

Literature, Morality and the Individual in the Shadows of Postmodernism

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Harold Bloom is the author of a recent large and widely discussed book, *The Western Canon*.¹ The author of more than twenty books, Bloom has been a towering figure, and also a frequent target, on the landscape of literary studies for many years. The very title of this book might already suggest something of why his views have been unpopular in various quarters. By 'The Western Canon' Bloom means in part a group of authors (Bloom says authors not texts) whose writings have certain qualities which make them authoritative in our culture. A prominent view in recent years has been that such a canon is not only untenable but even offensive. It perpetuates the myth, authoritarian in character, of universally valid literary values and traditions, against which everything is to be judged. But this has been held to be a myth not just about literature. Commitment to such a canon is more broadly ethically and politically authoritarian, since the literary values enshrined in the works said to constitute the canon actually serve to reinforce bourgeois ideals which have supported oppressively hierarchical features of western culture—most notably patriarchy, sexism, racism, and class-consciousness.

That is a stronger claim than saying simply that what is wrong with the idea of a canon is that it expresses a desire to entrench a particular set of moral and political views. For even if such entrenchment involves the 'marginalizing' of practices and outlooks and convictions which oppose the moral and political values in question, those values might not be as repressive as the stronger claim supposes. But that distinction does not matter here, since Bloom directly opposes this whole way of thinking about what invocation of a canon must involve. The following passage from his book both registers that opposition, and suggests what he takes to be the most important use (Bloom's word) of reading those authors who make up his version of the Canon. I want to see whether what Bloom says here helps us, in the shadow of postmodernism, to a better way of thinking about a very old question: in what sense, if any, the importance imaginative literature has for us involves its moral significance. Bloom writes:

The silliest way to defend the Western canon is to insist that it incarnates all of the seven deadly moral virtues that make up our supposed range of normative values and democratic principles. This is palpably untrue. The *Iliad* teaches the surpassing glory of armed victory, while Dante rejoices in the eternal torments he visits upon his very personal enemies. Tolstoy's private version of Christianity throws aside nearly everything that anyone among us retains, and Dostoevsky preaches anti-Semitism, obscurantism, and the necessity of human bondage. Shakespeare's politics, insofar as we can pin them down, do not appear to be very different from those of his *Coriolanus*, and Milton's ideas of free speech and free press do not preclude the imposition of all manner of societal restraints. Spenser rejoices in the massacre of Irish rebels, while the egomania of Wordsworth exalts his own poetic mind over any other source of splendor.

The West's greatest writers are subversive of all values, both ours and their own. Scholars who urge us to find the source of our morality and our politics in Plato, or in Isaiah, are out of touch with the social reality in which we live. If we read the Western canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation. To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgment, to read at all. The reception of aesthetic power enables us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves. The true use of Shakespeare or of Cervantes, of Homer or of Dante, of Chaucer or of Rabelais, is to augment one's own growing inner self. Reading deeply in the Canon will not make one a better or a worse person, a more useful or more harmful citizen. The mind's dialogue with itself is not primarily a social reality. All that the Western Canon can bring is the proper use of one's own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality. (pp.29-30)

There is considerable deployment of rhetoric here, and I do not think that Bloom really believes that one who read the western canon to form his or her personal values—if we can even make sense of the project—would have to become a monster of selfishness and exploitation. But still, Bloom trenchantly dissociates what he calls the 'aesthetic power' of the writers whose canonical standing he wants to display from any particular moral views which their works may enjoin, and emphasises that the true 'use' of reading in the canon is the reception of such aesthetic power.

I want to develop my theme by trying to bring out more of what Bloom imagines the 'canonical' standing of the authors he reflects on, to involve. Consider the terms in which Bloom speaks about how we are engaged—we could say the 'level' at which we are most deeply

engaged—by the writing he proposes to reflect on. Our reading there involves what he calls the 'mind's dialogue with itself'. This is not, he says, primarily a social reality. In such reading, we find that 'our own growing inner self is augmented'. With these terms, Bloom ushers in the sense of a dimension of inwardness, in what we are, which cannot be wholly understood on the plane of social reality, the plane on which we are 'more useful and more harmful citizens'. His thought is that it is this 'dimension' of what we are which is most importantly engaged, and capable of being 'augmented'—in and through the *agon* (his word), the struggle, involved in that reading of the literature which belongs to the canon. It is important to get things the right way round here: works, or writers, belong to the canon *because* they engage us in this continually 'agonistic' way, *because* they thus make these demands on us, take us out of ourselves in responding to them. This is close to the reverse of saying that authors get into the canon because they endorse a set of already wholly determinate social, political and moral values whose dimensions and effects are already fully known to us. Canonical status, for Bloom, is not election into a mausoleum—a repository of the bones of dead white males in a now familiar phrase—but a mark of an ever renewed power to renew, to transform, to vivify, to deepen the lives and self-understanding of those capable of reading.

