

A Reflection on the 'Culture Wars':  
Harold Bloom, Gore Vidal, and the Resistance of  
the Philistines<sup>1</sup>

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In David Rosenberg's translation of the putative *Book of J*, published with Harold Bloom's commentary in 1990, the Philistines enter the narrative when the patriarch Isaac, son of Abram, moves into Philistine territory, in Gerar, during a time of famine. Thriving within Yahweh's favour, Isaac reaps a fruitful harvest, his sheep and cattle multiply, and he becomes wealthy. Consequently, as Rosenberg tells it, 'Philistine envy also bloomed'.

The wells dug by his father's servants, in Abram's day, were blocked by the Philistines, filled in with dirt.

'Go out from our people', said Abimelech to Isaac.

'You have sprung up too strong for us.'<sup>2</sup>

Isaac and his people move into the Gerar valley, and disputes ensue with the shepherds there over the ownership of more wells, dug by Isaac's servants. Isaac and his people move once again, to Beersheba, where they are followed by the Philistine king, Abimelech. Abimelech has belatedly realized the advantages of being on good terms with a man who is blessed by Yahweh, and asks for a truce, a new covenant between them. Isaac agrees to this, and peace is restored.

Matthew Arnold appropriated the name of the historical Philistines to designate the middle class in *Culture and Anarchy*, explaining that '*Philistine* gives the notion of something particularly stiff-necked and perverse in the

1 This article is an extended version of a paper delivered at the 17th biennial ANZASA conference in Christchurch, New Zealand, 2-7 February 1996.

2 *The Book of J* Translated from the Hebrew by David Rosenberg. Interpreted by Harold Bloom (New York, Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), p. 99.

resistance to light and its children'. For Arnold, the great defect of the Philistine is 'a defect in delicacy of perception'.<sup>3</sup> The Philistine episode in *The Book of J* ends happily, with Abimelech manifesting sufficient perspicacity eventually to see the true state of things. Nonetheless, the figuration of the Philistines in *The Book of J*, as those who fill up the wells with dirt because of an indiscriminating envy, provides an inviting trope through which to approach the subject of the recent so-called 'culture wars' in the United States.

In *The Western Canon*, those whom Harold Bloom posits as being wilfully impervious to the light — his implied Philistines — are those of his professional colleagues who he collectively terms 'the School of Resentment': 'Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists [and] Deconstructors'.<sup>4</sup> This list of members varies slightly throughout the book — what is constant is Bloom's certainty that a formidable array of fellow-scholars is 'destroying literary study in the name of socio-economic justice' (p. 113). This 'School of Resentment' overlaps with what Bloom deems 'The movement misnamed "multiculturalism", [which he describes as] altogether anti-intellectual and anti-literary, [and intent upon] removing from the curriculum

<sup>3</sup> *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869, ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1932, 1960), p. 182. As Arnold indicated earlier in the essay 'Heinrich Heine', he derived the term 'Philistinism' from the German *Philister*, which had apparently emerged in the late seventeenth century as a symptom of the hostility between university students and townspeople at Jena. 'The French have adopted the term *épiciier* (grocer), to designate the sort of being whom the Germans designate by the term Philistine; but the French term ... is really, I think, in itself much less apt and expressive than the German term.' 'Heinrich Heine', in *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1962), iii. 111.

<sup>4</sup> *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994), p. 20. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

most works that present imaginative and cognitive difficulties ...' (p. 422).

Bloom declares his intended audience of *The Western Canon* to be the 'Common Reader', under which term he embraces those who still love reading for its own sake (p. 518). Bloom would appear to be using the term as an honorific, connoting those who may need to be led in their tastes but who — unlike his academic opponents — are open-minded and intelligent enough to grasp the truth when it is put before them. Similarly, in *Cultural Literacy*, E.D. Hirsch refers to 'the common reader' as 'a person who knows the things known by other literate persons in the culture'. The common reader in his conception is the person who is culturally literate, whose knowledge lies above what is possessed by everyone, and below the expert level of specialists.<sup>5</sup> Hirsch's 'common reader', then, is not so common after all.

