

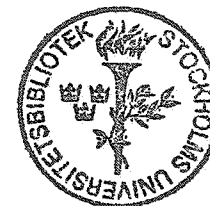
ALSO BY HAROLD BLOOM

- The American Religion (1992)
The Book of J (1990)
Ruin the Sacred Truths (1989)
Poetics of Influence (1988)
The Strong Light of the Canonical (1987)
Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism (1982)
The Breaking of the Vessels (1982)
The Flight to Lucifer: A Gnostic Fantasy (1979)
Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (1977)
Figures of Capable Imagination (1976)
Poetry and Repression (1976)
A Map of Misreading (1975)
Kabbalah and Criticism (1975)
The Anxiety of Influence (1973)
The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in
Romantic Tradition (1971)
Yeats (1970)
Commentary on David V. Erdman's Edition
of *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (1965)
Blake's Apocalypse (1963)
The Visionary Company (1961)
Shelley's Mythmaking (1959)

THE WESTERN CANON

The Books and School of the Ages

HAROLD BLOOM



PAPERMAC

(1994)

An Elegy for the Canon

ORIGINALLY THE CANON meant the choice of books in our teaching institutions, and despite the recent politics of multiculturalism, the Canon's true question remains: What shall the individual who still desires to read attempt to read, this late in history? The Biblical three-score years and ten no longer suffice to read more than a selection of the great writers in what can be called the Western tradition, let alone in all the world's traditions. Who reads must choose, since there is literally not enough time to read everything, even if one does nothing but read. Mallarmé's grand line—"the flesh is sad, alas, and I have read all the books"—has become a hyperbole. Overpopulation, Malthusian repletion, is the authentic context for canonical anxieties. Not a moment passes these days without fresh rushes of academic lemmings off the cliffs they proclaim the political responsibilities of the critic, but eventually all this moralizing will subside. Every teaching institution will have its department of cultural studies, an ox not to be gored, and an aesthetic underground will flourish, restoring something of the romance of reading.

Reviewing bad books, W. H. Auden once remarked, is bad for the character. Like all gifted moralists, Auden idealized despite himself, and he should have survived into the present age, wherein the new commissars tell us that reading good books is bad for the character, which I think is probably true. Reading the very best writers—let us say Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Tolstoy—is not going to make us better citizens. Art is perfectly useless, according to the sublime Oscar Wilde, who was right about everything. He also told us that all bad poetry is sincere. Had I the power to do so, I would command that these words be engraved above every gate at every university, so that each student might ponder the splendor of the insight.

President Clinton's inaugural poem, by Maya Angelou, was praised in a *New York Times* editorial as a work of Whitmanian magnitude, and its sincerity is indeed overwhelming; it joins all the other instantly canonical achievements that flood our academies. The unhappy truth is that we cannot help ourselves; we can resist, up to a point, but past that point even our own universities would feel compelled to indict us as racists and sexists. I recall one of us, doubtless with irony, telling a *New York Times* interviewer that "We are all feminist critics." That is the rhetoric suitable for an occupied country, one that expects no liberation from liberation. Institutions may hope to follow the advice of the prince in Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, who counsels his peers, "Change everything just a little so as to keep everything exactly the same."

Unfortunately, nothing ever will be the same because the art and passion of reading well and deeply, which was the foundation of our enterprise, depended upon people who were fanatical readers when they were still small children. Even devoted and solitary readers are now necessarily beleaguered, because they cannot be certain that fresh generations will rise up to prefer Shakespeare and Dante to all other writers. The shadows lengthen in our evening land, and we approach the second millennium expecting further shadowing.

I do not deplore these matters; the aesthetic is, in my view, an individual rather than a societal concern. In any case there are no culprits, though some of us would appreciate not being told that

we lack the free, generous, and open societal vision of those who come after us. Literary criticism is an ancient art; its inventor, according to Bruno Snell, was Aristophanes, and I tend to agree with Heinrich Heine that "There is a God, and his name is Aristophanes." Cultural criticism is another dismal social science, but literary criticism, as an art, always was and always will be an elitist phenomenon. It 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 departments, 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, who after all, invented all of us.

The Canon, once we view it as the relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written, and forget the canon as a list of books for required study, will be seen as identical with the literary Art of Memory, not with the religious sense of canon. Memory is always an art, even when it works involuntarily. Emerson opposed the party of Memory to the party of Hope, but that was in a very different America. Now the party of Memory *is* the party of Hope, though the hope is diminished. But it has always been dangerous to institutionalize hope, and we no longer live in a society in which we will be allowed to institutionalize memory. We need to teach more selectively, searching for the few who have the capacity to become highly individual readers and writers. The others, who are amenable to a politicized curriculum, can be abandoned to it. Pragmatically, aesthetic value can be recognized or experienced, but it cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions. To quarrel on its behalf is always a blunder.

What interests me more is the flight from the aesthetic among so many in my profession, some of whom at least began with the ability to experience aesthetic value. In Freud, flight is the metaphor for repression, for unconscious yet purposeful forgetting. The purpose is clear enough in my profession's flight: to assuage displaced guilt. Forgetting, in an aesthetic context, is ruinous, for

cognition, in criticism, always relies on memory. Longinus would have said that pleasure is what the resenterers have forgotten. Nietzsche would have called it pain; but they would have been thinking of the same experience upon the heights. Those who descend from there, lemminglike, chant the litany that literature is best explained as a mystification promoted by bourgeois institutions.

