Harold Bloom (b. 1930), *The Western Canon*. *The Books and School of the Ages* (1994): extracts from “Preface and Prelude” (pp. 1-12), Part I: On the Canon. Chapter 1. “An Elegy for the Canon” (pp. 15-41), Part II: The Aristocratic Age. Chapter 2. “Shakespeare, Centre of the Canon”(pp. 45-75), Part V: Cataloging the Canon. Chapter 23: “Elegiac Conclusion” (pp. 517-528).

The book’s table of contents (informative):

From “Preface and Prelude”, pp. 1-12

1

THIS BOOK studies twenty-six writers, necessarily with a certain nostalgia, since I seek to isolate the qualities that made these authors canonical, that is, authoritative in our culture. "Aesthetic value" is sometimes regarded as a suggestion of Immanuel Kant's rather than an actuality, but that has not been my experience during a lifetime of reading. Things have however fallen apart, the center has not held, and mere anarchy is in the process of being unleashed upon what used to be called "the learned world." Mimic cultural wars do not much interest me; what I have to say about our current squalors is in my first and last chapters. Here I wish to explain the organization of this book and to account for my choice of these twenty-six writers from among the many hundreds in what once was considered to be the Western Canon. Giambattista Vico, in his *New Science*, posited a cycle of three phases – Theocratic, Aristocratic, Democratic – followed by a chaos out of which a New Theocratic Age would at last emerge. Joyce made grand seriocomic use of Vico in organizing *Finnegans* /**2**/ *Wake*, and I have followed in the wake of the *Wake*, except that I have omitted the literature of the Theocratic Age. My historical sequence begins with Dante and concludes with Samuel Beckett, though I have not always followed strict chronological order. Thus, I have begun the Aristocratic Age with Shakespeare, because he is the central figure of the Western Canon, and I have subsequently considered him in relation to nearly all the others, from Chaucer and Montaigne, who affected him, through many of those he influenced – Milton, Dr. Johnson, Goethe, Ibsen, Joyce, and Beckett among them – as well as those who attempted to reject him: Tolstoy in particular, along with Freud, who appropriated

Shakespeare while insisting that the Earl of Oxford had done the writing for "the man from Stratford." [a reference to alternative theories about the authorship of Shakespeare's plays]

The choice of authors here is not so arbitrary as it may seem. They have been selected for both their sublimity and their representative nature: a book about twenty-six writers is possible, but not a book about four hundred. Certainly the major Western writers since Dante are here – Chaucer, Cervantes, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Dickens, Tolstoy, Joyce, and Proust. But where are Petrarch, Rabelais, Ariosto, Spenser, Ben Jonson, Racine, Swift, Rousseau, Blake, Pushkin, Melville, Giacomo Leopardi, Henry James, Dostoevsky, Hugo, Balzac, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Browning, Chekhov, Yeats, D.H. Lawrence, and so many others? I have tried to represent national canons by their crucial figures: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Dickens for England; Montaigne and Molière for France; Dante for Italy; Cervantes for Spain; Tolstoy for Russia; Goethe for Germany; Borges and Neruda for Hispanic America; Whitman and Dickinson for the United States. The sequence of major dramatists is here: Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, and Beckett; and of novelists: Austen, Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoy, Proust, Joyce, and Woolf. Dr. Johnson is here as the greatest of Western literary critics; it would be difficult to find his rival. 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. Its key writers are Freud, Proust, Joyce, Kafka: they personify whatever literary spirit the era possesses. Freud called **/3/** himself a scientist, but he will survive as a great essayist like Montaigne or Emerson, not as the founder of a therapy already discredited (or elevated) as another episode in the long history of shamanism. I wish that there were space for more modern poets here than just Neruda and Pessoa, but no poet of our century has matched *In Search of Lost Time*, *Ulysses*, or *Finnegans Wake*, the essays of Freud, or the parables and tales of Kafka.

With most of these twenty-six writers, I have tried to confront greatness directly: to ask what makes the author and the works canonical. The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange. Walter Pater defined Romanticism as adding strangeness to beauty, but I think he characterized all canonical writing rather than the Romantics as such. The cycle of achievement goes from *The Divine Comedy* to *Endgame*, from strangeness to strangeness. When you read a canonical work for a first time you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfillment of expectations. Read freshly, all that *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Faust Part Two*, *Hadji Murad*, *Peer Gynt*, *Ulysses*, and *Canto general* have in common is their uncanniness, their ability to make you feel strange at home.

Shakespeare, the largest writer we ever will know, frequently gives the opposite impression: of making us at home out of doors, foreign, abroad. His powers of assimilation and of contamination are unique and constitute a perpetual challenge to universal performance and to criticism. I find it absurd and regrettable that the current criticism of Shakespeare – "cultural materialist" (NeoMarxist); "New Historicist" (Foucault); "Feminist" – has abandoned the quest to

meet that challenge. Shakespeare criticism is in full flight from his aesthetic supremacy and works at reducing him to the "social energies" of the English Renaissance, as though there were no authentic difference in aesthetic merit between the creator of Lear, Hamlet, Iago, Falstaff and his disciples such as John Webster and Thomas Middleton. The best living English critic, Sir Frank Kermode, in his *Forms of Attention* (1985) has issued the clearest warning I know about the fate of the canon, that is to say, in the first place, the fate of Shakespeare:

> Canons, which negate the distinction between knowledge and opinion, which are instruments of survival built to be time proof, not reason-proof, are of course deconstructible; if people think there should not be such things, they may very well find the means to destroy them. Their defense cannot any longer be undertaken by central institutional power; they cannot any longer be compulsory, though it is hard to see how the normal operation of learned institutions, including recruitment, can manage without them.

The means to destroy canons, as Kermode indicates, are very much at hand, and the process is now quite advanced. I am not concerned, as this book repeatedly makes clear, with the current debate between the right-wing defenders of the Canon, who wish to preserve it for its supposed (and nonexistent) moral values, and the academic-journalistic network I have dubbed the School of Resentment, who wish to overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed (and nonexistent) programs for social change. I hope that the book does not turn out to be an elegy for the Western Canon, and that perhaps at some point there will be a reversal, and the rabblement of lemmings will cease to hurl themselves off the cliffs. In the concluding catalog of canonical authors, particularly of our century, I have ventured a modest prophecy as to survival possibilities.

ONE MARK of an originality that can win canonical status for a literary work is a strangeness that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies. Dante is the largest instance of the first possibility, and Shakespeare, the overwhelming example of the second. Walt Whitman, always contradictory, partakes of both sides of the paradox. After Shakespeare, the greatest representative of the given is the first author of the Hebrew Bible, the figure named the Yahwist or J by nineteenth-century biblical scholarship (the "J" from the German spelling of the Hebrew Yahweh, or Jehovah in English, the result of a onetime spelling error). J, like Horner, a person or persons lost in the dark recesses of time, appears to **/5/** have lived in or near Jerusalem some three thousand years ago, well before Homer either lived or was invented. Just who the primary J was, we are never likely to know. I speculate, on purely internal and subjective literary grounds, that J may very well have been a woman at King Solomon's court, a place of high culture, considerable religious skepticism, and much psychological sophistication.

