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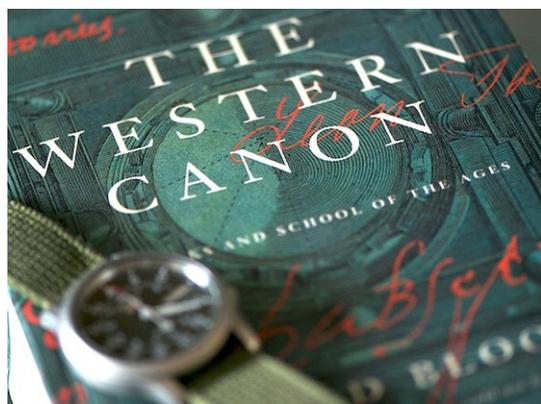
Drunk on La Verse

## Harold Bloom's American Sublime

*The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*, Harold Bloom, Penguin Random House, 524 pages.

By ALLEN MENDENHALL • May 28, 2015

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What can be said about Harold Bloom that hasn't been said already? The Yale professor is a controversial visionary, a polarizing seer who has been recycling and reformulating parallel theories of creativity and influence, with slightly different foci and inflections, for his entire career, never seeming tiresome or repetitive. He demonstrates what is manifestly true about the best literary critics: they are as much artists as the subjects they undertake.

Bloom's criticism is characterized by sonorous, cadenced, almost haunting prose, by an exacting judgment and expansive imagination, and by a painful, sagacious sensitivity to the complexities of human behavior and psychology. He is a discerning Romantic in an age of banality and distraction, in a culture of proud illiteracy and historical unawareness. Bloom reminds us that to be faithful to tradition is to rework it, to keep it alive, and that tradition and innovation are yoked pairs, necessarily dependent on one another.

Bloom has been cultivating the image and reputation of a prophet or mystic for decades. His stalwart defense of the Western canon is well known but widely misunderstood. His descriptive account is that the canon is fluid, not fixed—open, not closed. It might be stable, but it's not unchangeable. The literary canon is the product of evolution, a collection of the fittest works that have been selectively retained, surviving the onslaught of relentless competition.

Bloom's prescriptive position is that, because human agency is a controllable factor in this agnostic filtering process, serious readers can and should ensure that masterpieces, those stirring products of original, even genius minds, are retained, and that the latest works are held to the highest aesthetic standards, which are themselves established and proven by revisionary struggle. The merit of a work is not found in the identity of its author—his or her race, gender, or sexuality—but in the text proper, in the forms and qualities of the work itself.

Bloom's latest book, *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime*, examines ambitious and representative American authors, its chapters organized by curious pairings: Whitman with Melville (the "Giant Forms" of American literature), Emerson with Dickinson (the Sage of Concord is Dickinson's "closest imaginative father"), Hawthorne with Henry James (a relation "of direct influence"), Twain with Frost ("our only great masters with popular audiences"), Stevens with Eliot ("an intricate interlocking" developed through antithetical competition), and Faulkner with Crane ("each forces the American language to its limits"). This mostly male cast, a dozen progenitors of the American sublime, is not meant to constitute a national canon. For that, Bloom avers in his introduction, he envisions alternative selections, including more women: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Marianne Moore, and Flannery O'Connor. Bloom's chosen 12 represent, instead, "our incessant effort to transcend the human without forsaking humanism." These writers have in common a "receptivity to daemonic influx." "What lies beyond the human for nearly all of these writers," Bloom explains, "is the daemon."

What is this daemon, you ask. As always, Bloom is short on definition, embracing the constructive obscurity—that Richard Poirier celebrated in Emerson and William James and Robert Frost, Bloom's predecessors. Bloom implies that calling the "daemon" an idea is too limiting; the word defies ready explanation or summation.

The daemon, as I read it, is an amorphous and spiritual source of quasi-divine inspiration and influence, the spark of transitional creative powers; it's akin to shamanism, and endeavors to transcend, move beyond, and surpass. Its opposite is stasis, repose. "Daemons divide up divine power and are in perpetual movement from their supernal heights to us," Bloom remarks in one of his more superlative moments. "They bring down messages," he intones, "each day's news of the metamorphic meanings of the division between our mundane shell and the upper world."

