

HAROLD BLOOM REVISITED, OR THE YET UNGOVERNED ISLE OF CANON

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Given his admiration for the works of Shakespeare, Harold Bloom could never blame my use of one of the historical dramas of the bard of Stratford to describe the motivation behind these pages.



Illustration: Carolina Tapia

The work in question is *Richard III*, and the passage is taken from Scene VII, Act III, when, in the presence of two bishops; Sir William Catesby; the Lord Mayor of London, and his advisers and guards, the Duke of Buckingham speaks in the following dialogue with the Duke of Gloucester:

Gloucester.. what is your Lord's pleasure?

Buckingham Even that, I hope, which pleaseth God above, And all good men of this ungovent' d isle.

Gloucester I do suspect I have done some offence That seems disgraceous in the city's eye; And that you come to reprehend my ignorance.

Buckingham You have, my lord: would it might please your Grace, On our entreaties to amend your fault!

Like Gloucester, Bloom committed an offence with the publication of his book, in 1994, *The Western Canon*, an offence born, if not of ignorance, then certainly of arrogance; an offence which, disgraceous or not in the city's eye, contributed nothing to the establishment of a legitimate and stable government on the ungovented isle that is the literary canon. It is precisely the gravity of such lack of government that encourages me in the need to revisit Bloom's book five years later, as it is obvious by now that no-one expects already an amendment of his error.

From my point of view, the basic error committed by Bloom was the very title he gave to his book: *The Western Canon*; for it would have been a different state of affairs, and one which would have taken away the principal motive for these pages, had he called it, for example, *Pages I Have Read*. Bloom's Western Canon was neither a canon nor was it Western: it was no more than what is expressed by the title which, with humility, I propose for a second edition of the book, even if these pages are many (albeit not all) pages read in the libraries of the University of Yale to which Bloom accords grateful thanks for containing many pages of many books (albeit not all pages of all books). Even Bloom himself seemed to recognise from time to time the impossibility of establishing a definitive canon of Western literature, at least one compiled by one person alone. Thus, in the introduction to the book, "An Elegy for the Canon", he said the following: «no-one has the authority to tell us about what the Western Canon is, certainly not from about 1800 to the present day», and, he added, «It is not, cannot be, precisely the list I give, or that anyone else might give». How fortunate it is then that Bloom advised us that the lists which he included at the end of his book, which occupied no less than thirty-seven pages, were *not* the Western Canon. However, this statement came almost five hundred pages before the appearance of the said lists, and not heading them, as prudence and honesty might have required.

In any case, even supposing that the lists were to be preceded by such a statement, what other purpose could such lists have? That was, after all, a book entitled *The Western Canon*, the principal objective of which was the constantly alluded to necessity for a stable literary canon, and twenty-one of whose twenty-three chapters were dedicated to the vehement justification of the setting apart of a small number of writers (twenty-six in all) as being *more* canonical than the others who appeared in the famous lists. Whether or not Bloom so wished, it is impossible to read these lists without seeing them as the writers he decided to canonise (because he read and liked their works); amongst them the twenty-six greats, and beside them all the others, to a greater or lesser extent canonical.

Therefore, there is no room for doubt that, from the very title onwards, Bloom's book set itself up not just as an elegy for the canon, but also as a proposal of the contents of the Western Canon, and it was a proposal which the author appeared to regard as definitive (and completely so before 1800, as he said he felt confident with regard to the works he included before that date). However, as I have already said, *The Western Canon* was neither a canon nor Western, which indicates that Bloom's enterprise was a failure; at the very least, it was not a canon established on the basis of intellectual rigour, crosscultural communication and respect for diversity which should be the basis of so thorny a question. For my own part, I will attempt to remain as faithful as I can to these three principles, not in order to propose an alternative canon (for I am aware of my own limits) but rather to indicate some (I would not wish to be so immodest as to believe that I have indicated all) of what Harold Bloom omitted or forgot in his Western Canon, that is (and it bears repeating) the Western and the canon. I will begin with the canon.

