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Krešimir ŠIMIĆ

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Robert STUBIČAR

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek
Lorenza Jägera 9
HR – 31 000 Osijek
ksimic@ffos.hr
robertstubicar1@gmail.com

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HAROLD BLOOM AND THE CRISIS IN LITERATURE

Abstract

This paper presents one of the greatest American literary critics and theoreticians of the 20th century, Harold Bloom, and his thoughts on literature as a civilizational attainment under the attack of modern literary movements. As a disciple of Gnosticism, Bloom was convinced that post-structuralist anti-humanist tendencies are the culprit of degenerative processes in literature. Bloom calls such degenerative movements the “School of Resentment” and the “New Cynicism” and believes that the concepts of literary canon and authorship are in a struggle for their existence. Within the “School of Resentment,” Bloom names those literary movements that he considers to be responsible for the current crisis of literature: Marxist literary criticism, African-American studies, New Historicism, Feminist criticism and Post-structuralism. He singles out Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault as the main culprits of degenerative changes in Western literary works. As a consequence of their denial of the existence of literary canons and authors, Bloom decides to write his monumental work, *The Western Canon*, in which he rejects their radical claims. In such circumstances, Bloom stands out as a gnostic champion who opposes post-structuralist tendencies, and it is precisely his thoughts on the crisis in literature, as well as the struggle for the literary canon and the concept of authorship, that are presented in this paper.

Key words: Harold Bloom, school of resentment, deconstruction, literary crisis, canon, authorship

1. Introduction: The Life and Theory of Harold Bloom

Harold Bloom, one of the great literary critics and theoreticians of the 20th century, wrote extensively throughout his entire life. During his almost 70-year-long tenure as a professor at Yale University, Bloom went through three to four main phases of scholarly creation. As a young PhD student and assistant professor, Bloom began his career as a researcher of Romanticism and Romantic authors—namely Shelley, whose name appears in the title of his first book published in 1959, *Shelley's Mithmaking (Towards Historical Rhetorics 5)*. During his study of Romantic authors, Bloom gained deep knowledge and understanding of interpoetical relations and the spread of literary influence between poets and other writers. Throughout his first writing phase, which we shall call the *Romanticist phase*, Bloom published a number of books containing theoretical and critical reviews of Romantic authors¹, all of which were published from the 1950s to the 1970s (*Towards Historical Rhetorics 5*).

At the same time, during the first half of the 1970s, Bloom began working on his first theoretical book about literary theory, which he published in 1973 under the title *The Anxiety of Influence*. It is exactly this book that initiated his *literary-theoretical phase* and his fight against the deconstructionists, who were the first to launch an assault on the literary canon and the concept of the author. Bloom wrote extensively against the deconstructionists in his works *The Anxiety of Influence*, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, and *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds*. Throughout these books, the reader can clearly see that Bloom came to a conclusion that the entire Western literary establishment was in a dire crisis, caused by the deconstructionists' attempt to destroy both the literary canon and the concept of the author. A more detailed look at the deconstructionists and Bloom's response to them will be presented later in the paper.

It should be noted that Bloom also wrote extensively about religion and the Bible during what is referred to as his *biblical phase*, publishing many

¹ *Shelley's Mithmaking* (1959, Author), *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (1961, Author), *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (1963, Author), *The Complete Poems of William Blake* (1965, Blooms Commentary), *From Sensibility to Romanticism* (1966, Editor), *Yeats* (1970, Author), *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (1970, Editor), *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (1971, Author), *Poetry and Repression; Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (1976, Author), *Figures of Capable Imagination* (1976, Author), *Romantic Poetry and Prose and Victorian Poetry and Prose* (1978, Editor), *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of our Climate* (1977, Author)

works² throughout his lifetime, among which *The Book of J* is of special significance. In this work, he theorized that the author of the *Book of J* was a woman of noble birth living at the court of the ancient Israelite kingdom. Writing about Bloom's life and work is impossible without mentioning the different influences that were present throughout his entire career. Bloom was strongly influenced by various religious, spiritual, and philosophical movements, explicitly naming Gnosticism, the Jewish Kabbalah, and the works of Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche as having the greatest effect on him and his writings. Due to these influences, he created a unique literary theory based on many gnostic and kabbalistic concepts and ideas (*The Rhetoric of Romantic Vision* 63). He often called himself a "Jewish Gnostic" (*Genius* 51), thereby indicating that his view of literature had a more divine and spiritual notion than that of other contemporary authors, namely the deconstructionists, whom he portrayed as materialists and his archenemies.