This reduces the aesthetic to ideology, or at best to metaphysics. A poem cannot be read *as a poem*, because it is primarily a social document or, rarely yet possibly, an attempt to overcome philosophy. Against this approach I urge a stubborn resistance whose single aim is to preserve poetry as fully and purely as possible. Our legions who have deserted represent a strand in our traditions that has always been in flight from the aesthetic: Platonic moralism and Aristotelian social science. The attack on poetry either exiles it for being destructive of social well-being or allows it sufferance if it will assume the work of social catharsis under the banners of the new multiculturalism. Beneath the surfaces of academic Marxism, Feminism, and New Historicism, the ancient polemic of Platonism and the equally archaic Aristotelian social medicine continue to course on. I suppose that the conflict between these strains and the always beleaguered supporters of the aesthetic can never end. We are losing now, and doubtless we will go on losing, and there is a sorrow in that, because many of the best students will abandon us for other disciplines and professions, an abandonment already well under way. They are justified in doing so, because we could not protect them against our profession's loss of intellectual and aesthetic standards of accomplishment and value. All that we can do now is maintain some continuity with the aesthetic and not yield to the lie that what we oppose is adventure and new interpretations.

FREUD FAMOUSLY DEFINED anxiety as being *Angst vor etwas*, or anxious expectations. There is always something in advance of which we are anxious, if only of expectations that we will be called upon to fulfill. Eros, presumably the most pleasurable of expectations, brings its own anxieties to the reflective conscious-

ness, which is Freud's subject. A literary work also arouses expectations that it needs to fulfill or it will cease to be read. The deepest anxieties of literature are literary; indeed, in my view, they define the literary and become all but identical with it. A poem, novel, or play acquires all of humanity's disorders, including the fear of mortality, which in the art of literature is transmuted into the quest to be canonical, to join communal or societal memory. Even Shakespeare, in the strongest of his sonnets, hovers near this obsessive desire or drive. The rhetoric of immortality is also a psychology of survival and a cosmology.

Where did the idea of conceiving a literary work that the world would not willingly let die come from? It was not attached to the Scriptures by the Hebrews, who spoke of canonical writings as those that polluted the hands that touched them, presumably because mortal hands were not fit to hold sacred writings. Jesus replaced the Torah for Christians, and what mattered most about Jesus was the Resurrection. At what date in the history of secular writing did men begin to speak of poems or stories as being immortal? The conceit is in Petrarch and is marvelously developed by Shakespeare in his sonnets. It is already a latent element in Dante's praise of his own *Divine Comedy*. We cannot say that Dante secularized the idea, because he subsumed everything and so, in a sense, secularized nothing. For him, his poem was prophecy, as much as Isaiah was prophecy, so perhaps we can say that Dante invented our modern idea of the canonical. Ernst Robert Curtius, the eminent medieval scholar, emphasizes that Dante considered only two journeys into the beyond, before his own, to be authentic: Virgil's Aeneas in Book 6 of his epic and St. Paul's as recounted in 2 Corinthians 12:2. Out of Aeneas came Rome; out of Paul came Gentile Christianity; out of Dante was to come, if he lived to the age of eighty-one, the fulfillment of the esoteric prophecy concealed in the *Comedy*, but Dante died at fifty-six.

Curtius, ever alert to the fortune of canonical metaphors, has an excursus upon "Poetry as Perpetuation" that traces the origin of the eternity of poetic fame to the *Iliad* (6.359) and beyond to Horace's *Odes* (4.8, 28), where we are assured that it is the Muse's eloquence and affection that allow the hero never to die. Jakob Burckhardt, in a chapter on literary fame that Curtius quotes,

observes that Dante, the Italian Renaissance poet-philologist, had "the most intense consciousness that he is a distributor of fame and indeed of immortality," a consciousness that Curtius locates among the Latin poets of France as early as 1100. But at some point this consciousness was linked to the idea of a secular canonicity, so that not the hero being celebrated but the celebration itself was hailed as immortal. The secular canon, with the word meaning a catalog of approved authors, does not actually begin until the middle of the eighteenth century, during the literary period of Sensibility, Sentimentality, and the Sublime. The *Odes* of William Collins trace the Sublime canon in Sensibility's heroic precursors from the ancient Greeks through Milton and are among the earliest poems in English written to propound a secular tradition of canonicity.

The Canon, a word religious in its origins, has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival, whether you interpret the choice as being made by dominant social groups, institutions of education, traditions of criticism, or, as I do, by late-coming authors who feel themselves chosen by particular ancestral figures. Some recent partisans of what regards itself as academic radicalism go so far as to suggest that works join the Canon because of successful advertising and propaganda campaigns. The compeers of these skeptics sometimes go farther and question even Shakespeare, whose eminence seems to them something of an imposition. If you worship the composite god of historical process, you are fated to deny Shakespeare his palpable aesthetic supremacy, the really scandalous originality of his plays. Originality 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—of all those whom I have described as members of the School of Resentment.

One illuminating theory of canon formation is presented by Alastair Fowler in his *Kinds of Literature* (1982). In a chapter on "Hierarchies of Genres and Canons of Literature," Fowler remarks that "changes in literary taste can often be referred to reevaluation of genres that the canonical works represent." In each era, some genres are regarded as more canonical than others. In

the earlier decades of our time, the American prose romance was exalted as a genre, which helped to establish Faulkner, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald as our dominant twentieth-century writers of prose fiction, fit successors to Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain, and the aspect of Henry James that triumphed in *The Golden Bowl* and *The Wings of the Dove*. The effect of this exaltation of romance over the "realistic" novel was that visionary narratives like Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* enjoyed more critical esteem than Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. Now a further revision of genres has begun with the rise of the journalistic novel, such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, and Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*; *An American Tragedy* has recovered much of its luster in the atmosphere of these works.

The historical novel seems to have been permanently devalued. Gore Vidal once said to me, with bitter eloquence, that his outspoken sexual orientation had denied him canonical status. What seems likelier is that Vidal's best fictions (except for the sublimely outrageous *Myra Breckenridge*) are distinguished historical novels—*Lincoln*, *Burr*, and several more—and this subgenre is no longer available for canonization, which helps to account for the morose fate of Norman Mailer's exuberantly inventive *Ancient Evenings*, a marvelous anatomy of humbuggery and bumbuggery that could not survive its placement in the ancient Egypt of *The Book of the Dead*. History writing and narrative fiction have come apart, and our sensibilities seem no longer able to accommodate them one to the other.