A shrewd reviewer of my *Book of J* chided me for not having the audacity to go the whole way and identify J as Bathsheba the queen mother, a Hittite woman taken by David the king after he arranged for her husband, Uriah, to die conveniently in battle. I am happy to adopt the suggestion belatedly: Bathsheba, mother of Solomon, is an admirable candidate. Her dark view of Solomon's catastrophic son and successor, Rehoboam, implied throughout the Yahwistic text, is thus highly explicable; so is her very ironic presentation of the Hebrew patriarchs, and her fondness both for some of their wives and for such female outsiders as Hagar and Tamar. Besides, it is a superb, J-like irony that the inaugural author of what eventually became the Torah was not an Israelite at all, but a Hittite woman. In what follows, I refer to the Yahwist alternately as J or Bathsheba.

[...]

6

[...]

Ambivalence between the divine and the human is one of J's grand inventions, another mark of an originality so perpetual that we can scarcely recognize it, because the stories Bathsheba told have absorbed us. The ultimate shock implicit in this canon-making originality comes when we realize that the Western worship of God – by Jews, Christians, and Moslems – is the worship of a literary character, J's Yahweh, however adulterated by pious revisionists. The only comparable shocks I know come when we realize that the Jesus loved by Christians is a literary character largely invented by the author of the Gospel of Mark, and when we read the Koran and hear one voice only, the voice of Allah, recorded in detail and at length by the audacity of his prophet Mohammed. Perhaps some day, well on in the twenty-first century, when Mormonism has become the dominant religion of at least the American West, those who come after us will experience a fourth such shock when they encounter the daring of the authentic American prophet Joseph Smith in his definitive visions, *The Pearl of Great Price* and *Doctrines and Covenants*.

Canonical strangeness can exist without the shock of such audacity, but the tang of originality must always hover in an inaugural aspect of any work that incontestably wins the agon with tradition and joins the Canon. Our educational institutions are thronged these days by idealistic resenters who denounce competition in literature as in life, but the aesthetic and the agonistic are one, according to all the ancient Greeks, and to Burckhardt and Nietzsche, who recovered this truth. What Homer teaches is a poetics of conflict, a lesson first learned by his rival Hesiod. All of Plato, as the critic Longinus saw, is in the philosopher's incessant conflict with Homer, who is exiled from *The Republic*, but in vain, since Homer and not Plato remained the schoolbook of /**7**/ the Greeks. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, according to Stefan George, was "the book and school of the ages," though that was more true for poets than for anyone else and is properly assigned to Shakespeare's plays, as will be shown throughout this book.

Contemporary writers do not like to be told that they must compete with Shakespeare and Dante, and yet that struggle was Joyce's provocation to greatness, to an eminence shared only by Beckett, Proust, and Kafka among modern Western authors. The fundamental archetype for literary achievement will always be Pindar, who celebrates the quasi-divine victories of his aristocratic athletes while conveying the implicit sense that his victory odes are themselves victories over every possible competitor. Dante, Milton, and Wordsworth repeat Pindar's key metaphor of racing to win the palm, which is a secular immortality strangely at odds with any pious idealism. "Idealism," concerning which one struggles not to be ironic, is now the fashion in our schools and colleges, where all aesthetic and most intellectual standards are being abandoned in the name of social harmony and the remedying of historical injustice. Pragmatically, the "expansion of the Canon" has meant the destruction of the Canon, since what is being taught includes by no means the best writers who happen to be women, African, Hispanic, or Asian, but rather the writers who offer little but the resentment they have developed as part of their sense of identity. There is no strangeness and no originality in such resentment; even if there were, they would not suffice to create heirs of the Yahwist and Homer, Dante and Shakespeare, Cervantes and Joyce.

As the formulator of a critical concept I once named "the anxiety of influence," I have enjoyed the School of Resentment's repeated insistence that such a notion applies only to Dead White European Males, and not to women and to what we quaintly term " multiculturalists." Thus, feminist cheerleaders proclaim that women writers lovingly cooperate with one another as quilt makers, while African-American and Chicano literary activists go even further in asserting their freedom from any anguish of contamination whatsoever: each of them is Adam early in the morning. They know no time when they were not as they are now; self-created, self-begot, their puissance is their own. As assertions by **/8/** poets, playwrights, and prose fiction writers, these are healthy and understandable, however self-deluded. But as declarations by supposed literary critics, such optimistic pronouncements are neither true nor interesting and go against both human nature and the nature of imaginative literature. There can be no strong, canonical writing without the process of literary influence, a process vexing to undergo and difficult to understand. I have never been able to recognize my theory of influence when it is under attack, since what is under attack is never even an apt travesty of my ideas. As the chapter on Freud in this book demonstrates, I favor a Shakespearean reading of Freud, and not a Freudian reading of Shakespeare or of any other writer. The anxiety of influence is not an anxiety about the father, real or literary, but an anxiety achieved by and in the poem, novel, or play. Any strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts. An authentic canonical writer may or may not internalize her or his work's anxiety, but that scarcely matters: the strongly achieved work is the anxiety. This point has been well expressed by Peter de Bolla in his book *Towards Historical Rhetorics*:

> the Freudian family romance as a description of influence represents an extremely weak reading. For Bloom, "influence" is both a tropological category, a figure which determines

> the poetic tradition, and a complex of psychic, historical and imagistic relations ... influence describes the relations between texts, it is an intertextual phenomenon ... both the internal psychic defense – the poet's experience of anxiety – and the external historical relations of texts to each other are themselves the result of misreading, or poetic misprision, and not the cause of it.

Doubtless that accurate summary will seem intricate to those unfamiliar with my attempts to think through the problem of literary influence, yet de Bolla gives me a good starting point, here at the start of this examination of the now-threatened Western Canon. The burden o f influence has to be borne, if significant originality is to be achieved and reachieved within the wealth of Western literary tradition. Tradition is not only a handing-down or process of benign transmission; it is also a conflict between **/9/** past genius and present aspiration, in which the prize is literary survival or canonical inclusion. That conflict cannot be settled by social concerns, or by the judgment of any particular generation of impatient idealists, or by Marxists proclaiming, "Let the dead bury the dead," or by sophists who attempt to substitute the library for the Canon and the archive for the discerning spirit. Poems, stories, novels, plays come into being as a response to prior poems, stories, novels, and plays, and that response depends upon acts of reading and interpretation by the later writers, acts that are identical with the new works.