The publication of *The Anxiety of Influence* ended Bloom's *Romanticist phase* (even though he still occasionally published works on Romantic authors) and marked the beginning of his *literary-theoretical phase*—a phase that included the creation of Bloom's most famous trilogy (some authors even call it a tetralogy). Bloom's literary-theoretical trilogy includes *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975) and, according to some, should be expanded to a tetralogy by including his book *Poetry and Repression* (1976) (*A Poetics of Conflict* xv–xvi). It is in these books that Bloom's literary theory, the so-called "Anxiety of Influence," was first presented to the public. This theory entails a description of interpoetical relations between poets (their works/poems). Bloom theorized that every young author creates under the influence of his predecessor. The young author is usually designated as the ephebe, while the older author is simply called the precursor or predecessor (*Anxiety of Influence* 13–14). The central point of Bloom's anxiety of influence is that every single author creates under the influence of his precursor and that his own work is, in fact, a kind of misreading or misprision of the predecessor's earlier work. It is noteworthy that Bloom does not believe that older poems directly influence younger poets; rather, the process of influence occurs between written

² *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present* (1989), *The Book of J: Translated from the Hebrew by David Rosenberg; Interpreted by Harold Bloom* (1990), *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus* (1992), *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (1993), *Jesus and Yahwe The Names Divine* (2005), *The Shadow of a Great Rock: A Literary Appreciation of The King James Bible* (2011)

works (with poems engaging each other in a kind of battle), thereby portraying the authors as vessels of creative thought and their poems as divine creations that contend with one another. The entire process comprises six ratios (he took the term ratio from Blake, a clear indication of the romanticist influence on his writing) (*The Rhetoric of Romantic Vision* 63), which Bloom named after ancient (mostly Greek) terms and which are usually described by him as his six revisionary ratios: *Clinamen*, *Tessera*, *Kenosis*, *Daemonization*, *Askesis*, and *Apophrades* (*Anxiety of Influence* 14–16). Each of these revisionary ratios corresponds to a certain phase in the young ephebe's life and literary creation, which Bloom explains in detail.³ Speaking of the revisionary ratios, it must be noted

³ 1. *Clinamen*, which is poetic misreading or misprision proper; I take the word from Lucretius, where it means a "swerve" of the atoms so as to make change possible in the universe. A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves.

2. *Tessera*, which is completion and antithesis; I take the word not from mosaic-making, where it is still used, but from the ancient mystery cults, where it meant a token of recognition, the fragment say of a small pot which with the other fragments would re-constitute the vessel. A poet antithetically "completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough.

3. *Kenosis*, which is a breaking-device similar to the defense mechanisms our psyches employ against repetition compulsions; kenosis then is a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor. I take the word from St. Paul, where it means the humbling or emptying-out of Jesus by himself, when he accepts reduction from divine to human status. The later poet, apparently emptying himself of his own afflatus, his imaginative godhood, seems to himself as though he were ceasing to be a poet, but this ebbing is so performed in relation to a precursor's poem of-ebbing that the precursor is emptied out also, and so the later poem of deflation is not as absolute as it seems.

4. *Daemonization*, or a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in reaction to the precursor's Sublime; I take the term from general Neo-Platonic usage, where an intermediary being, neither divine nor human, enters into the adept to aid him. The later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor. He does this, in his poem, by so stationing its relation to the parent poem as to generalize away the uniqueness of the earlier work.

5. *Askesis*, or a movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude; I take the term, general as it is, particularly from the practice of pre-Socratic shamans like Empedocles. The later poet does not, as in *kenosis*, undergo a revisionary movement of emptying, but of curtailing; he yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor, and he does this in his poem by so stationing it in regard to the parent-poem as to make that poem undergo an *askesis* too; the precursor's endowment is also truncated.

6. *Apophrades*, or the return of the dead; I take the word from the Athenian dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead returned to reinhabit the houses in which they had lived. The later poet, in his own final phase, already burdened by an imaginative solitude that is almost a solipsism, holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet's flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself in the revisionary ratios. But the poem is now held open to the precursor, where once

that Bloom created something of a handbook for applying his theory of the anxiety of influence on poems or other literary works. Titled *A Map of Misreading*, the book also includes a small visual guide for understanding the revisionary ratios in relation to different types of images and rhetorical tropes in poetry (*A Map of Misreading* 84). By means of *A Map of Misreading*, the reader should be able to apply Bloom's literary theory to enhance their reading and to identify the relationships between different texts that influenced and shaped them into what they ultimately became (*A Map of Misreading* 3).