FOWLER GOES a long way toward expounding the question of just why all genres are not available at any one time:

we have to allow for the fact that the complete range of genres is never equally, let alone fully, available in any one period. Each age has a fairly small repertoire of genres that its readers and critics can respond to with enthusiasm, and the repertoire easily available to its writers is smaller still: the temporary canon

is fixed for all but the greatest or strongest or most arcane writers. Each age makes new deletions from the repertoire. In a weak sense, all genres perhaps exist in all ages, shadowily embodied in bizarre and freakish exceptions. . . . But the repertoire of active genres has always been small and subject to proportionately significant deletions and additions . . . some critics have been tempted to think of the generic system almost on a hydrostatic model—as if its total substance remained constant but subject to redistributions.

But there is no firm basis for such speculation. We do better to treat the movements of genres simply in terms of aesthetic choice.

I myself would want to argue, partly following Fowler, that aesthetic choice has always guided every secular aspect of canon formation, but that is a difficult argument to maintain at this time when the defense of the literary canon, like the assault against it, has become so heavily politicized. Ideological defenses of the Western Canon are as pernicious in regard to aesthetic values as the onslaughts of attackers who seek to destroy the Canon or “open it up,” as they proclaim. Nothing is so essential to the Western Canon as its principles of selectivity, which are elitist only to the extent that they are founded upon severely artistic criteria. Those who oppose the Canon insist that there is always an ideology involved in canon formation; indeed, they go farther and speak of the ideology of canon formation, suggesting that to make a canon (or to perpetuate one) is an ideological act *in itself*.

The hero of these anticanonizers is Antonio Gramsci, who in his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* denies that any intellectual can be free of the dominant social group if he relies upon merely the “special qualification” that he shares with the craft of his fellows (such as other literary critics): “Since these various categories of traditional intellectuals experience through an ‘esprit de corps’ their uninterrupted historical qualification, they thus put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group.”

As a literary critic in what I now regard as the worst of all times for literary criticism, I do not find Gramsci’s stricture relevant. The esprit de corps of professionalism, so curiously dear to many

high priests of the anticanonizers, is of no interest whatsoever to me, and I would repudiate any “uninterrupted historical continuity” with the Western academy. I desire and assert a continuity with a handful or so of critics before this century and another handful or so during the past three generations. As for “special qualification,” my own, contra Gramsci, is purely personal. Even if “the dominant social group” were to be identified with the Yale Corporation, or the trustees of New York University, or of American universities in general, I can search out no *inner* connection between any social group and the specific ways in which I have spent my life reading, remembering, judging, and interpreting what we once called “imaginative literature.” To discover critics in the service of a social ideology one need only regard those who wish to demystify or open up the Canon, or their opponents who have fallen into the trap of becoming what they beheld. But neither of these groups is truly *literary*.

The flight from or repression of the aesthetic is endemic in our institutions of what still purport to be higher education. Shakespeare, whose aesthetic supremacy has been confirmed by the universal judgment of four centuries, is now “historicized” into pragmatic diminishment, precisely because his uncanny aesthetic power is a scandal to any ideologue. The cardinal principle of the current School of Resentment can be stated with singular bluntness: what is called aesthetic value emanates from class struggle. This principle is so broad that it cannot be wholly refuted. I myself insist that the individual self is the only method and the whole standard for apprehending aesthetic value. But “the individual self,” I unhappily grant, is defined only against society, and part of its agon with the communal inevitably partakes of the conflict between social and economic classes. Myself the son of a garment worker, I have been granted endless time to read and meditate upon my reading. The institution that sustained me, Yale University, is ineluctably part of an American Establishment, and my sustained meditation upon literature is therefore vulnerable to the most traditional Marxist analyses of class interest. All my passionate proclamations of the isolate selfhood’s aesthetic value are necessarily qualified by the reminder that the leisure for meditation must be purchased from the community.

No critic, not even this one, is a hermetic Prospero working

white magic upon an enchanted island. Criticism, like poetry, is (in the hermetic sense) a kind of theft from the common stock. And if the governing class, in the days of my youth, freed one to be a priest of the aesthetic, it doubtless had its own interest in such a priesthood. Yet to grant this is to grant very little. The freedom to apprehend aesthetic value may rise from class conflict, but the value is not identical with the freedom, even if it cannot be achieved without that apprehension. Aesthetic value is by definition engendered by an interaction between artists, an influencing that is always an interpretation. The freedom to be an artist, or a critic, necessarily rises out of social conflict. But the source or origin of the freedom to perceive, while hardly irrelevant to aesthetic value, is not identical with it. There is always guilt in achieved individuality; it is a version of the guilt of being a survivor and is not productive of aesthetic value.

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. Value that cannot be altogether reduced constitutes itself through the process of interartistic influence. Such influence contains psychological, spiritual, and social components, but its major element is aesthetic. A Marxist or Foucault-inspired historicist can insist endlessly that the *production* of the aesthetic is a question of historical forces, but production is not in itself the issue here. I cheerfully agree with the motto of Dr. Johnson—"No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money"—yet the undeniable economics of literature, from Pindar to the present, do not determine questions of aesthetic supremacy. And the openers-up of the Canon and the traditionalists do not disagree much on where the supremacy is to be found: in Shakespeare. Shakespeare *is* the secular canon, or even the secular scripture; forerunners and legatees alike are defined by him alone for canonical purposes. This is the dilemma that confronts partisans of resentment: either they must deny Shakespeare's unique eminence (a painful and difficult matter) or they must show why and how history and class struggle produced just those aspects of his plays that have generated his centrality in the Western Canon.

