sensible order, how it sets the parameters for what is visible, sayable, and doable, and how it determines the places, times, and forms of participation in a common world" (O'Rourke 223), there are definite echoes of Bloom. Bloom writes, for instance, of the awareness that arises from reading Borges, an "awareness, at once visionary and ironical, [that] is hard to describe because it breaks down discursive antitheses between individuality and the communal" (472). Elsewhere, he asserts that "Shakespeare…adds to the function of imaginative writing, which was instruction in how to speak to others, the now dominant if more melancholy lesson of poetry: how to speak to ourselves" (49). He means, more or less precisely, that Shakespeare has redefined the boundaries of perception and created a new form of participation in a common world. Todd May signals another potential overlap between the two in building on Rancière to suggest that "when one's own life…is the subject matter of art, then one is encouraged to approach one's life differently, to take it as a

more vital matter, perhaps as worthy of reflective concern" (91). Bloom's argument that the poetry of the democratic era takes the poet himself as subject accords with this, less in terms of subject matter than in the depiction of literature as an exhortation to its readers. Bloom, at least in Rancière's sense, is practicing politics, where the "politics of literature…means that literature as literature is involved in this partition of the visible and the sayable" (Rancière, "Politics" 10). But the visible and sayable for Bloom must be subject, at the same time, to his concept of the aesthetic elite. Rancière's foundational equality is, as always in Bloom's view, limited to a narrow group that, Bloom insists, are the only ones able to perceive the possibility of such an equality in the first place.

Dennis S. Erasga criticizes Rancière's *Politics of Literature* as ultimately apolitical (in the typical sense of the word) because Rancière "assumes that the author writes without any real or imaginary readers in mind, and that obliviousness imputes power to otherwise 'mute letters', even as the work addresses no one but targets everyone" (545). This, again, echoes the seemingly solipsistic world of Bloom, recalling in particular his idea of solitary competition—what might in Rancière's case be described instead as solitary equality. But Erasga confuses traditional politics with the meta-politics of Rancière's literature, which abandons "the common stage of the conflict of wills in order to investigate in the underground of society and read the symptoms of history" (Rancière, "Politics" 19). This is Rancière's two-fold departure from Bloom: a refusal of the "conflict of wills" in the literary or the properly political sphere, and a positioning of modern literature as symptomatic, not inventive, of history. Rancière can be seen as offering a decisive response to Bloom at least on the question of utility: what Bloom has called "uselessness," the practice and experience of literature, Rancière identifies as a

(useful) politics of perception. The very mechanisms that Bloom describes as aiming ultimately at a confrontation with mortality convincingly become, in Rancière, means of self-assertion within community. What Bloom views as the contest for domination over cultural memory, Rancière views as a collaborative uncovering of the roots or truths of cultural memory.

Both, finally, are focused on what one person can do with words. Bloom's anti-instrumentalism can be interpreted as a bid for cultural capital or as an adherence to aesthetic traditionalism without affecting this fact. This is one area of Bloom's thinking that appears to legitimately exceed the boundaries of the canon wars. If Rancière offers a means of conceiving of literature as radically democratic, what *The Western Canon* is offering, in its constant implication of the reader, is a challenge towards involvement. If, as Rancière describes, "[t]he absolutization of style was the literary formula for the democratic principle of equality" (11), then Bloom's focus on the ability of style to "contaminate" carries a political analogy as well: an admonishment towards participation.

It is this element of *The Western Canon* that does not seem so opposed to many of the academic viewpoints on literature's functions today. In the National Endowment for the Humanities' "Report to the President" a few years after "To Reclaim A Legacy," Lynne V. Cheney wrote with appropriate bombast of the canon-defending types who "have written of disarray and isolation, of rupture and distrust. They have written of a lost sense of meaning in academic humanities. And they have made these observations, paradoxically enough, at the same time that people outside the academy are increasingly turning to literary, historical, and philosophical study" (A18). This is a fear that Bloom and Cheney share with all manner of other theorists on every side of the canon wars: that

the humanities will somehow have a detrimental effect on the objects of their study, the very texts and ideas and words that students and professors of the Humanities love and thrill to. For many who find value in literature, the public perception of literature and its study are important, in either (or both) a spirit of generosity and of self-preservation. Bloom's declaration to readers—that literature has created the world in which they live, that Shakespeare has "invented all of us" (17)—is not merely an argument for the value of literature. More than that, it suggests the value of actively engaging with literature on an individual level. Bloom proposes of the canon that it is "the authentic foundation for cultural thinking" and, as centrally, "the image of the individual thinking" (35). What Bloom does not say is that the canon becomes in this way a challenge to every individual to read, and to struggle with, the ideas that are fundamental to their culture. To read as Bloom suggests is finally to imagine oneself in the image of the undefined "individual"—it is to attend to the connection between one's memory, one's thoughts, one's opinions, and one's world with a sense of potential power. If there is one idea in *The Western Canon* that is both compatible and worthy of inclusion in ongoing discussions about the value and functions of literature, it is this one.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Bloom's elitism remains unconvincing. There is no reason to imagine literature as inherently exclusive, and little reason to believe that certain works are objectively "great." Bloom's claims for literary uselessness are similarly unconvincing, given the extensive evidence *The Western Canon* itself offers of its value. What Bloom offers that Rancière does not is an explicit appeal to the non-reader and the denouncer of the Humanities. Emily O'Rourke's concern with Rancière's thinking is that under modern "neoliberal rationality and governance, it is not so easy to imagine that the subject of rational calculation has the capacity to stage scenes of *dissensus*…even if humans do have this capacity, we should not so easily imagine they *want* this responsibility… that they would not walk right by the open book" (233, original emphasis). Rancière suggests that literature does politics merely by the way we perceive it. But the egalitarian address of literature to "those who *should not* read" (Rancière, "Politics" 15, original emphasis), Rancière's formulation for the equality of literature's targets, does not imply that anyone *should* read. Bloom does, and forcefully. His argument is that what becomes visible and sayable through literature affects an individual whether or not they read it themselves. Communal memory affects everyone even as they create and sustain it, and if literature is a uniquely democratic sphere, it is a unique tool for the understanding of traditional or non-literary politics. To imagine oneself in the "image of the individual thinking" is to imagine that these words matter for the individual actions that follow individual thought. Without the burden of "greatness," literature appears democratically collaborative. Perhaps Bloomian anxiety really means: we should attend to any words that affect the way we perceive our world—no matter whose.

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