

The Salt Companion to Harold Bloom

Edited by

GRAHAM ALLEN is Senior Lecturer in Modern English, University College Cork. He is the author of *Harold Bloom: A Poetics of Conflict* (Harvester, 1994), *Intertextuality* (Routledge, 2000), *Roland Barthes* (Routledge, 2003), *The pupils of the University*. Ed. parallax 40 (2003) and is currently working on a monograph on Mary Shelley (to be published by Palgrave in 2007) and a first collection of poetry, provisionally entitled *Some Things I Never Did*.

ROY SELLARS is Senior Lecturer in English literature at the University of Southern Denmark, Kolding; in 2005–06 he is in residence at the Kierkegaard Library, St. Olaf College, Minnesota. A graduate of St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, where he discovered Bloom thanks to his tutor Ann Wordsworth, he has also worked at Marburg University, the University of Geneva, Cornell University and the National University of Singapore. He has published on topics in literature and theory, and is completing a book on Milton; he is also co-editor, with Per Krogh Hansen, of *Glossing Glas* (Nebraska, forthcoming). He welcomes notice of any relevant writings for a complete bibliography of Bloom in progress.

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ROY SELLARS



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For Harold, at 75

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Key to Abbreviations

(Printed Texts by Harold Bloom)

References to texts by Bloom are made in parentheses in each essay according to the following abbreviations. We have not distinguished between American and British editions of the same book. In the case of *Anxiety* and *Map*, pagination of the text is identical between the first and second editions; the new prefaces to the latter are listed below separately.

<i>Agon</i>	<i>Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism</i> . New York: Oxford UP, 1982.
<i>Alone</i>	“Preface.” <i>Alone With the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sūfism of Ibn ‘Arabī</i> . By Henry Corbin. Trans. Ralph Manheim. 1969. Bollingen Series 91. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. ix–xx.
<i>American</i>	<i>The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation</i> . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.
<i>Anxiety</i>	<i>The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry</i> . New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
<i>Apocalypse</i>	<i>Blake’s Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument</i> . Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1963.
<i>Ashbery</i>	Introduction. <i>John Ashbery</i> . Ed. Bloom. <i>Modern Critical Views</i> . New York: Chelsea House, 1985. 1–16.
“Beard”	“The One with the Beard Is God, the Other Is the Devil.” <i>Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies</i> [Dartmouth, MA] 6 (2001): 155–66.
<i>Best American</i>	<i>The Best of the Best American Poetry</i> . Ed. Bloom. New York: Scribner Poetry, 1998.
<i>Best English</i>	<i>The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer through Frost</i> . Ed. Bloom. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

- “Breaking” “The Breaking of Form.” *Deconstruction and Criticism*. By Bloom, et al. New York: Seabury, 1979. 1–37.
- Canon *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt, 1994.
- “Daemonic” “The Daemonic Allegorist.” Rev. of *The Prophetic Moment: An Essay on Spenser*, by Angus Fletcher. *Virginia Quarterly Review* 47 (1971): 477–80.
- Deconstruction *Deconstruction and Criticism*. By Bloom, et al. New York: Seabury, 1979.
- Exodus *Exodus*. Ed. Bloom. Modern Critical Interpretations. New York: Chelsea House, 1987.
- Figures *Figures of Capable Imagination*. New York: Seabury, 1976.
- “Foreword” “Foreword.” *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*. By Moshe Idel. New Haven: Yale UP, 2002. ix–xvii.
- Futur *El futur de la imaginació*. Barcelona: Anagrama / Empúries, 2002.
- Genesis *Genesis*. Ed. Bloom. Modern Critical Interpretations. New York: Chelsea House, 1986.
- Genius *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds*. New York: Warner, 2002.
- Hamlet *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. New York: Riverhead, 2003.
- How *How to Read and Why*. New York: Scribner, 2000.
- “How” “Preface: How to Read Milton’s Lycidas.” *A Map of Misreading*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. xiii–xxiii.
- “Introduction” JM Introduction. *John Milton*. Ed. Bloom. Modern Critical Views. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. 1–7.
- “Introduction” JMPL Introduction. *John Milton’s Paradise Lost*. Ed. Bloom. Modern Critical Interpretations. New York: Chelsea House, 1987. 1–11.

- “Introduction”
PL, PR, SA Introduction. *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, Samson Agonistes*. By John Milton. Ed. Bloom. New York: Collier, 1962. 5–11.
- J *The Book of J*. Trans. David Rosenberg. Interpreted by Bloom. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990.
- “J to K” “From J to K, or The Uncanniness of the Yahwist.” *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*. Ed. Frank McConnell. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. 19–35.
- Kabbalah* *Kabbalah and Criticism*. New York: Seabury, 1975.
- Kierkegaard* Introduction. Søren Kierkegaard. Ed. Bloom. *Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1989. 1–4.
- King Lear* Introduction. *William Shakespeare’s King Lear*. Ed. Bloom. *Modern Critical Interpretations*. New York: Chelsea House, 1987. 1–8.
- Map* *A Map of Misreading*. New York: Oxford UP, 1975.
- Merrill* Introduction. *James Merrill*. Ed. Bloom. *Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1985. 1–7.
- “New Poetics” “A New Poetics.” Rev. of *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, by Northrop Frye. *Yale Review* 47 (1957): 130–33.
- Omens* *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection*. New York: Riverhead, 1996.
- Peripheral* Introduction. *Peripheral Light: Selected and New Poems*. By John Kinsella. New York: Norton, 2003. xiii–xxviii.
- Poetics* *Poetics of Influence: New and Selected Criticism*. Ed. John Hollander. New Haven: Henry R. Schwab, 1988.
- Poetry* *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1976.
- Pope* *Alexander Pope*. Ed. Bloom. *Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1986.

- “Preface” Preface. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. xi–xlvii.
- Ringers *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971.
- Ruin *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present*. Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1987–88. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989.
- Shakespeare *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead, 1998.
- Shelley *Shelley’s Mythmaking*. Yale Studies in English 141. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1959.
- Stevens *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.
- Vessels *The Breaking of the Vessels*. Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.
- Visionary *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*. 1961. Rev. ed. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1971.
- Wisdom *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* New York: Riverhead-Penguin, 2004.
- Yeats *Yeats*. New York: Oxford UP, 1970.

Preface
Harold Bloom and Critical Responsibility

GRAHAM ALLEN
AND
ROY SELLARS

It is difficult to read. The page is dark.
Yet he knows what it is that he expects.
—STEVENS, “Phosphor Reading by His Own Light”

Opposition is true Friendship.
—BLAKE, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 20

Harold Bloom is the most famous living literary critic in the English-speaking world.¹ Such a statement is easy enough to make in terms of its truth-value; however, it also brings with it a host of paradoxes and complications. For a long time now, Bloom has been presenting himself as a solitary voice, ignored by an academic audience who should—but never will—listen. The role sounds like a painful one; but is it anything more than a role, played with a mask? Bloom’s customary self-presentation does not sit neatly with our opening statement. Writing in 1988, Peter de Bolla began his study of Bloom with a confirmation of Bloom’s self-figuring: “while Bloom’s notion of ‘influence’ is probably one of the most widely disseminated concepts at work in literary critical practice today, the books in which this idea is conceptually formulated are little read or commented upon” (8). De Bolla goes on to suggest that there is within Bloom’s work itself a resistance to critical imitation and extension, to generating disciples and schools. Indeed, Bloom has forcefully confirmed this resistance to emulation. To take one example, from his

¹ Roger Gilbert, in this volume, calls him “the most famous, and in some quarters infamous, literary critic of our time.”

essay “Agon: Revisionism and Critical Personality:” “I want first to suggest that on a pragmatic view there is no language of *criticism* but only of an individual critic, because . . . a theory of strong misreading denies that there is or should be any common vocabulary in terms of which critics can argue with one another” (*Agon* 21). While it may be true that Bloom’s work is difficult to adopt as a methodology, and that it presents itself as a kind of literature, its unrepeatability does not, on its own, explain the lack of academic dialogue to which De Bolla refers. Kristeva, Barthes, Derrida and De Man are equally unrepeatable, for example, and yet their works, unlike those of Bloom, have been subject to a widespread and intensive (if not always successful) incorporation into academic discourse.²

Academic and other worlds have changed significantly since the mid-1980s, and now is a good time to reassess the reception of Bloom’s ever-increasing corpus. The first and most remarkable change has been in Bloom’s own critical focus. De Bolla refers inevitably to Bloom’s famous theory of the anxiety of influence and the idea of literary and indeed critical writing as miswriting. However, if we had to characterise Bloom’s work since the mid-1980s, it would be in terms of freedom from influence, originality, authors who are influencers rather than influenced, movers rather than moved. As a number of contributors to this volume explain, Bloom has dramatically altered his orientation in the last twenty years, ceasing to describe and in some ways embody those who are belated and, instead, focusing on that small circle of authors who, as he now likes to put it, have made us all possible, whoever ‘we’ may be.³ That reorientation may seem unremarkable; but to many readers who have closely followed Bloom’s career, richly and diversely assembled in the current volume, the change of perspective is immense and does not come without a certain sense of loss. Graham Allen, for example, pivots his essay on this commonly expressed regret, foregrounding the ironic fact that, in moving away from the anxiety of influence and the struggle against the poetic burden of the past, Bloom may have temporarily lost sight of the future-orientation of the most vital forms of literature.