It can be said that Bloom's revisionary ratios create a visualized process of the young ephebe's life and his literary creation. Using the anxiety of influence and its six revisionary ratios, we can study and determine the relationship between the young ephebe and his precursor. The precursor is like a flood (*Anxiety of Influence* 57), trying to drown the young ephebe with the influence of his written works (his poems). If the young ephebe manages to fight off his precursor and defeat him on the poetical/literary battlefield, then he shall be crowned as a strong author who will influence other young authors once he departs from this world, and the process of influence will start anew. In some instances, Bloom compares literary influence on influenza; "Influence is a kind of *influenza*, a contamination once thought to pour in upon us from the stars. Mark's *influenza* was caught by him from the J Writer, or Yahwist; Paul's and John's cases stem from the Law and the Prophets alike..." (*Jesus and Yahweh* 47). It is interesting that Bloom himself rarely speaks about his own predecessors, but in *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine*, he acknowledges that Northrop Frye contaminated him with the *influenza* of influence (*Jesus and Yahweh* 47). Further, according to Bloom, there are authors who are strong and those who are not. Only the strong authors are able to succeed and, thereby, influence the works of other, younger authors. The entire process of transferring influence between authors (between the works they created, poem to poem) also entails the existence of a literary canon (composed of strong authors) that should hold the entire Western literary world and civilization together. It should be no wonder, then, that Bloom published works on the necessity of a defined literary canon, presenting an argument for the concept of the author as a creative force.

it was open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work (*Anxiety of Influence* 14-16).

2. Bloom's Vision of the Crisis in Literature: The Crisis of the Canon and the Author

As early as the publication of *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom explained his reasoning for creating this theory and spoke favorably of preserving a defined literary canon and the concept of the author. Bloom coined the term "School of Resentment" (*Anxiety of Influence*) and "New Cynicism" (*Gnostički autor* 269) to designate those he believed were the main culprits in the deconstruction and devastation of the literary canon and the concept of the author. For Bloom, it all started with the publication of Roland Barthes's paper *Death of the Author* (1967), which clearly defined the concept of the author as dead and a relic of a bygone era. This did not sit well with Bloom, who, in response to the work of Barthes (and later Foucault), created his own literary theory to defend both the concept of the author and that of the literary canon. According to Bloom, all those who wish to destroy the literary canon and the concept of the author belong to the so-called "School of Resentment," a group he explicitly identifies as including neo-Marxists, new feminists, new historicists, and French-influenced theorists (Barthes and Foucault) (*Anxiety of Influence*). Bloom's perception of the Western literary canon consists of strong authors with profound originality, with Shakespeare as its foundation. Shakespeare is the starting point of the Western canon as we know it, and these new deconstructionists seek to destroy both Shakespeare and the canon itself because of their narrow, materialistic perception of literature (*Anxiety of Influence* xv). Bloom also notes that the members of the "School of Resentment" misrepresent their multiculturalist views of literature, unlike genuine multiculturalists around the globe, who "accept Shakespeare as the one indispensable author, different from all others in degree, and by so much that he becomes different in kind" (*Anxiety of Influence* xv). Bloom goes even further and notes that Shakespeare is not merely the foundation stone of the Western literary canon but of the literary canon of the entire world, observing that "his appeal is equal to audiences of all continents, races, and languages" (*Anxiety of Influence*). Speaking about Shakespeare from the perspective of the "School of Resentment" and why he is at the center of Bloom's canon, Bloom notes:

The School of Resentment is compelled by its dogmas to regard aesthetic supremacy, particularly in Shakespeare's instance, as a prolonged cultural conspiracy undertaken to protect the political and economic interests of mercantile Great Britain from the eighteenth century until today. In

contemporary America, the polemic shifts to a Shakespeare utilized as a Eurocentric center of power in order to oppose the legitimate cultural aspiration of various minorities, including academic Feminists, who are now scarcely a minority. One sees why Foucault has won such favor with apostles of Resentment; he replaces the canon with the metaphor he calls the library, which dissolves hierarchies. But if there is no canon, then John Webster, who wrote always in Shakespeare's shadow, might as well be read in Shakespeare's place, a substitution that would have amazed Webster.

