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HAROLD BLOOM

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—HAROLD BLOOM
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PREFACE AND PRELUDE

THIS BOOK studies twenty-six writers, necessarily with a certain nostalgia, since I seek to isolate the qualities that made these authors canonical, that is, authoritative in our culture. "Aesthetic value" is sometimes regarded as a suggestion of Immanuel Kant's rather than an actuality, but that has not been my experience during a lifetime of reading. Things have however fallen apart, the center has not held, and mere anarchy is in the process of being unleashed upon what used to be called "the learned world." Mimic cultural wars do not much interest me; what I have to say about our current squalors is in my first and last chapters. Here I wish to explain the organization of this book and to account for my choice of these twenty-six writers from among the many hundreds in what once was considered to be the Western Canon.

Giambattista Vico, in his *New Science*, posited a cycle of three phases—Theocratic, Aristocratic, Democratic—followed by a chaos out of which a New Theocratic Age would at last emerge. Joyce made grand seriocomic use of Vico in organizing *Finnegans Wake*, and I have followed in the wake of the *Wake*, except that I have omitted the literature of the Theocratic Age. My historical sequence begins with Dante and concludes with Samuel Beckett, though I have not always followed strict chronological order. Thus, I have begun the Aristocratic Age with Shakespeare, because he is the central figure of the Western Canon, and I have

subsequently considered him in relation to nearly all the others, from Chaucer and Montaigne, who affected him, through many of those he influenced—Milton, Dr. Johnson, Goethe, Ibsen, Joyce, and Beckett among them—as well as those who attempted to reject him: Tolstoy in particular, along with Freud, who appropriated Shakespeare while insisting that the Earl of Oxford had done the writing for “the man from Stratford.”

The choice of authors here is not so arbitrary as it may seem. They have been selected for both their sublimity and their representative nature: a book about twenty-six writers is possible, but not a book about four hundred. Certainly the major Western writers since Dante are here—Chaucer, Cervantes, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Dickens, Tolstoy, Joyce, and Proust. But where are Petrarch, Rabelais, Ariosto, Spenser, Ben Jonson, Racine, Swift, Rousseau, Blake, Pushkin, Melville, Giacomo Leopardi, Henry James, Dostoevsky, Hugo, Balzac, Nietzsche, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Browning, Chekhov, Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, and so many others? I have tried to represent national canons by their crucial figures: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Dickens for England; Montaigne and Molière for France; Dante for Italy; Cervantes for Spain; Tolstoy for Russia; Goethe for Germany; Borges and Neruda for Hispanic America; Whitman and Dickinson for the United States. The sequence of major dramatists is here: Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, and Beckett; and of novelists: Austen, Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoy, Proust, Joyce, and Woolf. Dr. Johnson is here as the greatest of Western literary critics; it would be difficult to find his rival.

Vico did not postulate a Chaotic Age before the *ricorso* or return of a second Theocratic Age; but our century, while pretending to continue the Democratic Age, cannot be better characterized than as Chaotic. Its key writers are Freud, Proust, Joyce, Kafka: they personify whatever literary spirit the era possesses. Freud called himself a scientist, but he will survive as a great essayist like Montaigne or Emerson, not as the founder of a therapy already discredited (or elevated) as another episode in the long history of shamanism. I wish that there were space for more modern poets here than just Neruda and Pessoa, but no poet of our century has matched *In Search of Lost Time*, *Ulysses*, or *Finnegans Wake*, the essays of Freud, or the parables and tales of Kafka.