² For a discussion of this issue, see the conclusion of R. Clifton Spargo’s essay in this volume.

³ For a rigorous reading of originality in the context of Bloom’s work, readers should turn to Gregory Machacek’s “Conceptions of Origins and Their Consequences: Bloom and Milton,” in this volume.

We need to avoid premature assumptions about the overall character of Bloom's work. Contributors to this volume often remind us that there exists what we might call an *alternative Bloom*, or *alternative Blooms*. Like any culturally central controversialist, he is not quite the figure that public opinion imagines. There is a Bloom who fiercely defends the art of reading and a dynamic but central canon of strong literary texts. There is also a Bloom who is a highly respected contributor to Biblical studies and religious studies more generally. Nicholas Birns, in this volume, comments that "*The Book of J* seems one of the most 'primary' of Harold Bloom's works." In his "Foreword" to Moshe Idel's *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation*, Bloom styles himself a "literary critic and not a Kabbalistic scholar" (x). But his evident ability, in a few pages, magisterially to evaluate the relationship between Idel, the great scholar of Kabbalah in our generation, and the great precursor in that field, Gershom Scholem—added to the very fact that it is he, Bloom, who is prefacing what he calls Idel's "most important volume so far" (x)—runs against his own self-humbling characterisation. The enormous influence that Bloom has had in Biblical studies and related disciplines of reading cannot be ignored if we hope to take full measure of his life-long achievement. The fact that so many of the contributors to this volume, including Geoffrey Hartman and Moshe Idel himself, focus on this aspect demonstrates its importance for Bloom's thought. Many of these contributions attempt to link Bloom's work on Kabbalah and the Bible with his theories of literary influence and poetic (or critical) agonism. This move is on one level an obvious one, and it is clear that Bloom sees in the realms of religious writing a 'poetics of conflict' similar to the one he has so memorably marked out in the realms of poetry and imaginative literature (see Allen, *Harold Bloom*, esp. ch. 2). Whether Bloom's interventions in different fields can ultimately be reconciled is not for us to judge; the purpose of this heterogeneous collection was never to create a synthetically unified Bloom. Of the many precursors to whom Bloom refers in his moving "Afterword" to this volume, the overriding presence is that of Walt Whitman. Bloom here states that "[t]he politics of pre-civil war America scarcely illuminate *Leaves of Grass* (1855)," and much the same could be said of the eras of Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush père, Clinton, or Bush fils ("Benito Bush," as Bloom calls him) in relation to Bloom's own major writings on literature. However, since the Reagan years another Bloom has emerged who, like Whitman and Emerson before him, is quite prepared to leave the realms of poetic *agon* in order to address the

political follies of the day. This Bloom—perhaps more ephemeral, but hardly minor—is still little known to academic readers, for it is a Bloom one will mainly find in the mass media. In the American university system to which he remains attached, he has often been castigated as an elitist or reactionary, but the American university system is not the world, and it is the world, increasingly, that is Bloom’s audience. Scourge of Newt Gingrich and other right-wing ideologues, defender of abortion rights, analyst of religious fundamentalisms, Bloom has become one of those American critics who can most help readers outside the US to read the text that the American empire has been writing on minds and bodies around the world. The diversity of his interventions makes Stanley Fish’s claim, in 1995, that Bloom is not a “public intellectual” look out of date (*Professional* 118). Much as Bloom likes to mock academic pretensions and pseudo-politics, one cannot survey his work without registering its own political dimension or, if a trope is required, face.

Harold Bloom has many faces, and like his favourite literary character, Sir John Falstaff, or like Whitman, these faces do not amount to a totality. There is a passage in Whitman which is so obvious in this context that many sophisticated critics, fearful of repetition, would no doubt avoid it. The passage comes to us in such a familiar guise that it already reads like a quotation or even cliché. But some clichés are quotations whose apparent staleness can be refreshed, being thus transformed back into moments of literature; and for demonstrating this quickening power, we owe gratitude to Bloom, a critic never anxious about repeating (from memory, naturally) the texts which have, as he puts it, helped him to live his life. Here it is:

Do I contradict myself?
 Very well then I contradict myself,
 (I am large, I contain multitudes.) (*Song of Myself* 51)

The planet Bloom contains multitudes; we say it here because we know enough about him to know that he might say it himself, smiling at the ironies that such a statement would contain. This reminds us of another Bloom, another face often missed by the multitude of critics and journalists who have pronounced on, or denounced, his work. This Bloom is nowhere better represented than in his own “Afterword” here, a text written on the morning of his seventy-fifth birthday in 2005. This is a Bloom who, as Roy Sellars, alongside a number of others collected here, reminds us, is a comic genius—a man for whom literary life allows for constant

irony and pastiche; a man for whom Oscar Wilde is a giant precursor. Bloom deals in tropes and roles, not identities; and he writes aphoristically, at his best, rather than magisterially. One of the principles for “the restoration of reading” that he outlines in the provocative Prologue to *How to Read and Why* is “the recovery of the ironic” (25). The Wildean role is hard to sustain, though, in any context, and sometimes it seems as if Bloom is verging on self-parody. It’s hard to tell. Bloom’s humour is certainly lost on academics trained to be bureaucrats rather than readers, professionalised to the point where vast ironies can go unseen and unmarked. If opposition is true friendship, then the hostile non-reception of Bloom suggests that one can have too much of a good thing.⁴ We return, then, to Bloom’s readers, whom we hope this collection will create as well as reach.

The shift from the anxiety of influence to the celebration of Shakespearean originality might seem to have confirmed Bloom’s academic marginalisation. But then we ask: whose margins? Our contributors are geographically diverse, our publisher is not based in the US, and we question the tendency of the US academy to take for granted its own frames of reference. Furthermore, and again appropriately in our view, our publisher is not a university press—for academics are not the only readers. In the past fifteen years or so, Bloom has gained a worldwide audience who purchase books such as *How to Read and Why* (2000), *Genius* (2002), *The Art of Reading Poetry* (2004), *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (2004) or *Jesus and Yahweh* (2005). This has happened not just in English but also in translation (another aspect of his work that has been little studied). Bloom has become good copy, and each of his new publications is heralded by a degree of media coverage unrivalled by any other living critic. The current foundation stone of this presence in popular culture is his Bardolatry, his uncompromising (and professionally thankless) defence of Shakespeare as the central author in Western and indeed world literature.⁵ Herbert Weil, in *Harold Bloom’s Shakespeare*, states that Bloom “has managed to capture the curiosity and attention of readers whom professional specialists have failed to reach” (Weil 126). Linda Charnes, in the same book, states that Bloom’s *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1999) has made him “the literary critic of the educated, nonacademic middle class” (Charnes 262). Richard Levin adds: “I think that [the] striking difference between the

⁴ Readers are referred to Barnard Turner’s essay in this volume, a sustained examination of Bloom’s contemporary agon with what he calls the School of Resentment.

⁵ A significant account of Bloom’s approach to Shakespeare is found in T. J. Cribb’s contribution to this volume.

book's reception inside and outside the academy should concern us, since it marks the extent to which our vanguard critics have separated themselves from, and alienated, a significant part of the public that used to be included in our audience and our constituency" (Levin 77). In a period in which literary critics increasingly diversify and apply their techniques to analysis of the productions of popular culture, it is Bloom, staunch defender of more traditional ideals of canonicity and close reading, who has himself become both a subject and an object of that culture. The cultural capital of Bloom has probably never been higher. The irony is not lost on him—is irony ever lost on Bloom?—and is part of what allows for his confident and joyfully vengeful prophetic stance, as adopted here at the opening of *The Western Canon*:

Not a moment passes these days without fresh rushes of academic lemmings⁶ off the cliffs they proclaim the political responsibilities of the critic, but eventually all this moralizing will subside. Every teaching institution will have its department of cultural studies, an ox not to be gored, and an aesthetic underground will flourish, restoring something of the romance of reading. (*Canon* 15)

Beyond any other contemporary critic, Bloom stands for a fierce love of literature. Nowhere is this fact better attested to than in María Rosa Menocal's amusing and moving "How I Learned to Write Without Footnotes," below. If this love of literature can only be kept burning outside the techno-bureaucratic university—and that remains a large if—then so be it. Bloom's critical desire to honour literature, and the passion with which he pursues it, has won him a readership on a scale unimaginable to other critics, and those who have followed and cared about his work can only rejoice at such a situation in all its irony. Martin McQuillan expresses this response memorably at the beginning of his contribution: "Thank goodness for Harold Bloom. There is no literary critic writing today who is more encyclopaedic, more prolific, more outrageous, or more camp than Harold Bloom." John Phillips's wonderfully provocative Bloomian treatment of the word 'bloom,' in this volume, is also indicative of the intellectual affection and critical regard Bloom still inspires in many, even in the academy.