A reading, one after the other, of the prominent texts in the recent stage of the debate about American cultural literacy reveals suggestive shifts and nuances in the use of certain terms, 'the common reader' being one of them. A comparison of the common reader of Bloom and Hirsch respectively with the hypothetical individual sketched in the title-piece of Virginia Woolf's collection of essays, *The Common Reader*, demonstrates something of the shift. Woolf, following Samuel Johnson, projects a common reader whose intellect was haphazard and indiscriminating, '[whose] deficiencies as a critic are too obvious to be pointed out'.<sup>6</sup> In the American context William Charvat, in his study of the profession of authorship in America between 1800 and 1870, cites Herman Melville's description of 'the common reader' as 'the superficial skimmer of pages' on the one hand, and

5 E.D. Hirsch Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), pp. 13, 19.

6 Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1929), pp. 11-12.

Albert Guerard's definition — 'the alert non-professional reader' — on the other.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the term 'the common reader' has traditionally been ambiguous, implying the potential for either a lack of culture and sensibility, or precisely the opposite — the innate ability to discern 'the light'. As Bloom points out, there is now such a glut of books in existence, besides the array of technological distractions available, that the reading lifespan of any individual today is proportionately very limited. Thus choices must be made. According to the internal logic of *The Western Canon*, if the common reader is seduced by the 'multiculturalists', by the School of Resentment, and collectively becomes enthused by the works of Alice Walker rather than by those of Shakespeare, it is as if the metaphorical wells of literary studies are being filled with what is trendy, politically correct, thus obstructing access to the literature that 'matters', which is of 'lasting value'. If the 'multiculturalists' are implicitly imagined by Bloom as so many Philistines filling the wells of literary studies with dirt, because of their envy of those who have hitherto been historically blessed, then his common reader — on the surface at least — is being addressed as a potential Abimelech, capable of recognizing and reconciling with the good.

Bloom's particular animus towards Alice Walker must strike any reader of *The Western Canon*. Curiously, he treats the no less 'ideological' and popular Toni Morrison with respect. Interviewed for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* after the publication of *The Western Canon*, Bloom categorically dismissed Alice Walker as 'the worst writer in America'. Praising Morrison's novels *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon*, he went on to say, 'I think Miss Morrison in *Beloved* and even more in *Jazz* has gone wrong.

<sup>7</sup> *The Profession of Authorship in America: 1800-1870* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 263.

She's taking her political responsibilities, her social and communitarian responsibilities, very seriously'.<sup>8</sup>

Bloom's politely expressed suggestion here, that Morrison is misprising her talent by regarding literature as a vehicle for social comment, is consistent with views more trenchantly expressed in *The Western Canon*. Bloom's premise is that literature should be approached apolitically, and that its inherent value lies not in its relation to the socio-historical contexts of its inscription, but rather in aesthetic criteria alone. 'Aesthetic criticism', he says, 'returns us to the autonomy of imaginative literature and the sovereignty of the solitary soul, the reader not as a person in society but as the deep self, our ultimate inwardness' (pp. 10-11) '... the individual self is the only method and the whole standard for apprehending aesthetic value' (p. 23). Literature, in his belief, has no moral or moralizing aspect. 'Real reading is a lonely activity and does not teach anyone to become a better citizen' (p. 519).

Bloom was complimented in *The Hudson Review*, by a reviewer of *The Western Canon*, for reorienting his stance toward the common reader.<sup>9</sup> His current project, 'Bloom's Notes', a series of brief commentaries on literary texts which may blow the various producers of traditional crib notes out of the water, would appear to signal a further step along this path. However, Bloom's overtures to 'the common reader' are clearly equivocal. Advocating our submersion in 'the difficult pleasures' of canonical literature, in *The Western Canon* and throughout his career, Bloom seems to be offering the possibility of an elevated solipsism to everyone, in the Emersonian discourse of a democracy of intuition.<sup>10</sup>

8 *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 7 September 1994, (A10-11, 24-25), A25.

9 David Dooley. 'Bloom and the Canon', *The Hudson Review* XLVII (1995), pp. 333-338.

10 'Strong poems strengthen us by teaching us *how to talk to ourselves*, rather than how to talk to others.' Harold Bloom in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 387.

But the invitation apparently thus issued is cursorily withdrawn. In the conclusion of *The Western Canon*, Bloom remarks that 'The strongest poetry is cognitively and imaginatively too difficult to be read deeply by more than a relative few of any social class, gender, race, or ethnic origin' (p. 520). Denouncing what he describes as the current 'culture of universal access', he at times paints himself into corners of self-contradiction. If the apprehension of aesthetic value is a matter for the individual, then how can there be a literary canon? If the capacity to appreciate difficult — i.e. canonical — literature is given only to the few, then can Bloom be addressing his ostensible audience, 'the common reader', in good faith? At such moments, one is reminded uncomfortably of the less endearingly eccentric Allan Bloom, who far more overtly addresses an elite in *The Closing of the American Mind*.<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Levine's summing up, in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, of Allan Bloom's contentious contribution to the debate on culture pertains here.