Here they confront insurmountable difficulty in Shakespeare's most idiosyncratic strength: he is always ahead of you, conceptually and imagistically, whoever and whenever you are. He renders you anachronistic because he *contains* you; you cannot subsume him. You cannot illuminate him with a new doctrine, be it Marxism or Freudianism or Demanian linguistic skepticism. Instead, he will illuminate the doctrine, not by prefiguration but by postfiguration as it were: all of Freud that matters most is there in Shakespeare already, with a persuasive critique of Freud besides. The Freudian map of the mind is Shakespeare's; Freud seems only to have prosified it. Or, to vary my point, a Shakespearean reading of Freud illuminates and overwhelms the text of Freud; a Freudian reading of Shakespeare reduces Shakespeare, or would if we could bear a reduction that crosses the line into absurdities of loss. *Coriolanus* is a far more powerful reading of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* than any Marxist reading of *Coriolanus* could hope to be.

Shakespeare's eminence is, I am certain, the rock upon which the School of Resentment must at last founder. How can they have it both ways? If it is arbitrary that Shakespeare centers the Canon, then they need to show why the dominant social class selected him rather than, say, Ben Jonson, for that arbitrary role. Or if history and not the ruling circles exalted Shakespeare, what was it in Shakespeare that so captivated the mighty Demiurge, economic and social history? Clearly this line of inquiry begins to border on the fantastic; how much simpler to admit that there is a *qualitative* difference, a difference in kind, between Shakespeare and every other writer, even Chaucer, even Tolstoy, or whoever. Originality is the great scandal that resentment cannot accommodate, and Shakespeare remains the most original writer we will ever know.

ALL STRONG literary originality becomes canonical. Some years ago, on a stormy night in New Haven, I sat down to reread, yet once more, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I had to write a lecture on Milton as part of a series I was delivering at Harvard University, but I wanted to start all over again with the poem: to read it as though I had never read it before, indeed as though no one ever

had read it before me. To do so meant dismissing a library of Milton criticism from my head, which was virtually impossible. Still, I tried because I wanted the experience of reading *Paradise Lost* as I had first read it forty or so years before. And while I read, until I fell asleep in the middle of the night, the poem's initial familiarity began to dissolve. It went on dissolving in the several days following, as I read on to the end, and I was left curiously shocked, a little alienated, and yet fearfully absorbed. What was I reading?

Although the poem is a biblical epic, in classical form, the peculiar impression it gave me was what I generally ascribe to literary fantasy or science fiction, not to heroic epic. *Weirdness* was its overwhelming effect. I was stunned by two related but different sensations: the author's competitive and triumphant power, marvelously displayed in a struggle, both implicit and explicit, against every other author and text, the Bible included, and also the sometimes terrifying strangeness of what was being presented. Only after I came to the end did I recall (consciously anyway) William Empson's fierce book *Milton's God*, with its critical observation that *Paradise Lost* seemed to Empson as barbarically splendid as certain African primitive sculptures. Empson blamed the Miltonic barbarism upon Christianity, a doctrine he found abhorrent. Although Empson was politically a Marxist, deeply sympathetic to the Chinese Communists, he was by no means a precursor of the School of Resentment. He historicized freestyle with striking aptitude, and he continually showed awareness of the conflict between social classes, but he was not tempted to reduce *Paradise Lost* to an interplay of economic forces. His prime concern remained aesthetic, the proper business of the literary critic, and he fought free of transferring his moral distaste for Christianity (and Milton's God) to an aesthetic judgment against the poem. The barbaric element impressed me as it did Empson; the agonistic triumphalism interested me more.

THERE ARE, I suppose, only a few works that seem even more essential to the Western Canon than *Paradise Lost*—Shakespeare's major tragedies, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Dante's *Divine*

Comedy, the Torah, the Gospels, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Homer's epics. Except perhaps for Dante's poem, none of these is as embattled as Milton's dark work. Shakespeare undoubtedly received provocation from rival playwrights, while Chaucer charmingly cited fictive authorities and concealed his authentic obligations to Dante and Boccaccio. The Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament were revised into their present forms by redactionists who may have shared very little with the original authors whom they were editing. Cervantes, with unsurpassed mirth, parodied unto death his chivalric forerunners, while we do not have the texts of Homer's precursors.

Milton and Dante are the most pugnacious of the greatest Western writers. Scholars somehow manage to evade the ferocity of both poets and even dub them pious. Thus C. S. Lewis was able to discover his own "mere Christianity" in *Paradise Lost*, and John Freccero finds Dante to be a faithful Augustinian, content to emulate the *Confessions* in his "novel of the self." Dante, as I only begin to see, creatively corrected Virgil (among many others) as profoundly as Milton corrected absolutely everyone before him (Dante included) by his own creation. But whether the writer is playful in the struggle, like Chaucer and Cervantes and Shakespeare, or aggressive, like Dante and Milton, the contest is always there. This much of Marxist criticism seems to me valuable: in strong writing there is always conflict, ambivalence, contradiction between subject and structure. Where I part from the Marxists is on the origins of the conflict. From Pindar to the present, the writer battling for canonicity may fight on behalf of a social class, as Pindar did for the aristocrats, but primarily each ambitious writer is out for himself alone and will frequently betray or neglect his class in order to advance his own interests, which center entirely upon *individuation*. Dante and Milton both sacrificed much for what they believed to be a spiritually exuberant and justified political course, but neither of them would have been willing to sacrifice his major poem for any cause whatever. Their way of arranging this was to identify the cause with the poem, rather than the poem with the cause. In doing so, they provided a precedent that is not much followed these days by the academic rabble that seeks to connect the study of literature with the quest for

social change. One finds modern American followers of this aspect of Dante and Milton where one would expect to find them, in our strongest poets since Whitman and Dickinson: the socially reactionary Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost.