These readings of precursor writings are necessarily defensive in part; if they were appreciative only, fresh creation would be stifled, and not for psychological reasons alone. The issue is not Oedipal rivalry but the very nature of strong, original literary imaginings: figurative language and its vicissitudes. Fresh metaphor, or inventive troping, always involves a departure from previous metaphor, and that departure depends upon at least partial turning away from or rejection of prior figuration. Shakespeare employs Marlowe as a starting point, and such early Shakespearean hero-villains as Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* and Richard III are rather too close to Barabas, Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. When Shakespeare creates Shylock, his Jew of Venice, the metaphorical basis of the farcical villain's speech is radically altered, and Shylock is a strong misreading or creative misinterpretation of Barabas, whereas Aaron the Moor is something closer to a repetition of Barabas, particularly at the level of figurative language. By the time that Shakespeare writes *Othello*, all trace of Marlowe is gone: the self-delighting villainy of Iago is cognitively far subtler and light years more refined imagistically than the self-congratulatory excesses of the exuberant Barabas. Iago's relation to Barabas is one in which Shakespeare's creative misreading of his precursor Marlowe has triumphed wholly. Shakespeare is a unique case in which the forerunner is invariably dwarfed. *Richard III* manifests an anxiety of influence in regard to *The Jew of Malta* and *Tamburlaine*, but Shakespeare was still finding his way. With the advent of Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part One* the finding was complete, and Marlowe became only the way not to go, on the stage as in life.

After Shakespeare there are only a few figures who fight relatively free of the anxiety of influence: Milton, Molière, Goethe, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Freud, Joyce; and for all of these except Molière, Shakespeare alone remained the problem, as this book seeks to demonstrate. Greatness recognizes greatness and is shadowed by it. Coming after Shakespeare, who wrote both the best prose and the best poetry in the Western tradition, is a complex destiny, since originality becomes peculiarly difficult in everything that matters most: representation of human beings, the role of memory in cognition, the range of metaphor in suggesting new possibilities for language. These are Shakespeare's particular excellences, and no one has matched him as psychologist, thinker, or rhetorician. Wittgenstein, who resented Freud, nevertheless resembles Freud in his suspicious and defensive reaction to Shakespeare, who is an affront to the philosopher even as he is to the psychoanalyst. There is no cognitive originality in the whole history of philosophy comparable to Shakespeare's, and it is both ironic and fascinating to overhear Wittgenstein puzzling out whether there is an authentic difference between the Shakespearean representation of thinking and thinking itself. It is true, as the Australian poet-critic Kevin Hart observes, that "Western culture takes its lexicon of intelligibility from Greek philosophy, and all our talk of life and death, of form and design, is marked by relations with that tradition." Yet intelligibility pragmatically transcends its lexicon, and we must remind ourselves that Shakespeare, who scarcely relies upon philosophy, is more central to Western culture than are Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, Heidegger and Wittgenstein.

I feel quite alone these days in defending the autonomy of the aesthetic, but its best defense is the experience of reading *King Lear* and then seeing the play well performed. King Lear does not derive from a crisis in philosophy, nor can its power be explained away as a mystification somehow promoted by bourgeois institutions. It is a mark of the degeneracy of literary study that one is considered an eccentric for holding that the literary is not dependent upon the philosophical, and that the aesthetic is irreducible to ideology or to metaphysics. Aesthetic criticism returns us to the autonomy of imaginative literature and the sovereignty of the solitary soul, the reader not as a person in society but as the **/11/** deep self, our ultimate inwardness. That depth of inwardness in a strong writer constitutes the strength that wards off the massive weight of past achievement, lest every originality be crushed before it becomes manifest. Great writing is always rewriting or revisionism and is founded upon a reading that clears space for the self, or that so works as to reopen old works to our fresh sufferings. The originals are not original, but that Emersonian irony yields to the Emersonian pragmatism that the inventor knows how to borrow.

The anxiety of influence cripples weaker talents but stimulates canonical genius. What intimately allies the three most vibrant American novelists of the Chaotic Age – Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner – is that all of them emerge from Joseph Conrad' s influence but temper it cunningly by mingling Conrad with an American precursor – Mark Twain for Hemingway, Henry James for Fitzgerald, Herman Melville for Faulkner. Something of the same cunning appears in T. S. Eliot's fusion of Whitman and Tennyson, and Ezra Pound's blend of Whitman

and Browning, as again in Hart Crane's deflection of Eliot by another turn toward Whitman. Strong writers do not choose their prime precursors; they are chosen by them, but they have the wit to transform the forerunners into composite and therefore partly imaginary beings.

I am not directly concerned in this book with the intertextual relations among the twenty-six authors under consideration; my purpose is to consider them as representatives of the entire Western Canon, but doubtless my interest in problems of influence emerges almost everywhere, sometimes perhaps without my own full awareness. Strong literature, agonistic whether it wants to be or not, cannot be detached from its anxieties about the works that possess priority and authority in regard to it. Though most critics resist understanding the processes of literary influence or try to idealize those processes as wholly generous and benign, the dark truths of competition and contamination continue to grow stronger as canonical history lengthens in time. A poem, play, or novel is necessarily compelled to come into being by way of precursor works, however eager it is to deal directly with social concerns. Contingency governs literature as it does every cognitive enterprise, and the contingency constituted by the Western literary /**12**/ Canon is primarily manifested as the anxiety of influence that forms and malforms each new writing that aspires to permanence. Literature is not merely language; it is also the will to figuration, the motive for metaphor that Nietzsche once defined as the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere. This partly means to be different from oneself, but primarily, I think, to be different from the metaphors and images of the contingent works that are one's heritage: the desire to write greatly is the desire to be elsewhere, in a time and place of one's own, in an originality that must compound with inheritance, with the anxiety of influence.

From Part I: On the Canon. Chapter 1. “An Elegy for the Canon” (pp. 15-41)

[...]

25

[...]

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 **/26/** 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* **/27/** *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 **/28/** 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 openers-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 overidealization 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 **/29/** 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 **/30/** 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 Holderlin to Yeats, the self-canonizing greater ode has proclaimed its agonistic immortality. The socially acceptable ode of the future will doubtless spare us **/31/** 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.

[...]

[...]

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.

[...]

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 **/33/** 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.

[...]

I am not at all happy about these truths of poetry's reliance **/34/** 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.

35

[...]

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 **/36/** 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 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 I 8oo 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 **/38/** 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?

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 **/39/** 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 Garcia Marquez, 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 **/40/** 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 semi-ruined 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 **/41/** 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.

[...]

Tolstoy demands "the truth," and the trouble with Shakespeare, in Tolstoy's perspective, is that he was not interested in the truth.

That certainly joins the issue: How relevant is Tolstoy's complaint? Is the center of the Western Canon a pragmatic exaltation of lies ? George Bernard Shaw greatly admired *What Is Art?* [the essay where Tolstoy attacks Shakespeare] and presumably preferred Bunyan's *Pilgrim 's Progress* to Shakespeare in somewhat the same way that Tolstoy ranked *Uncle Tom 's Cabin* above King Lear. But this kind of thinking is now drearily familiar to us; one of my younger colleagues told me she valued Alice Walker's *Meridian* over Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* because Pynchon lied and Walker incarnated the truth. With political correctness replacing religious rightness, we are back in Tolstoy's polemic against difficult art. And yet Shakespeare, as Tolstoy refused to see, is virtually unique in simultaneously manifesting both difficult and popular art. There, I suspect, was the true Shakespearean offense and the ultimate explanation of why and how Shakespeare centers the Canon. To this day, multiculturally, Shakespeare will hold almost any audience, upper or lower class. What burned its way into the canonical center was a mode of representation universally available as far as I can tell, give or take a few French naysayers.