With most of these twenty-six writers, I have tried to confront great-

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

Shakespeare, the largest writer we ever will know, frequently gives the opposite impression: of making us at home out of doors, foreign, abroad. His powers of assimilation and of contamination are unique and constitute a perpetual challenge to universal performance and to criticism. I find it absurd and regrettable that the current criticism of Shakespeare—"cultural materialist" (Neo-Marxist); "New Historicist" (Foucault); "Feminist"—has abandoned the quest to meet that challenge. Shakespeare criticism is in full flight from his aesthetic supremacy and works at reducing him to the "social energies" of the English Renaissance, as though there were no authentic difference in aesthetic merit between the creator of *Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Iago*, *Falstaff* and his disciples such as John Webster and Thomas Middleton. The best living English critic, Sir Frank Kermode, in his *Forms of Attention* (1985) has issued the clearest warning I know about the fate of the canon, that is to say, in the first place, the fate of Shakespeare:

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

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

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

A shrewd reviewer of my *Book of J* chided me for not having the audacity to go the whole way and identify J as Bathsheba the queen mother, a Hittite woman taken by David the king after he arranged for her husband, Uriah, to die conveniently in battle. I am happy to adopt the suggestion belatedly: Bathsheba, mother of Solomon, is an admirable candidate. Her dark view of Solomon's catastrophic son and successor,

Rehoboam, implied throughout the Yahwistic text, is thus highly explicable; so is her very ironic presentation of the Hebrew patriarchs, and her fondness both for some of their wives and for such female outsiders as Hagar and Tamar. Besides, it is a superb, J-like irony that the inaugural author of what eventually became the Torah was not an Israelite at all, but a Hittite woman. In what follows, I refer to the Yahwist alternately as J or Bathsheba.

The J writer was the original author of what we now call Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers, but what she wrote was censored, revised, and frequently abrogated or distorted by a series of redactors across five centuries, culminating with Ezra, or one of his followers, in the era of the return from Babylonian exile. These revisionists were priests and cultic scribes, and they seem to have been scandalized by Bathsheba's ironical freedom in portraying Yahweh. J's Yahweh is human—all too human: he eats and drinks, frequently loses his temper, delights in his own mischief, is jealous and vindictive, proclaims his justness while constantly playing favorites, and develops a considerable case of neurotic anxiety when he allows himself to transfer his blessing from an elite to the entire Israelite host. By the time he leads that crazed and suffering rabblement through the Sinai wilderness, he has become so insane and dangerous, to himself and to others, that the J writer deserves to be called the most blasphemous of all authors ever.

The J saga concludes, as far as we can tell, when Yahweh, with his own hands, buries his prophet Moses in an unmarked grave, after refusing the long-suffering leader of the Israelites more than a glimpse of the Promised Land. Bathsheba's masterpiece is her story of the relations between Yahweh and Moses, a narrative beyond irony or tragedy that moves from Yahweh's surprising election of the reluctant prophet to his motiveless attempt to murder Moses, and to the subsequent vexations that afflict both God and his chosen instrument.

Ambivalence between the divine and the human is one of J's grand inventions, another mark of an originality so perpetual that we can scarcely recognize it, because the stories Bathsheba told have absorbed us. The ultimate shock implicit in this canon-making originality comes when we realize that the Western worship of God—by Jews, Christians, and Moslems—is the worship of a literary character, J's Yahweh, however adulterated by pious revisionists. The only comparable shocks I know come when we realize that the Jesus loved by Christians is a liter-

ary character largely invented by the author of the Gospel of Mark, and when we read the Koran and hear one voice only, the voice of Allah, recorded in detail and at length by the audacity of his prophet Mohammed. Perhaps some day, well on in the twenty-first century, when Mormonism has become the dominant religion of at least the American West, those who come after us will experience a fourth such shock when they encounter the daring of the authentic American prophet Joseph Smith in his definitive visions, *The Pearl of Great Price* and *Doctrines and Covenants*.

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

Contemporary writers do not like to be told that they must compete with Shakespeare and Dante, and yet that struggle was Joyce's provocation to greatness, to an eminence shared only by Beckett, Proust, and Kafka among modern Western authors. The fundamental archetype for literary achievement will always be Pindar, who celebrates the quasidevine victories of his aristocratic athletes while conveying the implicit sense that his victory odes are themselves victories over every possible competitor. Dante, Milton, and Wordsworth repeat Pindar's key metaphor of racing to win the palm, which is a secular immortality strangely at odds with any pious idealism. "Idealism," concerning which one struggles not to be ironic, is now the fashion in our schools and colleges, where all aesthetic and most intellectual standards are being abandoned in the name of social harmony and the remedying of historical injustice. Pragmatically, the "expansion of the Canon" has meant the destruction

of the Canon, since what is being taught includes by no means the best writers who happen to be women, African, Hispanic, or Asian, but rather the writers who offer little but the resentment they have developed as part of their sense of identity. There is no strangeness and no originality in such resentment; even if there were, they would not suffice to create heirs of the Yahwist and Homer, Dante and Shakespeare, Cervantes and Joyce.