There is no substitute for Shakespeare, not even in the handful of dramatists, ancient or modern, who can be read and played with him or against him. What matches the four great Shakespearean tragedies? Even Dante, as James Joyce confessed, lacks Shakespeare's richness, which means that the reading of character appears infinite in Shakespeare, but also suggests that the thirty-eight plays and attendant sonnets form a discontinuous Earthly Comedy far more comprehensive than Dante's and refreshingly free of Dante's allegory of the theologians. Shakespeare's multiplicity far exceeds Dante's or Chaucer's. The creator of Hamlet and Falstaff, Rosalind and Cleopatra, Iago and Lear, differs in degree as well as in kind. If that difference can be defined, we will be closer to seeing why Shakespeare of necessity recentered the Western Canon, and will go on recentering it, however much it is altered for the worse by political considerations. (*The Western Canon* 53)

Therefore, the "School of Resentment" seeks to deconstruct and discredit Shakespeare's legacy—not because of his aesthetic or literary worth, but because of what they perceive as his apparent political complicity in the oppression of minorities and people who are not of European or British descent. Such a view of literature is, according to Bloom, completely misguided and has no place in contemporary academic discourse concerning literature in general and the Western canon as a whole. The addition or removal of literary works from the literary canon should be governed solely by strict rules regarding the aesthetic (literary) worth of each work and its degree of originality.

As a way of fighting the "School of Resentment" and the ongoing crisis in literature, Bloom wrote two books—*The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* and *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Creative Minds*—in which he presented his view of the literary canon as it should be conceived and the

criteria for choosing which authors should be included in the canon and which should be excluded. One can view both of these works as applications of Bloom's literary theory, the anxiety of influence, to the process of literary canonization.

The Western Canon is structured in three main sections, which Bloom named after Giambattista Vico's historical cycle of three phases (which end with chaos and the creation of a new, fourth phase) as presented in his book *New Science* (*The Western Canon* 1). Bloom therefore names the four sections of *The Western Canon*: the Aristocratic, the Democratic, and the Chaotic Ages (*The Western Canon* 1). He omitted the Theocratic Age and began his canon with the Aristocratic Age and the figure of Shakespeare as the central pillar of the entire Western canon. All in all, he writes about twenty-six authors who, according to him, are essentially the founding stones of the Western literary canon (*The Western Canon* 2). Bloom chose these twenty-six authors for their sublimity and representative nature—and also because “writing a book about four hundred authors would be impractical” (*The Western Canon* 2). At the very beginning of *The Western Canon*, Bloom notes that the forces of the “cultural materialists” (Neo-Marxists, New Historicists, Feminists) are trying to destroy the literary canon—which is centered around Shakespeare—and are therefore the main culprits of the current literary crisis that Bloom is trying to fight. As Bloom puts it:

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. (*The Western Canon* 4)

Therefore, Bloom hopes that his book *The Western Canon* will not be the last effort to preserve the Western literary canon from its destruction and that it might contribute to the struggle against deconstructionism. While choosing the

twenty-six authors presented in *The Western Canon*, Bloom used originality as a means of determining which authors should be canonical and which should not (*The Western Canon* 4). For Bloom, originality equates to strangeness, something that “we altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies” (*The Western Canon* 4). Dante is the prime example for the first possibility, while Shakespeare is the best example for the second one. Originality as a criterion for the canonical will be explained in more detail later in the paper while discussing Bloom’s book *Genius*. Further, speaking about Shakespeare and the strength of his ironic writing, Bloom notes that Shakespeare descends from the ancient author J, or the Yahwist, who was the first author of the Hebrew Bible (*The Western Canon* 4). According to Bloom, who wrote extensively about J in his earlier work *The Book of J*, the Yahwist was a woman (possibly Bathsheba) living at King Solomon’s court thousands of years ago, who wrote the original Yahwistic text (*The Book of J* 9). The fierce originality of J (which, for Bloom, is the sign of a strong author) shines through in her literary portrayal of Yahweh as a character who is “at once human, all too human: even childlike, even childish, and yet Yahweh and none other, which is to say, wholly incommensurate even with himself” (*The Book of J* 26). It is exactly this unique and “blasphemous” portrayal of Yahweh that, for Bloom, makes the author J the most original, strongest, and most ironic author to have ever lived. J created a story and portrayed Yahweh as a literary character, who then influenced nearly the entirety of human civilization by producing three religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) from that one Yahwistic portrayal of Yahweh (*The Western Canon* 6). One can conclude that, according to Bloom, there would be no Western civilization and no Shakespeare if it were not for the fierce originality of the J author (*The Western Canon* 6-7). For Bloom, then, the battle for the canonical and for the concept of the author should begin with the defense of the Yahwist and Shakespeare, along with the list of authors and works that were presented first in his *The Western Canon* and later in his *Genius*.