Before continuing, I need to mark a misleading accent in Bloom's passage. To reading in the canon in order to form our social and moral values Bloom misleadingly opposes reading in it to foster the proper use of our own solitude. Or rather, that opposition will be misleading if 'one's own solitude' is proposed as the only conceptual counter to a picture of human beings as 'social' creatures. The dimension of inwardness which I said Bloom is trying to uncover will not be realised or manifested only in 'the proper use of one's solitude'. It will also show itself in differences in the ways in which human beings are able to engage with and 'understand' one another. The 'augmenting of the inner self' Bloom speaks of is not tied only to contexts of individual solitude and privacy (as Bloom's words here may tempt one to suppose).² So, at least, the line of thought I develop will suggest.

Something Bloom cites from the eighteenth-century Italian thinker Giambattista Vico can help us appreciate what Bloom is getting at in the passage I quoted from him. Vico thought that three phases could be identified in the development of Western culture: a Theocratic, an Aristocratic and a Democratic phase—the age of gods, of heroes, and of men. A sense of the world as divinely ordained and ordered, indeed divinely saturated, is superseded by a world dominated by semi-divine

kings and lawgivers, which eventually makes way for the democratic age. This last age is not defined by the predominance in the world of a certain form of government. That is itself an expression, or effect, of a wider and more fundamental shift in sensibility—a sense of hierarchies as having been levelled. (Opposition to the very idea of the literary canon as implying a ‘hierarchy’ of literary worth, is thus itself another expression of the democratic impulse Vico foreshadows.) Without wanting Vico’s picture to bear too much significance, I think it is suggestive in relation to the passage I quoted from *The Western Canon*. In the two phases which Vico identifies as preceding the democratic, there is arguably no difficulty in sustaining a sense that there is a dimension of significance to human life which is not merely ‘social’, and even the sense that what is of *most* significance escapes being understood in social terms. If that is evidently so in the case of the ‘theocratic’ phase of culture, with its conviction of the world as devolving from the divine, it is hardly less so for the aristocratic age, since as I said the significance of its hierarchies is an echo of a still pervasive sense of divine hierarchy. But it can readily seem that things are very different indeed, come the democratic age. Then the significance of our experience is radically reduced. There is no longer any room for significances which escape being wholly understood in terms of the kind Bloom calls social, where these can include political, sociological, psychological, psychoanalytic, and biological terms. The gaze of a modern sceptical and levelling eye has simply dissolved the illusory reality of all those earlier ways of making sense of our experience. (It matters not here whether we name that gaze ‘Enlightenment reason’ or ‘suspicion’.) Of course a certain kind of ‘inwardness’ can be acknowledged in such a world: but it is essentially accessible to some science or other, some ‘systematic’ ‘theoretical’ discourse, be it psychology, or psychoanalysis, or economics, or Marxism, or deconstructionism or something else. There is no longer available or accessible a sense or dimension of inwardness—a beyond-the-ready-to-hand inwardness having a significance which might be called spiritual—of the kind which was sustainable by the theocratic and aristocratic phases of our cultural history. Then, entrenched in the ‘democratic’ age, we necessarily live in a world of fewer dimensions and lesser depth, a world in which, as Nietzsche put it, God is dead, however much a fair number of individuals may still invoke his name.

So it may seem, and so—a thought I’ll elaborate later—some versions of post-modernism, unfortunately the most popular ones, maintain. But that—I suggest—is not how Bloom sees things, and

neither do I. It is not that Bloom denies Vico's distinctions. But, acknowledging them, he wants to insist on the continuing need for recognition of a dimension of 'inwardness', a 'reality' of each and all of us which is 'not social', and to insist, furthermore, that a seminal way in which this 'inner self' can be engaged and deepened, augmented, is precisely through encounter with what he calls 'the Canon'. Bloom's thought is that an understanding of what we are which lacks, or denies to us, a certain kind of inwardness, or which fails to appreciate the need for the continual nourishment and 'augmenting' of such inwardness, seriously impoverishes us. But as this implies, Bloom resists the widespread suggestion, more often assumption, that the sense of there being a crucial not-primarily-social 'dimension' of what we are depends upon convictions about 'the gods'—and more broadly about trans-human hierarchies and principles of divine or cosmic order—convictions which are culturally no longer available to us. He thinks that literature remains capable of fostering the 'increase' of such inwardness, capable of deepening our sense of what it is to be human, even in the age Vico calls democratic. Bloom does not deny that the pressure of the age is both against acknowledgment of such a dimension of 'inwardness' as crucial to what we are, and also therefore against acknowledgment of literature as capable of the power he writes of. But in Bloom's view, I think, this actually gives literature a culturally more, not less, important place than before.

