Why Read Literature According to Harold Bloom?

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Abstract:

This essay examines Harold Bloom's apology for reading literature by focusing on his *How to Read and Why* (2000), though not limited to this book. One of the main motifs implied in Bloom's works as why we (should) read literature is inwardness. There is something very Hamletian about inwardness, thus I discuss Bloom with a constant reference to Shakespeare's play. Hamlet-like inwardness, or what Bloom occasionally calls deep subjectivity, is the possible outcome of a lifetime's deep reading. As an aesthete, Bloom celebrates the solitary reader and brackets off history and politics, apparently to attend to the metamorphosis of the individual's mind. Hamlet's self-overhearing is the psychic scene of instruction and change, the possibilities of which can be extended to the act of reading. For Bloom, Hamlet's inwardness is a paradigm for all reading. Fully knowing many people is almost impossible, and reading, as implied by Bloom, is attuning to a particular human experience, which also entails encountering the unexpected otherness of our own many selves. The aura of mystery about knowing others/ourselves to which Bloom pledges is rooted in his deep humanism.

Keywords: Harold Bloom, Hamlet, deep subjectivity, inwardness

Introduction

In *How to Read and Why* (2000), Harold Bloom writes, quite disturbingly, that:

> The pleasures of reading are indeed selfish rather than social. You cannot directly improve anyone else's life by reading better or more deeply. I remain skeptical of the traditional social hope that the care for others may be stimulated by the growth of the individual imagination, and I am wary of any arguments whatsoever that connect the pleasures of solitary reading to the public good. (22)

This comes from a literary critic who spent most of his life reading and teaching literature. What would be the use of the growth of the individual imagination if not for some sort of care for others and public good? Plato knew the usefulness of literature too well, and unless more utilitarian, we should oblige to the power of this peculiar medium, while remaining wary of banishing the poets from the city. Yet if not usefulness – at least some kind of value – then what justifies the reading of literature? Being a romanticist, Bloom should agree with Percy

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Bysshe Shelley that "whatever strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to sense, is useful" (368).

We should, however, consider the "art for art's sake" argument, and may hence want to acquiesce with Marjorie Garber when she says in *The Use and Abuse of Literature* (2011) that "the very uselessness of literature is its most profound and valuable attribute" (7). Aesthetic pleasure is fine but not enough as Bloom knows when he says *directly* improve, meaning literature could have ameliorative functions though perhaps not immediate ones. However, the champions of aestheticism are exposed to the critique that an aesthete has already secured himself all the necessities of life and hence belongs to a distinct class whose values are not easily generalizable. Here is Bloom-as-Moses establishing the second principle of reading in the same book: "*Do not attempt to improve your neighbor or your neighborhood by what or how you read*. Self-improvement is a large enough project for your mind and spirit: there are no ethics of reading" (24, italics original). One could object that self-improvement is expected to lead to social improvement because society is the sum of individuals.

It is now inevitable, as an interesting episode in the history of literary criticism, to talk about Bloom's *agon* with what he sarcastically calls "The School of Resentment" (one wonders if this is a parody of Nietzsche's *ressentiment*). That school has tended to politicize literary criticism for more than three decades. Bloom would have rather agreed with a Rortyan post-critical pedagogy. As Bianca Thoilliez notes, "The main problem with 'critical pedagogy' [Bloom's school of resentment] is that it wears down the hopefulness that every pedagogical undertaking demands" (453). Pointing out to the similarities between Richard Rorty's pragmatic ironism and Bloom's aesthetic understanding of strong poetry, and highlighting Rorty's late life regret that he wished he had read more poetry, Benjamin D. Carson writes, "We are more fully human when our memories are amply stocked with verses" (16). Yet Bloom was not very hopeful about the future of reading in an age of screens, depthlessness, pastiche, and endless (mis-)information. In fact, the dominant tone in many of his late writings is elegiac. Despite his mourning for the canonical greatness, Bloom's affirmative rather than negative (resentment) stance is best described by the recent post-critical turn in theory and pedagogy.

