

On the Stone Raft: Harold Bloom in Catalonia and Portugal

(Harold Bloom, *'El futur de la imaginació'*, Barcelona: Anagrama / Empúries, May 2002, 206 pp., ISBN 84-7596-927-5)

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Note: All translations in this essay from Catalan, Portuguese and Spanish are my own.

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I - THE STONE RAFT

In 1986, José Saramago - the Portuguese Nobel laureate whom the American critic Harold Bloom believes is the greatest living novelist - wrote 'A Jangada de Pedra' ('The Stone Raft'), a magic-realist fiction in which the Iberian peninsula breaks away from Europe and drifts out into the Atlantic, until it halts at a location off the Azores, halfway to North America. More recently, the Yale Professor of Humanities and author of 'The Western Canon' and 'Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human' has paid significant literary visits to the Iberian peninsula - Portugal in May 2001, Barcelona in May 2002 - and has both times been welcomed by a reception considerably warmer than he would be likely to find in his home country, where the antagonisms persisting between him and much of the university establishment are notorious. Indeed, Bloom's trajectory in Portugal and Catalonia conjures up images of the septuagenarian critic standing on the 'stone raft', a lone mariner facing the hostile sea-spray.

The reflections that follow arise out of my reading of the two main essays contained in a book signed by Bloom and published in Barcelona. This volume, whose title would translate into English as 'The Future of the Imagination', appeared in May 2002, published by Anagrama/Empuries, simultaneously in two editions, Catalan ('El futur de la imaginació') and Spanish ('El futuro de la imaginación') (my references are to the Catalan edition). It falls into three sections, of which the first consists of a brand-new lecture, while the last is a text which will be new to the great majority of readers. The opening text, 'El futur de la imaginació i les seves formes en relació amb la proesa catalana' ('The future of the imagination and its forms in relation to the Catalan achievement'; pp. 9-18), is Bloom's acceptance speech given on May 2002 at the ceremony, held at the Generalitat (the seat of the Catalan regional government) at which he received the Premi Internacional Catalunya - an award whose previous winners include the likes of Vaclav Havel and Edgar Morin. It is notable not only for its author's trenchant statements on the state of literary studies in the twenty-first century, but also for the knowledge and appreciation he displays of Catalan literature. This new text is followed by a set of 24 brief essays on individual writers, all of them translations from critical monographs originally published by Bloom in the US in his Chelsea House series. At the end, significantly positioned, comes a fifteen-page tribute to Portugal's Nobel laureate entitled, simply, 'José Saramago' (pp. 191-206). It is stated that this text was given as a lecture in Lisbon in 2001 - evidently during Bloom's Portuguese visit in May of that year; the exact date and venue are not specified. I have not managed to locate any on-line reference to any published English or Portuguese version of this text, and therefore presume that it will be new for most readers.

I shall now proceed to discuss these two 'new' (opening and closing) essays, following which I shall offer some further thoughts on the issues Bloom raises in them; the latter comments will be backed up from my reading of a number of articles on and interviews with Bloom which have appeared in the Spanish-and-Portuguese-language press over the last two years, and

which I have had the good fortune to locate on-line. As this material - book and articles - is not accessible to Anglophone readers who are not cognisant with Spanish, Catalan or Portuguese, I am offering this essay in the hope that it will be of interest and use to those who would like to know more about Harold Bloom's work on the literatures of the Iberian-language world, as well as the reception of his ideas in that cultural area. His controversial positions, as expressed in 'The Western Canon' and 'Shakespeare' - in defence of the literary tradition, against both political correctness on the left and religious fundamentalism on the right - are well enough known, but the particular context, i.e. concrete exposure to the literary of a specific language area, should help bring them into sharper focus.