Was or is that way of representing men and women true ? Is *Uncle Tom 's Cabin* more sincere than the *Divine Comedy*, whatever that assertion may mean? Perhaps Walker's *Meridian* is more sincere than *Gravity's Rainbow*. Doubtless the later Tolstoy is more sincere than Shakespeare or anyone else. Sincerity has no royal road to the truth, and imaginative literature situates itself somewhere between truth and meaning, a somewhere I once compared to what ancient Gnostics called the *kenoma*, the cosmological emptiness in which we wander and weep, as William Blake wrote.

Shakespeare gives one a more persuasive representation of the *kenoma* than anyone else, particularly when he sets the backgrounds of *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. There, once again, Shakespeare centers the Canon, because we have to struggle hard to think of any representation that is not more convincing in **/60/** Shakespeare than anywhere else, be it in Homer, Dante, or Tolstoy. Rhetorically, Shakespeare has no equal; no more awesome panoply of metaphor exists. If your quest is for a truth that defies rhetoric, perhaps you ought to study political economy or systems analysis and abandon Shakespeare to the aesthetes and the groundlings, who combined to elevate him in the first place.

I keep circling back to the mystery of Shakespeare's genius, well aware that the very phrase “Shakespeare's genius" means that I am out of it as far as the School of Resentment is concerned.

But the trouble with Foucault's Death of the Author is that it merely alters rhetorical terms without creating a new method. If "social energies" wrote *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, why exactly were social energies more productive in the son of the Stratford artisan than in the burly bricklayer Ben Jonson ? The exasperated New Historicist or Feminist critic has a curious affinity with the exasperations that keep creating partisans for the idea of Sir Francis Bacon or the earl of Oxford as the true author of *Lear*. Sigmund Freud, the master of all who know, went to his death insisting that Moses was an Egyptian and that Oxford wrote Shakespeare. The marvelously named Looney, the founder of the Oxfordians, gained a disciple in the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Had Freud joined the Flat Earth Society, we could not be more chagrined, though there are depths beneath depths, and at least we can be grateful that Freud never wrote more than a few sentences on the Looney hypothesis.

It was somehow a great comfort to Freud to believe that his precursor Shakespeare was not a rather ordinary personality from Stratford, but an enigmatic and mighty nobleman. More than snobbery was involved. For Freud, as for Goethe, the works of Shakespeare were the secular center of culture, the hope for a rational glory in mankind still to come. There was more even than that for Freud. On some level, Freud understood that Shakespeare had invented psychoanalysis by inventing the psyche, insofar as Freud could recognize and describe it. This could not have been a pleasant understanding, since it subverted Freud's declaration that "I invented psychoanalysis because it had no literature. " Revenge came with the supposed demonstration that Shakespeare was an impostor, which satisfied Freudian resentment though ra-**/61/**tionally it did not make the plays any less of a precursor. Shakespeare had played great havoc with Freud's originalities; now Shakespeare was unmasked and disgraced. We can be grateful that we do not have Freud's Oxford and Shakespeareanism to consort on our shelves with Moses and Monotheism and the various classics of New Historicist, Marxist, and Feminist Shakespeare. French Freud was silly enough; and now we have French Joyce, which is hard to take. But nothing can be as oxymoronic as French Shakespeare, which is what the New Historicism ought to be called.

[...]

It is very satisfactory to the imagination to be compelled to fall back upon the work when no authorial maelstrom seems to be there. With Christopher Marlowe I brood upon the man, who can be meditated upon endlessly, as the plays cannot; with Rimbaud I brood over both, though the boy is even more enigmatic than the poetry. Stevens the man evaded himself so completely that we scarcely need seek him; the man Shakespeare can hardly be termed evasive, or much of anything else. He has no incontestable spokesperson in the plays: not Hamlet, not Prospero, certainly not the ghost of Hamlet's father, whom he is supposed to have played. Nor can even his most careful scholars definitively mark out the **/62/** boundaries between the conventional and the personal in the sonnets. Seeking to understand the work or the man, we are always returned to the

indisputably central eminence of the greater plays, almost from the days when they were first enacted.

One way of dealing with the eminence of Shakespeare's primacy is to deny it. From Dryden to the present, it is remarkable how few have chosen this path. The novelty or intended scandal of the current New Historicism purports to reside elsewhere, but in fact it dwells in this denial, generally implicit but sometimes overt. If the social energies (assuming that these are more than a historicizing metaphor, which I doubt) of the English Renaissance somehow wrote *King Lear*, then the singularity of Shakespeare can be called into question. It may be that in a generation or so "social energy" as author of *King Lear* will seem about as enlightening as the surmise that the earl of Oxford or Sir Francis Bacon wrote the tragedy. The impulse involved is much the same. But it is as easy to reduce Shakespeare to his context, whatever context, as to reduce Dante to the Florence and Italy of his day. No one is going to rise up, here or in Italy, to proclaim that Cavalcanti was the aesthetic equal of Dante, and it would be equally vain to make a case for even Ben Jonson or Christopher Marlowe as authentic rivals to Shakespeare. Jonson and Marlowe, in very different ways, were great poets and sometimes remarkable dramatists, but the reader or player enters another order of art in encountering *King Lear*.

What is the Shakespearean difference that demands Dante, Cervantes, Tolstoy, and only a few others as aesthetic companions ? To ask the question is to undertake the quest that is the final aim of literary study, the search for a kind of value that transcends the particular prejudices and needs of societies at fixed points in time. Such a quest is illusory, according to all our current ideologies; but the purpose of this book is, in part, to combat the cultural politics, both Left and Right, that are destroying criticism and consequently may destroy literature itself. There is a substance in Shakespeare's work that prevails and that has proved multicultural, so universally apprehended in all languages as to have established a pragmatic multiculturalism around the globe, one that already far surpasses our politicized fumblings toward such an ideal. Shakespeare is the center of the embryo of a world canon, **/63/** not Western or Eastern and less and less Eurocentric; and so again I am thrown back to the great question: What is the singular excellence of Shakespeare, the difference in kind as well as in degree from all other writers ?

Shakespeare's command of language, though overwhelming, is not unique and is capable of imitation. Poetry written in English becomes Shakespearean frequently enough to testify to the contaminating power of his high rhetoric. The peculiar magnificence of Shakespeare is in his power of representation of human character and personality and their mutabilities. The canonical praise of this magnificence was inaugurated by Samuel Johnson's preface to the Shakespeare of 1765, and is both revelatory and misleading: "Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirrour of manners and of life." Johnson, in tribute to Shakespeare, echoes Hamlet's praise of the actors. Against his words, one sets Oscar Wilde's: "This unfortunate aphorism about art holding the mirror up to Nature is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters. "

Actually Hamlet was speaking o f the actors as holding a mirror up to nature, but Johnson and Wilde assimilated the actors to the poet-playwright. Wilde's "nature" was a blocking agent vainly attempting to thwart art, while Johnson saw "nature" as a reality principle, submerging the idiosyncratic in the general, the "progeny of common humanity." Shakespeare, wiser than both of these genuinely wise critics, saw "nature" through clashing perspectives, those of Lear and Edmund in the most sublime of the tragedies, of Hamlet and Claudius in another, of Othello and Iago in yet another. You cannot hold a mirror up to any of these natures, or persuade yourself convincingly that your sense of reality is more comprehensive than that of Shakespearean tragedy. There are no literary works that go beyond Shakespeare's in reminding you that nothing can be like a play except another play, while at the same time intimating that a tragic idea is not just like another tragic idea (though it may be) but is also like a person, or like change in a person, or like the final form of personal change, which is death.