Bloom is the most remarkable literary critic today. In an age of apparently irresistible professionalisation, with its concomitant stress on specialisation, his range over world literature appears sublime, beyond

⁶ On the trope of the lemmings, see the essay by Roy Sellars below.

reason. This fact is frequently celebrated in the pages which follow. In the various discussions of the sublime in this volume (Heidi Sylvester's being the most sustained), we find a resounding testament to the fact that in our age, the sublime cannot be thought about critically without reference to Bloom. He is, as many in this volume argue, an example of the sublime. In his huge body of critical monographs, and in his prefaces for the innumerable Chelsea House volumes of criticism (addressed not only to an undergraduate but also a high-school audience), Bloom has introduced more texts than any other critic now or in the recent past. It would be an interesting exercise to attempt to name a handful of authors, of any note whatsoever, about whom he has not written at all. Many of the essays below may surprise readers who solely associate him with the canonical works of British and American literature. Christopher Rollason, for example, gives us a Bloom who is a champion of literatures from the Iberian, Ibero-American and Luso-Hispanic worlds, while Stephen Da Silva and Peter Morris, in their quite different ways, give us a Bloom relevant to the complex discussion of homoerotic literatures in English. More important than Bloom's sheer range is the astonishing amount of seminal interpretations that he has gifted us. Intertextually complex and original, these readings will remain a vast testament to the importance of literary interpretation and what Bloom calls "the romance of reading."

If we are to understand the phenomenon that is Bloom—at the beginning of his appreciation, Roger Gilbert asks "What is Harold Bloom?"—we need to pay attention to the continuities as well as the twists and turns of his half-century of critical work. A pair of quotations from two of his most characteristic works will suffice:

If the imagination's gift comes necessarily from the perversity of the spirit, then the living labyrinth of literature is built upon the ruin of every impulse most generous in us. So apparently it is and must be—we are wrong to have founded a humanism directly upon literature itself, and the phrase 'humane letters' is an oxymoron. A humanism might still be founded upon a completer *study of literature* than we have yet achieved, but never upon literature itself, or any idealized mirroring of its implicit categories. The strong imagination comes to its painful birth through savagery and misrepresentation. The only humane virtue we can hope to teach through a more advanced study of literature than we have now is the social virtue of detachment from one's own imagination, recognizing always that such detachment made absolute destroys any individual imagination. (*Anxiety* 85–86)

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. (*Canon* 32)

Two things link these passages from *The Anxiety of Influence* and *The Western Canon*. The obvious connection concerns the persistence of Bloom's dark, anti-liberal vision of the literary imagination, one that allies him with Leo Bersani (*The Culture of Redemption*) rather than Allan Bloom (*The Closing of the American Mind*)—with whom, absurdly, he is sometimes conflated. One of the most challenging aspects of *The Western Canon* lies in Harold Bloom's exasperation: despite three decades of demystification, he laments at length, the academic approach to literature has merely intensified its idealisations of its object. The argument presented in *The Anxiety of Influence* about literature's unavailability for social reform—which, as Bloom frequently reminds us, finds one of its greatest statements in the work of the radical Romantic writer William Hazlitt—is presented again in *The Western Canon*. The difference in the presentation is worth remarking upon, however, since in the former text it is a message delivered mainly to academic literary critics, whilst in the latter it is a message delivered in spite of them.

The persistence of the Bloomian vision of the agonistic literary imagination should move us to the second link between these passages. As various contributors to this collection show, Bloom is a critic committed to what he calls above “the responsibility of the literary critic.” Aligning literature with implicit or explicit programmes for social reform does not, he consistently states, meet the challenge of critical responsibility. So, we might ask in return, what does?

A significant number of the essays collected here concern themselves with Bloom's engagement with the Judaic tradition of Biblical interpretation (see especially the contributions by Nicholas Birns, Leslie Brisman, Gwee Li Sui, and Moshe Idel). The philosophical and critical work of Jacques Derrida is a recurrent point of reference in such discussions of Bloom's relation to Judaic interpretation and culture.⁷ His old sparring partner, Derrida, reminds us in *The Gift of Death* of the Biblical roots of the Western notion of responsibility. The purpose of such a move in Derrida's work is, in particular, to return us to the impossibility of responsibility's call. Working back through Levinas (see R. Clifton

⁷ See Martin McQuillan's “Is Deconstruction Really a Jewish Science? Bloom, Freud, Derrida,” in this volume.

Spargo in this collection) and Kierkegaard (see Anders Klitgaard in this collection), Derrida's text confronts us once again with the terrible logic of responsibility, captured in the Abrahamic paradox which places us between the Other as Totality (God) and the Other as particular (Isaac). This is a paradox which defeats us every time.⁸ Reading Bloom, wherever we may start in his prolific corpus, reminds us that for the literary critic this paradox presents itself as an impossible shuttle between Literature and the text: the need for a theory of literature always threatens the critic's desire and duty to do full justice to the individual text. It also reminds us that evaluation, an inherent aspect of Bloom's work that is frequently noted in this volume, is not something which we can simply choose to embrace or reject.

The presence of evaluative criticism within Bloom's work is a feature which has, as Gilbert suggests, received the most inaccurate and skewed forms of response, both in his supporters and detractors. The tendency has been to assert, against Bloom's rhetoric of 'strong' and 'weak' texts, that such evaluation is unnecessary, and even politically conservative. It hardly needs to be said that the majority of Bloom's critics on this issue have been practitioners of various forms of post-colonial or feminist literary criticism (a sophisticated and sensitive version of this latter form of critique can be found in Sinéad Murphy's contribution). The mistake upon which many of these responses have been built is to suppose that Bloom's evaluative statements issue from a stable map of the literary canon, and that such evaluations are essentially comparative in relation to given identities.⁹ For Bloom, strength (power, pathos, more life) does not originate from comparison within a totalising (inclusive) map—who actually possesses such a map?—but from a passionate commitment to the text. The ultimate paradox of evaluation, at least in Bloom's committed hands, is that it is not comparative but, rather, competitive. His evaluative method does not give us a hierarchy of literary greats and also-rans but rather, time after time, the experience of a critic gaining power and more life from texts which possess an uncanny excess of vitality (or what he calls 'strength').

⁸ For a careful reading of Bloom's response to this Biblical scene—a response which demonstrates his "distaste for the trial of Abraham"—readers should turn to Leslie Brisman's essay.

⁹ Milton Welch, in this volume, for example, returns us to the complex question of whether Bloom supports or undermines the traditional figure of the author.

Bloom has presented us with a number of literary maps in his time; but he knows that, for the literary critic, responsibility is always first and foremost to the text. What he also knows, with regard to the Abrahamic paradox (which can look like a straight translation of the hermeneutic circle) is that it is not really Totality (the literary universe) which overwhelms us but the particular, singular text as Other. The crucial question facing all literary critics is what such responsibility to the text as Other involves. When we critically confront a text, is it power or knowledge that we seek? Bloom's decades-long *agon* with Derrida and De Man makes it clear that, faced with a choice between an epistemological and a tropological model, Bloom unhesitatingly chooses the latter—or argues that the latter has already chosen what we like to call 'us.' As he writes in "Ratios: The Language of Poetry and the Language of Criticism:"

We want to be kind, we think, and we say that to be alone with a book is to confront neither ourselves nor another. We lie. When you read, you confront either yourself, or another, and in either confrontation you seek power. Power over yourself, or another, but power. And what is power? *Potentia*, the pathos of more life, or to speak reductively, the language of possession. The idealization of power, in the reading process, or processes, is finally a last brutal self-idealization, a noble lie against our own origins. This lie is against mortality . . . (*Breaking* 13)

The choice between understanding and power may ultimately be unimportant on the level of critical responsibility, however. What critic, after all, even if armed with an epistemological account of the reading process, will argue that she has read enough because she has spent a lifetime reading X, even if X turns out to be *The Iliad*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Ulysses*, or even Shakespeare? On the level of responsibility such a statement would be meaningless, since not only does X remain beyond critical closure, but there remain so many other texts with magnificent claims for critical attention which must be sacrificed during the study of X in order for that study to be possible. The truly responsible critic wishes to meet fully and completely not only with X but with every text worthy of attention, since how can she claim to be fully responsible if she has not given critical attention to all texts worthy of such attention? We read Bloom, we have always read Bloom, and we continue to read Bloom, because he is the greatest example in the past fifty years (at least) of this form of critical responsibility.