One of Bloom’s greatest concerns was the expansion of the literary canon without the use of proper literary or aesthetic criteria:

”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. (*The Western Canon* 7)

It is clear that Bloom equates the expansion of the canon with its destruction, primarily because of the desire of the “School of Resentment” to add works based on their own agenda, rather than the literary or aesthetic worth that these works possess. Bloom himself was often attacked by members of the “School of Resentment” who would cite his theory of the anxiety of influence and proclaim that it only applies to dead white European males, and not to women or multiculturalists (*The Western Canon* 7). Bloom strongly rejected this notion and concluded that:

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 Shakespearian 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. (*The Western Canon* 8)

In other words, by rejecting the theory of the anxiety of influence, the “School of Resentment” admits that the works they want to add to the literary canon are not strong enough. Therefore, these works lack the originality and aesthetic proficiency required of a work striving to be part of the literary canon (part of the family of literary masterworks). Every canonical literary work needs to shoulder the burden of influence and must be fiercely original to become part of the Western literary tradition. Bloom’s perception of tradition itself actually represents “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” (*The Western Canon* 8-9). Genius, according to

Bloom, cannot be determined by “social factors, Marxists, or Sophists, but only by other poems, stories, novels, or plays that come into being as a response to prior poems, stories, novels, and plays while being dependent upon acts of reading and interpretation by later writers” (ephebes) (*The Western Canon* 9).

One of the reasons Bloom’s literary theory was demonized by the “School of Resentment” is because he concluded that “it cripples weaker talent but stimulates canonical genius,” which consequently marked all the works they wanted to include in the literary canon as inferior (*The Western Canon* 11). It also designated the works of the “School of Resentment” as not original enough, as Bloom himself said:

Originality becomes a literary equivalent of such terms as individual enterprise, self-reliance, and competition, which do not gladden the hearts of Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors of all those whom I have described as members of the School of Resentment (*The Western Canon* 20). It is exactly these groups of people that are currently the main cause of the literary crisis plaguing our Western literary tradition. Bloom believes that their attack on the canon is motivated mostly by social and political interests and world-views, which is a travesty in itself. The only criteria that a literary work needs to satisfy to enter the literary canon are supposed to be aesthetic and artistic in nature. (*The Western Canon* 22)

The “School of Resentment’s” anger towards the canonical, therefore, stems from their inability to produce or find literary works that fulfil the aesthetic and artistic criteria necessary to become canonical. That is why they choose the route of destruction and political and social bias in adding new works to their own, new, and “multiculturalist” literary canon. As Bloom noted about the contemporary abandonment of aesthetic literary values:

The flight from or repression of the aesthetic is endemic in our institutions of what still purport to be higher education. Shakespeare, whose aesthetic supremacy has been confirmed by the universal judgment of four centuries, is now “historicized” into pragmatic diminishment, precisely because his uncanny aesthetic power is a scandal to any ideology. The cardinal principle of the current School of Resentment can be stated with singular bluntness: what is called aesthetic value emanates from class struggle. (*The Western Canon* 23).

Concluding his thoughts on the institution of the Western literary canon, Bloom notes that its existence is necessary not to save valuable literary masterworks, but to preserve the memory of bygone ages and people whose lives and deeds defined and shaped not just Western literature but our Western civilization as a whole:

The Western Canon, despite the limitless idealism of those who would open it up, exists precisely in order to impose limits, to set a standard of measurement that is anything but political or moral. I am aware that there is now a kind of covert alliance between popular culture and what calls itself “culture criticism,” and in the name of that alliance cognition itself may doubtless yet acquire the stigma of the incorrect. Cognition cannot proceed without memory, and the Canon is the true art of memory, the authentic foundation for cultural thinking. Most simply, the Canon is Plato and Shakespeare; it is the image of the individual thinking, whether it be Socrates thinking through his own dying, or Hamlet contemplating that undiscovered country. Mortality joins memory in the consciousness of reality-testing that the Canon induces. By its very nature, the Western Canon will never close, but it cannot be forced open by our current cheerleaders. Strength alone can open it up, the strength of a Freud or a Kafka, persistent in their cognitive negations. (*The Western Canon* 35)

Speaking against the formation of a new multiculturalist canon, Bloom notes that every canon is, in a way, elitist. This means that even a new canon produced by the “School of Resentment” would require certain criteria and rules that would bar some works from entering it, thereby making this new canon elitist as well.