Those who can do canonical work invariably see their writings as larger forms than any social program, however exemplary. The issue is containment, and great literature will insist upon its self-sufficiency in the face of the worthiest causes: feminism, African-American culturism, and all the other politically correct enterprises of our moment. The thing contained varies; the strong poem, by definition, refuses to be contained, even by Dante's or Milton's God. Dr. Samuel Johnson, shrewdest of all literary critics, concluded rightly that devotional poetry was impossible as compared to poetic devotion: "The good and evil of Eternity are too ponderous for the wings of wit." "Ponderous" is a metaphor for "uncontainable," which is another metaphor. Our contemporary opens-up of the Canon decry overt religion, but they call for devotional verse (and devotional criticism!) even if the object of devotion has been altered to the advancement of women, or of blacks, or of that most unknown of all unknown gods, the class struggle in the United States. It all depends upon your values, but I find it forever odd that Marxists are perceptive in finding competition everywhere else, yet fail to see that it is intrinsic to the high arts. There is a peculiar mix here of simultaneous over-idealization and undervaluation of imaginative literature, which has always pursued its own selfish aims.

Paradise Lost became canonical before the secular Canon was established, in the century after Milton's own. The answer to "Who canonized Milton?" is in the first place John Milton himself, but in almost the first place other strong poets, from his friend Andrew Marvell through John Dryden and on to nearly every crucial poet of the eighteenth century and the Romantic period: Pope, Thomson, Cowper, Collins, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats. Certainly the critics, Dr. Johnson and Hazlitt, contributed to the canonization; but Milton, like Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare before him, and like Wordsworth after him, simply overwhelmed the tradition and subsumed it. That is the strongest test for canonicity. Only a very few could overwhelm

and subsume the tradition, and perhaps none now can. So the question today is: Can you compel the tradition to make space for you by nudging it from within, as it were, rather than from without, as the multiculturalists wish to do?

The movement from within the tradition cannot be ideological or place itself in the service of any social aims, however morally admirable. One breaks into the canon only by aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily of an amalgam: mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction. The final injustice of historical injustice is that it does not necessarily endow its victims with anything except a sense of their victimization. Whatever the Western Canon is, it is not a program for social salvation.

THE SILLIEST way to defend the Western Canon is to insist that it incarnates all of the seven deadly moral virtues that make up our supposed range of normative values and democratic principles. This is palpably untrue. The *Iliad* teaches the surpassing glory of armed victory, while Dante rejoices in the eternal torments he visits upon his very personal enemies. Tolstoy's private version of Christianity throws aside nearly everything that anyone among us retains, and Dostoevsky preaches anti-Semitism, obscurantism, and the necessity of human bondage. Shakespeare's politics, insofar as we can pin them down, do not appear to be very different from those of his Coriolanus, and Milton's ideas of free speech and free press do not preclude the imposition of all manner of societal restraints. Spenser rejoices in the massacre of Irish rebels, while the egomania of Wordsworth exalts his own poetic mind over any other source of splendor.

The West's greatest writers are subversive of all values, both ours and their own. Scholars who urge us to find the source of our morality and our politics in Plato, or in Isaiah, are out of touch with the social reality in which we live. If we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation. To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgment, to read at all. The reception of aesthetic

power enables us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves. The true use of Shakespeare or of Cervantes, of Homer or of Dante, of Chaucer or of Rabelais, is to augment one's own growing inner self. Reading deeply in the Canon will not make one a better or a worse person, a more useful or more harmful citizen. The mind's dialogue with itself is not primarily a social reality. All that the Western Canon can bring one is the proper use of one's own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality.

WE POSSESS the Canon because we are mortal and also rather belated. There is only so much time, and time must have a stop, while there is more to read than there ever was before. From the Yahwist and Homer to Freud, Kafka, and Beckett is a journey of nearly three millennia. Since that voyage goes past harbors as infinite as Dante, Chaucer, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy, all of whom amply compensate a lifetime's rereadings, we are in the pragmatic dilemma of excluding something else each time we read or reread extensively. One ancient test for the canonical remains fiercely valid: unless it demands rereading, the work does not qualify. The inevitable analogue is the erotic one. If you are Don Giovanni and Leporello keeps the list, one brief encounter will suffice.

Contra certain Parisians, the text is there to give not pleasure but the high unpleasure or more difficult pleasure that a lesser text will not provide. I am not prepared to dispute admirers of Alice Walker's *Meridian*, a novel I have compelled myself to read twice, but the second reading was one of my most remarkable literary experiences. It produced an epiphany in which I saw clearly the new principle implicit in the slogans of those who proclaim the opening-up of the Canon. The correct test for the new canonicity is simple, clear, and wonderfully conducive to social change: it must not and cannot be reread, because its contribution to societal progress is its generosity in offering itself up for rapid ingestion and discarding. From Pindar through Hölderlin to Yeats, the self-canonizing greater ode has proclaimed its agonistic immortality. The socially acceptable ode of the future will doubtless spare us

such pretensions and instead address itself to the proper humility of shared sisterhood, the new sublimity of quilt making that is now the preferred trope of Feminist criticism.

Yet we must choose: As there is only so much time, do we reread Elizabeth Bishop or Adrienne Rich? Do I again go in search of lost time with Marcel Proust, or am I to attempt yet another rereading of Alice Walker's stirring denunciation of all males, black and white? My former students, many of them now stars of the School of Resentment, proclaim that they teach social selflessness, which begins in learning how to read selflessly. The author has no self, the literary character has no self, and the reader has no self. Shall we gather at the river with these generous ghosts, free of the guilt of past self-assertions, and be baptized in the waters of Lethe? What shall we do to be saved?

The study of literature, however it is conducted, will not save any individual, any more than it will improve any society. Shakespeare will not make us better, and he will not make us worse, but he may teach us how to overhear ourselves when we talk to ourselves. Subsequently, he may teach us how to accept change, in ourselves as in others, and perhaps even the final form of change. Hamlet is death's ambassador to us, perhaps one of the few ambassadors ever sent out by death who does not lie to us about our inevitable relationship with that undiscovered country. The relationship is altogether solitary, despite all of tradition's obscene attempts to socialize it.