II - HOMAGE TO CATALONIA

Bloom begins his Barcelona address with a polemical statement targeted on the epigones of modernism (and, by implication, of postmodernism too). He declares that, as one who 'grew up in the literary epoch of high modernism', he never accepted the belief of that period that human nature had somehow irrevocably changed near the beginning of the twentieth century - thus throwing down the gauntlet to those who would read the literature of the past through the sole prism of the present and its immediate concerns. He goes on to make the by now expected complaints against 'the epoch of resentment and political correctness', and, in the same breath, to distance himself from the cyberutopians and their belief that network technologies will bring about a qualitative transformation of consciousness. For Bloom, what continues to matter is the printed page: indeed, he declares provocatively that 'the Internet horrifies me', seeing the plethora of on-line information as a nightmare of excess, an infinitely expanded version of the flood of unsolicited textual material with which, as America's best-known literary critic, he has himself been inundated with for years in paper form. Consciously drawing on Jorge Luis Borges' anti-utopian visions of random, self-reproducing systems, Bloom paints a dark picture of the Internet as an 'immense ocean without form', 'a universal sea of chaos': 'the Internet has no form, unless it be that of one of Borges' labyrinths'.

Bloom is nonetheless far from believing that literature is dead. He has high praise for the works of such living novelists as José Saramago, Gabriel García Márquez, Philip Roth and Thomas Pynchon - a list which, containing two Americans but also writers from Portugal and Colombia, immediately points up the broadness of Bloom's critical vision and his visible distance from narrow notions of Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority. He fears, however, that in spite of the impressive performances of these and other novelists, the time may be approaching when the novel as we know it will be replaced, as the wheel comes full circle, by something resembling the pre-Renaissance romance which Cervantes was the first to transcend. Whatever happens to literature, Bloom reposes his faith for its future reception not in the universities but in the common, non-academic reader. The academic establishment, he believes, has abandoned virtually all notion of aesthetic or intellectual standards, and has become the prisoner of lobby groups. The only hope for criticism lies in the survival of what he calls of 'a group of advanced readers' - a kind of cultural rearguard (or vanguard?) who will preserve the reading of canonic literature as a minority pursuit.

In the second section of the address, Bloom pays tribute to the literature of Catalonia. Here too, it deserves stressing that he has made the effort to read (in translation), and to praise, a significant range of works from one of Europe's more obscure and marginal literatures - indeed, one which does not even have the backing of a nation-state to promote it (unless one counts Andorra). Bloom lauds the late Salvador Espriu as 'an extraordinary poet by any international standard'. This homage to Catalonia, paid by Harold Bloom in admiration of a

lesser-known European literature, will come as a surprise to many, although those who have looked carefully at the reading lists appended to some editions of 'The Western Canon' will have noted that half a dozen Catalan writers, including Espriu, already figured there.

Bloom also finds a significant analogy between the Catalan and Jewish traditions, recalling the medieval Catalan-Jewish mystical tradition as represented by the likes of Isaac the Blind of Gerona, and comparing the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis with the stifling of Catalan culture by the 'abominable Franco regime' ('Yiddish was destroyed by Hitler in the same way as Franco tried to destroy Catalan ... the Catalans' struggle to preserve their literary culture and their language is very similar to the Jewish effort to keep their linguistic and literary identity'). It should be recalled here that, secular Jew though he is, Bloom's Jewishness has very deep roots in his family history: his father, who hailed from the large Jewish community in Odessa (now in Ukraine), which also produced the remarkable writer Isaac Babel, and his mother, born in a shtetl [Jewish community] near Brest-Litovsk (now in Belarus), were first-generation emigrants, and the young Harold grew up in an Orthodox Jewish New York household where only Yiddish was spoken indoors.

Meanwhile, Bloom's detractors might care to note what this speech tells us in general about the open-ended nature of his canon, his willingness to include writers from lesser-known literatures and minority linguistic areas. He certainly believes canonic status can only be granted on strict criteria of merit, but a canon with a seat for Salvador Espriu is surely no exclusive gentlemen's club. Bloom's literary internationalism contrasts sharply with the Anglophone insularity which more often than not afflicts critics from the planet's hegemonic language area: in Britain, in particular, it would be difficult to imagine a major critic, alive or dead, whether F.R. Leavis, Raymond Williams, or even a proclaimed internationalist like Terry Eagleton, taking up the cudgels for Catalan literature.