What, you might ask in follow up, is the American sublime that it should stand in marked contrast to the European tradition, rupturing the great chain of influence, revealing troublesome textual discontinuities and making gaps of influence that even two poets can pass abreast? "Simplistically," Bloom submits, "the sublime in literature has been associated with peak experiences that render a secular version of a theophany: a sense of something interfused that transforms a natural moment, landscape, action, or countenance." This isn't quite Edmund Burke's definition, but it does evoke the numinous, what Bloom calls, following Burke, "an excursion into the psychological origins of aesthetic magnificence."

*The Daemon Knows* is part memoir, a recounting of a lifetime spent with books. There are accounts of Robert Penn Warren, Leslie Fiedler, and Cleanth Brooks. Bloom's former students and mentors also make brief appearances: Kenneth Burke, for instance, and Camille Paglia. And Bloom doesn't just analyze, say, *Moby Dick*—he narrates about his first encounter with that book back in the summer of 1940. He later asserts, "I began reading Hart Crane in the library on my tenth birthday." That he remembers these experiences at all speaks volumes to Melville's and Crane's bewitching facility and to Bloom's remarkable receptivity.

Bloom has not shied away from his signature and grandiose ahistorical pronouncements, perhaps because they're right. Melville, for instance, is "the most Shakespearean of our authors," an "American High Romantic, a Shelleyan divided between head and heart, who held against Emerson the sage's supposed deficiency in the region of the heart." Or, "Emersonian idealism was rejected by Whitman in favor of Lucretian materialism, itself not compatible with Indian speculations." Or, "Stevens received from Whitman the Emersonian conviction that poetry imparts wisdom as well as pleasure." These generalizations would seem to service hagiography, but even if they're overstatement, are they wrong?

My professors in graduate school, many of them anyway, chastised Bloom and dubbed him variously a reactionary, a racist, a misogynist, a bigot, or a simpleton; they discouraged his presence in my essays and papers, laughing him out of classroom conversation and dismissing his theories out-of-hand. Or else, stubbornly refusing to assess his theories on their own terms, they judged the theories in the light of their results: the theories were bad because certain authors, the allegedly privileged ones, came out on top, as they always have. This left little room for newcomers, for egalitarian fads and fashions, and discredited (or at least undermined) the supposedly noble project of literary affirmative action.

They will be forgotten, these dismissive pedants of the academy, having contributed nothing of lasting value to the economy of letters, while Bloom will live on, continuing to shock and upset his readers, forcing them to second-guess their judgments and tastes, their criteria for aesthetic value, challenging their received assumptions and thumping them over the head with inconvenient facts and radical common sense. The school of resentment and amateurish cultural studies, appropriate targets of Bloom's learned animus, will die an inglorious death, as dogmatic political hermeneutics cannot withstand the test of time.

Bloom, on the other hand, like his subjects, taps his inner daemon, invokes it and rides it where it travels, struggles against the anxiety of influence and displays all of the rhetorical power and play of the strong poets he worships. Dr. Samuel Johnson and Northrop Frye reverberate throughout his capacious tome, and for that matter his entire *oeuvre*. Bloom's psychic brooding becomes our own, if we read him pensively, and we are better off for it.

Those who view literary study as a profession requiring specialized and technical training, who chase tenure and peer approval, publishing in academic journals and gaining no wider audience than groveling colleagues, do not possess the originality, the foresight, or the brute imagination necessary to achieve enduring appeal. Reading, done right, is a profoundly personal activity, an exercise in solitary contemplation and possible revelation; writing, done right, is transference: the redirection of complex states of consciousness and knowing from one person to another. A few sentences of Bloom's contemplative questioning, such as the following, are worth the weight of whole academic articles: "At eighty-four I wonder why poems in particular obsessed me from childhood onward. Because I had an overemotional sensibility, I tended to need more affection from my parents and sisters than even they could sustain. From the age of ten on, I sought from Moyses-Leyb Halpern and Hart Crane, from Shakespeare and Shelley, the strong affect I seemed to need from answering voices." Here Bloom invites Freudian investigation of himself, summoning the psychoanalytic models he uses on others.