Critical responsibility is impossible, but for someone of Bloom's unique capabilities only just. His failure "to complete the work," as he

often expresses it (*How* 277), comes under the sign of the *only just*. Bloom's lifelong dedication to the duty of the critic (that duty being to *literature, but also in terms of each of its particular manifestations*) throws a gigantic shadow over everyone else who would take up that task. Few could plausibly claim to rival Bloom in terms of critical range. And yet to experience the Bloom of *The Western Canon* unflinchingly facing up to the impossibility of the task of the contemporary critic not only confronts us with our own deracinated critical visions but also compounds our sense of limitation by presenting us with the master's *only just* sense of incompleteness:

What shall the individual who still desires to read attempt to read, this late in history? The Biblical three-score years and ten no longer suffice to read more than a selection of the great writers in what can be called the Western tradition, let alone in the world's traditions. Who reads must choose, since there is literally not enough time to read everything, even if one does nothing but read. Mallarmé's grand line—"the flesh is sad, alas, and I have read all the books"—has become a hyperbole. Overpopulation, Malthusian repletion, is the authentic context for canonical anxieties. (*Canon* 15)

A fierce dedication to the responsibilities of the critic has, as the following essays demonstrate, placed Bloom himself within the Western canon while giving us an unavoidable and yet unrepeatable example of critical responsibility. That responsibility rests in what Bloom calls strangeness, another word for what we have been calling the unrepeatable. As a critic, his lifelong responsibility has been to "a strangeness" in literary texts "that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies" (*Canon* 4). This collection is dedicated, then, in a spirit of friendly opposition, to preventing Harold Bloom from ever becoming a given.

Last but not least, no collection such as this one (and this one, despite its lengthy gestation, is the first) could possibly do without the attempt, by poets and prose writers, at some original literary contribution (with all the irony that the word 'original' can stand). This book therefore brings together a number of professional creative writers and a number of academics venturing into creative writing. The section, Creative Work, which begins this volume is at least as important as the Critical Work which it prefaces. We can easily imagine whole anthologies of poems dedicated to, or written in agonistic contention with, the work of Harold Bloom. He has already had (as many of the critical essays here recognize) an immense impact on poetry and

fiction written in the past thirty years. No other post-war literary critic can come near Bloom's ignition and motivation of radically new literary responses. Our opening creative section is a chance to acknowledge the productive influence of the greatest literary critic of recent years. The fact that the pieces are almost all new to print is an acknowledgement of the continued vitality for literature that Bloom embodies—and a taster, for readers of this collection, of what is already out there, to be discovered in the future.

Acknowledgements

The call for papers with which this collection began, originally as a special issue of the creative journal *Salt*, produced an overwhelming response. No single book can ever hope to be comprehensive or definitive as far as Bloom is concerned, and it is no exaggeration to say that an entire book series could have been constructed as well as this particular volume. We would like to thank all those who submitted proposals and drafts as well as those whose work is actually included in this collection. The contributors have been very patient in enduring delay and accommodating requests for revision. The book has been a long time in the making, and we would like to acknowledge the immense act of faith that its initiator, John Kinsella, and everyone at Salt Publishing, placed in it over the years. We are grateful to Chris Hamilton-Emery for advice and for seeing the volume through the press so efficiently. Above all, we thank Harold Bloom himself for being so generous and supportive with regard to the entire project. Graham Allen, as always, is indebted most profoundly and personally to Bernie, Dani and Chrissie. The debts of Roy Sellars are too huge to list, but he is grateful to all those who have sustained him in different ways during the making of this book, including the librarians at Cornell University, the University of Southern Denmark, and St. Olaf College.

We would also like to take this opportunity to register our appreciation of the many critics who have responded significantly to Harold Bloom's work. We hope and expect that in the near future there will be an adequate bibliography allowing readers to assess these responses for themselves; in the meantime we have especially benefited from responses to Bloom by M. H. Abrams, Jonathan Arac, Elizabeth Bruss, Peter de Bolla, David Fite, Wlad Godzich, Susan Handelman, Jean-Pierre

Mileur, Donald Pease, Louis Renza, Lars Ole Sauerberg, and Ann Wordsworth, among others. John Hollander has not only written the best book to show what Bloomian approaches can actually do for literary criticism (*The Figure of Echo*) but has also edited the best anthology of Bloom's work, *Poetics of Influence*, which we recommend to readers who are new to him or who have come to him in the past fifteen years. It is hard to imagine Bloom's own best work, agonistically, without critics such as Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Barbara Johnson, J. Hillis Miller—and of course Jacques Derrida.

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Lastly, Graham Allen and Roy Sellars thank Harold for being the medium by which they found each other, thus initiating a true friendship now twenty years long.

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92.

Passage

—GRAHAM ALLEN
For Harold Bloom

I

And soon, there being no end,
He forgot how he had begun,
And could not tell
Whether he was falling still
Or rising.

II

Why must there be this untutored clash,
This ever trumpeted division and discord?
Light and dark, east and west,
Full Moon and crescent, frost and fire,
You and I. I deny them all.
In the name of the light that separates itself
Through imperfectly closed wooden blinds
Only to blend together to form one ray,
One undeniable beam, I deny them all.
In the name of You and I, I deny them all.

III

If I injure myself, is it for you?
If I neglect my body,
Tighten my lip,
No longer point my face
Towards what makes me happy;
If I burn myself by the water
Or freeze my bones outside
Of hearth and home,
Do you think it is for you?

I have cut myself so badly
That I begin to feel.

IV

In the garden
He rose above himself
And paused.

He denied the intuition of the sun,
The elective demonstration of hills,
The simple pride of oak and lily.

He presumed there would be other days,
Interrogative, challenged, somewhat straightened.
But he rose above himself on this day.

He paused.
In the garden, he said:
"This is enough. This is home."

v

If I were to have my days again
I would repeat the same mistakes:
The same enemies, the same misguided kisses,
The same unnoticed tragedies and triumphs.

If I were to have my days again,
Knowing what acts were wise, and what unholy,
My hand would still reach out to you
And you would still crumble at its touch.

vi

And soon, there being no end,
He forgot how it had begun,
And could not tell
Whether he was falling still
Or rising.

Aliyah

—NORMAN FINKELSTEIN

For Harold Bloom

From an infinite distance, the corrosive Word
calls to the soul, which had lost itself
 in the mirror of its activities.
The simulacrum dissolves: Go up to the Book
which contains the emptiness. Go up to the Book
 as if everything were forgotten.
Go up to the Book, because the thrice-commanded
have endured the anger, the scorn and the pity,
all the expectations, the normative illusions,
 and cannot be repossessed.

This is the world of the strong fragments,
where all the voices double back on themselves.
It is the world of the going up, where every image
 projects itself upon another
until the soul denies that it was ever privileged,
that it was the element of risk lost in translation,
 that its integrity was jeopardized
 because it had no integrity,
 that love could curl around the tongue
 until it gave birth to truth.

Here among the pages there are no mysteries.
Bird calls to bird as the seasons shift,
 speaking in that ancient language
 that somehow is always new.
They sit on the branches like words in a sentence.
Sweet world! when will you give yourself to the soul,
which has waited so long among its contradictions?
The wind that blows through the wreckage of history
 stirs among the idle leaves.
Even here in the place that was promised,
where the sheer light sears every wound,
the figures are fruitful and multiply
 as if it had been ordained.

The soul falls back into the world of the mirror,
as across an infinite distance the Word withdraws,
 leaving only the faintest trace of itself
 exiled from the delight of continuity.
They are shaking hands all around;
they are shaking hands and kissing each other,
kissing each other as they kiss the Book.
It is the birth of irony, born again and again
from the dissatisfactions, meager compensation,
 strong fragments, broken speech.