III - HERE THE SEA ENDS

A similar positive internationalism illuminates Bloom's Lisbon lecture on José Saramago, whom, it is clear, Bloom today considers to be the greatest writer of fiction alive: 'the most impressive living novelist on our planet, who overshadows all other living Europeans and all Americans too, whether they write in English, Spanish and Portuguese' (Bloom admittedly here fails to mention Asians or Africans, but the thrust of his point is clear). Again, to the well-informed this will not come as a complete surprise. Bloom's interest in Portuguese literature was visibly manifested in 'The Western Canon', which featured a section on Fernando Pessoa, Portugal's great twentieth-century poet, and the reading lists at the end of that book included a number of Portuguese texts, including the national epic, Luis de Camões' 'Os Lusíadas' ('The Lusíads'), and just one novel by Saramago, his remarkable historical novel of 1982 'Memorial do Convento' (known to English-speaking readers as 'Baltasar & Blimunda'). Since then, Bloom has quite clearly made a point of reading right through Saramago's *oeuvre*, albeit in translation (his reading knowledge of Portuguese is, he says, not on the level of the novelist's complex style). The present text is not, in fact, Bloom's first on the Portuguese writer: a study of 'O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo' ('The Gospel according to Jesus Christ'), entitled 'The One with the Beard is God, the Other is the Devil', appeared in 2001 in No 6 of 'Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies' (published by the Centre for Portuguese Studies and Culture of University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth).

Bloom begins by comparing Saramago's work to the ocean, the archetypal image of Portuguese letters as also sung by Camões and Pessoa: 'Re-reading Saramago, I always feel

like Ulysses endeavouring to grasp Proteus, the metamorphic god of the ocean: at all moments, he eludes my grip'. He here appears to evoke the opening of Saramago's 'O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis' ('The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis'), which begins with the words 'Here the sea ends and the earth begins' (themselves harking back to Camões), while also highlighting the tale-teller's supreme unpredictability, the mutability of his writing from one novel to the next. While identifying 'O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo' as Saramago's master-work, and 'História do Cerco de Lisboa' ('History of the Siege of Lisbon') as his own personal favourite, Bloom dispassionately runs through the sequence of novels from 'Memorial do Convento' onwards, up to the neo-Kafkaesque 'Todos os Nomes' ('All the Names') of 1997; he admits that he has yet to get to grips with Saramago's [then] most recent novel, 'A Caverna' ('The Cave'), which ironically juxtaposes Plato with the modern world of shopping-malls, as the English translation had (at the time of his lecture) still to come out.

While he is scarcely unaware of Saramago's political stance as an unrepentant communist militant and a passionate foe of market-led globalisation, Bloom prefers not to view his subject in ideological terms, affirming: 'Saramago is a free man, and his books exalt freedom, typically representing the appalling alternatives to it'. He focuses chillingly on the novelist's ability to stare totalitarianism in the face, in a country which, from the Inquisition to the Salazar dictatorship, has, alas, not lacked in examples of that phenomenon: he sees 'Memorial do Convento' as 'Saramago's historical novel of the sentiments, set in the fear-inspiring Portugal of the early eighteenth century, a country still untouched by the Enlightenment', a social and ideological universe whose motto is, in the novelist's words, 'Either shut up or burn'; and he shows how 'O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis', Saramago's dark, dense evocation of Lisbon in the 1930s, is impregnated with 'the cosmos of the great poet Pessoa and that of the fascist dictator Salazar', in one and the same paradoxical vision. For Bloom, if in the first novel 'Saramago prophetically dispatches Portugal, the Catholic church and the monarchy to the hell of history', in the second, 'we are back in hell, and now it's the historical Portugal of December 1935, with Salazar in power and Spain on the point of succumbing to the fascist usurpation.' We may note how, here as in his paean to Catalan literature, Bloom has no time whatever for General Franco; we may also note how his Jewish roots are - in Portugal as they were in Catalonia - stirred, here in 'Memorial do Convento' by the character Blimunda, 'the half-Jewish witch', an illiterate but magically gifted woman of the people. He further notes in passing - in relation to 'A Jangada de Pedra' ('The Stone Raft') - that Saramago is marked by the (benign) influence of an earlier magic-realist master, the Cuban Alejo Carpentier - although, curiously, he fails to draw attention to certain images (a proletarian hero mutilated in the arm; a monument built by the forced sweat of the people) that provide a strong continuity between 'Memorial do Convento' and Carpentier's remarkable novel 'El reino de este mundo' ('The Kingdom of This World').