Regarding the concept of the author, Bloom began refuting the deconstructionist claims about the death of the author in *The Western Canon* and later wrote an entire book, *Genius*, to further challenge them and demonstrate that the author is, in fact, very real, alive, and still among us. Bloom’s response was that the author is not dead—in reality, the exact opposite is true:

The death of the author, proclaimed by Foucault, Barthes, and many clones after them, is another anticanonical myth, similar to the battle cry of resentment that would dismiss “all of the dead, white European males”—that is to say, for a baker’s dozen, Homer, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Montaigne, Milton, Goethe, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Kaf-

ka, and Proust. Livelier than you are, whoever you are, these authors were indubitably male, and I suppose “white”. But they are not dead, compared to any living author whomsoever. Among us now are García Márquez, Pynchon, Ashbery, and others who are likely to become as canonical as Borges and Beckett among the recently deceased, but Cervantes and Shakespeare are of another order of vitality. The Canon is indeed a gauge of vitality, a measurement that attempts to map the incommensurate. (*The Western Canon* 39)

It is exactly upon this concept of vitality and originality that Bloom based his book *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds*, which was published after *The Western Canon* as a way of expanding his literary canon with a hundred authors, each in their own way marked as unique and strong with a refined degree of originality. While working on *Genius*, Bloom decided to use the kabbalistic image of the Sefirot as a way to define the chapters in the book. That is why the structure of *Genius* contains 10 different Sefirot (Keter, Hokmah, Binah, Hesed, Din, Tiferet, Nezah, Hod, Yesod, Malkhut), and each one contains two lustres, with five authors each (*Genius* xii-xiv). The Sefirot can be understood as the attributes of God’s genius, which is why Bloom uses them in his own book about literary geniuses (*Genius* xii). This usage reflects Bloom’s vision of their original meaning as divine emanations through which all reality is structured (*Kabbalah and Criticism* 22). Bloom’s research of the Sefirot and the Jewish Kabbalah in general can be observed in his work *Kabbalah and Criticism* where he offers a short historical overview of the Jewish Kabbalah together with its main concepts and the descriptions of each Sefirot (*Kabbalah and Criticism* 27–32). Further, by dividing each Sefirot into two lustres, Bloom creates two groups of five authors that are interconnected and reflect their own genius upon each other (*Genius* xv). By using different paradigms, namely Gnosticism, Jewish Kabbalah, and the Hermeneutic Corpus or Hermetica, Bloom defines each of the one hundred authors as unique and strangely original (*Genius* 1). The main purpose of *Genius* is to clearly show the contemporary academy, the public, and especially the “School of Resentment” that the concept of the author (genius) is still alive and strong. While discussing what literary genius is supposed to entail, Bloom tried to define it:

Literary genius, difficult to define, depends upon deep reading for its verification. The reader learns to identify with what she or he feels is a greatness that can be joined to the self, without violating the self’s integrity.

“Greatness” may be out of fashion, as is the transcendental, but it is hard to go on living without some hope of encountering the extraordinary. (*Genius* 4)

Literary genius is therefore supposed to enrich the life of the reader, to bring something extraordinary into his mundane everyday life, and to revive the spark that lies deep in each human being, which thirsts for the transcendental and the extraordinary. It is by reading the works of genius that the reader can obtain wisdom, enrich one’s life, and thereby achieve the true purpose of literature. By reading the works of genius, we enrich ourselves with ideas from times and people that have long since passed, but whose wisdom has survived through the ages, ready to enrich us and make us feel closer to a higher being. While discussing the concept of genius, Bloom notes that, in today’s world, it is not accepted as a term by scholars and members of the “School of Resentment”, but that it is still favored by the general public:

Genius is no longer a term much favored by scholars, so many of whom have become cultural levelers quite immune from awe. Yet, with the public, the idea of genius maintains its prestige, even though the word itself can seem somewhat tarnished. We need genius, however envious or uncomfortable it makes many among us. It is not necessary that we aspire after genius for ourselves, and yet, in our recesses, we remember that we had, or have, a genius. Our desire for the transcendental and extraordinary seems part of our common heritage, and abandons us slowly, and never completely. (*Genius* 7)

This is also one of the reasons why Bloom decided to define the meaning of genius (the author) in this book, while at the same time using it as a way to fight off the deconstructionists. Bloom also notes that genius is primarily defined by the stimulation of prior geniuses’ work, and not by cultural or political context, as the “School of Resentment” wants us to believe (*Genius* 8). Knowing the current trends in literature, the literary canon, and academia, Bloom dreaded that literature, as we know it, might be destroyed by the forces of the deconstructionists and reductionists. That is exactly why he wrote *Genius*, as he himself noted:

We cannot confront the twenty-first century without expecting that it too will give us a Stravinsky or Louis Armstrong, a Picasso or Matisse, a Proust or James Joyce. To hope for a Dante or Shakespeare, a J. S. Bach or Mozart, a Michelangelo or Leonardo, is to ask for too much, since gifts

that enormous are very rare. Yet we want and need what will rise above the twenty-first century, whatever that turns out to be. The use of my mosaic is that it ought to help prepare us for this new century, by summoning up aspects of the personality and achievements of many of the most creative who have come before us. The ancient Roman made an offering to his genius on his birthday, dedicating that day to “the god of human nature,” as the poet Horace called each person’s tutelary spirit. Our custom of a birthday cake is in direct descent from that offering. We light the candles and might do well to remember what it is that we are celebrating. (*Genius* 10)

This is one of the passages from *Genius* that beautifully encapsulates Bloom’s enduring belief in the necessity of aesthetic greatness as a cornerstone of our civilization. By invoking figures like Dante, Shakespeare and Mozart, Bloom reminds us that cultural memory is preserved, not through consensus, but through the continuous survival of extraordinary creative minds. Furthermore, Bloom’s invocation of the Roman ritual underscores his view of genius as something which is at the same time individual, transcended and rooted in tradition but also oriented towards the future. In celebrating genius, we reaffirm the power of literature to shape and elevate human consciousness across time and generations. Therefore, Bloom’s mosaic is not merely a retrospective, but it is a visionary framework for encountering and evaluating future artistic achievement.

3. Conclusion

Harold Bloom has, throughout his life, constructed a literary theory based on the aesthetic and spiritual power of the canonical. His theoretical model of the anxiety of influence argues that all strong authors misread their predecessors and that literature, as a whole, survives through a chain of powerful, original authors. For Bloom, the core of our western literary tradition is Shakespeare (whose origin can be found in the ancient Yahwist author) who is then followed by a lineage of authors (Dante, Cervantes, Milton, Blake, Emerson...) who he calls genius. However, beyond reaffirming Bloom’s canon-centered theory, this paper must also address a pressing question, namely: what makes Bloom’s work relevant today? Looking at the current state of academia, where social and political imperatives increasingly guide our canon formation, Bloom’s call for aesthetic value as the cornerstone of literary judgment becomes increasingly urgent. While one can challenge Bloom’s biases, notably his dismissal of litera-

ture which is politically engaged, his calls for a strict standard of originality and aesthetic strength forces contemporary scholars of literature to consider what is lost when canon debates ignore true artistic merit. Bloom therefore reminds us that literature's capacity to endure throughout time, lies in its transformative beauty and not in its political utility alone. Furthermore, the rise of digital and AI-driven content generation raises compelling questions about the meaning of authorship. Therefore, Bloom's insistence on the authors vitality gains renewed relevance today. His theories provide us a filter through which we might assess, not only literary tradition, but also the evolving nature of creativity itself. By returning to Bloom we are not advocating for an exhaustive restoration of his canon, but rather for the reintegration of aesthetic criteria into the ongoing debate about the purpose and meaning of literature. Bloom's work, therefore, remains a provocative challenge to contemporary studies of literature, inviting us to balance between the calls for justice and political representation with the never-ending quest for artistic excellence and originality.