A Merrie Melody for Harold

—JOHN HOLLANDER

Fiddle-de-dee, fiddle-de-dee,
The fly has married the bumble-bee
 Then down to fiddle-de-gee
 Then up again to fiddle-de-ay
 And way up there to fiddle-de-eeeeeeeeeeeeee—
 Which is the way to play.
 Is this some kind of boring riddle
 Or
 Is it that I am the cat and the fiddle?
 Both—and more:
 Hey diddle bloody diddle
 Indeed!—And no, I'm not Stephane Grappelli,
 Nor Joseph Szigeti, the fiddler of Dooney,
 Nor the accomplished busker outside the local deli,
 But I'm monumentally looney
 If only because the improbable astronomical event
 A certain cow was said to jump over,
 Instead of munching her clover,
 Has become so central to my discontent.
Io sono amalato
 And hearing my own most unmellow
 Buzzing yet stingless *ponticello*
 And watching the dizzying bounce of my *spiccato*
 Turns my poor head nightly . . .

But the centrality I mentioned, of that moon:
 The little dog (he was a brown Norfolk terrier, if I remember rightly)
 Didn't exactly laugh at it, mind you, but rather lightly
 Barked: at it, at the cow, at the cat horsehairing away at the catgut, at
 the song
 They were in, and all so perplexed by, for so long:
 Were they jailed in it or created by and out of it?
 But enough of that. I return to the moon,

Reminded in so doing that (and I have no doubt of it)
Once in a green moon,
Which comes about some time in early—*that's right!*—June,
This sort of thing has been known to occur:
As in a bad joke,
The dish broke—
Not into pieces but, as it were,
Keeping its physical, if not its moral, integrity—
Into the place where silverware
In its soft brown bed of treated cloth lay there
In its trustful tranquility,
And rummaging through a pile
Of mismatched pieces (whispering all the while
The sort of promises that empty bowls
Are full of) persuaded the silly spoon
(They were poles
Apart in knowledge of the world, the sky, the sun, the moon
The cow had overjumped) to run away
With him and children sing about it to this very day
Unseeing of the darker side of what they sing and say,
And all that I have always known about the games they play.

The Song of Solomon's Daughter

in the Paradise of Poets
 Exulting that She Exists
 The Composer of Yahweh
 Editor: Geoffrey Hartman

*A prophecy discovered in the crypt of Yale's famous Babylonian Collection after extensive searches inspired by the thesis of Professor Harold Bloom in **The Book of J**.*¹

O yet once more the ancient letters dower
 a mortal hand. What confident shadow
 strides before my sight? I am reborn!
 This critic—surely a renegade priest
 or lovesick rabbi—has guessed I was a girl,
 a clever daughter of Solomon. (I wonder
 who really begat me. Things were pretty wild
 at court, in those over-enlightened days.
 They're wilder now, of course, in literature.)
 I am found, found out. But what game is he playing
 anyway? He's smarter than Baalam's ass,
 my favorite invention, unless it's the bit
 (truly Lady's gothic) about that awful
 adult circumcision. It's all the fault
 of those poetic tales around my father's knee,
 and bubemaizes sucked from jeweled tongues
 of strangely-named women who ran in and out
 of his chambers,—he couldn't sleep anyway,—
 dripping myrrh and chanting about foxes,
 vines, kisses, a garden of nuts, she-gods
 and dragons of the flood, their dismembered
 heroes, the, what was the Greek word?
 yes, sparagmos. The ground I stood on,
 they said, was alive, and danced and stamped,

¹ A first version of this poem appeared in *Kerem: A Journal of Creative Explorations in Judaism* (winter 1992-93); permission to republish is hereby gratefully acknowledged.

merging the roles of hunter and hunted,
while shouting at each final selah-kick:
"The earth is the Lord's, all who live therein!"

That maddening refrain, like a priest's blessing,
covered every Davidic wildness.
A canny gift sprang from uncanny sounds
his tortured love provoked. I was the harp
that observed all this, child, legacy,
who played before him on the moody strings
and acclaimed Shaddai. Sheba herself
smiled on me, as though she knew (o image
of perfumed wisdom, sister-maze and guide)
what I was and was not.

Here the manuscript ends, but scraps survive from another scroll. It is possible that the following fragments, which the editor has revised into a semblance of coherence, may have been composed by someone other than J. They should be treated as a separate document provisionally called MS JJ.

My brother, my spouse, I was locked in the deep
a fountain closed up of living speech
only my eyes declared you in silence:
I was even lonelier than Joseph
abandoned in the pit,
who had a thousand working for me once,
Lilith and Leilah, the redeemed night-spirits.
Then came the withering priests of the chamzin,
terrorists of the unutterable.
Then came a raggedness, rabbis and scribes,
depressing the tongue of the text. I curse
the degrees, o David, though not your psalms,
I bless the dragon exuberance, the roar
of her against envious eye and pierced ear.
I bless my beloved, the spicy crow's* message

* Obscure. The Hebrew *kvk*, seems to be a defective reduplicative *kvkv*, with an onomatopoeic meaning (caw-caw).

rousing the Torah's ear in the cool evening.
You appeared, remade me in your image,
in the image of love and strife you exalted me:
I had faded away, shadow of delight,
you arrived and opened, lord of my mouth,
the firstborn speech I dedicate to you.
You are before I was, who was not there,
gone always gone—you found me in the laughter
and bloom** of your spirit

caetera desunt

** The Hebrew text has *gevurah*.

Voyaging Out

—PETER ABBS

(After Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 26)

For Harold Bloom

Master, I said, *If within these flames this man can speak*
Let me draw close and hear his words. And Virgil replied:
Listen then and Ulysses will tell you how and where he died.

The oval flame before me began to flicker and rise higher
 As if the inferno's wind was slowly rising. Then from the fire
 I heard a spectral voice. *When I escaped from Circe*

Nothing held me. Neither my son, nor my decrepit father,
Least of all my dotting wife. Some inner devil drove me on
To unravel the riddle of the sphinx, to take seductive nature

To the rack and screw. I wanted to map the sordid runnels
Of the mind, break open the hieroglyphs of dreams,
Crack the recalcitrant code of matter, good or evil—

What the hell? So I set out with a motley crew
And crossed the bare sea tracks to Spain, Morocco,
Sardinia—and other slack backwaters where no man spoke

A word we knew. Then we veered out to the sheer edge,
Where maps end, where the coolest trailblazers screw up,
Where great ships stagger back. My gang looked mutinous.

Men, I said, we have come a long way to reach
This black rock which marks the beginning of uncharted seas
And we are aging now. There's not a young man on this deck.

So, in whatever time remains, let us become as gods.
We were not born to live like pigs drooling in the muck
But to follow the flare of knowledge. To live dangerously!

*My words drugged my fractious crew. They wolf-whistled
And clapped as if it was some streetwise spiel,
Not a gamble against the odds. So each bent to lift*

*His oars and lunged with a drunk elation. For five days
We advanced until no-one could decode the programme of the stars;
Then at dawn I saw this mountain drifting through the haze,*

*Its bulk was large, larger than anything I'd ever seen.
I do not know why, some loudmouth cackled hysterically.
It was the anti-climax of our trip: this towering hunk of rock*

*Blockading us. But then from nowhere a storm blew in.
It smacked our boat. Three times we spun around, the tall mast
Cracked and snapped, the prow reared up and then went down*

And over our reeling heads the water swirled and closed.

Three Poems

PAOLO VALESIO

Translations by Graziella Sidoli

To Harold Bloom,
who understands poetry like a poet

Da Il cuore del girasole (di prossima pubblicazione)

Sal Poeticum

Il poeta è come il sale
ma non come il pane:
non il sale della terra
ma il sale sulla terra—
quello che, sparso e sperso
sopra i solchi terreni, li fa sterili.
Eppure anche i seni smagriti
possono scintillare seduzione.
Il poeta rivela
il deserto al deserto,
lo rivergina e prepara.

Teatro di Fuggi
3 gennaio 2002

From *The Heart of the Sunflower* (forthcoming)

Sal Poeticum

The poet is like salt
but not like bread:
not the salt of the earth,
but the salt upon the earth—
that, dispersed and dissipated
on the furrowed terrain, makes it sterile.
And yet, even barren breasts
can be a sparkling seduction.
The poet reveals
the desert to the desert,
revirginizing it and making it ready.

The Theater at Fiuggi
3 January 2002

Da *Il cuore del girasole* (di prossima pubblicazione)

Sakura Park

Il più profondo velo della Vergine
era quello che le copriva il cuore.
Adesso solamente l'ho compreso,
adesso che il mio cuore velato per sempre è lo scrigno
custode delle parole
che più non posso dire è la piccola
lanterna cieca
come quel cuore esterno
che è la grande lanterna di pietra
dolcemente vuota alta sulla colonna
nell'aiuola del parco giapponese.