Bloom's approach to reading literature is appreciative, an approach the contemporary post-critical turn (e.g., Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015) and Hodgson et al., *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (2017)) would be much in favor of. It is as if in the face of greatness (or the sublime, to use one of Bloom's favorite words), instead of being a resisting reader or a resenting and suspecting critic, the reader

has no choice but be a student, a learner. It is with much humility that Bloom discusses a character like Hamlet: "Don't condescend to the Prince of Denmark: he is more intelligent than you are, whoever you are. That, ultimately, is why we need him and cannot evade his play" (*Poem Unlimited* 86). While various critical approaches may create self-righteous readers, Bloomian humility encourages a more dialogic ethos in encountering otherness. In effect, Hamlet forestalls the hermeneutics of suspicion when he says "Call me what instrument you will, / though you fret me, / you cannot play upon me" (3.2.370-72). Humility and careful attentiveness to literary characters – not merely as marks on the page, but as totally other personalities – are two Bloomian virtues. In this sense, reading becomes an ethical exercise.

Bloom's models are neither Plato nor Aristotle, but Longinus, Dr. Johnson, Hazlitt, Emerson, Wilde, and Pater; and his main critical agon, needless to say, is with T. S. Eliot (not to mention C. S. Lewis, Heideggerians, New Critics, and New-Historicists). In *The Anatomy of Criticism: Literature as a Way of Life* (2011) Bloom says, "Literary criticism, as I learned from Walter Pater, ought to consist of acts of appreciation". Still the canon (rather capital C in his own writings) of greatness Bloom is fond of appreciating is not least uncontroversial. If appreciation is an individual matter, could there be standards of appreciation?

From the perspective of cultural memory studies, the canon, as a mnemonic site, is subject to the inexorable process of selectivity. Even the most canonists of teachers have to choose what comes in the curricula – there is no time to read everything – the canon is more of an ordering idea than a practice. It is important to note that "canons of literature as archives of cultural memory are by no means created by critics alone – and therefore the hope of anti-canonist critics and theorists to be able to abolish them seems rather vain" (Grabes: 314). Despite Bloom's ambitious efforts in *The Western Canon* (1994) to establish an ideal order of the canon – and collective memory – there is little consensus as to what constitutes the canon in the first place. However, "Cognition cannot proceed without memory, and the Canon is the true art of memory, the authentic foundation for cultural thinking" (*Canon*: 35).

Bloom's favorite philosopher, perhaps second only to Sir John Falstaff, is Nietzsche. He frequently quotes Nietzsche in discussing *Hamlet*: "the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have *gained knowledge*" (*Invention* 393). Elsewhere we read: "Not reflection, no – true knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action, both in Hamlet and in the Dionysian man" (*Poem Unlimited* 93). That horrible

truth is obviously mortality. However, we do not read literature just to be reminded of how fragile and vulnerable our lives are, although one way to look at *Hamlet* is "how the suffering of all the characters in [the play] might offer companionship, and thus solace, to others who suffer" (Frank: 396).

Inwardness

Always a gnostic, knowledge is what Bloom seeks. In Gnosticism, knowledge is considered as an "illumination of one's secret, true self: the self that is usually obscured by our conventional thoughts and activities. Somewhere deep beneath everyday life […] lies the authentic spark or *pneuma*, imprisoned in matter" (Mikics 136). We may ask what (self-)knowledge the Prince of Denmark gains and how.