My late friend Paul de Man liked to analogize the solitude of each literary text and each human death, an analogy I once protested. I had suggested to him that the more ironic trope would be to analogize each human birth to the coming into being of a poem, an analogy that would connect texts as infants are connected, voicelessness linked to past voices, inability to speak linked to what had been spoken to, as all of us have been spoken to, by the dead. I did not win that critical argument because I could not persuade him of the larger human analogue; he preferred the dialectical authority of the more Heideggerian irony. All that a text, let us say the tragedy of *Hamlet*, shares with death is its solitude. But when it shares with us, does it speak with the authority of death? Whatever the answer, I would like to point out

that the authority of death, whether literary or existential, is not primarily a social authority. The Canon, far from being the servant of the dominant social class, is the minister of death. To open it, you must persuade the reader that a new space has been cleared in a larger space crowded by the dead. Let the dead poets consent to stand aside for us, Artaud cried out; but that is exactly what they will not consent to do.

If we were literally immortal, or even if our span were doubled to seven score of years, say, we could give up all argument about canons. But we have an interval only, and then our place knows us no more, and stuffing that interval with bad writing, in the name of whatever social justice, does not seem to me to be the responsibility of the literary critic. Professor Frank Lentricchia, apostle of social change through academic ideology, has managed to read Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar" as a political poem, one that voices the program of the dominant social class. The art of placing a jar was, for Stevens, allied to the art of flower arranging, and I don't see why Lentricchia should not publish a modest volume on the politics of flower arranging, under the title *Ariel and the Flowers of Our Climate*. I still remember my shock, thirty-five years or so back, when I was first taken to a soccer match in Jerusalem where the Sephardi spectators were cheering for the visiting Haifa squad, it being of the political right, while the Jerusalem squad was affiliated with the labor party. Why stop with politicizing the study of literature? Let us replace sports writers with political pundits as a first step toward reorganizing baseball, with the Republican League meeting the Democratic League in the World Series. That would give us a form of baseball into which we could not escape for pastoral relief, as we do now. The political responsibilities of the baseball player would be just as appropriate, no more, no less, than the now-trumpeted political responsibilities of the literary critic.

Cultural belatedness, now an all-but-universal world condition, has a particular poignance in the United States of America. We are the final inheritors of Western tradition. Education founded upon the *Iliad*, the Bible, Plato, and Shakespeare remains, in some strained form, our ideal, though the relevance of these cultural monuments to life in our inner cities is inevitably rather remote. Those who resent all canons suffer from an elitist guilt founded

upon the accurate enough realization that canons always do indirectly serve the social and political, and indeed the spiritual, concerns and aims of the wealthier classes of each generation of Western society. It seems clear that capital is necessary for the cultivation of aesthetic values. Pindar, the superb last champion of archaic lyric, invested his art in the celebratory exercise of exchanging odes for grand prices, thus praising the wealthy for their generous support of his generous exaltation of their divine lineage. This alliance of sublimity and financial and political power has never ceased, and presumably never can or will.

There are, of course, prophets, from Amos to Blake and beyond to Whitman, who rise up to cry out against this alliance, and doubtless a great figure, equal to a Blake, will some day come again; but Pindar rather than Blake remains the canonical norm. Even such prophets as Dante and Milton compromised themselves as Blake would or could not, insofar as pragmatic cultural aspirations may be said to have tempted the poets of the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost*. It has taken me a lifetime of immersion in the study of poetry before I could understand why Blake and Whitman were compelled to become the hermetic, indeed esoteric poets that they truly were. If you break the alliance between wealth and culture—a break that marks the difference between Milton and Blake, between Dante and Whitman—then you pay the high, ironic price of those who seek to destroy canonical continuities. You become a belated Gnostic, warring against Homer, Plato, and the Bible by mythologizing your misreading of tradition. Such a war can yield limited victories; a *Four Zoas* or a *Song of Myself* are triumphs I call limited because they drive *their* inheritors to perfectly desperate distortions of creative desire. The poets who walk Whitman's open road most successfully are those who resemble him profoundly but not at all superficially, poets as severely formal as Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and Hart Crane. Those who seek to emulate his apparently open forms all die in the wilderness, inchoate rhapsodists and academic impostors sprawling in the wake of their delicately hermetic father. Nothing is got for nothing, and Whitman will not do your work for you. A minor Blakean or an apprentice Whitmanian is always a false prophet, making no way straight for anyone.

I am not at all happy about these truths of poetry's reliance

upon worldly power; I am simply following William Hazlitt, the authentic left-winger among all great critics. Hazlitt, in his wonderful discussion of Coriolanus in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, begins with the unhappy admission that "the cause of the people is indeed but little calculated as a subject for poetry: it admits of rhetoric, which goes into argument and explanation, but it presents no immediate or distinct images to the mind." Such images, Hazlitt finds, are everywhere present on the side of tyrants and their instruments.

Hazlitt's clear sense of the troubled interplay between the power of rhetoric and the rhetoric of power has an enlightening potential in our fashionable darkness. Shakespeare's own politics may or may not be those of Coriolanus, just as Shakespeare's anxieties may or may not be those of Hamlet or of Lear. Nor is Shakespeare the tragic Christopher Marlowe, whose work and life alike seem to have taught Shakespeare the way not to go. Shakespeare knows implicitly what Hazlitt wryly makes explicit: the Muse, whether tragic or comic, takes the side of the elite. For every Shelley or Brecht there are a score of even more powerful poets who gravitate naturally to the party of the dominant classes in whatever society. The 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.

The strongest women among the great poets, Sappho and Emily Dickinson, are even fiercer agonists than the men. Miss Dickinson of Amherst does not set out to help Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett Browning complete a quilt. Rather, Dickinson leaves Mrs. Browning far behind in the dust, though the triumph is more subtly conveyed than Whitman's victory over Tennyson in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," where the Laureate's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" is overtly echoed so as to compel an alert reader's recognition of how far the Lincoln elegy surpasses the lament for the Iron Duke. I do not know whether Feminist criticism will succeed in its quest to change human nature, but I rather doubt that any idealism, however belated, will change the entire basis of the Western psychology of creativity, male and female, from Hesiod's contest with Homer down to the agon between Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop.