There is, finally, the ... sense that culture is something created by the few for the few, threatened by the many, and imperilled by democracy; the conviction that culture cannot come from the young, the inexperienced, the untutored, the marginal; the belief that culture is finite and fixed, defined and measured, complex and difficult of access, recognisable only by those trained to recognise it, comprehensible only to those qualified to comprehend it.<sup>12</sup>

For Gore Vidal, another controversial figure in American letters, the connection sought between writer and reader, and the nature and quality of the contemporary reading public, are also matters of concern. In an interview with me in 1985, he elaborated on these subjects.

11 *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987).

12 Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 252.

... it is the unity between reader and writer that is ultimately what this thing is about. This doesn't happen very often.... It's the idea that the writer has inhabited the text and it comes to the reader, who is inhabited or inhabits that text, and the circle is complete.

Vidal went on to criticize what he perceives to be the excessively emotional, personal style of American literary criticism, in book reviewing in particular.

... this is part of the false democracy — everyone thinks that his opinion is just as important as everyone else's, "cos, aren't I just as important as every else? Yes! I've got my rights too." The point is, you don't have your rights. Literature is not a democracy.<sup>13</sup>

Here we find something similar to what we have encountered less explicitly in *The Western Canon* — a conception of the reading experience as ideally a mystical experience, a private communion with a text, and through that text, with its author. The corollary, as in Bloom, is the assumption that only a few are privileged with the capacity so to experience the difficult pleasures of reading.

The interview was conducted two months after Vidal and Bloom first met, on the occasion of a party in New York to celebrate Vidal's turning sixty. I am not suggesting that at this stage there was any mutual influence at work. Rather, their affinities were such that a cordial acquaintance would later develop. Ten years later, I posed a number of questions to Vidal, about his position vis-a-vis the various more visible participants in the 'culture wars'. Vidal's responses were typically cagey, simultaneously self-revealing and self-concealing.

In the middle of his memoir *Palimpsest*, Vidal alludes to *The Western Canon*, but then breaks off, stating that a memoir is 'not the place' to discuss literary theory.<sup>14</sup> Asked

13 Interview with Heather Neilson, *Antithesis*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (1987), pp. 41-58.

14 Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest: a Memoir* (London, Andre Deutsch, 1995), p. 260.

if he would indicate where he felt Bloom to be on the right track in *The Western Canon*, and where he himself would depart from Bloom, he replied:

Like everyone else (any good) his literary theory is a protean affair at whose hard core is the agon between writer now and writer-ancestor, usually Shakespeare. This will do for a time but I don't find his readings rigid or Procrustean.<sup>15</sup>

Given that Vidal's own writing has largely been dedicated to the supplementation of the American education system, political education particularly, I asked him if he disagreed with Bloom's position that the worth of literature is to be judged according to aesthetic values only — that literature has no moral effect on those who read it. His response:

'Moral' is not a word I use: what IS moral might be the question that every interesting writer must answer in his own way. I suppose I have had some conscious utilitarian purpose in educating my countrymen but the education of myself is all that I have ever really cared about and I do it by writing from my reading as Harold Bloom does, in his fashion.<sup>16</sup>

Asked why he had not explicitly joined the debate on the so-called culture wars, and specifically for his views on Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, he evades.

Allan Bloom was a narrow depressing character. Harold Bloom is larger, in every sense. There is no war that interests me. There is good and bad literature and in every generation only a handful of critics can sort it out. But why sort it out? Why not read, and see — study — your own response to *Chaos and Old Night*? The replacement of the literary text by literary theory (written in academic near-English) is a bad thing and if it does not pass, the Internet will sweep everything away.<sup>17</sup>

The persona which emerges from these responses — the detached and barely interested observer of the twilight of literary studies — is in marked contrast with the Vidal

15 Fax from Gore Vidal to Heather Neilson, from Italy, 24 January 1996.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

recognized by Edward Said who, twice in the 1993 Reith lectures, invoked Vidal and Noam Chomsky together as models of the politically committed and fearless intellectual.<sup>18</sup>