The meaning of a word is always another word, for words are **/64/** more like other words than they can be like persons or things, but Shakespeare hints frequently that words are more like persons than they are like things. Shakespearean representation of character has a preternatural richness about it because no other writer, before or since, gives us a stronger illusion that each character speaks with a different voice from the others. Johnson, noting this feature, attributed it to Shakespeare's accurate portrayal of general nature, but Shakespeare might have been prompted to question the reality of such a nature. His uncanny ability to present consistent and different actual-seeming voices of imaginary beings stems in part from the most abundant sense of reality ever to invade literature.

When we attempt to isolate Shakespeare's consciousness of reality (or the plays' version of reality, if you prefer), we are likely to become bewildered by it. When you stand back from the Divine Comedy, the poem's strangeness shocks you, but Shakespearean drama seems at once utterly familiar and yet too rich to absorb all at once. Dante interprets his characters for you; if you cannot accept his judgments, his poem abandons you. Shakespeare so opens his characters to multiple perspectives that they become analytical instruments for judging you. If you are a moralist, Falstaff outrages you; if you are rancid, Rosalind exposes you; if you are dogmatic, Hamlet evades you forever. And if you are an explainer, the great Shakespearean villains will cause you to despair. Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth are not motiveless; they overflow with motives, most of which they invent or imagine for themselves. Like the great wits –Falstaff, Rosalind, Hamlet – these monstrous malevolences are artists of the self, or free artists of themselves, as Hegel remarked. Hamlet, the most fecund among them, is endowed by Shakespeare with something that looks very much like an authorial consciousness, and one not Shakespeare's own. Interpreting Hamlet becomes as difficult as interpreting such aphorists as Emerson, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. "They lived and wrote," something in one wants to protest, but Shakespeare has found a way of giving us Hamlet, who wrote those additions that revised *The Murder of Gonzago* into *The Mousetrap*. The most bewildering of Shakespearean

achievements is to have suggested more contexts for explaining us than we are capable of supplying for explaining his characters.

65

For many readers the limits of human art are touched in *King Lear*, which with *Hamlet* appears to be the height of the Shakespearean canon. My own preference is for *Macbeth*, where I never get over my shock at the play's ruthless economy, its way of making every speech, every phrase count. Still, *Macbeth* has only the one huge character, and even *Hamlet* is so dominated by its hero that all the lesser figures are blinded (as we are) by his transcendent brilliance. Shakespeare's power of individualization is strongest in *King Lear* and, oddly enough, in *Measure for Measure*, two plays in which there are no minor characters. With *Lear* we are at the center of centers of canonical excellence, as we are in particular cantos of the *Inferno* or the *Purgatorio*, or in a Tolstoyan narrative like *Hadji Murad*. Here, if anywhere, the flames of invention burn away all context and grant us the possibility of what could be called primal aesthetic value, free of history and ideology and available to whoever can be educated to read and view it.

Partisans of Resentment might stress that only an elite can be so educated. As our more truthful moments inform us, it has become harder and harder to read deeply as this century grows older. Whether the cause be media or other distractions of the Chaotic Age, even the elite tend to lose concentration as readers. Close reading may not have ended with my generation, but it has certainly been eclipsed in the generations after us. Is it irrelevant that I was nearly forty before I first owned a television set ? I cannot be sure, yet I sometimes wonder if a critical preference for context over text does not reflect a generation made impatient with deep reading. The tragedy of Lear and Cordelia can be imparted to even superficial playgoers or readers, because it is Shakespeare's oddness that he will divert nearly every level of attention. But properly played, properly read, it will demand more than any single answering consciousness is able to provide.

[...]

70

[...]

Against all of them [other playwrights], at a salutary height, Hegel places Shakespeare, in the best critical passage on Shakespearean representation yet written:

> The more Shakespeare on the infinite embrace of his worldstage proceeds to develop the extreme limits of evil and folly, to that extent ... he concentrates these characters in their limitations. While doing so, however, he confers on them intelligence and imagination; and *by means of the image in which they, by virtue of that intelligence, contemplate themselves objectively, as a work of art, he makes them free artists of themselves*, and is fully able, through the complete virility and truth of his characterization, to awaken our interest in

> criminals, no less than in the most vulgar and weak-witted lubbers and fools. [Italics Bloom's] (*translated by F. P. B. Osmaston*)

lago and Edmund and Hamlet contemplate themselves objectively in images wrought by their own intelligences and are enabled to see themselves as dramatic characters, aesthetic artifices. They thus become free artists of themselves, which means that they are free to write themselves, to will changes in the self. Overhearing their own speeches and pondering those expressions, they change and go on to contemplate an otherness in the self, or the possibility of such otherness.

[...]

72

[...]

What is it, what can it be, that a fictive character should be termed "a free artist of himself" ? I do not find this phenomenon in Western literature before Shakespeare. Achilles, Aeneas, Dante the Pilgrim, Don Quixote do not change by overhearing what they themselves have said and on that basis, through their own intellect and imagination, turn themselves about. Our naive but aesthetically crucial conviction that Edmund, Hamlet, Falstaff, and scores of others can, as it were, get up and walk on out of their plays, perhaps even against Shakespeare's own desires, is connected to their being free artists of themselves. As a theatrical and literary illusion, as an effect of figurative language, this Shakespearean power remains beyond comparison, though it has been imitated universally for almost four centuries now. The power would not be possible except for the Shakespearean soliloquy, forbidden to Racine by French critical doctrine, which could not allow the tragic actor to address either himself or the audience directly. The Spanish Golden Age playwrights, Lope de Vega in particular, form the soliloquy as a sonnet, in a kind of baroque triumph that works against inwardness. Yet you cannot make a character into a free artist of himself or herself by denying that character inwardness. Shakespeare is not possible in the baroque mode, but then tragic freedom is a Shakespearean oxymoron rather than a condition in Lope or Racine or Goethe.

71

One sees why Cervantes failed as a writer for the theater and triumphed as the author of *Don Quixote*. There is a hermetic affinity between Cervantes and Shakespeare: the Don and Sancho are neither of them free artists of themselves; they enter fully into the order of play. It is the singular strength of Shakespeare that, heroes and villains alike, his tragic protagonists dissolve the demarcations between the orders of nature and of play. Hamlet's peculiar authority, his persuasive assumption of an authorial consciousness all his own, goes beyond his shaping of *The Murder of Gonzago* into *The Mousetrap*. At every moment Hamlet's mind is a play within the play, because it is Hamlet, more than anyone else in Shakespeare, who is the free artist of himself. His exaltation and his torment alike stem from his continuous meditation upon his own

image. Shakespeare is at the center of the Canon at least in part because Hamlet is. The introspective consciousness, free to contemplate itself, remains the most elitist of all Western images, but without it the Canon is not possible, and, to put it most bluntly, neither are we.