Bloom is now 85. He claims to have another book left in him, making this one his penultimate. His awesome and dedicated engagement with the best that has been thought and known in the world appears to have left him unafraid of the finish, of what comes next, as though literary intimacy and understanding have prepared him, equipped him, for the ultimate. It seems fitting, then, to quote him on this score and to end with a musing on the end: "We are at least bequeathed to an earthly shore and seek memorial inscriptions, fragments heaped against our ruins: an interval and then we are gone. High literature endeavors to augment that span: My twelve authors center, for me, that proliferation of consciousness by which we go on living and finding our own sense of being."

*Allen Mendenhall is the author of [Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism \(2014\)](#). Visit his website at [AllenMendenhall.com](#).*

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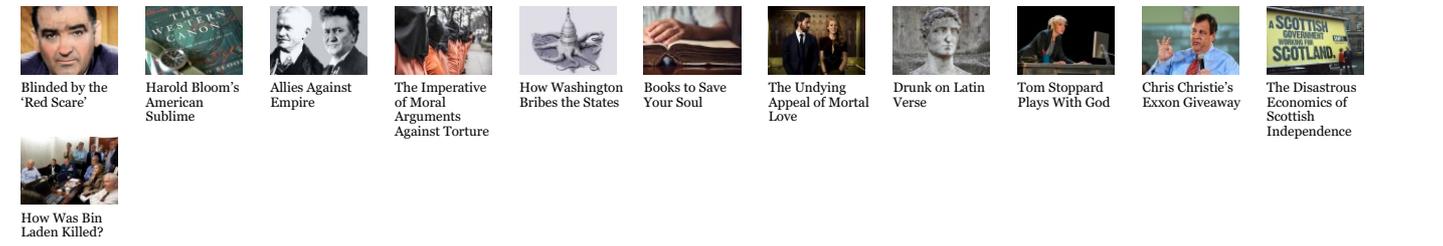
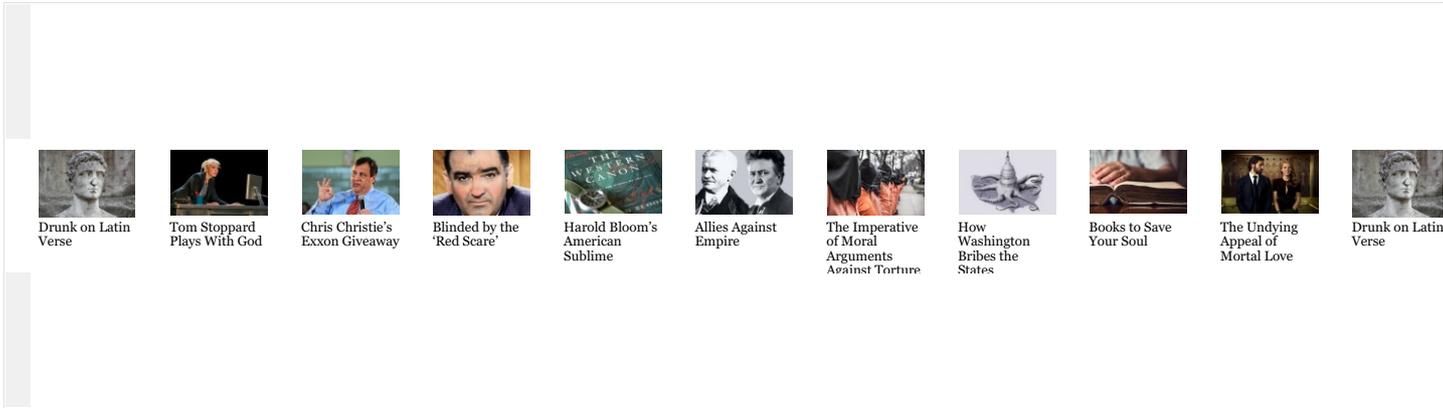
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