Well, I have been speaking, very generally, about a 'particular kind' of inwardness, and I need to make clear what I mean. Let me refer, briefly, to Andrew Riemer's book on the Demidenko debate.³ One of Riemer's many themes in the book is whether *The Hand that Signed the Paper* itself endorses the wicked actions, and beliefs, which it ascribes to various of its characters, or whether, at least from time to time and partly, it condemns those. Riemer, partly sharing a contemporary suspicion of any such thing as 'authorial' voice, avoids pressing the question in quite those terms. Instead he claims that there are many 'voices' in Darville's novel, and that their juxtaposition, often ironic though he says not always very successfully so, warrants saying that the 'unspeakable evil'—his phrase—which the book records cannot be regarded as assented to or endorsed by the book or its author. But even if we grant the subtlety about 'authorial voice', this way of discussing the book—'is it to be blamed or exculpated?'—misses something very important. What matters is not whether those characters in the book who perpetrate deeds of what Riemer calls 'unspeakable brutality' are or are not 'condemned' either by other

characters in the novel or by an 'authorial voice', or whether they are 'counterpointed' by other voices. What matters is rather the possibility of rendering what is shown—of what those characters do and how they think—in such a way that a deeper understanding of it is made accessible. I do not mean that the characters who do the deeds have to be shown as understanding what they do, nor even necessarily that any other character in the book must be shown as understanding this. But a way of realising to us readers, the significance, the meaning—by contrast with the psychological and social causes—of what has been thus done has to be found, if the book is to have any chance of counting as exploring what it presents, indeed if it is to have any chance of being seriously engaged with the events it depicts.⁴

Let me try to make clear what I mean here by moving away from literature specifically. In the modern world of unprecedented sexual licence, sexual crimes are regarded as more serious than ever before. That conjunction already marks something close to a paradox, the telling of which would be deeply revealing of the times. But I want to consider something perhaps at a tangent to, or at least not immediately connected with, that paradox: a kind of discussion one encounters frequently, inside and outside philosophy, of the kind of evil involved in rape. A central concept in it is that of autonomy, and its denial: the evil of rape consists fundamentally in the denial of another's, usually a woman's, autonomy. That is held to be the reflective characterisation which gives the morally significant sense or meaning of someone's being raped. Talk of denial of autonomy can partner, or lead into, talk of rape in terms of power—a man's assertion of his power over another (usually a woman). Now I should not deny that power and denial of autonomy may both be relevant concepts here, but to highlight them, or at least to do so without seeing that something different and distinctive has to be made of them here, risks trivialising the significance of rape. Rape is made to sound akin to the secretary, in order to annoy the boss, sending in to see him someone he had expressly said he did not want to see. His autonomy—here his power of deciding whom he will see—is denied in that case too. Perhaps she is also trying to assert some power over him, and he may recognise this. But any comparison with rape is patently absurd. (If we reversed the example, and had the boss doing something similar to the secretary, and we still make the secretary female and the boss male, in order to preserve the power inequalities which many say that the act of rape seeks to emphasise and enforce, even then the basic absurdity of comparing such a deed with rape would not be diminished.) Talk of denial of autonomy and enforcing

of power inequalities leaves us a long way short of the terribleness of rape. We need a much richer language than any of this to articulate a sense of the significance, the meaning, of rape. Just what language is a further question. All I would say here is that it must be a language which also reveals the significance of sexual love, since much of the significance of rape as a serious evil must surely lie in its violation of the peculiar intense tenderness and intimacy which can inform and be informed by sexual love. The way we make sense of rape reflects, but also partly shapes, our sense of the possibilities inherent in sexual love.