In *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (2003) Bloom struggles, amongst other mysteries, with the question of Hamlet's growing consciousness and individuality. This I think is a clue to how we as readers may grow by reading. When Hamlet says "But I have that within which passeth show" (1.2.85), we wonder at the originality of this unique sense of interiority and introversion. Ultimately, the question of reading literature has to do with the power of the mind over facticity: "What is the power of Hamlet's mind over a universe of death, or a sea of troubles?" (*Poem Unlimited* 35). Vladimir Nabokov provides one possible answer:

> I remember a cartoon depicting a chimney sweep falling from the roof of a tall building and noticing on the way that a sign-board had one word spelled wrong, and wondering in his headlong flight why nobody had thought of correcting it. In a sense, we are all crashing to our death from the top storey of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering […] at the patterns of the passing wall. This capacity to wonder at trifles – no matter the imminent peril – these asides of the spirit […] are the highest forms of consciousness (Nabokov: 373-74).

Hamlet's asides of the spirit are his soliloquies, indeed the highest form of consciousness. Although he loses the name of action, he overhears his own heightened "cognitive music" (*Poem Unlimited* 36). How do we develop a capacity to wonder at trifles – the Nabokovian saving lie?

In these global neoliberal times, where the everyday life is a space of commodity fetishism, how can we resist conventional thoughts and automatic activities and rekindle our *pneuma*? The word "wonder" (not counting wonderful) is used four times in *Hamlet*, most interestingly in 1.1.239-243 where Hamlet says: "What is he whose grief / Bears such an emphasis? whose phrase of sorrow / Conjures the wand'ring stars and makes them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers? / This is I, / Hamlet the Dane." The seventh chapter of Bloom's *Poem Unlimited*, called

"Wonder-Wounded Hearers," extends this metaphor for all acts of reading, and in this case, for our amazement at the sea-change which the prince has undergone. Put differently, and in line with Bloomian epistemic and psychological humility, all readers of literature are "wonder-wounded". Thus, rather than a disenchantment of the world (the tradition of critical theory), Bloom encourages re-enchantment.

Bloom has little patience with truth thinking. Instead, he wants us to believe in some sort of a saving lie. As Agata Bielik-Robson notes in *The Saving Lie: Harold Bloom and Deconstruction* (2011), "The willing error, opposing the deadening *truth*, is thus also supported by a powerful *fantasy*, which defensively veils its traumatic core" (10). In this sense, reading is a displacement of the primary trauma of existence. Is reading fantasizing? Not that fantasy, as genre, and fantasizing, as reader's cognitive activity, are the same. Here let us pause on Bloom's "*Clinamen*: Towards a Theory of Fantasy" first published as a chapter in *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (1982). It is an important piece, not least because, as expected, we see some talk of influence anxieties (belatedness) in a typical Bloomian gesture. Belatedness, both in literature and life, is a feeling of anterior exhaustion. Fantasy, according to Bloom, itself "*a belated version of romance* […], beckons as a release to any sense of belatedness" (206, 201). We can generalize from this and argue that reading is "release" from belatedness. Does reading help lessen anxiety?

Occasionally we have anxieties over the authenticity of our selfhood. Bloom's idea of *clinamen* or swerve, both in poetry and life, assumes that originality, or deep subjectivity, is the possible outcome of our constant agon with what is already given. This too is Hamletian in essence. The young prince is addressed by the ghost of King Hamlet as in a moment of the *ephebe*'s rising anxiety over what tradition, both a scene of instruction and exhaustion, enjoins. The depth of inwardness in a strong writer, and by extension, in a strong reader, "wards off the massive weight of past achievement, lest every originality be crushed before it becomes manifest" (*Canon*: 10-11). Hamlet's burgeoning inwardness is the release from that pressure, a sort of defense mechanism against over-determination. Here the conflict is between "I have that within which passeth show" (1.2.85) and "These but the trappings and the suits of woe" (1.2.86), that is, between inwardness (being) and outwardness (seeming). The theme of inwardness is at the heart of Bloom's *How to Read and Why* as he endeavors to discover glimpses of Shakespearean inwardness in the other authors discussed; for example, Milton, Dickinson, Ibsen, Chekhov, and Joyce, among others.