Upper West Side, Manhattan
20 aprile 2005

From *The Heart of the Sunflower* (forthcoming)

Sakura Park

The most arcane veil of the Virgin
was the one covering her heart.
Only now I know it,
now that my own veiled heart
is forever more the coffer
that guards the words I cannot say
it is the small blind lantern
resembling the uncovered heart
that is the large stone lantern
gently empty and high above the pillar
at the center of the flower-bed
in the Japanese garden.

Upper West Side, Manhattan
20 April 2005

Da *Figlio dell'uomo a Corcovado: Poema drammatico in nove scene*

Scene II:

Il colle di Corcovado

STATUA:

I libri-guida nordamericani
che non voglion turbare la pace
mentale dei loro lettori
mi chiamano soltanto: il Monumento.
In verità io sono
la statua del Cristo Redentore.
Quasi quaranta metri sono alta,
ogni mio braccio è trenta tonnellate.
In alto sopra il colle germinante
del Corcovado,
da una piazzetta al termine
di una fila di scale di pietra,
guardo la gente della mia città
guardo i visitatori, gli stranieri
e il paese, e più che il paese.
Guarda, Solange, che ti guardo
(*Mira que Jesús te mira*).
Ti vedo in basso che mi stai negando
di fronte alla minuscola cappella
incavata nel mio piedestallo.
Laggiù in basso tu mi stai negando
con il sogghigno dietro il quale resti
sopra la soglia mentre i professori
visitanti, di cui
tu sei la guida a Rio, sbirciano dentro.
Mi stai negando in ogni movimento,
in ogni scatto della testa eretta,
in ogni scintillio
dei tuoi occhiali rotondi,
in ogni tua carezza

alla tua minigonna di blue-jeans.
Non mi hanno scavato le pupille
dentro le grandi orbite di pietra
ma ciò non m'impedisce di vedere;
e il mio sguardo ha conquistato—
sguardo che più non sa
se è rivolto all'interno o al di fuori—
la precisione di ogni distacco.

Tu, la non credente,
tu sei libera di dimenticare
o anche addirittura cancellare
intere parti del mondo;
così che tu ti senti più leggera,
più infuocata all'assalto
di quelle che sono per te
le vere realtà della vita.
Io qui in alto sopra il Corcovado
con queste braccia
così enormemente distese—
tanto che ho dimenticato
quale dovrebbe essere il mio gesto:
riflesso di crocefissione?
movimento di benedizione?
accoglimento paziente
di ciò che si estende ai miei piedi?—
non ho questo potere: debbo vedere tutto,
compresi anche i più frivoli dettagli.

Il mio vedere
è di là del piacere.
Ma è anche al di là del dovere;
è l'aura sopra l'aria,
l'aura vertiginosa che mi avvolge.
Ma ho errato (col mio impeto
che rapido sovente mi trascina):
Come puoi tu negarmi, se mi ignori?

From *Son of Man at Corcovado: A Dramatic Poem in Nine Scenes***Scene II:****The hill of Corcovado**

STATUE:

The North-American guide-books
which do not want to disturb the peace
of mind of their readers
simply call me: the Monument.
I am really the statue of Christ the Redeemer.
I stand almost one hundred twenty feet tall
and each of my arms weighs thirty tons.
High up above the germinating hill of Corcovado
I look down from a small piazza
where the stone steps end,
and I watch my townspeople,
the visitors, the foreigners;
I see my country, and also beyond it.
Look up Solange, I see you
(*Mira que Jesús te mira*).
Down below you are denying me
as you stand facing the small chapel
scooped out of my pedestal.
You are denying me down below
sneering while waiting outside
as the visiting professors peek inside
(you are their guide in Rio).
With each movement you deny me,
with each start of your proud head
each flash of light
darting from your round glasses
and each time you gently fondle
your blue-jeans miniskirt.
They did not carve out my pupils

inside these large eye-sockets of stone
but that does not prevent me from seeing;
and my glance—
a glance that no longer knows
if it is inner or outer—
has reached the precision
of every distancing.

 You, the unbeliever,
you are free to forget
even to erase
entire parts of the world;
which makes you feel lighter
and readier for the fiery attacks
upon those things which to you
are life's true realities.

High above Corcovado, I
with these arms
stretched out so widely
that I have forgotten
what they signify—

 is it a mirroring of the cross?
 a gesture of blessing?
 a patient embracing of all
 that lies at my feet?—

I do not have your power: I must see it all,
even the most frivolous details.

My seeing is beyond pleasure,
but it is also beyond duty;
it is the aura above the air,
the whirling aura that envelops me.

But I err (with the impetuosity
that so often overwhelms me):
How can you deny me, if you ignore me?

The Trader's Wife

—KEVIN HART
(after Li Bo)¹

When hair was hardly covering my brow
I was out plucking blossom in the sun.
You rode up smartly on your bamboo horse
And chased me round the garden, throwing plums:

Two kids, without a second thought to share,
Both growing up in a small river town.
At fourteen, now your wife, I was so shy
I lived in corners, head forever bowed,

And never once, not once, came round to you.
By fifteen I had learned to smile with you,
And longed to be with you, like ash and dust
Impossible to part! When you were far

You were still here, as steady as my heart,
And so I never thought to scan the road.
At sixteen, trading took you way out west,
Out past those boiling rapids with that rock

Where gibbons thump their chests and screech all night.
Here, by our gate, you held my hand an hour,
The moss grew green and thick in your slow steps:
I sweep the fallen leaves, but it sticks hard.

¹ This poem, which is dedicated to Harold Bloom, will appear as a coda to an essay on translation forthcoming in *Meanjin* [Melbourne].

The Autumn winds came quick and cold this year;
September's here, and yellow butterflies
Flit by the garden bed, always in pairs.
I cannot look at them: a lonely face

Will sometimes find a way into my own.
One day you will return, and when you know
Please write and say. I'll leave at once, upstream,
And come as close as sailors think it safe.

Field Notes from Mount Bakewell

—JOHN KINSELLA
For Harold Bloom

I.

Bark-stripped upper branches
of York gums—olive dugites
stretched taut, the dry blue
like stark black bitumen,
a torn limb from last night's
high winds, the snake struck
by a vehicle, maybe taking aim:
is it revenge when a snake,
tossed into the chassis, drops
and strikes the driver
searching for an oil leak?

II.

The stubble a bed of nails,
or hypodermics mounted
on mixed-media, piercing
boot-soles, stapling socks—
soaked with blood that rubs.
Up there, through the burn-off
and parrot bush sown like mythology,
the harsh green of heat trees
mocks foliage—an idea
without history here,
on the hillside.

The launch places
of paragliders—best thermals
for four hundred or a thousand
kilometres, depending on whom

you believe: where euros sweat
 in small numbers and the minutiae
 of reserves are transgressed
 by stand of sheoaks: aerial mimics,
 clarifiers of vegetable harmonics,
 telecommunication dishes
 microwaving panoramically,
 ingesting and feeding
 the collective soul.

III.

Quartz outcrops packed in soil,
 crumbling with sheep trails and frantic climbs,
 sheoak, York gum, jam tree,
 xanthorrhoea lean back to correct
 the incline, against the vertical:
 air comes out of the mountain
 and fumes across the denuded spaces—
 where drifts of pesticide settle,
 brought by outside draughts.

IV.

“There is all day, all
 day to go.”

Denise Riley

Locusts are starting to move
 in small gusts, like plumes
 or insistent waves
 lapping at dry oats,
 stubble. They rise up
 like seed dispersal.

v.

In corridors and channels,
flurries, waves, and bands,
fed on first heat, undoing
in simultaneous languid
and accelerated sweeps,
NOT chaos, trite similes
don't work for them,
even biblical comparisons
pall; like water spilt
over a hot surface?
Spitting dispersal?
Plague centre,
splitting to pass the mountain—
failing to reach the crown,
the trigonometrical station,
place of surveys
where altitude makes
for slight variations
in plantlife . . .
“Up top,” tracks are cut
and bush is bashed,
yet locusts—so far—
are scarce. They happen
down there, like . . .

vi.

The last plague,
evoking red paint—delisting
gardens, chlorophyll
as blood and threatening
mad cow disease,
or its equivalent,
in locusts. Comparison
is often laconic.

VII.

Non-return valves
are standard in gardens
post the drawback,
the payback from hoses
left in poison tanks,
sucked back, drawn back,
getting into the system.

VIII.

Roos and bronzewing pigeons
can eat 1080 without suffering
ill-effects? That they gut them
rapidly, to keep the eating
safe and sweet? The less said
the better.

IX.