There is some space here between the way in which someone might inchoately 'feel' or 'experience' rape, and the way in which they are able to articulate the significance of what they experience. And doubtless there are also limits to the experience's expressibility, which could be registered in someone's saying 'You couldn't know what it is like unless it has happened to you'. But still, I should say that the fact of such a gap should not be taken to deny the close connection between the character of the experience and the kind of language available for making sense of it. Put it this way. If people came to experience their being raped, in a way whose significance was adequately given by talk about denial of autonomy and power of the kind I began with, then rape could then no longer be registered as having the kind of seriousness it still has. It could then no longer be registered as the kind of evil which it still is registered as. Then, I should say, a 'dimension' of our experience, and of the sense of what we are which is mediated through that experience, would have atrophied. For that understanding of rape to come to have sway would involve a dwindling in our sense of the possibilities which can be realised in part through sexual love. (A beautiful reflection on the interdependence of our experience of love and the language available for its articulation, which bears on what I am saying here, is 'Love and Language' by the poet Fay Zwicky, in her collection of essays *The Lyre in the Pawnshop*.)

Now you do not have to agree with everything I have just been saying in order to appreciate the possibility of a shallower and a deeper understanding of rape—a shallower and deeper understanding of its significance or meaning. And we can bring this to bear on what I was saying in connection with Riemer's book. Of two people who both condemn rape, one might have only a shallow and the other a deeper understanding of the significance of what he or she condemns. One might of course say that from the point of view of being what Bloom calls a 'useful rather than a harmful citizen', the crucial thing is not your depth of understanding, but that you do indeed condemn, and

avoid, rape. And there would be point in saying that. Those of course very important 'moral requirements' of being a good citizen pertain to what Bloom calls 'social reality'. But once we move into the possibility of realising a deeper understanding of (say) rape—sticking with that for the moment—we move into a territory which escapes containment within the bounds of such social reality even if it will have significant effects in that domain. For what is at issue is in part an understanding of one's 'inner self', to use Bloom's phrase, which is always capable of being 'augmented'—his phrase again—or of diminishing. The different understandings of rape involve different realisations of what one is. The shallower understanding diminishes, rather than 'augments', one's inner self.

Here, on Bloom's view, we find what he calls the 'true use' of literature: that it can sustain, and deepen, our inwardness. To demand of a book—as many did of Darville's book—that it condemn the deeds it depicted, and to think of its doing or failing to do that as marking its most significant moral dimensions, is to seek to contain the significance and power of literature within the domain of what Bloom calls 'social reality' alone. (As I have already intimated, by the way, I do not think that we should pooh-pooh the importance of literature's effects in that domain. As I said, if in that I diverge from what Bloom actually says, I suspect that this owes only to his striving for rhetorical effect. Literature—stories—always have, and in some form or another always will, influence people's behaviour in 'social reality', provide them with models which they will emulate, and which will lead them to 'endorse' some things and 'condemn' others. To say that literature's value goes importantly beyond that in the Bloomian way I am suggesting is not to deny it such socially important 'uses'.) There remains the question, in relation to that demand which many made of Darville's book, of what understanding would be expressed in any such 'condemnation' of the deeds and lives it depicts. Is the book such that its exploration of what it presents does enable the 'augmenting' Bloom speaks of? That is a quite different sort of question from the question of whether the book condemns or does not condemn the evil it purports to depict. And Bloom's thought (I am suggesting) is that it is a much more important question to ask.

I spoke earlier of a widespread assumption that in the 'democratic' age our lives necessarily lack a kind of depth, inwardness, resonance, significance which in earlier ages people could readily, because of their religious convictions, take them to have. A frequent corollary of that assumption is that this difference of the democratic—in Vico's

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broad sense—present from the past manifests our freedom from a range of illusions which pervaded our ancestors' lives. This is no myth or straw figure of my devising. Reference to Riemer's book is again instructive. He writes:

There can be little doubt that *The Hand that Signed the Paper* does attempt to humanize its chief characters, if by that we understand an endeavour to account for their behaviour in psychological, social, political and historical terms. (p.84)

The whole tenor of Riemer's discussion makes it clear that this is the only thing we can mean by 'humanize'. 'Humanizing' the characters means, that is: locating them in certain indefinitely extensive patterns of force, or 'cause'—psychological, social, political and historical causes. Implicitly excluded by the project of humanising, understood in this way, is the possibility of attempting to intensify an understanding of the characters' activity. Let me dwell for a moment on the difference between a project of extensive understanding and what I am calling intensive understanding. What Riemer labels 'humanizing' the characters belongs to the former project: 'understanding' what they do by locating it in an indefinitely broadenable psychological, social, historical and political context. By contrast with that, it is possible to try to reveal what would need to be understood by someone who did such deeds if he or she were to understand the significance of what they did. This project would imply a different sense of what it is to 'humanize'. Then one's sense of the depth of a person's humanity would be shown by the depth or shallowness of the ways in which sense, of this intensifying kind, is to be made of what they did. So—to stick with my example—I should say that a novel in which rape was made sense of only in the first of the ways I spoke of would have failed to 'humanize' either those presented as its victims or those presented as its perpetrators, however extensive its locating of what it presents in a psychological and social context. Riemer claims to think that such intensifying understanding was once possible but is so no longer. His thought seems to be that the word 'humanize' can have only the 'extensive' sense unless we import specifically religious, or otherwise metaphysical, categories into the way we 'make sense' of what people do. So he writes:

The complaint that the novel perpetrates an outrage by humanizing its characters only yields sense if it is taken to refer ... to their actions viewed against a moral, historical, but most significantly a religious or spiritual background. (p.85)

And shortly after that:

A ... confusion seems to have informed the complaints about the impropriety of humanizing or explaining the character's actions and motivations in the novel. Though the human agents of the operation of evil may be driven by plausible desires, fears and hatreds, the consequences of their actions cannot be viewed in purely human, that is to say secular, terms. ... (The tenor of these complaints) is essentially religious and theological; their cadences are often those of the pulpit or the revival meeting. Yet none is able to attain that essentially religious dimension because all, like the novel itself, are firmly trapped within late-twentieth century secular rationalism ... (p.88)

I do not say that it is improper to invoke psychological, social and political 'explanations' of the sort Riemer says the novel invokes. Let us grant the in-principle 'propriety' of that undertaking. Riemer assumes, however, that any other kind of understanding of what the characters in Darville's novel are depicted as doing requires both the intelligibility and the authority of a 'religious' background which has simply passed from our culture. But now I hope that my discussion about the kind of evil involved in rape shows this assumption to be simply false. Suppose a rapist to be 'humanized' in the way Riemer envisages. There still remains the question of the kind of understanding available of the significance of what he did. There is no 'essentially religious' background to the second of the two ways of 'making sense' of the evil of rape that I spoke about—that is, as a terrible violation of another of a kind which can be understood only against the background of the distinctive tenderness and disturbing and vulnerable intimacy which can inform and be informed by sexual love. I am not certain that those are exactly the right terms, but they are terms of the right kind. And the point is that they need no religious 'underpinning'. There need be no religious background to the thought that only some such way of making sense of rape has any chance of realising a full understanding of what the rapist did in raping and the victim suffered in being raped. There is still good reason to call that an understanding in purely human terms. It is an understanding of ourselves as creatures of a kind such that a progressive deepening of a sense of the significance of what we do is possible for us. But then what our 'humanity' is, in this sense, and what it is for literary characters to be 'humanized' in this sense, involves the 'augmenting' of just that dimension of inwardness which Bloom speaks of. For finding ourselves making sense of rape in that way just is an aspect of our realising contours and depths in our experience which is the 'augmenting' of our human inwardness. And

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the possibility of this does not, as Riemer like so many others supposes, depend at all on a specifically religious or otherwise metaphysical background which has disappeared from the modern world.

I have been speaking in a number of ways to the passage from Bloom with which I began. Does what I have said amount to according a *moral* significance to imaginative literature? Well, we saw Bloom's implicit reason for not speaking that way—in effect that 'morality' is a word which most readily pertains to the 'mores', the social customs and practices, of a group; and he thinks that literature's deepest power is engaged behind or before all that. But the word can also be used as almost synonymous with 'human'. Then our deepest moral self-understanding is just our deepest understanding of what we are as human beings; and if that involves the kind of inwardness which Bloom speaks of, then whatever 'augments' that can be regarded as morally important. I should like to use the word 'moral' that way, but given the manifold echoes of authoritarianism and priggishness—echoes of the moralistic—which the word now evokes, I can appreciate the reason for eschewing it. In any case, what I have been saying about inwardness and depth can stand without it.

The phrase 'the individual' was part of my title, and I want to say a bit more about what it was doing there. To do that I have to say a bit about post-modernism. A different historical perspective from Vico's, though one still compatible with his, sees post-modernism as a response to the 'modernism' of the Enlightenment of the second half of the eighteenth century. The recent French philosopher, Michel Foucault, observed that while only those who came later could give their right names to the Renaissance and the Reformation and the Dark Ages and Neo-Classicism and so on, the Enlightenment was unique in naming itself. That fact reflects its very essence: the conviction that reason could be brought to bear on all human affairs in such a way that human beings could ideally become wholly transparent to themselves. The Enlightenment's being able to name itself, instead of having to wait for a later age to see what its preoccupations really meant, is a momentary crystallising of that aspiration to transparent self-understanding. The story is a complex one, but one outcome of the aspiration can be expressed this way: to subject all human activity to the gaze of reason, when reason is understood this way, involves no longer simply accepting that activity 'at face value'. Apparent generosity to a beggar, for example, might