Coming to Saramago's later novels - which are for the most part no longer located in an identifiable Portuguese context, but set either elsewhere (a quasi-biblical Palestine) or nowhere (in the depersonalised land of allegory) - Bloom distils the essence of each in a few words. He compares 'O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo' favourably to D.H. Lawrence's provocative re-write of the resurrection story in 'The Man Who Died', and declares: 'The God of his "Gospel" certainly deserves refusal: he is the most disagreeable person in all Saramago' (thus, be it said, creating a Bloom-Saramago axis that joins forces with Salman Rushdie in saying no to the contemporary bien-pensant orthodoxy that uncritically counsels 'respect for religion'). He reads the terrifying 'Ensaio sobre a Cegueira' ('Blindness') as a 'parable of the perpetual possibility of the return of fascism, or its advent', adding that if asked to choose between this novel and Albert Camus' 'La peste' ('The Plague'), he 'would opt for Saramago'.

Finally, Bloom lauds 'Todos os Nomes' ('All the Names'), Saramago's fictional interrogation of the universe of bureaucracy, as a latter-day, and more hopeful, re-creation of the world of Franz Kafka. It is abundantly clear from the comparisons Bloom deploys - Lawrence, Camus, Kafka - that he considers the Portuguese Nobel laureate to be the equal of the twentieth century's most respected masters of fiction: at a time when many in the academy deny the very notion of literary value, Bloom the critic unflinchingly assumes the role of defender and, indeed, maker of reputations, concluding: 'I, as a literary critic, gain encouragement from the wisdom of Saramago'.

IV - THE PRESS PAYS TRIBUTE

Bloom's two 'new' lectures in this volume may be further illuminated by reference to selected elements from the clutch of articles on and interviews with him which appeared in the Iberian-language press and electronic media, tying in with his visits, in 2001 and 2002. These texts, apart from clarifying Bloom's positions on various subjects, chronicle a number of significant events: in particular, on 27 May 2001 Harold Bloom was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Coimbra, Portugal's oldest seat of learning, in the presence of and with the sponsorship of José Saramago. In the next section, I shall offer the anglophone reader a digest of the salient points from the following press texts, translating all quotations from Spanish or Portuguese into English (I have chosen seven texts - five in Portuguese, two in Spanish; each full reference is preceded by a codeword that will serve to identify it afterwards):

Almeida. Catarina Solano de Almeida, 'Ser um génio literário não implica ser inteligente para outras coisas' ['Literary genius doesn't guarantee intelligence in other fields'], website: SIC Online, 1 September 2002 - <http://www.sic.pt/article4540visual4.html> (this article is a paraphrase of statements made by Bloom in an interview with the Chilean newspaper 'El Mercurio')

DN. 'Uma "lança" cultural nos EUA' ['A thorn in America's cultural flesh'], 'Diário de Notícias', 22 May 2001 - reproduced on Lusoplanet website, <http://lusoplanet.free.fr/noti0105.htm>