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All of what he wrote appears to indicate that Bloom confused reading with literary theory and criticism; the frequent references to «my lifetime of reading» are proof of this. Nonetheless, however divergent our conceptions of the function of literary theory, we would all agree that criticism is, by definition, an activity very different from that of reading, especially that of texts considered to be "literary". To my mind, and I hope that simplification will not alter the sense of what I wish to say, each critic is faced with four different ways of addressing literary works, and history provides us with abundant examples of each of these. In the first place a critic may adopt a *prescriptive* point of view of a specific work or of literature in general. The prescriptive function of the critic is that of answering the question "What should the literary work be like?", and it is a question applicable to various levels of literary production (for example: what type of metre should an elegiac poem have?, or how should a novel be structured?, or what should be the duration of the action of a tragedy?, etc.).¹ The second perspective which any literary critic may assume is the *valorative*. This critical function poses

the question "Is the literary work good?", and extends the limits of its reference over all evaluations and judgements on literature.² The third function of criticism is the *descriptive*, which attempts to answer the question "What is the literary work really like?" (and not "what should it be like?", nor "is it good?").³ Finally, the fourth of the functions of literary criticism is the *interpretative*, that is responding to the question "What does the literary work mean?". These are, in my view, the four basic functions of literary criticism, which is understood, according to the classic definition of René Wellek and Austin Warren (*Theory of Literature*, 1949), as the analysis of individual literary works; and it seems to me permissible to extend the limits of these four functions to the field of literary theory, which is understood, again according to Wellek and Warren, as the discipline which deals with the general conception of literature, and which has only developed since the beginning of this century. Thus we could also speak of the four possible functions exercised by literary theory: the prescriptive, valorative, descriptive and interpretative functions.⁴

If we agree about all that has been expounded up to this point, it should not be difficult to establish the frontier between reading and criticism, and even less difficult to do the same for reading and literary theory. It is evident that the descriptive and interpretative functions, which literary studies of this century have converted into the fundamental pillars of their own existence, derive naturally from the basic process of the activity of reading: the perception and decoding of the signs of the text are the two co-relative stages which every reader must necessarily pass through; that is, they are inherent conditions of reading. (However, it is not so clear that literary valoration, and still less prescription, are functions derived naturally from the activity of reading: it is precisely for this reason that literary criticism and theory of twentieth century, with its emphasis on the text rather than the biographical and social circumstances of the author, have privileged the descriptive and interpretative functions.) Thus, when the literary critic acts as such (that is, in a stage after reading, for at the stage of reading there is no difference between the critic and any other reader since at this point the critic is, more than anything, just another reader), and even though the two processes in ques-

tion, descriptive and interpretative, derive naturally from the process of reading, the task of the critic is not the same as that of any other reader, since the reader alone is relieved of any critical responsibility. No-one can be unaware of the complexity of the exercise of the interpretative and descriptive functions by the literary critic; such complexity lies in the need to base the critical task on certain theoretical principles, which are, preferably, explicit. From this perspective it is possible to understand contemporary literary theory and the diverse formulations of literary matters which it has generated, such as feminism, deconstruction, reception theory, marxism, new historicism, multiculturalism, etc. I personally may agree to a greater or lesser extent with the theoretical bases which support each of these lines of thought, but whatever one's own personal view there is no shadow of doubt that each of them responds to an be of sufficient strength to constitute a canon. What is more, proposals of canons such as his can only hasten the fulfillment of his own prophecy: «The means to destroy canons are very much at hand, and the process is now very much advanced». In effect, it is precisely the means that he used which are the most effective in destroying the canon, the concept of the canon, or the feeling of necessity for any canon. Bloom's book was, it seems to me, one more step along the road to such destruction, and this is because it would be difficult to conceive of a project for a canon that demonstrated so clearly that precisely what Bloom wished to condemn (the idea that «to make a canon (or to perpetuate one) is an ideological act in itself») is true. Bloom's canon was ideologically marked, and greatly, unnecessarily marked; marked by an ideology that is both narrow and oppressive; on that, at the same time, shows itself to be a paradigm entirely free of objectivity.

For all of these reasons, I repeat once more, Bloom's canon was not a canon, and it was precisely that accentuated ideological determination that prevented it from being Western. In any case, what it was, was a pseudo-canon of English-language literature with a few satellites from other literary orbits that constituted a periphery to English-language literature. The pseudo-canon of Bloom was stamped from beginning to end with the mark of anglocentrism, or to be more correct with the mark of American anglocentrism.