on Marxist thought in fact be someone's *really* giving expression to their class interests, by helping disguise the injustice which the dominance of his class helps perpetuate. Then no activity, or practice, or set of values, is just what it seems. The modern practice of unmasking, integral to the contemporary cultural landscape—seeing the class interest behind the apparent generosity, the Freudian unconscious drive behind the conscious representation, the will to power beneath the religious affirmation, the sexism beneath the family structure—finds its warrant in this Enlightenment orientation. But an effect of this orientation is that no practice can any longer be thought of as having any genuine authority, since all are now truly seen as just more 'phenomena', all having a particular complex history—of a psychological, social, political, historical and perhaps biological kind—which is quite different from the 'justifying' myths with which those whose practice it is seek to entrench it. (There is no genuine authority, there is only 'power'.) Once you get into the swing of it, you can come to the view that ideas of truth, understanding, reality, and justice are themselves the mere 'effects' of the operation of such 'forces'. So they can no longer be relied on, invoked as evaluative norms, by a 'discourse' which remains impressed by the aim of transparent self-understanding. Even the 'individual' is another such 'effect'. Each different individual—you and I—becomes only a set of 'effects' of the operation of various intersecting forces—of political, social, historical, and biological forces. (One expression of this is the now familiar idea, already referred to, that there can be no 'authorial' voice, because the word 'author' is already only the name for a certain congeries of effects. A novel, then, becomes the site for the 'operation' of indefinitely many effects, which we can if we like call 'voices'.) This postmodernist conception thus shares the outlook I sketched before: that a sense of the domain of the human as a domain of meanings which can be explored ever more deeply is tied to the illusions of a bygone age. In this way the aspirations of 'modernism' are disassembled from within by one main strand of postmodernist thought.

But one does not have to respond to Enlightenment modernism this way, and it is important to note that there is another, quite different, strand of post-modernist response.⁵ This second form of post-modernism does not abandon truth, universality of understanding, reality, justice, the individual and the meaning of his or her experience, or even necessarily God. Rather, it seeks to rethink them, to make sense of them in a different way, a way which I should say goes back behind

what is sometimes called the 'Enlightenment project' rather than following out what are taken to be its consequences. In all of this—the Enlightenment and responses to it—the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who died in 1804, is an ambiguous figure. But one theme of his late thought bears on what is at issue here. In his book on aesthetics, the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant defined an 'aesthetic idea' as 'that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. *concept*, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never quite get on level terms with or render completely intelligible' (pp.175–176). Kant confined what he said to the domain of aesthetics, but I think we can see it as having a wider scope. In my brief remarks about rape I said that a language which aspired to making sense of rape as a serious evil could articulate the violation it effects only against the background of the distinctively volatile tenderness and intimacy realisable in sexual love. (Someone could say—many influenced by post-modernism of the first kind have in effect said—that all such talk of the tenderness and intimacy realisable through sexual love is just an insubstantial ideological 'effect' of various social and cultural causes. In other words it is mere romantic rhetoric. My only remark about that here is to repeat that if you think that you make it very difficult to see how rape can be thought of as any more serious than the relatively trivial offence I contrasted it with earlier.) I think the idea of 'violation' I there spoke of is like what Kant called an aesthetic idea. That is to say, it is not as if we already have a full and clear 'understanding' of what violation is, and then we just apply it to the 'action' of rape. It is rather that its 'sense' for us remains to be given through what we can make of it in this particular context. It will acquire resonance and depth which it wholly lacks when we speak, for example, of traffic violations, or even of violation of someone's right to choose for him or herself.

It is important that it is not the word in itself, but the word in a particular way of using it—or better, in a particular way of finding or 'resolving' oneself through one's use of it—which is expressive of what Kant called an aesthetic idea. It is not, for instance, that the word 'autonomy' is in itself different from 'violation' in this regard. As employed in the way of thinking and speaking about rape which I mentioned, it functions as something more fixed than an 'aesthetic idea'. The thought there was: 'we know what autonomy is—it is being free to do what you choose—and rape denies that.' But we can readily imagine—and many political thinkers, moralists, psychoanalysts, and even New Age gurus are busy at work—feeling the way towards an