75

Universality is the authentic aspect of only a handful of Western writers: Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, perhaps Tolstoy. Goethe and Milton have dimmed, because of cultural change; Whitman, so popular on the surface, is hermetic at the core; Moliere and Ibsen still share the stage, but always after Shakespeare. Dickinson is astonishingly difficult because of her cognitive originality, and Neruda is less of a Brechtian and Shakespearean populist than he may have intended himself to be. The aristocratic universalism of Dante ushered in the era of the greatest Western writers, from Petrarch through Holderlin; but only Cervantes and Shakespeare fully achieved universality, populist authors in the greatest of aristocratic eras. The nearest approach to universality in the Democratic Age is the flawed miracle of Tolstoy, at once aristocrat and populist. In our chaotic time, Joyce and Beckett come closest, but the baroque elaborations of the first and the baroque undoings of the second both work to impede universality. Proust and Kafka have the strangeness of Dante in their sensibilities. I find myself agreeing with Antonio Garcia-Berrio when he makes universality the fundamental property of poetic value. Centering the Canon for other poets has been the unique role of Dante. Shakespeare, with Don Quixote, continues to center the Canon for more general readers. Perhaps we can go farther; for Shakespeare we need a more Borgesian term than universality. At once no one and everyone, nothing and everything, Shakespeare is the Western Canon.

I AM NOT presenting a "lifetime reading plan," though that phrase has now taken on an antique charm. There always will be (one hopes) incessant readers who will go on reading despite the proliferation of fresh technologies for distraction. Sometimes I try to visualize Dr. Johnson or George Eliot confronting MTV Rap or experiencing Virtual Reality and find myself heartened by what I believe would be their ironical, strong refusal of such irrational entertainments. After a lifetime spent in teaching literature at one of our major universities, I have very little confidence that literary education will survive its current malaise.

I began my teaching career nearly forty years ago in an academic context dominated by the ideas of T. S. Eliot; ideas that roused me to fury, and against which I fought as vigorously as I could. Finding myself now surrounded by professors of hip-hop; by clones of Gallic-Germanic theory; by ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited, I realize that the Balkanization of literary studies is irreversible. All of these **/518/** Resenters of the aesthetic value of literature are not going to go away, and they will raise up institutional resenters after them. As an aged institutional Romantic, I still decline the Eliotic nostalgia for Theocratic ideology, but I see no reason for arguing with anyone about literary preferences. This book is not directed to academics, because only a small remnant of them still read for the love of reading. What Johnson and Woolf after him called the Common Reader still exists and possibly goes on welcoming suggestions of what might be read.

Such a reader does not read for easy pleasure or to expiate social guilt, but to enlarge a solitary existence. So fantastic has the academy become that I have heard this kind of reader denounced by an eminent critic, who told me that reading without a constructive social purpose was unethical and urged me to reeducate myself through an immersion in the writing of Abdul Jan Mohammed, a leader of the Birmingham (England) school of cultural materialism. As an addict who will read anything, I obeyed, but I am not saved, and return to tell you neither what to read nor how to read it, only what I have read and think worthy of rereading, which may be the only pragmatic test for the canonical. I suppose that once you have "cultural criticism" and "cultural materialism, " you must also entertain the notion of "cultural capital." But what is the "surplus value" that has been exploited in order to accumulate "cultural capital"? Marxism, famously a cry of pain rather than a science, has had its poets, but so has every other major religious heresy. "Cultural capital" is either a metaphor or an uninteresting literalism. If the latter, it simply relates to the current marketplace of publishers, agents, and book clubs. As a figure of speech, it remains a cry partly of pain, partly of the guilt of belonging to the intellectuals spawned by the French upper middle class, or of the guilt of those in our own academies who identify with such French theorists and pragmatically have forgotten in what country they actually live and teach. Is there, has there ever been, any "cultural capital" in the United States of America ? We dominate the Age of Chaos because we have always been chaotic, even in the Democratic Age. Is *Leaves of*

Grass "cultural capital" ? Is *Moby-Dick* ? There has never been an official American literary canon, and there never can be, for the aesthetic **/519/** in America always exists as a lonely, idiosyncratic, isolated stance. "American Classicism" is an oxymoron, whereas "French Classicism" is a coherent tradition.

I do not believe that literary studies as such have a future, but this does not mean that literary criticism will die. As a branch of literature, criticism will survive, but probably not in our teaching institutions. The study of Western literature will also continue, but on the much more modest scale of our current Classics departments. What are now called "Departments of English" will be renamed departments of "Cultural Studies" where *Batman* comics, Mormon theme parks, television, movies, and rock will replace Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens. Major, once-elitist universities and colleges will still offer a few courses in Shakespeare, Milton, and their peers, but these will be taught by departments of three or four scholars, equivalent to teachers of ancient Greek and Latin. This development hardly need be deplored; only a few handfuls of students now enter Yale with an authentic passion for reading. You cannot teach someone to love great poetry if they come to you without such love. How can you teach solitude ? Real reading is a lonely activity and does not teach anyone to become a better citizen. Perhaps the ages of reading – Aristocratic, Democratic, Chaotic – now reach terminus, and the reborn Theocratic era will be almost wholly an oral and visual culture.

In the United States, "a crisis in literary study" has the same peculiarity as a religious revival (or Great Awakening) and a crime wave. They are all journalistic events. Our country has been in a perpetual religious revival for two centuries now; its addiction to civil and domestic violence is even more venerable and incessant, and in the nearly half-century since first I immersed myself in literary study, such activity has been questioned endlessly by society and generally held to be irrelevant. English and related departments have always been unable to define themselves and unwise enough to swallow up everything that seems available for ingestion.

There is a dreadful justice in such voraciousness having proved to be self-destructive: the teaching of poems, plays, stories, and novels is now supplanted by cheerleading for various social and **/520/** political crusades. Or else, the artifacts of popular culture replace the difficult artifices of great writers as the material for instruction. It is not "literature" that needs to be redefined; if you can't recognize it when you read it, then no one can ever help you to know it or love it better. "A culture of universal access" is offered by post-Marxist idealists as the solution to "crisis," but how can *Paradise Lost* or *Faust, Part Two* ever lend themselves to universal access ? The strongest poetry is cognitively and imaginatively too difficult to be read deeply by more than a relative few of any social class, gender, race, or ethnic origin.

When I was a boy, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, almost universally part of the school curriculum, was an eminently sensible introduction to Shakespearean tragedy. Teachers now tell me of many schools where the play can no longer be read through, since students find it beyond their attention spans. In two places reported to me, the making of cardboard shields and swords

has replaced the reading and discussion of the play. No socializing of the means of production and consumption of literature can overcome such debasement of early education. The morality of scholarship, as currently practiced, is to encourage everyone to replace difficult pleasures by pleasures universally accessible precisely because they are easier. Trotsky urged his fellow Marxists to read Dante, but he would find no welcome in our current universities.