As I write these sentences, I glance at the newspaper and note a story on the anguish of feminists forced to choose between Elizabeth Holtzman and Geraldine Ferraro for a Senate nomination, a choice not different in kind from a critic pragmatically needing to choose between the late May Swenson, something close to a strong poet, and the vehement Adrienne Rich. A purported poem may have the most exemplary sentiments, the most exalted politics, and may also be not much of a poem. A critic may have political responsibilities, but the first obligation is to raise again the ancient and quite grim triple question of the agonist: more than, less than, equal to? We are destroying all intellectual and aesthetic standards in the humanities and social sciences, in the name of social justice. Our institutions show bad faith in this: no quotas are imposed upon brain surgeons or mathematicians. What has been devaluated is learning as such, as though erudition were irrelevant in the realms of judgment and misjudgment.

The Western Canon, despite the limitless idealism of those who would open it up, exists precisely in order to impose limits, to set a standard of measurement that is anything but political or moral. I am aware that there is now a kind of covert alliance between popular culture and what calls itself "culture criticism," and in the name of that alliance cognition itself may doubtless yet acquire the stigma of the incorrect. Cognition cannot proceed without memory, and the Canon is the true art of memory, the authentic foundation for cultural thinking. Most simply, the Canon is Plato and Shakespeare; it is the image of the individual thinking, whether it be Socrates thinking through his own dying, or Hamlet contemplating that undiscovered country. Mortality joins memory in the consciousness of reality-testing that the Canon induces. By its very nature, the Western Canon will never close, but it cannot be forced open by our current cheerleaders. Strength alone can open it up, the strength of a Freud or a Kafka, persistent in their cognitive negations.

Cheerleading is the power of positive thinking transported to the academic realm. The legitimate student of the Western Canon respects the power of the negations inherent in cognition, enjoys the difficult pleasures of aesthetic apprehension, learns the hidden roads that erudition teaches us to walk even as we reject easier pleasures, including the incessant calls of those who assert a

political virtue that would transcend all our memories of individual aesthetic experience.

Easy immortalities haunt us now because the current staple of our popular culture has ceased to be the rock concert, which has been replaced by the rock video, the essence of which is an instantaneous immortality, or rather the possibility thereof. The relation between religious and literary concepts of immortality has always been vexed, even among the ancient Greeks and Romans, where poetic and Olympian eternities mixed rather promiscuously. This vexation was tolerable, even benign, in classical literature, but became more ominous in Christian Europe. Catholic distinctions between divine immortality and human fame, firmly founded upon a dogmatic theology, remained fairly precise until the advent of Dante, who regarded himself as a prophet and so implicitly gave his *Divine Comedy* the status of a new Scripture. Dante pragmatically voided the distinction between secular and sacred canon formation, a distinction that has never quite returned, which is yet another reason for our vexed sense of power and authority.

The terms "power" and "authority" have pragmatically opposed meanings in the realms of politics and what we still ought to call "imaginative literature." If we have difficulty in seeing the opposition, it may be because of the intermediate realm that calls itself "spiritual." Spiritual power and spiritual authority notoriously shade over into both politics and poetry. Thus we must distinguish the aesthetic power and authority of the Western Canon from whatever spiritual, political, or even moral consequences it may have fostered. Although reading, writing, and teaching are necessarily social acts, even teaching has its solitary aspect, a solitude only the two could share, in Wallace Stevens's language. Gertrude Stein maintained that one wrote for oneself and for strangers, a superb recognition that I would extend into a parallel apothegm: one reads for oneself and for strangers. The Western Canon does not exist in order to augment preexisting societal elites. It is there to be read by you and by strangers, so that you and those you will never meet can encounter authentic aesthetic power and the authority of what Baudelaire (and Erich Auerbach after him) called "aesthetic dignity." One of the ineluctable stigmata of the canonical is aesthetic dignity, which is not to be hired.

Aesthetic authority, like aesthetic power, is a trope or figuration for energies that are essentially solitary rather than social. Hayden White long ago exposed Foucault's great flaw as being a blindness toward his own metaphors, an ironic weakness in a professed disciple of Nietzsche. For the tropes of the Lovejoyan history of ideas Foucault substituted his own tropes and then did not always remember that his "archives" were ironies, deliberate and unde-liberate. So is it with the "social energies" of the New Historicist, who is perpetually prone to forget that "social energy" is no more quantifiable than the Freudian libido. Aesthetic authority and creative power are tropes too, but what they substitute for—call it "the canonical"—has a roughly quantifiable aspect, which is to say that William Shakespeare wrote thirty-eight plays, twenty-four of them masterpieces, but social energy has never written a single scene. The death of the author is a trope, and a rather pernicious one; the life of the author is a quantifiable entity.

All canons, including our currently fashionable counter-canons, are elitist, and as no secular canon is ever closed, what is now acclaimed as "opening up the canon" is a strictly redundant operation. Although canons, like all lists and catalogs, have a tendency to be inclusive rather than exclusive, we have now reached the point at which a lifetime's reading and rereading can scarcely take one through the Western Canon. Indeed, it is now virtually impossible to master the Western Canon. Not only would it mean absorbing well over three thousand books, many, if not most, marked by authentic cognitive and imaginative difficulties, but the relations between these books grow more rather than less vexed as our perspectives lengthen. There are also the vast complexities and contradictions that constitute the essence of the Western Canon, which is anything but a unity or stable structure. No one has the authority to tell us what the Western Canon is, certainly not from about 1800 to the present day. It is not, cannot be, precisely the list I give, or that anyone else might give. If it were, that would make such a list a mere fetish, just another commodity. But I am not prepared to agree with the Marxists that the Western Canon is another instance of what they call "cultural capital." It is not clear to me that a nation as contradictory as the United States of America could ever be the context for "cultural capital," except for those slivers of high culture that contribute to mass

culture. We have not had an official high culture in this country since about 1800, a generation after the American Revolution. Cultural unity is a French phenomenon, and to some degree a German matter, but hardly an American reality in either the nineteenth century or the twentieth. In our context and from our perspective, the Western Canon is a kind of survivor's list. The central fact about America, according to the poet Charles Olson, is space, but Olson wrote that as the opening sentence of a book on Melville and thus on the nineteenth century. At the close of the twentieth century, our central fact is time, for the evening land is now in the West's evening time. Would one call the list of survivors of a three-thousand-year-old cosmological war a fetish?