Vidal would be expected to disagree with the absoluteness with which Bloom seeks to separate the aesthetic from the moral and political. Vidal has, after all, aspired more than once to enter conventional politics as well as pursuing his writing career, and his writing has explicitly served as an alternative means for him to influence his society. A cogent description of the difficulties of a man like Vidal in the United States today is provided by Allan Bloom:

The aspiration to be number one and gain great fame is both natural in man and, properly trained, one of the soul's great strengths. Democracy in itself is hostile to such spiritedness and prevents its fulfilment. This was a problem for all ancient democracies. Coriolanus represents an extreme example of the man who refuses to ground his right to rule on any admixture of consent of the people, in this case a people ready to accept his right to rule.<sup>19</sup>

That *Coriolanus*, the tragedy of an aristocratic war hero turned traitor, is Vidal's favourite of Shakespeare's plays, is a nice detail. As Allan Bloom states earlier in *The Closing of the American Mind*, 'The claim of democracy is that every man decides for himself. The use of one's natural faculties to determine for oneself what is true and false and good and bad is the American philosophic method.'<sup>20</sup> It is a statement that resonates ironically with Harold Bloom's remarks on the individual self as the only method for apprehending aesthetic criteria, quoted earlier. Vidal, politician and didactic novelist, is pledged in good faith to further what he sees as true democracy in the United States. However, just as he regards as a 'false democracy' the notion that any ill-educated

18 Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London, Random House, 1994), pp. xv, 25.

19 *The Closing of the American Mind*, p. 329.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 246.

person has the right to judge literature, so too he regards as a 'false democracy' a society in which the populace is not educated in its history and kept misinformed or under-informed with regard to contemporary reality. In such circumstances, his whole *oeuvre* implies, *noblesse oblige* those like himself to do the judging, and to lead the minds of their compatriots towards certain truths.

Were Vidal to take an explicit position in relation to the debate about culture in the United States, his position would be somewhat anomalous, especially with respect to Edward Said and Harold Bloom. On political issues, he departs from Bloom, and is much closer to Said. Vidal has consistently criticized the American government for its favouring of Israel, manifested in the large proportion of foreign aid which successive governments have directed to that nation. In his political campaigns, he has taken the absolute position that the United States should not be involved — overtly or covertly — in the politics of other countries. His and Said's representations of the United States as an aggressive imperial power in their respective writings are very similar.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the affinities in Vidal's and Bloom's work are striking — from the valetudinarian tonalities of *Palimpsest* and *The Western Canon*, to the more substantial instance of the almost simultaneous publication, in 1992, of Bloom's *The American Religion* and Vidal's *Live From Golgotha*, attesting to the intellectual concerns both writers bring to bear upon the United States as 'a post-Christian nation'. In 1985 Vidal spoke with approval of Italo Calvino's belief that all children should be obliged to memorize many great texts<sup>22</sup> — as a classicist, he cannot but be in sympathy with Bloom's nostalgia for a well-read general public. However, Vidal cannot argue with the degree of conviction that Bloom does that people should be guided

21 See, for example, Vidal's *Empire: a Novel* (New York, Random House, 1987), together with the fourth part of Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1993).

22 Interview with Heather Neilson, *loc.cit.*, p. 50.

to read only canonical literature, because as a novelist he wants to be widely read himself. The audience of Alice Walker — who he says he has never read<sup>23</sup> — very probably overlaps with his audience. The dilemma in which he is perpetually caught is that he hungers for the approval of the masses, while at the same time distrusting their judgment.

Bloom's disparagement of Alice Walker I read as, in part, a deflecting strategy vis-a-vis one of her strong admirers, Henry Louis Gates, who — for whatever reasons — Bloom does not choose to confront directly. The *New Statesman* review of *The Western Canon* advised that when Bloom uses the word 'multiculturalism', this should be read as a code word for 'black'.<sup>24</sup> This is too glibly reductive. Henry Louis Gates is clearly on Bloom's mind, but equally so is the Edward Said of *Culture and Imperialism*, although neither of them is named in *The Western Canon*. Said's purpose and premises in *Culture and Imperialism* are encapsulated in the following statement, reiterated in its essentials at various points in the book:

To read [the] major works of the imperial period retrospectively and heterophonically with other histories and traditions counterpointed against them, read them in the light of decolonization, is neither to slight their great aesthetic force nor to treat them reductively as imperialist propaganda. Still, it is a much graver mistake to read them stripped of their affiliations with the facts of power which informed and enabled them.<sup>25</sup>