Júnior: António Júnior, 'Harold Bloom - Um autor a que não podemos ficar indiferentes' ['Harold Bloom, an author to whom no-one can be indifferent'] - website: Blocos On Line (Brazil), 2001 - <http://www.blocosonline.com.br/entrev/entrev03.htm>

Moret. Xavier Moret, 'Harold Bloom, crítico literario: "Los lectores están en peligro de desaparición"', ['Harold Bloom, literary critic: "Readers are an endangered species"'], 'El País', 22 June 2002, reproduced at website: literaturas.com, <http://www.literaturas.com/haroldbloom.htm>

Najmías. Daniel Najmías, 'El boom Bloom: Harold Bloom en Barcelona' ['The Bloom boom: Harold Bloom in Barcelona'], 'Barcelona Review', No 30, May-June 2002, http://www.barcelonareview.com/30/s_dn.htm

Queirós. Luís Miguel Queirós, 'Só Faltam Começarem a Partir-me Os Vidros das Janelas' ['Next thing they'll be smashing my windows'], 'Público', 26 de Maio de 2001 - republished on terravista.pt site, <http://www.terravista.pt/Bilene/5099/bloom2.htm>

Sobrado. Jorge Sobrado, 'O Futuro passa por ... Shakespeare' ['The future is ... Shakespeare'], site of Feira do Livro do Porto (Oporto Book Fair), 2001 - http://feiradolivro.clix.pt/prt/g_img/programa/programa_eventos_02.html

V - THE CRITIC SPEAKS

The first point to be stressed from the reading of these press texts is the way in which they underline Bloom's enthusiasm for the literatures of the Iberian world. Thus, he tells Júnior: "'The [doctoral] ceremony in Coimbra was extraordinary and eloquent - an incentive to me to go on learning more deeply about the Portuguese literary tradition. I've already written pieces on Camões and Eça [de Queirós or Queirós]. I believe that [Eça's] 'The Maias' is a work of sublime beauty, one of the finest European novels of the nineteenth century"; and Júnior, in return, notes that Bloom's popularity in Portugal may not be unrelated to his declared interest in that nation's great writers: 'People in Portugal are delighted at your high opinion of Fernando Pessoa and José Saramago'. Elsewhere, in the article by [Luís] Queirós, we are told that Bloom considers Camões' neo-classical epic 'Os Lusíadas' to be "a great poem - extraordinary powerful and disturbing, better by far than all of Virgil"; the DN article adds that 'Bloom has written the introduction to a translation of Eça's "A Relíquia" ["The Relic"], slated for publication in the US in the autumn [of 2001]'; Almeida adds that 'among those whom he believes to be the greatest literary geniuses, the likes of Shakespeare, Balzac, Cervantes or Hemingway, the critic [Bloom] has no hesitation in including the Portuguese writer José Saramago'; while Sobrado reports: 'A careful reader and confessed admirer of the Portuguese author, Harold Bloom declared him to be a "great writer", even comparing him with Cervantes' (one may guess that Bloom was here thinking of Saramago's picaresque, pan-Iberian and, indeed, quixotic narrative 'A Jangada de Pedra'). For Spanish literature, we may, then, note Bloom's recourse to Miguel de Cervantes as a point of reference; while for Catalan literature, Moret quotes Bloom as declaring: "'The Nobel committee is guilty of many errors, and one of those was not to have given the prize to Salvador Espriu. I believe he deserved it'".

On the more specific details of the Bloom-Saramago connection, we learn from Sobrado that, at the Oporto Book Fair in May 2001, 'Bloom was unstinting in his praise for Portugal's literature Nobel, José Saramago, with whom he says he regularly exchanges correspondence'. Still on his relationship with the Portuguese writer, Bloom further tells Queirós: "'I regret the fact that I don't speak Portuguese. On the few occasions when I've met Saramago, we had considerable difficulty in communicating. I manage to read Portuguese, but I find it difficult to pronounce, and his English is non-existent. And so we ended up speaking in a crazy mixture of French, Italian and Spanish. Saramago is a great writer and a most engaging person'".