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

the Freudian family romance as a description of influence represents an extremely weak reading. For Bloom, "influence" is

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

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

These readings of precursor writings are necessarily defensive in part; if they were appreciative only, fresh creation would be stifled, and not for psychological reasons alone. The issue is not Oedipal rivalry but the very nature of strong, original literary imaginings: figurative language and its vicissitudes. Fresh metaphor, or inventive troping, always involves a departure from previous metaphor, and that departure depends upon at least partial turning away from or rejection of prior figuration. Shakespeare employs Marlowe as a starting point, and such early Shakespearean hero-villains as Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* and Richard III are rather too close to Barabas, Marlowe's Jew of Malta. When Shakespeare creates Shylock, his Jew of Venice, the metaphorical basis of the farcical villain's speech is radically altered, and Shylock is a strong misreading or creative misinterpretation of Barabas, whereas Aaron the Moor is something closer to a repetition of Barabas, particu-

larly at the level of figurative language. By the time that Shakespeare writes *Othello*, all trace of Marlowe is gone: the self-delighting villainy of Iago is cognitively far subtler and light years more refined imagistically than the self-congratulatory excesses of the exuberant Barabas. Iago's relation to Barabas is one in which Shakespeare's creative misreading of his precursor Marlowe has triumphed wholly. Shakespeare is a unique case in which the forerunner is invariably dwarfed. *Richard III* manifests an anxiety of influence in regard to *The Jew of Malta* and *Tamburlaine*, but Shakespeare was still finding his way. With the advent of Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part One* the finding was complete, and Marlowe became only the way not to go, on the stage as in life.

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

I feel quite alone these days in defending the autonomy of the aesthetic, but its best defense is the experience of reading *King Lear* and

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

The anxiety of influence cripples weaker talents but stimulates canonical genius. What intimately allies the three most vibrant American novelists of the Chaotic Age—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner—is that all of them emerge from Joseph Conrad's influence but temper it cunningly by mingling Conrad with an American precursor—Mark Twain for Hemingway, Henry James for Fitzgerald, Herman Melville for Faulkner. Something of the same cunning appears in T. S. Eliot's fusion of Whitman and Tennyson, and Ezra Pound's blend of Whitman and Browning, as again in Hart Crane's deflection of Eliot by another turn toward Whitman. Strong writers do not choose their prime precursors; they are chosen by them, but they have the wit to transform the forerunners into composite and therefore partly imaginary beings.

I am not directly concerned in this book with the intertextual relations among the twenty-six authors under consideration; my purpose is to consider them as representatives of the entire Western Canon, but doubtless my interest in problems of influence emerges almost everywhere, sometimes perhaps without my own full awareness. Strong literature, agonistic whether it wants to be or not, cannot be detached from its anxieties about the works that possess priority and authority in regard to it. Though most critics resist understanding the processes of literary influence or try to idealize those processes as wholly generous and benign, the dark truths of competition and contamination continue to grow

stronger as canonical history lengthens in time. A poem, play, or novel is necessarily compelled to come into being by way of precursor works, however eager it is to deal directly with social concerns. Contingency governs literature as it does every cognitive enterprise, and the contingency constituted by the Western literary Canon is primarily manifested as the anxiety of influence that forms and malforms each new writing that aspires to permanence. Literature is not merely language; it is also the will to figuration, the motive for metaphor that Nietzsche once defined as the desire to be different, the desire to be elsewhere. This partly means to be different from oneself, but primarily, I think, to be different from the metaphors and images of the contingent works that are one's heritage: the desire to write greatly is the desire to be elsewhere, in a time and place of one's own, in an originality that must compound with inheritance, with the anxiety of influence.