ORBS
 The issue is the mortality or immortality of literary works. Where they have become canonical, they have survived an immense struggle in social relations, but those relations have very little to do with class struggle. Aesthetic value emanates from the struggle between texts: in the reader, in language, in the classroom, in arguments within a society. Very few working-class readers ever matter in determining the survival of texts, and left-wing critics cannot do the working class's reading for it. Aesthetic value rises out of memory, and so (as Nietzsche saw) out of pain, the pain of surrendering easier pleasures in favor of much more difficult ones. Workers have anxieties enough and turn to religion as one mode of relief. Their sure sense that the aesthetic is, for them, only another anxiety helps to teach us that successful literary works are achieved anxieties, not releases from anxieties. Canons, too, are achieved anxieties, not unified props of morality, Western or Eastern. If we could conceive of a universal canon, multicultural and multivalent, its one essential book would not be a scripture, whether Bible, Koran, or Eastern text, but rather Shakespeare, who is acted and read everywhere, in every language and circumstance. Whatever the convictions of our current New Historicists, for whom Shakespeare is only a signifier for the social energies of the English Renaissance, Shakespeare for hundreds of millions who are not white Europeans is a signifier for their own pathos, their own sense of identity with the characters that Shakespeare fleshed out by his language. For them his universality is not historical but fundamental; he puts their lives upon his stage. In his

characters they behold and confront their own anguish and their own fantasies, not the manifested social energies of early mercantile London.

The art of memory, with its rhetorical antecedents and its magical burgeonings, is very much an affair of imaginary places, or of real places transmuted into visual images. Since childhood, I have enjoyed an uncanny memory for literature, but that memory is purely verbal, without anything in the way of a visual component. Only recently, past the age of sixty, have I come to understand that my literary memory has relied upon the Canon as a memory system. If I am a special case, it is only in the sense that my experience is a more extreme version of what I believe to be the principal pragmatic function of the Canon: the remembering and ordering of a lifetime's reading. The greatest authors take over the role of "places" in the Canon's theater of memory, and their masterworks occupy the position filled by "images" in the art of memory. Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, central author and universal drama, compel us to remember not only what happens in *Hamlet*, but more crucially what happens in literature that makes it memorable and thus prolongs the life of the author.

The death of the author, proclaimed by Foucault, Barthes, and many clones after them, is another anticanonical myth, similar to the battle cry of resentment that would dismiss "all of the dead, white European males"—that is to say, for a baker's dozen, Homer, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Montaigne, Milton, Goethe, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Kafka, and Proust. Livelier than you are, whoever you are, these authors were indubitably male, and I suppose "white." But they are not dead, compared to any living author whomsoever. Among us now are García Márquez, Pynchon, Ashbery, and others who are likely to become as canonical as Borges and Beckett among the recently deceased, but Cervantes and Shakespeare are of another order of vitality. The Canon is indeed a gauge of vitality, a measurement that attempts to map the incommensurate. The ancient metaphor of the writer's immortality is relevant here and renews the power of the Canon for us. Curtius has an excursus on "Poetry as Perpetuation" where he cites Burckhardt's reverie on "Fame in Literature" as equating fame and immortality. But Burckhardt and Curtius lived and died

before the Age of Warhol, when so many are famous for fifteen minutes each. Immortality for a quarter of an hour is now freely conferred and can be regarded as one of the more hilarious consequences of "opening up the Canon."

The defense of the Western Canon is in no way a defense of the West or a nationalist enterprise. If multiculturalism meant Cervantes, who could quarrel with it? The greatest enemies of aesthetic and cognitive standards are purported defenders who blather to us about moral and political values in literature. We do not live by the ethics of the *Iliad*, or by the politics of Plato. Those who teach interpretation have more in common with the Sophists than with Socrates. What can we expect Shakespeare to do for our semiruin society, since the function of Shakespearean drama has so little to do with civic virtue or social justice? Our current New Historicists, with their odd blend of Foucault and Marx, are only a very minor episode in the endless history of Platonism. Plato hoped that by banishing the poet, he would also banish the tyrant. Banishing Shakespeare, or rather reducing him to his contexts, will not rid us of our tyrants. In any case, we cannot rid ourselves of Shakespeare, or of the Canon that he centers. Shakespeare, as we like to forget, largely invented us; if you add the rest of the Canon, then Shakespeare and the Canon wholly invented us. Emerson, in *Representative Men*, got this exactly right: "Shakespeare is as much out of the category of eminent authors, as he is out of the crowd. He is inconceivably wise; the others, conceivably. A good reader can, in a sort, nestle into Plato's brain, and think from thence; but not into Shakespeare's. We are still out of doors. For executive faculty, for creation, Shakespeare is unique."

NOTHING that we could say about Shakespeare now is nearly as important as Emerson's realization. Without Shakespeare, no canon, because without Shakespeare, no recognizable selves in us, whoever we are. We owe to Shakespeare not only our representation of cognition but much of our capacity for cognition. The difference between Shakespeare and his nearest rivals is one of both kind and degree, and that double difference defines the reality

and necessity of the Canon. Without the Canon, we cease to think. You may idealize endlessly about replacing aesthetic standards with ethnocentric and gender considerations, and your social aims may indeed be admirable. Yet only strength can join itself to strength, as Nietzsche perpetually testified.