Jane Austen becomes the battleground upon which Bloom feints at Said in *The Western Canon*. In a section of *Culture and Imperialism* entitled 'Jane Austen and Empire', Said examines the brief allusions to Sir Thomas Bertram's plantation in Antigua in *Mansfield Park*, arguing that these allusions imply significant historical sub-text to the novel, as

23 Fax to Heather Neilson, *loc.cit.*

24 Boyd Tonkin, 'The Bloomsday book ...'. *New Statesman and Society*, 20 January 1995, p. 40.

25 *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 195.

Sir Thomas's wealth — eventually that of the heroine — is based upon slave labour. Bloom replies in his own chapter on Austen.

... it has become fashionable to talk about the socioeconomic realities that Jane Austen excludes, such as the West Indian slavery that is part of the ultimate basis for the financial security most of her characters enjoy. But all achieved literary works are founded upon exclusions, and no one has demonstrated that increased consciousness of the relation between culture and imperialism is of the slightest benefit whatsoever in learning to read *Mansfield Park*. (p. 257)

Instead of continuing to engage Said head on, by offering an alternative reading of *Mansfield Park*, Bloom cannily swerves into one of his idiosyncratic, compellingly loving psychological readings, of *Persuasion*.

Engaged long-term in the editing of the *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates in 1992 brought out *Loose Canons*,<sup>26</sup> a series of essays in which he argues that the decentering of the humanities is a process well underway, but one which does not necessitate the discarding or devaluing of texts hitherto regarded as essential. Gates alludes twice to Harold Bloom in *Loose Canons*, in both instances within parodic pieces in which Gates assumes the character of the detective Sam Slade. In the first piece, Slade questions Bloom about the process of canon-formations.

Bloom folded his hands together under his chin. 'My dear, the strong poet will abide. The weak will not. All else is commentary. Politics has nothing to do with it,'<sup>27</sup>

Denying that he has any influence on the fortunes of literary texts and authors, Bloom slyly winks, revealing himself to be politically canny after all, his familiar helplessly bewildered persona just a mask. Here Gates strikes at one of the basic problems of Bloom's work in the eyes of his critics, namely his denial of the complexly combative processes of canon-

<sup>26</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> 'Canon Confidential: A Sam Slade Caper', *Loose Canons*, p. 8.

formation in the past — of the ideological factors and sociological circumstances involved in the promulgation of some texts and the disappearance of others. In *The Western Canon* Bloom reiterates his belief that, until recently, traditionally 'aesthetic choice has always guided every secular aspect of canon formation.'<sup>28</sup>

For Bloom, the reader who reads literature as separated from its context in the world, as performing in a sphere of its own, is the closest thing possible to a 'disinterested' reader, who alone can apprehend the universal, timeless value of the greatest work. Gates and Said, each with his own agenda, proceed from the premise that culture — and the aesthetic forms which partially comprise it — derive from distinctive historical experiences, and should not be treated as independent of that history. None the less, each is at pains to assert that this does not mean that the literature and culture of a particular group of people, say Africans, is accessible only to the members of that group. For both of them the relatively recent move towards multiculturalism in the academic profession means an inclusive inquiring engagement with different cultures, not the proliferation of separate, self-contained specializations.

In Gates's second parodic allusion to Bloom in *Loose Canons*, Sam Slade watches a biblical scholar being interviewed on 'Good Morning America'.

The guy had just published a best-selling book claiming that *The Anxiety of Influence* was written by a woman. Not all of it, understand. Just the passages about Blake and gnosticism. The good parts, in other words.<sup>29</sup>

Here Gates is burlesquing what Bloom himself acknowledges to be the 'chosen fiction' at the core of *The Book of J*, namely that the author of the Hebrew *Book of J* was a woman, a member of the royal house of Israel, writing during the reign of Rehoboam.

28 *The Western Canon*, p. 22.

29 'The Big Picture', in *Loose Canons*, p. 153.