I am your true Marxist critic, following Groucho rather than Karl, and take as my motto Groucho's grand admonition, "Whatever it is, I'm against it!" I have been against, in turn, the neo-Christian New Criticism of T. S. Eliot and his academic followers; the deconstruction of Paul de Man and his clones; the current rampages of New Left and Old Right on the supposed inequities, and even more dubious moralities, of the literary Canon. The very rare, strong critics do not extend or modify or revise the Canon, though they certainly attempt to do so. But, knowingly or not, they only ratify the true work of canonization, which is carried on by the perpetual agon between past and present. There is no socioeconomic process that has added John Ashbery and James Merrill, or Thomas Pynchon, to the vague, nonexistent, and yet still compelling notion of an American canon that yet may be. The poetry of Wallace Stevens and of Elizabeth Bishop has chosen **/521/** its inheritors in Ashbery and Merrill, even as the poetry of Emily Dickinson selected Stevens and Bishop. Pynchon's best work can be said to marry S. J. Perelman and Nathanael West, but the canonical potential of *The Crying of Lot 49* depends more on our uncanny sense that it is being imitated by *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

Shakespeare and Dante are invariably the exceptions to the descents of canonicity; we never come to believe that they have read too deeply in Joyce and in Beckett, or in anyone else. That is another way of repeating what I have been moved to say throughout this book: the Western Canon is Shakespeare and Dante. Beyond them, it is what they absorbed and what absorbs them. Redefining "literature" is a vain pursuit because you cannot usurp sufficient cognitive strength to encompass Shakespeare and Dante, and they are literature. As for redefining them, good fortune to you. That enterprise is now considerably advanced by "the New Historicism," which is French Shakespeare, with Hamlet under the shadow of Michel Foucault. We have enjoyed French Freud or Lacan, and French Joyce or Derrida. Jewish Freud and Irish Joyce are more to my taste, as is English Shakespeare or universal Shakespeare. French Shakespeare is so delicious an absurdity that one feels an ingrate for not appreciating so comic an invention.

Precisely why students of literature have become amateur political scientists, uninformed sociologists, incompetent anthropologists, mediocre philosophers, and overdetermined cultural historians, while a puzzling matter, is not beyond all conjecture. They resent literature, or are ashamed of it, or are just not all that fond of reading it. Reading a poem or a novel or a Shakespearean tragedy is for them an exercise in contextualization, but not in a merely reasonable sense of finding adequate backgrounds. The contexts, however chosen, are assigned more force and value than the poem by Milton, the novel by Dickens, or *Macbeth*. I am not at all certain what the metaphor of "social energies" stands or substitutes for, but, like the Freudian drives, such energies cannot write or read or indeed do anything at all. Libido is a myth, and so

are "social energies. " Shakespeare, scandalously facile, was an actual person who contrived to write *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. That scandal is unacceptable to what now passes for literary theory.

522

Either there were aesthetic values, or there are only the overdeterminations of race, class, and gender. You must choose, for if you believe that all value ascribed to poems or plays or novels and stories is only a mystification in the service of the ruling class, then why should you read at all rather than go forth to serve the desperate needs of the exploited classes ? The idea that you benefit the insulted and injured by reading someone of their own origins rather than reading Shakespeare is one of the oddest illusions ever promoted by or in our schools.

The deepest truth about secular canon-formation is that it is performed by neither critics nor academies, let alone politicians. Writers, artists, composers themselves determine canons, by bridging between strong precursors and strong successors. Let us take the most vital contemporary American authors, the poets Ashbery and Merrill and the prose writer of epic fictions, Pynchon. I am moved to pronounce them canonical, but one cannot altogether know as yet. Canonical prophecy needs to be tested about two generations after a writer dies. Wallace Stevens, who lived from 1879 to 1955, is clearly a canonical poet, perhaps the major American poet after Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. His only rivals appear to be Robert Frost and T. S. Eliot; Pound and William Carlos Williams are more problematic, together with Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein (when considered strictly for her verse), and Hart Crane died too soon. Stevens helped engender Merrill and Ashbery as well as Elizabeth Bishop, A. R. Ammons, and others of real achievement. But it is too soon to know if enduring poets are emerging from their influence, though I myself so believe. When one or more very clearly has emerged, that will help confirm Stevens, but not as yet Merrill or Ashbery, at least not to the same degree.

It is a curious process, and I tend to challenge my own sense of it by asking: What about Yeats ? The Anglo-Irish poets after him are enormously wary of his influence and seem to have fought him off. The answer again is that it takes some time even to see influence accurately. Yeats died in 1939; after more than half a century, I can see his influence upon those who denied it, Eliot and Stevens; and their influence has been fecund, as in their joint effect upon Hart Crane, whose idiosyncratic accent, though dis-/**523**/puted, floats almost everywhere. Eliot and Stevens had cultural stances fiercely opposed to one another, while Crane's relation to Eliot in particular was almost wholly antithetical. But sociopolitical considerations can be turned inside out by canon-producing influence relations. Crane rejected Eliot's vision but could not evade Eliot's idiom. Great styles are sufficient for canonicity because they possess the power of contamination, and contamination is the pragmatic test for canon formation.

Immerse yourself, say for several days together, in reading Shakespeare and then turn to another author – before, after, or contemporary with him. For experiment, try only the highest in each grouping: Homer or Dante, Cervantes or Ben Jonson, Tolstoy or Proust. The difference in

the reading experience will be one of kind as well as of degree. That difference, universally felt from Shakespeare's time until now, is expressed alike by ordinary and sophisticated readers as having something to do with our sense of what we want to call "natural." Dr. Johnson assured us that nothing could please for long except just representations of general nature. That assurance still seems unassailable to me, though much of what is now exalted each week could not pass the Johnsonian test. Shakespearean representation, its supposed imitation of what is held to be most essential in us, has been felt to be more natural than anyone else's mirroring of reality ever since the plays were first staged. To go from Shakespeare to Dante or Cervantes or even Tolstoy is somehow to have the illusion of suffering a loss in sensuous immediacy. We look back at Shakespeare and regret our absence from him because it seems an absence from reality.

The motives for reading, as for writing, are very diverse and frequently not clear even to the most self-conscious readers or writers. Perhaps the ultimate motive for metaphor, or the writing and reading of figurative language, is the desire to be different, to be elsewhere. In this assertion I follow Nietzsche, who warned us that what we can find words for is already dead in our hearts, so that there is always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking. Hamlet agrees with Nietzsche, and both might have extended the contempt to the act of writing. But we do not read to unpack our hearts, so there is no contempt in the act of reading. Traditions tell us that the free and solitary self writes in order to overcome /**524**/ mortality. I think that the self, in its quest to be free and solitary, ultimately reads with one aim only: to confront greatness. That confrontation scarcely masks the desire to join greatness, which is the basis of the aesthetic experience once called the Sublime: the quest for a transcendence of limits. Our common fate is age, sickness, death, oblivion. Our common hope, tenuous but persistent, is for some version of survival.