ever deepened sense of what autonomy might mean. Not any 'being free to do what you choose' manifests autonomy because sometimes your choices might be self-destructive, or express radical self-deception. And so on. So even the idea of autonomy can lend itself to such progressive deepening without limit—without our ever being finally able conceptually to 'get on level terms with it and render it completely intelligible'. Kant is noting, then, a kind of thinking—which he says is operative only in aesthetic judgment, but which I am suggesting has a much wider scope—which essentially involves one's trying, through an always deepenable attentiveness to the particular occasion which summons the thinking, to 'get on level terms with' something which can never be finally grasped, which can never be wholly laid bare in concepts. One thing this means is that such thinking can always be intensified, or deepened, without limit. One can always press towards further ways in which the experience and the language—which need each other but which can never become perfectly congruent—can interpenetrate and illuminate one another. But it is crucial to the kind of thinking Kant is here picturing that it neither ideally issues in, nor is merely preparing the way for, a transparent self-understanding.

This Kantian line of thought is post-modernist, I suggest, in that it recognises the impossibility of a final transparently rational self-understanding. But this recognition occurs not in the spirit either of dismay or glee, or of complacent bravado presenting itself as facing honestly up to the sceptically diminished possibilities of the present age—tones which frequently belong to the first kind of postmodernist response. What those various tones indicate is the thought that the only kind of real self-understanding would indeed be such a final transparently rational one, and since that cannot be had we are condemned to scepticism about truth, understanding, the individual, justice, etc. This is another version of the familiar thought: 'After the death of God there can be no certainty'. But the most interesting aspect of this thought is the superficiality of its own manner of rejecting. It does not overcome, but simply leaves unquestioned, the way of thinking about truth, understanding, the individual, morality and God which is expressed in the aspiration to a final transparently rational self-understanding. From the conviction that this way of thinking them will not 'deliver', it concludes that truth, understanding, the individual etc. reduce to the status of mere 'effects' of the operation of indefinitely many 'forces'—cultural, historical, biological, economic and other forces. But one does not have to conclude this. Indeed it is arguably incoherent to do so. For if those earlier ways of thinking of truth and so

on really are in themselves incoherent, then we have lost nothing in losing them that ever could have realised for us a true understanding of ourselves. No real possibilities have been taken from us by (let us now call it) the death of God.

In the face of that thought, postmodernism can take a different form. It can involve recognising the need to think differently about truth, understanding, the individual, freedom, autonomy, morality, even God—the need to think them as not essentially constituted in a way in which the first kind of postmodernism colludes with one tradition of the Enlightenment in thinking them, and therefore as having to be abandoned when that way of thinking them proves inadequate. In the territory of recognition of such a need I locate the aspect of Kant's philosophy which I have been sketching. The thought I take from Kant is that the need to 'make sense' of ourselves through the presentation of what he calls 'aesthetic ideas' marks out a distinctive character that our understanding of ourselves as human beings actually has. That is what real understanding is like.

There are two implications of what I thus take from Kant which I want to develop a little. In the last of his *Four Quartets*, ruminating on the poet's task, T. S. Eliot writes that 'our concern was speech, and speech impelled us / To purify the dialect of the tribe'. 'Purify' is an interesting word there, but it is the final phrase I focus on. 'Dialect of the tribe' is just right. As language users we are indeed a 'tribe', people with a historically situated and complexly shaped human form of life. It is not just an accident, a mere contingency, that we do not speak Esperanto, or some other 'language' yet closer to the voice of abstractly perfect reason, by our subjection to which alone it might be thought that we would discover what we truly are. But that this is so does not mean that we should stop speaking, or thinking, about 'what we truly are'. The point, and Eliot's thought, is that what we truly are is creatures whose speech must be that of a 'tribe'. 'What we truly are' can be revealed to us only through speech which is shaped by the concretely human form of life which we live. Only the full use of the resources of such speech has any chance of realising the significance and meaning of human experience, through realising which we discover who and what we truly are. To stick to my example, we will not get anywhere towards understanding, making sense of, the significance of rape as a serious crime if we try to resort to Esperanto, or if we attempt to strip our own language of all nuance, all affectivity, all resonance, all depth. Doing that could only impoverish our sense of the significance of rape as a serious crime. The implication of Eliot's words, as of what

Kant says, is that the fully alive and imaginative use of such 'tribal' speech is a condition of our humanly understanding what we humanly are. That is not a merely temporary 'resting place' on the way to a transparent self-understanding which would, ideally, take us beyond what is expressible only by means of the resources of such 'tribal' speech. The alive and imaginative use of such speech is an eliminable condition of our humanly understanding ourselves. And again I emphasise the word 'humanly' here. It should be clear that nothing in this way of thinking depends, as Riemer and the first kind of post-modernism suppose, on specifically religious—or on otherwise metaphysical—convictions which may no longer be available to us.