The theoretical principles of Bloom seemed to come down the criteria of being American and working in «endless resource» libraries, that is, according to Bloom, the University of Yale libraries. The very description of the «unbreathable» atmosphere which has been created by multi-culturalism, feminism, marxism and other such tendencies of the “school of resentment” is, if that is true somewhere, precisely that of the American Academy. Perhaps there are those who would believe that such an accusation of American anglocentrism is due to a provincial attitude on my part, for it does not put in doubt the fundamental point: the defence of the necessity for a literary canon. But what is undeniable is that such an object can never be brought to a successful conclusion if the justification for and structure of the canon gives rise to the discrediting of the whole project rather than demonstrating the necessity for it. If, as Bloom affirmed, the expansion of the canon can have the effect of bringing about its own destruction, the reduction in scope of the canon due to unconscious American-anglocentric point of view could have the same effect, or worse. And the easily demonstrable fact is that Bloom’s book was guilty of such reduction to unbelievable, almost surrealist limits, and it was a reduction that was accompanied by a no less surreal expansion with respect to English-language, and above all American, literature.

In fact, the lack of a definition of “Western” in *The Western Canon* was remarkable. For if, as can be deduced from the lists at the end of the book, the Western Canon includes the Koran and other ancient Arabic texts, not to mention some Sanskrit ones (such as the *Mahabarata* or the *Ramayana*), what exactly are we to understand by the term “Western”? In any case, Bloom’s anglocentrism was visible not only in the lists, but rather governed the whole enterprise of the book from beginning to end, beginning with the obscure and unconvincing reasons provided for the canonisation of many writers (in most cases this is due to their having influenced other, later, and of course English-speaking, writers) and ending with the selection of the “magnificent twenty-six”, of whom half wrote in English. Other world literatures share out what’s left of the booty: there are three writers in French; three in Spanish; another three in German; and one in each of Russian, Portuguese, and Norwegian.⁵ Of these twenty-

six one critic was included: Samuel Johnson. Dr. Johnson was said to be the “canonical critic”, despite the fact that it is not difficult to perceive that outside the world of anglophone literature the influence of Johnson is negligible, much less in fact than that of Roman Jakobson or Schlegel (or even Eliot or Coleridge, to mention other English language critics). If pushed into choosing a Western canonical critic, few would hesitate in choosing Aristotle, whose *Poetics*, since their rediscovery in the fifteenth century, have exercised an unequalled influence in the West. Of course, the *Poetics* was written long before the birth of the American nation, and this must have subconsciously affected Bloom to a great degree.⁶ And what can be said of the extravagant division of Western literature into four periods (theocratic, aristocratic, democratic and chaotic) which framed the famous lists at the end of the book, if not that they were yet another example of the lack of rigour from which the whole enterprise of Bloom’s book suffered?⁷

While we are on the subject, let us reflect a little more on those lists which, as I have already said, most certainly do have a degree of importance given the context in which they were to be found. One could complain about the treatment accorded by Bloom to the literature written in his native language, and for which, it may be supposed, he must have, in his American anglocentrism, a degree of affection. But there is no reason to feel complaisant at being excluded from Bloom’s five “great” literatures, that is Italian, Spanish, French, German and, obviously, English, indeed there is room for considerable suspicion that the selection of works in Italian, French and German was seriously deficient.⁸ Furthermore, I doubt that the over-representation of works in English has not meant that significant gaps in this area exist still.⁹ But that is a can of worms I have no wish to open. For reasons of my own origins, what concerns me is the selection of works within one of the “great” literatures, that is, Spanish, and one of the marginal literatures, Catalan.