Moving out towards Beverley:
a side journey past Mount Matilda.
Wagyl tracks: no growth,
shining like scales in the sun.
Below, the Avon snaking
its way towards the ocean,
siphoning or drawing
the flood. Swamp sheoaks,
flooded gums, the few deep
water holes remaining.
The rainbow begins or ends
on the Wagyl tracks, and there's
nothing romantic about it.
This is something else,
but the speaking won't fit

these lines: it has,
as do these lines,
its own precise science.
And the tides of the moon
rip through the undergrowth,
fire breaking the crusts of seeds,
the night shadows thrive
and growth is inflammatory.
On the day of a funeral
no stories are told
after dark . . . or six o'clock,
depending on
the sun . . .

x.

Proximity unsettles chat,
the invitation: this body
wormed with holes,
locusts swarms
choking the labyrinth,
the owl bright on night's edge,
struck on rodents
electric, silently
and smokelessly firing
the vanishing grass.

xi.

The Amish sell corn
as Halloween approaches: a long way
from here, and a short time back.
American corn. Original,
or semi-original seed.
We make good
an exchange. Here,

at the base of the mountain,
a shearer grows corn.
He can plant and watch the growth,
despite injury. The pain
in his arm, in his head,
won't stop the silks forming.
Genetically engineered crops
are sweeping the district.
This corn grows steadily, daily.
The locusts have come. Let
them eat corn, he says, let them strip
the green before the seeds
have even come. They have
no choice, and I have no choice.
The insurance company
twists and turns, lies, hedges
its bets. Medical certificates
shoot the breeze. The locusts
tune in and out, changing frequencies.
No, they don't tell
the same story.

XII.

The road undoes the desire
to step generically: the locusts
so thick on their journeys
that snowfall or sandstorm
dictate coordinates. Like
diving and seeing sediment
flow past in the current,
as the day goes on
the flow increasing.
Like floaters in the eye
first distracting and
then forgotten.
Disaster brings

its minor reconciliations.
Judged monocultures,
comparatively speaking.

XIII.

Ground dyed blue by fallen
Paterson's curse: in the cold,
brilliantly purple. Heat sheds and takes
their colour. Unlike the yellow
everlastings on the mount,
a different yellow,
as dry as paper,
but speaking out
against hungover skies:
clouds looming
in unsettled atmospheres,
the compass showing
its different faces.
Yellow flowers,
desiccating, to turn
suddenly transparent,
feeding back into the sun,
fuelling its reactions
and evocations.

XIV.

Bandwidth locusts mono rain
bending frequency interlock wandoo
rock sheoak the botanist
Ludwig Preiss, priority one taxon,
and, of course, *Thomasia montana*,
which I don't see: oedipal, unreceptive,
adjusting the bandwidth.

xv.

The guy from the chemical company
drinks a half-glass of Herbicide.
“There you go, harmless to humans.”
The farmer, impressed, sprays
and gets his sheep straight back in there.

xvi.

“ . . . like fire and powder,
Which as they kiss, consume.”

Place of weeping, sleeping woman,
eloping against tradition
and cursed from bloodshed,
across the town,
across the region,
not hearing the warning,
the passion, the bleeding:
the mountains
breaking up and meeting,
reconciled as erosion
defeats them.

The Slide

—NICHOLAS ROYLE

There is this slide, just as you might find in a park for children. The only difference is that it is bigger and not in a park. You do not trouble to reflect upon such matters as you start clambering up. You are not alone. There is an ‘almost festival atmosphere,’ the sun is shining and people are enjoying themselves enormously. You join in, laughing and making witty remarks as you go. But the climbing is tricky. The rungs of the ladder are wooden and, trodden by so many feet, prove at moments treacherously smooth. Every so often someone slips and falls. This happens, however, without any great commotion. Indeed there is, almost straightaway, no indication that the incident even occurred. You begin to sense that the laughter of those around is not altogether genuine, but rather conceals a pervasive edginess concerning the demands of the ascent. The distance between rungs has increased. You feel you have to launch yourself up and forwards, as if very slowly and clumsily pole-vaulting, from one rung to the next. Each rung is wide and deep enough to give standing room for three or four people. For what feels like the first time, you stop. You pause to take in the view and see with a start how high you have climbed. You feel dwarfed. You gaze out over a tremendous vista of river, fringed with thick jungle. You are so preoccupied with the climb that you scarcely think about how long you have been at it. You find you have to rest more frequently. The river over which you are perched is so wide now that you can no longer make out any of the jungle observed earlier, not even at the farthest horizons. You know that the end is approaching. You are so near the top that you can see where the steel railings curve inwards and the rungs narrow, restricting the passage of climbers to just one person per step. The atmosphere becomes sombre. For the first time it dawns on you that you have not actually seen the chute itself, and that the amazing, endlessly sparkling silver slipway rushing downwards is a thing that

exists only in your imagination. You cast your mind back and realise that all your impressions of the slide are based on what you have heard from others and pictured to yourself. You do not look down any more, you are so filled with trepidation. You haul your exhausted body, by now practically useless, quivering, on to the brink. You are at the top now and, immeasurably elevated, on the very verge, can finally see that there is no slide, glittering and swaying, stretching away down before you. There is only a sheer drop. "At last," you tell yourself, as you inch into your final position, "I can start living."

*Acts of Reading, Acts of Loving:
Harold Bloom and the Art of Appreciation*

ROGER GILBERT

What is Harold Bloom? Many answers are possible, depending on whom you consult. He is, among other things, a sensitive yet bold interpreter of poetry, a dazzlingly original literary theorist, a charismatically eccentric teacher and lecturer, an ardent Gnostic theologian, a remarkably prolific editor of critical volumes, and a gloomy if not downright apocalyptic cultural prognosticator. All of these roles have contributed to Bloom's standing as the most famous, and in some quarters infamous, literary critic of our time. Yet at the heart of Bloom's enterprise, I would contend, lies an imperative that has all but disappeared from current critical practice. Harold Bloom is the last appreciative critic. That is to say, he is the last important critic who takes as his primary responsibility the task of persuading readers that a text or author has aesthetic value, and tries to illuminate the nature of that value as fully as possible. For all the brilliance of his work as an interpreter and as a theorist of literature, it is the passion and acuity of Bloom's evaluative discourse that will, I believe, ensure his place among the major critics of the last three hundred years.

This claim is a difficult one to advance in part because we no longer recognize value judgment as an intellectual activity on a par with interpretation and theoretical speculation. The shift away from evaluation as a central function of literary criticism is in fact a relatively recent development. In the first half of this century critics as diverse as Pound, Eliot, Leavis, Winters, Blackmur, and Jarrell all took the assessment of literary value as a primary aim, and even more theoretically minded critics like Richards, Empson, and Burke kept evaluative criteria strongly in view. The American New Critics are generally credited with making close reading the dominant mode of literary analysis, and in the process

elevating questions of meaning over questions of aesthetic value. Yet when one looks at the key writings of Ransom, Tate, and Cleanth Brooks, one sees that their strongest claims almost always have an evaluative component. Indeed it is worth remembering that one of the central tenets of New Criticism, the so-called Intentional Fallacy, was originally formulated by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley as a principle not of interpretation but of value judgment: one should never judge the aesthetic success of a work, it stated, by how closely it fulfills the intentions of its author.

Northrop Frye was the figure who most forthrightly challenged the idea that evaluation should be the final aim of all criticism (ironically, Frye was one of Bloom's most significant early influences). Throughout *The Anatomy of Criticism* and particularly in his "Polemical Introduction," Frye argues for a scientific and systematic model of literary study that deliberately excludes value judgment, relegating it to the realm of mere "taste." Firmly rejecting the notion that sound aesthetic judgment requires specific intellectual faculties and modes of expertise, Frye dismissed evaluation as an activity best left to amateurs, journalists, and literati, one hardly suited to serious scholars and critics. For all the shifts in critical fashion that have occurred since Frye's book appeared in 1957, it can be argued that we still inhabit its wake, inasmuch as value judgment has never regained its place as a respectable and necessary function of literary criticism. In this regard as in so many others, Harold Bloom has for the last forty-five years been swimming against the prevailing currents.

Bloom himself has grown increasingly aware of his anomalous position as an evaluative critic in an age that distrusts aesthetic judgment. He reflected wistfully on this status in a 1991 interview with Antonio Weiss:

I must be the only literary critic of any eminence who is writing today (I cannot think of another, I'm sad to say, however arrogant or difficult this sounds) who always asks about what he reads and likes, whether it is ancient, modern, or brand new, or has always been lying around, who always asks "How good is it? What is it better than? What is it less good than? What does it mean?" and "Is there some relation between what it means and how good or bad it is, and not only how is it good or bad, but why is it good or bad?" Mr. Frye, who was very much my precursor, tried to banish all of that from criticism . . . (Weiss 213)

Readers of Bloom are familiar with the elegiac note he has sounded with growing frequency over the years. Here he both mourns and

congratulates himself for single-handedly prolonging the tradition of evaluative criticism that runs from Samuel Johnson through Hazlitt, Ruskin, Pater, and Eliot. Yet throughout his career Bloom has aspired to a degree of intellectual breadth and rigor not usually associated with evaluation *per se*. Indeed in an early essay he took R. P. Blackmur to task for attempting “so little *description* and so much value judgment” (Ringers 197; Bloom’s italics). The later Bloom would almost certainly substitute “interpretation” for “description;” indeed, what separates him from an older school of critical impressionists blithely pronouncing on the relative merits of canonical works is his recognition that evaluation and interpretation go hand in hand. As his critical catechism in the Weiss interview suggests, questions of meaning are for Bloom inseparable from questions of value, and the special power of his work has everything to do with his insistence on treating them together.