I have reflected on Eliot's use of the word 'tribe', but not yet on 'dialect'. Note that he does not say *language* of the tribe. A dialect is a variation on a language, a variation which reflects local conditions and differences. This does not mean that *the* language of which various dialects are indeed dialects must be identifiable independently of all the dialects. Even so it allows the thought of a commonness here, a something shared between the dialects. Likewise, I think Eliot is evoking the thought of universal human experience, while resisting the suggestion that it can be identified independently of all 'tribal' realisations of it. If there *is* universal meaning in human experience, it has to be realised through the deployment of the resources of an absolutely particular, culturally shaped language. (Thus one might aspire to realising the significance of rape, even while acknowledging differences of 'dialect' even here.) This is the mode in which alone universality of experience is possible here. And this is different from (say) physics, which arguably does aspire to some sort of mathematical equivalent of Esperanto.

I spoke of two implications of the kind of thinking which Kant calls 'presenting aesthetic ideas'. The second is that it requires not just the deployment of a richly culturally saturated language, but also the capacity of an individual to be able to rise to speaking it with an individual voice. There is all the difference in the world between someone echoing the nostrums of the day, and transforming them into individually authoritative utterance. Literary works which belong to what Bloom calls the Canon are those whose individuality of voice is so strong as to require an effort on our part as readers to hear and respond, in doing which we make something new and different of ourselves. In this is *our* individuality deepened—'augmented' to use his word again. Individuality so understood is very different from what it comes to on the first strand of post-modernism I spoke of. There it

was only an 'effect' of the operation of wholly impersonal forces, and as thus a passive consequence—an 'epiphenomenon', an ideological effect, a mere piece of (for instance) the Marxian superstructure—it is precluded from making any real difference. On the picture implicit in what Kant says, individuality involves a perpetual redefining and re-shaping of ourselves in the activity of such thinking. What Kant calls 'thinking aesthetic ideas', and I have spoken of more generally as finding an ever deepenable sense in our experience, is an activity of individual self-realisation. The Kantian picture, along with Bloom's, actually sustains a sense of our individual human dignity and value which is quite absent from the other picture, as it also sustains a sense of this individuality as something we can never fully know, or be wholly in possession of, but have continually to rediscover and explore. It is continually 'at issue', and continually in resolution, in our engagement in the kind of exploratory thinking which is ever demanded of us if we are to 'make sense' of our experience, and which 'reading in the Canon' demands of us. And once again, the sense Kant and Bloom enable us to make of the idea of individuality relies on nothing which has to be regarded as a relic of specifically religious convictions. The realising of such individuality depends upon one's finding oneself in, and trusting,⁶ what Eliot calls the 'dialect of the tribe'. Without that communal background, one can be, as an individual, nothing. Yet without the creative 'agon' with the dialect of the tribe which Bloom speaks of—and himself manifests in his own critical response throughout his book—one will also remain less than an individual. I do not mean—neither does Bloom—that everyone has to be a reader of high literature. One is *already* involved in that individualising 'agon' just in being a member of the tribe, thereby participating in a living language by having to speak it as no-one else ever quite has or will. In that sense individuality demands of everyone that he or she be a poet. But in another sense there is also a need for particular people of the kind we call poets and novelists and dramatists to purify—we might also say deepen or intensify—the dialect of the tribe.

Notes

- 1 *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages*, New York, 1994.
- 2 Nor do I myself think that Bloom really thinks it is so tied. His rhetoric here has, it seems to me, temporarily blurred his own deeper insight.
- 3 *The Demidenko Debate*, Sydney, 1996.

- 4 Here I am indebted to Raimond Gaita, 'Remorse and the Depiction of Evil', *Quadrant* (May 1996): 33-36.
- 5 Among now classic texts of postmodernism which I think belong to the first strand I should include Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*, Cambridge, Mass., 1988; Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, New Haven, 1979; J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, New York, 1987, and even Richard Rorty in *The Consequences of Pragmatism and Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. But the analytical distinction between what I call two strands of postmodernism is cleaner than the facts of the matter, and in all of the writers mentioned one can find, in different ways and degrees, some suggestions of the second strand of thought. Foucault is one writer, I think, whose work oscillates from one strand to the other. (There is more of the second strand in the later work than in the earlier work, but the contrast is not just between earlier and later Foucault.) While, as I go on to suggest above, Kant's *Critique of Judgment* shows that second strand, its most sustained philosophical expression is the work of the later Wittgenstein.
- 6 Trusting here does not have to be something naive or thoughtless or even uncritical, any more than trust between people need be so.