One might be forgiven for supposing that, defying the language barrier, novelist and critic have indeed formed a Bloom-Saramago alliance in defence of the literary tradition and its value for today's world. However, all is not plain sailing when non-literary controversies raise their head. On the vexed subject of Middle Eastern politics, Almeida quotes some sharp words from Bloom on his Portuguese friend's anti-Israel line: "'Saramago was in Ramallah [in March 2002] and said that what he'd seen was a latter-day Auschwitz. Such a statement is absurd and unforgivable ... when he talks politics, the old Stalinist stereotype is always there'". It is clear that Bloom the critic makes a clear distinction between Saramago the novelist and Saramago the political animal - as, it might be recalled, an intelligent Marxist critic such as Georg Lukács does in the converse direction, drawing a sharp line between Balzac's monarchist politics and his novelist's genius.

This brings us to the question of Bloom's own wider political views, and it emerges from these documents that, while he certainly has no time for unreconstructed Stalinism or

(unsurprisingly) for the pro-Palestinian world-view, he is equally no admirer of the neo-conservative, hard-right forces that now rule America. On Bloom's views on the present President of the United States, Almeida comments: 'In the opinion of this US citizen, George W. Bush "is a semi-illiterate fascist" who might as well be the character Polonius from "Hamlet"'. Junior informs us that Bloom 'was invited to receive an honorary distinction at Yale's 300th anniversary celebrations, but decided not to go and to accept Coimbra's honorary doctorate in person instead', and quotes Bloom's own explanation for his choice: "'His majesty Bush was to be one of the recipients at Yale. I decided I would rather not be there, and I have no regrets ... George Bush II embodies the worst imbecility that exists in the USA, something which is quite beyond my comprehension'".

On the Internet, Bloom's position as expressed in these texts is at best lukewarm and at worst downright hostile. Sobrado's report on his address at the Oporto Book Fair cites remarks that are quite as acerbic as those in Bloom's Barcelona speech. The sea-of-chaos image recurs: 'Bloom declared peremptorily that the Internet is an "ocean of chaos, an ocean of death", which makes it impossible to read properly or to make any qualitative distinction between the works "afloat" on it. He concluded that from the literary viewpoint "the Web will not contribute anything of value"'. To Moret, however, Bloom is a shade more conciliatory, declaring: "'For a decently educated young person, the Internet may be a very useful tool. I'm glad to know that there's valuable information of every kind there on the Internet, but someone who uses it without the right educational background runs the risk of drowning in an ocean of information. When I read about the World Wide Web I can't help thinking of a huge spider's web trapping the unwary'".

On another manifestation of the vicissitudes of text in the modern world, namely Joanne K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, Bloom confesses to Moret: "'I've read 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone'. It's so badly written! It's full of clichés and repetitions. Frankly, I was most disappointed. If the Harry Potter books are now the most popular books in the world, then we've got a terrible problem"'"; and, in the same vein, he tells Queirós: "'Of all my writings in recent years, the one that caused the greatest furore was a small article in which I said, actually in a quite kindly tone, that the Harry Potter books have no value whatever, neither aesthetic, psychological or any other kind'".

If we now move centre-stage to consider Bloom's main preoccupations, we find that these articles, inevitably, touch on Bloom's defence of the Great Books, his hostile relationship with the dominant orthodoxy in American universities, the 'right-wing' label pinned on him by certain influential lobbies, and the book of his that sparked off the entire conflict, 'The Western Canon'. On the polemical issue of his own position inside the US academy, Blooms tells Moret: "'In the circles I move in, they treat me as a controversial critic. I don't feel that I am, but this must be a sign that something is not right"'"; and he declares to Queirós: "'If I'd been born in 1970, they'd never have given me a job. Even if I were ten times more gifted than I am, no-one would take me on, because my opinions aren't acceptable"'. Estranged from the academic establishment of which he is nominally part, Bloom finds solace in what he finds to be the more open-minded company of the common reader. He confides, again to Queirós: "'Around 1990 I came to the conclusion that there was no point in writing for an academic public. I went back looking for the general public - and I discovered that it existed. There are readers out there - thousands of them, all over the world"'.