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HAROLD BLOOM UND DIE KRISE IN DER LITERATUR

Zusammenfassung

Krešimir ŠIMIĆ

Robert STUBIČAR

Fakultät für Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften

Josip-Juraj-Strossmayer-Universität in Osijek

Lorenza Jägera 9

HR – 31 000 Osijek

ksimic@ffos.hr

robertstubicar1@gmail.com

Die Arbeit untersucht die Literaturkritik von Harold Bloom, einem der einflussreichsten amerikanischen Literaturtheoretiker des 20. Jahrhunderts. Sie konzentriert sich auf Blooms Ansicht, dass die Literatur eine Krise durchläuft, die auf den Einfluss poststrukturalistischer und antihumanistischer Strömungen zurückzuführen ist, die er als „*Schule des Ressentiments*“ bezeichnet. Dazu zählen marxistische Literaturkritik, afroamerikanische Studien, Neuer Historismus, feministische Kritik und Poststrukturalismus. Bloom argumentiert, dass diese Bewegungen den literarischen Kanon und das Konzept der Autorschaft untergraben, die er in Werken wie *The Anxiety of Influence*, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* und *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* zu verteidigen versucht hat. In *The Anxiety of Influence* stellt Bloom seine Theorie vor, dass jeder Schriftsteller von seinen Vorgängern beeinflusst wird und durch einen Prozess der „*revisionary ratios*“ um Originalität kämpft. Seine Opposition gegenüber postmodernen Dekonstruktivisten wie Jacques Derrida und Michel Foucault ergibt sich aus deren Ablehnung der Legitimität des literarischen Kanons und des Autors. Bloom sieht Shakespeare (und J/den Jahwisten) als zentrale Figur der westlichen Literatur, deren Werke über politische und kulturelle Grenzen hinausgehen. Als Antwort auf die dekonstruktivistische Behauptung vom „Tod des Autors“ betont Bloom in *Genius*, dass literarisches Genie weiterhin eine zentrale Rolle spielt. Er plädiert dafür, ästhetische und künstlerische Kriterien als einzige Maßstäbe für literarischen Wert beizubehalten, und kritisiert zeitgenössische Bestrebungen, den Kanon aus sozialen oder politischen Gründen zu verändern. Letztlich präsentiert diese Arbeit Bloom als entschlossenen Verteidiger der westlichen Literatur, der argumentiert, dass das Überleben der Literatur von der Bewahrung ihrer bedeutendsten Werke und der Abwehr ideologischer Umdeutungen abhängt.

Schlüsselwörter: Harold Bloom, Schule des Ressentiments, Dekonstruktion, literarische Krise, Kanon, Autorschaft

HAROLD BLOOM I KRIZA U KNJIŽEVNOSTI

Sažetak

Krešimir ŠIMIĆ

Robert STUBIČAR

Filozofski fakultet

Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku

Lorenza Jägera 9

HR – 31 000 Osijek

ksimic@ffos.hr

robertstubicar1@gmail.com

Ovaj rad predstavlja jednog od najvećih američkih književnih kritičara i teoretičara 20. stoljeća, Harolda Blooma, te njegova promišljanja o književnosti kao civilizacijskom postignuću koje je pod napadom suvremenih književnih pokreta. Kao sljedbenik gnosticizma, Bloom je bio uvjeren da su poststrukturalističke antihumanističke tendencije glavni uzrok degenerativnih procesa u književnosti. Takve degenerativne pokrete Bloom naziva „školom resantimana“ (*School of Resentment*) i „ironičnom iluzijom na novi historicizam“ (*New Cynicism*) te smatra da su koncepti književnog kanona i autorstva dovedeni u borbu za vlastiti opstanak. Unutar „škole resantimana“ Bloom svrstava one književne pravce koje smatra odgovornima za trenutačnu krizu književnosti: marksističku književnu kritiku, afroameričke studije, novi historicizam, feminističku kritiku i poststrukturalizam. Kao glavne krivce degenerativnih promjena u zapadnoj književnosti ističe Jacquesa Lacana, Jacquesa Derrida i Michela Foucaulta. Zbog njihova poricanja postojanja književnog kanona i autora, Bloom odlučuje napisati svoje monumentalno djelo *The Western Canon*, u kojem odbacuje njihove radikalne tvrdnje. U takvim okolnostima Bloom se ističe kao gnostički zagovornik koji se suprotstavlja poststrukturalističkim tendencijama, a upravo su njegova promišljanja o krizi u književnosti te borba za književni kanon i koncept autorstva u središtu ovoga rada.

Ključne riječi: Harold Bloom, škola resantimana, dekonstrukcija, književna kriza, kanon, autorstvo