Confronting greatness as we read is an intimate and expensive process and has never been much in critical vogue. Now, more than ever, it is out of fashion, when the quest for freedom and solitude is being condemned as politically incorrect, selfish, and not appropriate to our anguished society. Greatness in the West's literature centers upon Shakespeare, who has become the touchstone for all who come before and after him, whether they are dramatists, lyric poets, or storytellers. He had no true precursor in the creation of character, except for Chaucerian hints, and has left no one after him untouched by his ways of representing human nature. His originality was and is so easy to assimilate that we are disarmed by it and unable to see how much it has changed us and goes on changing us. Much of Western literature after Shakespeare is, in varying degree, partly a defense against Shakespeare, who can be so overwhelming an influence as to drown out all who are compelled to be his students.

The enigma of Shakespeare is his universalism: Kurosawa's film versions of *Macbeth* and *King Lear* are thoroughly Kurosawa and thoroughly Shakespeare. Even if you regard Shakespearean personages as roles for actors rather than as dramatic characters, you are still unable to account for the human persuasiveness of Hamlet or Cleopatra when you compare them to the roles provided by Ibsen, surely the principal post-Shakespearean dramatist that Europe has brought forth. 'When we move from Hamlet to Peer Gynt, from Cleopatra to Hedda Gabler, we

sense that personality has waned, that the Shakespearean daemonic has ebbed into the Ibsenite trollishness. The miracle of Shakespeare's universalism is that it is not purchased by any transcending of contingencies: the great characters and their plays accept being embedded in history and in society, while refusing every mode of reduction: historical, societal, theological, or our belated psychologizings and moralizings.

525

Falstaff possesses most of the squalid flaws that scholars, following Hal's lead, find in him, but Falstaff, at once great wit, powerful thinker, and true humorist, nevertheless matches Hamlet as an original consciousness. It is inadequate to say of Falstaff that he provides a magnificent role; he is a cosmos, not an ornament, and holds up the mirror not so much to nature as to our outermost capacity for fresh life. Blake said that exuberance was beauty, and by such an equation no other dramatic character is as beautiful as Sir John Falstaff. The exuberance of Rabelais' Giant Forms is matched by Sir John, who must perform within the confines of a stage while Panurge surges across a visionary France. What William Hazlitt named gusto, "power or passion defining any object," and found foremost in Shakespeare, he assigned to Boccaccio and Rabelais above all other prose writers. Hazlitt also urged us to realize that the arts are not progressive – a realization that belated ages, like our own, attempt to resist.

What use can it be for an individual critic, so belated in the tradition, to catalog the Western Canon as he sees it? Even our elite universities now are supine before oncoming waves of multiculturalists. Still, even if our current fashions prevail forever, canonical choices of both past and present works have their own interest and charm, for they too are part of the ongoing contest that is literature. Everyone has, or should have, a desert island list against that day when, fleeing one's enemies, one is cast ashore, or when one limps away, all warfare done, to pass the rest of one's time quietly reading. If I could have one book, it would be a complete Shakespeare; if two, that and a Bible. If three ? There the complexities begin. William Hazlitt, one of the few critics definitively in the Canon, has a splendid essay, "On Reading Old Books":

> I do not think altogether the worse of a book for having survived the author a generation or two. I have more confidence in the dead than the living. Contemporary writers may generally be divided into two classes – one's friends or one's foes. Of the first we are compelled to think too well, and of the last we are disposed to think too ill, to receive much pleasure from the perusal, or to judge fairly the merits of either.

526

Hazlitt expresses a wariness proper to the critic in an age of gathering belatedness. The overpopulation of books (and authors) brought about by the length and complexity of the world's recorded history is at the center of canonical dilemmas, now more than ever. "What shall I read ? " is no longer the question, since so few now read, in the era of television and cinema. The pragmatic question has become: "What shall I not bother to read ?"

As soon as one accepts any part of the dogma of the School of Resentment and admits that aesthetic choices are masks for social and political overdeterminations, such questions quickly become easily answerable. By a variant on Gresham's Law, bad writing drives out good, and social change is served by Alice Walker rather than by any author of more talent and disciplined imagination. But where will the social changers find the guidelines for their choices ? Politics, to our common sorrow, rapidly stales like last month's newspaper and only rarely remains news. Perhaps literary politics are always at work, but political stances have little effect in the strangely intimate family romance of the great writers, who are influenced by one another without much regard for political resemblances and differences.

Literary influence is "the politics of the spirit": canon formation, even if it necessarily always reflects class interests, is a highly ambivalent phenomenon. Milton, rather than the two greatest English poets –Chaucer and Shakespeare – is the central figure in the history of the Anglo-American poetic canon. In the same way, the crucial early writer in the history of the entire Western literary Canon is not one of the greatest poets – Homer, Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare – but Virgil, the great link between Hellenistic poetry (Callimachus) and the European epic tradition (Dante, Tasso, Spenser, Milton). Virgil and Milton remain poets who provoke immense ambivalences in those who come after them, and those ambivalences define centrality in a canonical context. A canon, despite its idealizers from Ezra the Scribe through the late Northrop Frye, does not exist in order to free its readers from anxiety. Indeed, a canon is an achieved anxiety, just as any strong literary work is its author's achieved anxiety. The literary canon does not baptize us into culture; it does not make us free of cultural **/527/** anxiety. Rather, it confirms our cultural anxieties, yet helps to give them form and coherence.

Ideology plays a considerable role in literary canon-formation if you want to insist that an aesthetic stance is itself an ideology, an insistence that is common to all six branches of the School of Resentment: Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians. There are, of course, aesthetics and aesthetics, and apostles who believe that literary study should be an overt crusade for social change obviously manifest a different aesthetic from my own post-Emersonian version of Pater and Wilde. Whether this is a difference that makes a difference is unclear to me: the social changers and I seem to agree on the canonical status of Pynchon, Merrill, and Ashbery as the three American presences of our moment. The Resenters throw in alternative canonical candidates, African-American and female, but not very wholeheartedly.

If literary canons are the product only of class, racial, gender, and national interests, presumably the same should be true of all other aesthetic traditions, including music and the visual arts. Matisse and Stravinsky can then go down with Joyce and Proust as four more dead white European males. I gaze in wonder at the crowds of New Yorkers at the Matisse exhibition: are they truly there because of societal overconditioning? When the School of Resentment becomes as dominant among art historians and critics as it is among literary academics, will Matisse go unattended while we all flock to view the daubings of the Guerrilla Girls? The lunacy

of these questions is plain enough when it comes to the eminence of Matisse, while Stravinsky is clearly in no danger of being replaced by politically correct music for the ballet companies of the world. Why then is literature so vulnerable to the onrush of our contemporary social idealists ? One answer seems to be the common illusion that less knowledge and less technical skill is required for either the production or the comprehension of imaginative literature (as we used to call it) than for the other arts.

If we all talked in musical notes or in brush strokes, I suppose Stravinsky and Matisse might be subject to the peculiar hazards now suffered by canonical authors. Attempting to read many of the works set forth as resentment's alternatives to the Canon, I **/528/** reflect that these aspirants must believe they have spoken prose all their lives, or else that their sincere passions are already poems, requiring only a little overwriting. I turn to my lists, hoping that literate survivors will find some authors and books among them that they have not yet encountered and will garner the rewards that only canonical literature affords.