Meanwhile, Bloom's strictures against political correctness in literary studies remain as harsh as those which he gave voice to in 'The Western Canon'. He states to Moret: "'For years now,

literature hasn't been taught decently in my own country or in any English-speaking country. If things go on like this, with the teaching of literature subordinated to gender, race, sexual preferences or political opinions, in the end society will self-destruct". Najmías, meanwhile, makes the salutary point (often overlooked by commentators) that in reality Bloom's polemic in 'The Western Canon' was directed as much against the right (read: the Christian fundamentalists) as the left (read: the politically correct): '[that book] raised the hackles of the members of the lobbies, on both the right and the left, whom Bloom accused of politicising literary studies and criticism'. Still on that book, Bloom makes an important clarification in the interview with Queirós. Some, but not all, editions (among them the 1995 UK paperback) include, apart from the twenty-six main author studies, a much more extensive set of reading lists in (mostly) western literature, from Homer and the Bible to the present day. Bloom explains why some editions lack these lists: "Those lists have nothing to do with me. I was obliged to include them, but I repudiated them a good while back. I decided to remove them from the book, and so they're not there in the Swedish or the Italian translation, although you will, unfortunately, find them in the Portuguese and Brazilian editions. My publisher and my agent banded together to persuade me that the book could only be published with those lists - and so, in protest, I wrote them off the top of my head, without looking up anything".

To Queirós, Bloom relates an incident at the University of California which, he feels, encapsulates the antagonism between his concept of literature and the world-view of his opponents: "Three years ago, I gave some lectures at the University of California, which is an extremely politically correct place (...). In the middle of one of my lectures, suddenly the hall literally exploded. They even wanted to lynch me, all because, in the end, I told the truth. I turned to them and said: 'A lot of you in this room are teachers of literature, but you don't really care about literature. If you commission a table from a carpenter who happens to be Mexican-American, or Marxist, or gay, and he hands you over a table that collapses on its legs, you'll return it and ask for your money back. Yet you're more than happy to accept books with no legs to stand on. You're totally hypocritical. There are quotas for women, blacks, Mexicans and gays in law and arts faculties, but not for medicine. You know why? Because if you politically correct folk were on a hospital table for a brain operation, and the doctor who was about to operate on you was a devastatingly attractive black lesbian - I'm trying to be as offensive as possible - who you are told got her qualifications thanks to her ethnic origin and her sexual orientation, all of you would run out at once'. The whole room started shouting at me: 'Racist! Fascist!' And I shouted back at them: 'All you are is a bunch of low-down nuisances. You don't have a single rational argument to throw back at me. You're a crowd of perfect swindlers. The whole lot of you would run out of the operating theatre.' It was war. But is there any more socially repugnant idea than to claim that it's more helpful for a young woman from Cape Verde who comes to live in Portugal to read her fellow nationals' books, however bad they are, than Eça or Almeida Garrett? Another day, I was speaking about five of my favourite poets: Whitman, Pessoa, Lorca, Hart Crane and the wonderful Luis Cernuda. All of them were gay, but why should I have to care whether they preferred to go to bed with men or women?"

VI - THE WORD IN THE MODERN WORLD

The above incident might suggest to some that the gulf between Harold Bloom and the self-styled representatives of today's modernity may simply be unbridgeable - that where two positions are irreconcilable to such a degree, no dialogue can exist and nothing can be done. However, if we retrace our steps and consider various of Bloom's positions, as expressed in

the material introduced in this essay, in a globally-oriented context, the outlines of a more inclusive perspective may emerge.