In an interview, Bloom speaks of *deep subjectivity* as a cure for inauthenticity. He considers reading a process through which deep

subjectivity is achieved though it may take a lifetime: "Subjectivity takes you a lifetime to authentically establish, and I think what arises out of deep subjectivity can ultimately be of use to anyone" ("Deep Subjectivity" 32). The term "use" should be understood in Shelley's sense as mentioned above. The problem with a teleological awaiting a final product of a life-long reading is that it reproduces the capitalist consumer logic. To counter utilitarian views of literature, Bloom adopts a Paterian aestheticism. Accordingly, rather than a means for further ends, reading ought to be looked at as an aesthetic experience in themselves, a form of attentiveness to otherness.

Hamlet-like inwardness finds its counterpart in deep reading. According to Bloom, deep reading is a search for "difficult pleasure". Like many other terms, Bloom rarely defines "deep reading" or "difficult pleasure," or the "Sublime," for that matter. Yet given the centrality of Shakespeare for the canon, we can surmise that difficult pleasure is indeed Shakespeare, especially *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, two of Bloom's favorites. When it comes to *Hamlet*, Bloom can best be described as ambivalent. Discussing Tennyson's "Ulysses" and finding a Hamletian echo in the line, "Death closes all," he writes, "Ambivalence, perfected by Shakespeare, is the arousal in us of powerful feelings, both positive and negative, towards an individual" (*How to Read* 74, 78). The allusion is clearly to Wordsworth's "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (282), but also to Keats' much celebrated Shakespearean virtue of "negative capability," whereby the poet has no irritable reaching for fact and reason and is able to remain in uncertainties and doubts. Bloom seems to use Keats's "negative capability," Wordsworth's "wise passiveness," and Hamlet's "Let be" as almost interchangeably to emphasize the importance of open-mindedness. Ambivalence, in reading literature and in love, is another principle of Bloom's apology that correlates with inwardness because the latter precludes any transparent knowing of other minds, which rather than being a sign of skepticism, is a pragmatic attitude towards alterity.

Hamlet's interiority, "I have that within which passeth show," has a dark side: it intimates solipsism. Once again taken as a paradigm of all reading, in addition to reading as being wounded by wonder, Bloom writes, albeit in discussing poetry in general and "Ulysses" in particular, "Only rarely can poetry aid us in communing with others; that is a beautiful idealism, except at certain strange moments, like the instant of falling in love. Solitude is the more frequent mark of our condition; how shall we people that solitude? (*How to Read* 79). We already know the answer: reading literature. Here too Bloom employs a Hamletian quality, namely, "self-overhearing," to note that "Poems can help us to speak to ourselves more clearly and more fully, and to *overhear* that speaking.

Shakespeare is the largest master of such overhearing" (ibid.). There is a clear logic here: reading is an exercise in self-overhearing; self-overhearing has the power to prepare us for change. Yet the project of self-change and self-improvement risks narcissism when taken to the extremes. Both self-cultivation and attention to otherness are present in Bloom, sometimes antithetically. Fully knowing many people is almost impossible, and reading, as implied by Bloom, is attuning to a particular human experience, which also entails encountering the unexpected otherness of our own many selves. The aura of mystery about knowing others/ourselves to which Bloom pledges is rooted in his deep humanism.

If Horatio is "a surrogate for the audience" in *Hamlet* (*How to Read* 203), then reading is assumed to expand the capacity to tell someone's story of suffering sympathetically. Bloom's wrestling with the question of why is a prerequisite to that of how.

Conclusion

Bloom's defense of literature is not always unambiguous. While his enthusiasm for individual appreciation of literary works aligns with the recent post-critical turn in theory and pedagogy, his ideal of greatness is difficult to generalize. Throughout his writings, he constantly refers to Hamlet's inwardness as a paradigm for the reading experience. Risking solipsism, Bloom seems to offer an agnostic theory where one's authentic identity can only be formed in an uncanny encounter with the sublime other.

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