Where the first is concerned, although Bloom bestowed the honour of counting Spanish literature amongst the great, he failed to show any great knowledge of the subject: thus, for example, in the brief

introduction to the canonical list for the “democratic age” (that is, the nineteenth century) he stated that the importance of Spanish literature decreases in nineteenth century, when in reality such a decrease occurred at the end of the seventeenth century. In the same manner he told us that the “democratic age” also saw the increased “strength” of American and Russian literature in what was apparently a literary anticipation of the Cold War. Not satisfied with all this, he wrote: «I have resisted the backward reach of the current canonical crusades ... Expanding the Canon ... tends to drive out the better writers, sometimes even the best, because pragmatically none of us (whoever we are) ever had time to read absolutely everything, no matter how great our lust for reading. And for most of us, the harried young in particular, inadequate authors will consume the energies that would be better invested in stronger writers». Such comments raise interesting questions: Did Bloom perhaps consume his energies reading one hundred and sixty-one North American writers rather than investing them in other, “stronger” writers than these? If no-one (and not even he) has the time to read “absolutely everything”, and who can doubt that this is the case, how could he be sure that he resisted the current crusade to “expand” the canon with third-class writers and filled his time with those writers who are worthy of his attention? The answer is, of course, that he could not resist the temptation to expand the canon unnecessarily and thereby left out some of the best writers and their works. In the case of Spanish writers and works in Castilian he omitted, for example, the *Libro de Buen Amor* of the Archpriest of Hita, one of the high points of medieval European literature (although he did find room for the *Cárcel de Amor* by Diego de San Pedro!); the poetry of Garcilaso de la Vega and Quevedo (two unpardonable omissions in any world wide canon); all of the novels of Benito Pérez Galdos except *Fortunata and Jacinta*, some of which can be counted amongst the greatest European nineteenth-century novels; and all of the literary production of Valle-Inclán.¹⁰ One small detail worth noting: Bloom cited *La Celestina* in an abridged edition... Latin American literature written in Spanish fared no better, and this despite the fact that Jorge Luis Borges and Pablo Neruda are two of the “magnificent twenty-six”.¹¹

Indeed, the scarce knowledge which Bloom demonstrated of Spanish literature appears to mirror

perfectly his lack of interest in the whole country. It is for this reason, on presumes, that while he was careful to speak of “England and Scotland” in the Middle Ages and of “Great Britain” in the nineteenth century, he referred to “Spain” from medieval times, when it is obvious that this term as reference to a single political entity is of much later origin, i.e. the eighteenth century. Curiously, it was only in the list for the “chaotic age” that Bloom gave a list of works in Catalan, in a paragraph independent of Spain, under the heading “Catalonia”, which leads one to believe that Bloom is of the opinion that Catalan literature is an invention of twentieth century.¹² Of course, this is not the case: medieval Catalan literature comprises a range of works of indubitable “aesthetic value” which are as important as those of other Romance literatures, such as those of Castilian and French (and, let it be said, some of them are of greater “aesthetic value” than anything produced in Medieval England). Thus, sentences such as «many good writers who are not quite central are omitted» or «I have neither excluded nor included on the basis of cultural politics of any sort» can only sound, to those who have a knowledge of the fundamental canonical importance of certain writers and works in the context of Romance literature, like a rather poor joke. No less a figure than Ramon Lull, the first European writer to use a modern language (Catalan) for philosophical speculations, a person of unique influence in medieval Europe, an author in four languages (Catalan, Latin, Occitan and Arabic) of some of the most varied and valuable works of literature and philosophy, failed to appear in Bloom’s lists. Nor was there room in Bloom’s pseudo-Western pseudo-canon for the great fifteenth century poet Ausiàs March, who is without doubt one of the greatest figures in medieval poetry and who was such an inspiration for the Spanish poet Garcilaso de la Vega (but then, as we already know, there was no room in Bloom’s canon for Garcilaso either).¹³ Finally, there was no room in Bloom’s canon either for the third great work in medieval Catalan literature, the novel of chivalry *Tirant lo Blanc* by Joanot Matorrell, which is saved from the flames by Cervantes in *Don Quijote*, calling it the best book in the world of its type,¹⁴ and it is a work which is greatly esteemed by modern writers such as Vargas Llosa. Given the absences described here, the rest of the gaps with respect to medieval Catalan literature could surprise no-one.¹⁵

Even if Bloom was not aware of the fact, Catalan literature of the nineteenth century does exist and comprises at least three writers of unquestionable value: the poet Jacint Verdaguer, the novelist Narcís Oller and the dramatist Àngel Guimerà. Of course, Catalan literature of the twentieth century also exists, this Bloom was aware of, although given the knowledge of the subject he demonstrated it would almost have been better if he had suffered total amnesia and forgotten about Catalonia completely: without going into any great detail, it is sufficient to state that the two greatest and most renowned writers in this category, Josep Carner (who would surely have occupied a privileged place in the canon if he had written in English) and the writer of prose Josep Pla failed to appear, while Bloom did include other, lesser, writers, some of whom are so young that they have probably not yet had time to produce their best works.¹⁶