Rather than simply mischievously engaging in a metaphorical emasculation of Bloom in this parody, Gates is astutely indicating the identification Bloom evidently feels with his character J. Bloom speculates that she lived in fear of exile, and her writing contains — in his and Rosenberg's reading of it — veiled criticism of Rehoboam, under whom much of the kingdom of David and Solomon had been lost. One might see Bloom's fascination with this political aspect of J's writing as an aberrant foray into New Historicism on his part, or a succumbing to the temptation not to read literature devoid of the context of its inscription. Bloom would inevitably respond to such a challenge that it is the quality of J's language that is his subject, and could ironically use in his own defence (and J's) a remark of Said's in *Culture and Imperialism* — 'A lesser work wears its historical affiliation more plainly.'<sup>30</sup>

*The Western Canon* is on one level a book about Bloom's perception of himself as a belated thinker and critic. In *The Book of J*, five years earlier, Bloom defies his own belatedness with an audacious and compelling blend of scholarship and fantasy, speaking through a fictional woman who lived in times as troubled and dangerous as Bloom's, but who achieved the unique luxury of absolute originality. One reviewer of *The Western Canon* has shrewdly observed that 'the book is really more an autobiography than a critical polemic.'<sup>31</sup> Given that *The Western Canon* reverberates with *The Book of J*, the earlier work provides useful clues to the psychology of *The Western Canon*. It also throws into further perspective the paradoxes arising from Bloom's ideological position.

30 *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 116.

31 Christopher Clausen, 'Second Thoughts: Canons in Front of Them' *The New Leader* LXXVII, No. 12, 19 December 1994 - 16 January 1995, pp. 18-19. Darren Tofts has since also described *The Western Canon* as 'Bloom's misreading of the discursive formation also known as Harold Bloom.' See 'Shakespeare, Donald Duck and the School of Resentment' in *The UTS Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, November 1995, pp. 242-3.

Bloom's two favourite characters in the putative *Book of J* are Jacob and Tamar. Both of these are ambitious usurpers who, through their strength of will, rewrite their destined roles in history. As Bloom summarizes the career of Jacob:

He battles Esau in the womb over which of them is to have priority of birth, and though bested by his fierce twin, he still emerges combatively, holding on to his brother's heel. We can say that his drive defines the Blessings once and for all: it is for more life. ... He must also know humiliation, since his progress and survival are marked by fraud or tricksterism, by heel-clutching. Yet he holds us fast even when we cannot approve of him.<sup>32</sup>

Tamar appears far more briefly than Jacob in the *Book of Genesis* and the *Book of J*, yet Bloom nominates her as 'the most memorable character in the *Book of J*.'<sup>33</sup> The widowed daughter-in-law of Jacob's son Judah, Tamar tricks Judah into having sexual intercourse with her so that she will not be left childless and nameless on the periphery of history. As Bloom has it, 'Tamar wins the immortality of her own name, and a central place in the story that she was not born into and so had to usurp for herself.'<sup>34</sup>

The resonances are obvious between Bloom's interpretation of these two characters, and the most familiar aspect of his *oeuvre*, namely his preoccupation with the agonistic rivalry with precursors which he regards as imperative for the strong artist. Bloom states in *The Western Canon* that a work of literature cannot enter the canon unless it contains within it the counter-canonical (p. 232). In *The Book of J* he is reading Jacob and Tamar as performative narratives of selfhood, aggressively countering what otherwise might have appeared to be an inexorable historical trajectory. Something of this has, of course, filtered through into the self-portrait in *The Western Canon* — which Peter Conrad has bitchily described as Bloom's 'pretext for

32 *The Book of J*, p. 210.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 220.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

dramatizing his own martyred heroism'.<sup>35</sup> But the irony is that, in Jacob and Tamar, Bloom has provided perfect prototypes for the projects of the multiculturalists, the African-Americanists, the feminists — for all those who are seeking to restore the lost voices of the past, the embodied reality behind the aesthetic representations of the historically blessed.

To move back from the general to the specific — whatever other grounds on which Bloom may reject the work of Alice Walker, and have reservations about the later Toni Morrison, he has refused to recognize that these are authentically counter-canonical writers, wittily engaging with the 'great' texts of the mainly white male tradition, just as Gore Vidal in his own way offers in fiction re-interpretations of received history. The strong writer does not simply 'abide' — he or she must fight, or be fought for. Multiculturalism in the context of literary studies does not mean that all writing warrants equal attention. Rather, it means the cessation of resentful well-filling — on both sides of the debate — and the unanxious readiness to consider the Tamars writing in our midst.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> *The Observer Review*, 22 January 1995, 16.

<sup>36</sup> My thanks to Loes Baker for her assistance in the compilation of reviews of *The Western Canon*.