To speak of Bloom simply as an appreciative critic is misleading in another way as well. In Bloom’s work appreciation is invariably accompanied by deprecation. He has never been content to toss bouquets to those writers he admires while tactfully ignoring those he does not. The literary sphere is, Bloom holds, a deeply competitive or, in one of his favored terms, “agonistic” arena in which a victory for one artist means a defeat for another, and this bitter truth must necessarily inform the attitude of the evaluative critic as well. In the Weiss interview, Bloom rather surprisingly invokes sports to illuminate the nature of aesthetic judgment:

In the end, the spirit that makes one a fan of a particular athlete or a particular team is different only in degree, not in kind, from the spirit that teaches one to prefer one poet to another, or one novelist to another. That is to say there is some element of competition at every point in one’s experience as a reader. (205)

As a poetry critic who has professed in print my devotion to the (old) Chicago Bulls, I am both intrigued and troubled by Bloom’s analogy. Can one only admire a particular poet at the expense of another? If the Bulls win, another team has to lose; if Wallace Stevens wins, must T. S. Eliot lose? In fact the precise nature of the competition varies a great deal in Bloom’s work. At times the contest may pit contemporaries against one another, though more often the battle is between father and son, precursor and ephebe; at other times the real struggle seems to take place in the critical arena, between competing interpretations, judgments, or methodologies. What does not vary from the outset of

Bloom's career to its most recent phase is the agonistic spirit, the conviction that poet and critic alike can only define their individual worth through combat or competition.

One consequence of this agonistic ethos is that Bloom's strongest positive judgments often share the stage with equally strong negative ones. Bloom is as notorious for his pithy put-downs as for his rhapsodic *hommages*. He is especially fond of invidious comparisons between illustrious moderns and faded minor poets; thus he has more than once predicted that Pound and Eliot will prove to be the Cowley and Waller of our time, while he has disdainfully crowned Sylvia Plath as our Felicia Hemans. To many readers such sweeping dismissals can seem gratuitous and excessive, and Bloom himself over time has softened some of his more severe judgments (he now grants Eliot grudging admiration). But it is worth asking whether a certain amount of sheer bile might not in fact be a necessity of good evaluative criticism. Bloom's great colleague and rival Paul de Man suggested that genuine critical insight is inevitably accompanied by some form of blindness, and the same may be true in the realm of evaluation. The best appreciative critics always seem to have blind spots, not only for specific artists but often for whole aesthetics.

Certainly Bloom's critical sensibility is distinguished as much by its biases as its predilections. Certain moralizing strains of Christian poetry, especially those that preach humility and self-abasement, have always rubbed him the wrong way; hence his dislike of Eliot, Auden and their kin. He has also shown little tolerance for avant-gardists of various stripes, from Pound to Ginsberg (his devotion to Ashbery being a significant exception). More recently Bloom's harshest barbs have been reserved for those writers he suspects of that dreaded disease called 'political correctness.' He has been particularly dismissive of women poets who openly address gender politics, singling out Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich for special scorn. I must confess that I find Bloom's animosity toward Plath and Rich disappointing, fueled as it seems to be by ideological intolerance rather than aesthetic discrimination. A remark by Bloom's favorite critic, Hazlitt, on another great critic, Coleridge, may be apropos: "In short, he was profound and discriminating with respect to those authors whom he liked, and where he gave his judgment fair play; capricious, perverse, and prejudiced in his antipathies and distastes" (228). To be sure, the same might be said of Hazlitt himself, or of any number of other major critics, but Bloom has put his antipathies and distastes on display to an extraordinary degree.

From the very beginning of his career in the 1950s, Bloom's work has been driven in equal measure by admiration and disdain. His first book, *Shelley's Mythmaking*, based on his doctoral thesis, was a passionate defense of Shelley from both his New Critical detractors and his Platonizing admirers, in the course of which Bloom mounted a bold polemic against the school of Donne, at that time generally placed above the Romantics for its cultivation of formal integrity and metaphorical unity. He extended this polemic in his landmark study of Romanticism *The Visionary Company*, distinguishing two main lines of English poetry—one High Church and conservative, linking the Metaphysicals to Eliot and his followers, the other Protestant and radical, running from Spenser and Milton through the Romantics and their heirs—and unsurprisingly declaring his allegiance to the latter camp. Even in these early works Bloom was magisterially judgmental, showing not the slightest hesitation in assessing and proclaiming the comparative strength and weakness of the poems he discussed. The word "mythmaking" in the title of his first book is crucial in delineating Bloom's emerging aesthetic. The term 'myth' links him to Frye, but where Frye is interested in continuities, archetypes, shared themes and plots, Bloom is drawn to precisely those aspects of a writer's work that mark its originality and inventiveness, its swerve from existing myths. For Bloom, originality is always a matter of mythmaking or individual vision; he has shown next to no interest in the kinds of formal and stylistic innovations that win praise from critics like Hugh Kenner and Marjorie Perloff.

By the time of his 1970 study of Yeats, Bloom's work had already begun its turn to the theoretical, yet this book too was primarily evaluative in tenor. *Yeats* represented something of an anomaly in Bloom's oeuvre, however, in offering a strongly mixed judgment; indeed its polemical thrust was to question both the degree to which and the terms in which Yeats had been praised up to that point. All Bloom's other single-author studies—on Shelley, Blake, Stevens, even Shakespeare—purport to give their subjects a fuller, more adequate appreciation than they have yet received. Perhaps because Yeats had already been hugely praised under the rubrics of Symbolist, Modernist and neo-Metaphysical poetics, Bloom felt compelled on the one hand to show that Yeats's greatness is inseparable from his roots in Romantic tradition, and on the other to show that many of the qualities for which Yeats had been praised were in fact not so admirable. Hence the book gives us the unusual spectacle of Bloom expressing moral outrage at the

later Yeats's glorification of violence. Since Bloom himself would just a few years later put forward the Nietzschean view that all great poems are patricidal, this moralizing judgment of Yeats may strike one as slightly disingenuous, and perhaps had more to do with Bloom's ongoing war against the New Critics than with Yeats himself. Nonetheless the book abounds in powerful readings and subtle discriminations, and served as a valuable corrective to the reverential treatment Yeats had been receiving at the time.

In 1973 Bloom published his critical manifesto *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, which fully expounded his now famous claim that literary influence occurs not as a benign process of transmission but as a fierce struggle for supremacy and originality between older and younger poets, or as he terms them "precursors" and "ephebes." At the time of its appearance it was possible to miss the book's fundamental difference from the main tendencies of literary theory, coming as it did amid the first great wave of structuralist and post-structuralist works by Barthes, Derrida, de Man, and others. That difference once again had to do with the essentially evaluative cast of Bloom's project. Though ostensibly descriptive, Bloom's account of intrapoetic relations is informed at every point by value judgment, from his initial assertion that "[w]eaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves" (5) to his late remarks on the embarrassment of reading Matthew Arnold's poetry and "finding the odes of Keats crowding out poor Arnold" (154). Indeed it would be fair to say that *The Anxiety of Influence* presents a theory of poetic value rather than poetic meaning, though Bloom halfheartedly tried to frame it as the latter in a strange "Interchapter" entitled "A Manifesto for Antithetical Criticism." There he proposed that a greater awareness of the way later poems revise earlier ones can allow us to "correct" for the misreadings that build up over time. Bloom quickly backed away from any suggestion that his theory might serve the old-fashioned purpose of generating more accurate interpretations of poems, however, and this claim remains the least persuasive aspect of the book.

One clear sign of the book's preoccupation with the nature of poetic value is its obsessive use of the word "strength," which might indeed be called its central term, more so even than "influence." By abandoning or subordinating older evaluative vocabularies of 'greatness,' 'beauty,' 'truth,' 'wisdom' and the like, and replacing them with a terminology that stresses willful action and competitive struggle, Bloom dramatically redefined the criteria by which he wanted poems to be judged.