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«No critic, not even this one, is a hermetic Prosper working white magic upon an enchanted island», Bloom wrote: However, there are many reasons for us to believe that Bloom had sought to reign on the ungoverned isle of the literary canon, and without taking into account Aristotle's *Poetics*, nor Cicero's *Pro Archia poeta*, nor the troubadours, nor the complete edition of the *Celestina*, nor the poetry of Ausiàs March and Garcilaso, nor Herder's essay on Shakespeare, nor *Luces de Bohemia* by Valle-Inclán, nor the poetry of Josep Carner. The words of Buckingham spring to mind:

*Know then, it is your fault that you resign
The supreme seat, the throne majestic,
The scepter'd office of your ancestors,
Your state of fortune and your due of birth,
To the corruption of a blemish'd stock;
Whiles, in the mildness of your sleepy thoughts,-
Which here we waken to our country's good,-
This noble isle doth want her proper limbs.*

But we all know that Buckingham is no more than a coward in the service of Gloucester, who, once crowned, will repay his favours by sending him to his death. It is clear then that Bloom was not playing the part of Richard III, because he has already lost his op-

portunity to govern the isle that is the canon; and no-one plays the role of Buckingham for nobody would wish Bloom's regime on the isle in question. What I have attempted to outline here has nothing to do with *Richard III* nor any of the historical tragedies; rather it seems more like a comedy which, in the ends, turns out to be something else *The Tempest*, for example. One would not have been able to criticise Bloom if he had not wished to be Prospero, but he can be criticised for having wished this (although he denied it) and for not going farther in his efforts than Esteban, Trinculo and Caliban.

ENDNOTES

¹ Although the prescriptive function of literary criticism is little used and essentially discredited today, it is undeniable that it has occupied a significant place throughout the history of literary thought, and at times has been the predominant form of criticism: this is the case, for example, of the doctrine classique of seventeenth century France, and, by extension, of the neo-classical criticism of most of Europe in the eighteenth century. This was absolutely dominant in France and Italy, but it also played a decisive role in other countries: for example it was enormously influential on the critical works of Samuel Johnson.

² It is scarcely necessary to have recourse to the remote past to be aware of the existence of the valorative function of literary criticism: it has always been present and we have constant reminders of its influence in reviews of new works to be found in newspapers and magazines.

³ To my mind, although the descriptive function can be found in platonist thought (in the third and tenth books of the dialogue *The Republic*, for example), which elsewhere is markedly prescriptive, and above all in the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* of Aristotle, it is the twentieth century which has seen the descriptive function acquire its greatest force, thanks to the Russian Formalist school (above all Jakobson and Shklovsky) and to the first structuralists (above all Mukarovsky). In effect, without the previous existence of Russian formalism and classic structuralism, as well as the limitations inherent in them, is not possible to understand, however surprising it may seem, such contemporary movements as semiotics or even deconstruction. Thus, if I refer on occasion to the limitations of formalism and structuralism it is because their merits lie not so much in the solutions they provided as in their addressing the problems which arise from literature: these limitations gave rise, rather paradoxically, to a very healthy dynamics in literary studies.

⁴ It is precisely in the diversity of positions that can be taken with regard to the interpretative function of literary theory (which purports to explain the general meaning of literature, whether it be conceived as autonomous or as a part of the social and historic structures that determine, and in great part, explain it) that are to be found the reasons for the multiplicity of theoretical positions of the last thirty years, from the Paris structuralist school to feminism, passing through Lacanian psychoanalysis and contemporary marxist thought.

⁵ Although, according to Bloom, «the choice of writers here is not as arbitrary as it might seem», there was no explanation of why the group of the "magnificent twenty-six" did not contain, for example, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Quevedo, Gongora, Leopardi, Flaubert, Stendhal, Balzac, Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Kavafis, any Latinoamerican novelists, etc. Why, for instance, was Freud there but not Marx nor Nietzsche? Also missing were Racine, Corneille, Calderon, Chekhov and Brecht, so that it is simply not true that «the sequence of major dramatists are here», as Bloom stated. If the composition of the "magnificent twenty-six" appeared unjustified, even more so was that of the "even more magnificent ten", who are, according

to Bloom, «the major Western writers since Dante». These were: Chaucer (a choice which Bloom made ahead of Boccaccio and which will flabbergast anyone who fails to take Bloom's flagrant Anglocentrism into account), Cervantes, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Goethe, Wordsworth, Dickens, Tolstoy, Joyce, and Proust. This of course maintained the 50% of English-speaking writers.

⁶ The lack of respect with which Bloom treated Aristotle, for whom he is an author preoccupied with "social science" (one wonders how Bloom has read the *Poetics*) broadly comparable with Platonic "moralism" alone, is almost alarming. In any case, the disdain for Aristotle was only the tip of the iceberg of the total absence (except in the lists) of what Bloom called the "theocratic age", that is, Western (and non-Western) literature before Dante. Bloom's lack of interest for Ancient Classical literature is almost impossible to believe. Even in the lists Plato's *Dialogues* were referred to in this manner, as though all of them were equally important (or unimportant). Of Aristotle's work he did not refer to *Rhetoric*, a treatise which enjoyed great influence in classical and medieval literature. Of those of Horace, as with Plato, he referred to the *Epistles* in general, and the *Epistola ad Pisones*, the famous *Horatian Poetics*, did not merit sufficient respect to be cited separately, despite the fact that the said work was enormously influential in the classical, medieval, Renaissance and Neo-Classical worlds. In his turn, Cicero was mentioned only for *On Gods*, thereby neglecting the greatest rhetorician of Antiquity's various treatises on the subject.

⁷ It would be difficult to give convincing motives (and, of course, in the book none were given) for the inclusion in the same all inclusive "theocratic age" both *Chrétien de Troyes* and the *Koran*. Nor should this be seen as a plausible attempt to group literary works in the largest possible periods: according to this scheme, medieval age was divided into before and after Dante, and by after Dante is understood anything between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries (for which reason German Romanticism was arbitrarily divided between the aristocratic and democratic ages). Bloom even fell into the ingenuous error of describing the twentieth century as the "chaotic age", without realising that any age is chaotic for those who live in it, since they have no historical perspective from which to view it; thus medieval man also believe his age to be chaotic. In any case, Bloom's attempt at division into periods was illogical: if the figure of Shakespeare is so central to the canon (or is, in fact, the canon, as he stated) it would have been logical to use the bard as the dividing line between eras, but instead of this, the dividing lines were drawn at Dante, Goethe and the end of the nineteenth century, after which comes the "chaos".

⁸ Although I have no wish to provide a full list of absences, nor anything like it, it is immediately apparent that all pre-Dante Italian poets, such as Cavalcanti or Cino, were missing; of Goldoni there was only *The servant of two masters*; of the works of Racine, Bloom chose only four tragedies (I have no idea why *Athalie* was included if *Iphigénie* was not); of Diderot, Bloom omitted his three greatest works: *Les bijoux indiscrets*, the treatise *Paradoxe sur le comédien* and the novel *Jacques le Fataliste*. As far as German literature is concerned, what more needs be said than that Herder, the ideological founder of German Romanticism, was missing. Of course, working with translations can give rise to misunderstandings (how could *Les fleus du mal* be translated into English, one wonders?); perhaps it is for this reason that Bloom sometimes recommended complete editions of poetical works (as in the case of Rimbaud) and at other times anthologies (as in the case of Verlaine).

⁹ In fact, although Bloom's "Age of chaos" took in no less than 161 writers from the United States, besides the 80 British and Irish writers (as against only 54 French, 29 Germans, 21 Italians and 13 Spaniards), I still notice the absence of Thom Gunn, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and Caryl Churchill; furthermore, important works by, for example, Harold Pinter, David Mamet and the Nigerian writer (in English) Wole Soyinka. From these absences we can assume that the most important criterion for Bloom was not that of aesthetic value, but rather that of the natural limitation to reading imposed on any human being, although Bloom did not make mention of this.

¹⁰ These were the most notable absences, but there were many more; without attempting an exhaustive list the following should be mentioned: the poetry of Berceo, that of the *Marqués de Santillana*, *El Conde Lucanor* by Juan Manuel

(a work often compared to the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales*), *El Laberinto de fortuna* by Juan de Mena, the old Spanish ballads, the novel of chivalry *Amadís de Gaula*, the poetry of Fernando de Herrera, the *Buscón* and *Sueños* by Quevedo, much of the poetry of Góngora (the ballads for example), some of the great dramas by Lope de Vega and some more of Calderón, the plays of Moratín, the poetry of Espronceda, Larra's articles, Bécquer's *Leyendas*, the novels of Juan Valera and Alarcón, Clarín's short stories, the novels of Azorín and those of Baroja, the literary essays of Ortega y Gasset and Dámaso Alonso... I could extend the list with a range of contemporary writers of great aesthetic value: Delibes, Ferlosio, Buero Vallejo, Mendoza, Carmen Martín Gaité, Ana María Matute, Gil de Biedma, Javier Marías...

¹¹ The choice of these two South American writers, alongside that of the Portuguese Pessoa, was hardly a coincidence: both Borges and Pessoa were bilingual (English was the second language of both) and Neruda demonstrated significant Anglophone literary influences. Indeed, the chapter in which Bloom dealt with all three had the title: "Borges, Neruda and Pessoa: Hispanic-Portuguese Whitman". (Speaking of which, if Whitman was cited for the first and third editions of *Leaves of Grass*, as well as *The Complete Poems*, why was Borges cited for *A Personal Anthology* alone and not for *Second Personal Anthology*?) Along the way many fine writers were omitted: Sábato, Casares, Puig, Valenzuela amongst others.

¹² In fact, given Bloom's omissions, it is surprising that he remembered the existence of Catalan literature at all: to judge by his "Western Canon" the other peninsular literatures, Basque and Galician, have simply never existed, in the twentieth century or any other (thus the excellent Galician poetess Rosalía de Castro must have been a collective hallucination); the same could be said of the literature of the *langue d'oc*. This last omission is extraordinary: what became, in Bloom's canon, of Occitan poetry, the poetry of the troubadours, which provides us with some of the greatest medieval poetry in Provence, Galia, Catalonia and parts of Italy, and which was a fundamental influence on the vernacular poetry of so many languages, especially that of Dante?

¹³ As far as I know there are two anthologies of Ausiàs March's poetry in English, one by Arthur Terry in 1976, and the other by Conejero, Ribes and Keown in 1986. It is also worth mentioning the English-language studies on Ausiàs March by Kathleen McNerney and Robert Archer.

¹⁴ «But, in taking so many [books] together, one fell at the barber's feet, who had a mind to see what it was, and found it to be the *History of the renowned knight Tirante the White*. 'Heaven save me!' quoth the priest, with a loud voice, 'is Tirante the White there? Give him to me, neighbour; for in him I shall have a treasure of delight, and a mine of entertainment. ... Verily, neighbour, in its way it is the best book in the world. ... Carry it home and read it, you will find all I say of him to be true».

¹⁵ Among these the most notable are the poets Andreu Febrer, Jordi de Sant Jordi and Jaume Roig, the writers of prose Bernat Metge, Francesc Eiximenis and Joan Roís de Corella, and the novel *Curial e Güelfa*.

¹⁶ Apart from Carner and Pla, there were other unforgivable omissions: the poets Joan Maragall, Costa i Llobera, Pere Quart and Gabriel Ferrater, and the novelists Víctor Català, Llorenç Villalonga, Pere Calders and Quim Monzó. Of J.V. Foix, there was mention of the poetry but not the prose; of the poet Carles Riba, there was no mention of his excellent literary criticism nor of his greatest work *Elegies de Bierville*; of Mercè Rodoreda, there was no mention of her incomparable novel *Mirall trencat*, although *La plaça del diamant* did appear; all of the theatre, short stories and best poetry of Salvador Espriu was missing, and just one work was present: *La pell de brau*, that is, the one which today is the most discredited of Espriu's works, although it did benefit for some years from considerable success due to political reasons, though Bloom, of course, was not swung by such political considerations. (There is an useful summary of the history of Catalan literature by Arthur Terry in *A Literary History of Spain, Catalan Literature*. London & New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972.)