Bloom defends the written word, but appears particularly resistant to its present-day recasting via the new medium that is the Internet: while some of his pronouncements on the network universe are more conciliatory than others, his general position is clearly hostile. It is true that intelligent use of the Internet for research purposes requires the capacity to select, filter and assess the masses of material available on-line, but Bloom surely underestimates the usefulness of the medium for literary study. The World Wide Web allows readers to download, read, keep, annotate and study large numbers of classic works of literature, and to track down quotations and references with unrivalled speed and accuracy (the same is true for CD-Rom versions). An electronic version of a novel is - unlike a stage, film or television adaptation - not a transposition of the text into the language of a different medium, with all the distortion that can entail; it is a reproduction of the existing text, within another medium, certainly, but with no distortion of the original message and with certain 'value-added' elements such as search capacity. An electronic text of 'Don Quixote' is still Cervantes' novel, in a way that a stage version like 'Man of La Mancha' is not; it is more like Pierre Menard's 'rewritten Quixote' in Borges' celebrated story: transcribed word for word for the readers of another age, superficially different yet ultimately still the same. In addition, with the rise of the Internet the cunning of history has brought about an unexpected resurgence of, precisely, that common reader whose intuitions Bloom says he now values well over those of the academy. Today, any computer-literate reader of books can post a review on any of numerous popular websites (Amazon and its imitators) or Usenet groups, so becoming his or her own critic and bypassing the official critical establishment altogether. The contours of a new reader-centred criticism are likely to become visible as our new century progresses, and it seems somewhat misplaced that a critic like Bloom should not be taking due note of this immensely positive development. Large swathes of the Internet are and will remain essentially text-based: the superficial difference between printed page and screen is no greater than that between papyrus and parchment, or vellum and paper. The new medium, in stark contrast to its audiovisual predecessors, has all the potential, *pace* the still-voluble disciples of the late Marshall McLuhan and his increasingly beleaguered world-view, to redeem the power of the written word for the coming generations - to transform and deepen it, while in no way abolishing it, thus repeating Gutenberg's quantum leap on a new and more powerful plane.

At the risk of appearing to compare great things with small, I now beg leave to move from the Internet to Harry Potter, and to question the usefulness of Bloom's critical positions over another latter-day manifestation of the written word. The analogy between Joanne Rowling's parallel world of witchcraft and the virtual universe of cyberspace may in fact not be so far-fetched as it might seem. The Potter books are, on one level, about the hidden potential of alternative forms of networking, and, like the electronic networks, they have given a remarkable and surprising boost worldwide to the allegedly 'out-of-date' medium of text, breaking through the barrier of anti-book prejudice and encouraging children to read as no other contemporary fictions have. Indeed, Joanne Rowling and Tim Berners-Lee may yet prove to be the two great anti-McLuhans of the new millennium. In such a context, Bloom's dismissal of the Potter books could come across as short-sighted and unfair. By denying their literary value, he aligns himself with José Saramago, who is, as it happens, another of J.K. Rowling's detractors (although, by contrast, such eminent figures from the world of letters as the critic George Steiner and the novelist Mario Vargas Llosa have praised her books). It may be added that the repetitive and formulaic element which displeases Bloom in Rowling's style may be linked to the fact that they are at least partly intended for oral delivery (as bedtime

stories), and thus stand at a particular intersection point of written and spoken word which, a more sympathetic critic might argue, could suggest comparison with the similarly formulaic works of Homer!

On the vexed question of the 'Western Canon versus political correctness' debate, it needs pointing out that, despite the white heat that fires Bloom's attacks on his adversaries (and theirs on him), the canonic gospel according to Bloom is in fact much more inclusive than some might think. This is very clear from the reading lists appended to some editions of 'The Western Canon', which include large numbers of texts (not exclusively western) and writers, both male and female, from an enormous range of times and places, and it seems unfortunate that Bloom has chosen to suppress those lists, thus generating unnecessary misunderstandings. His canon is infinitely more generous than that of F.R. Leavis, who seemed bent on whittling down the ranks of the great writers to the tiniest of elites. Nor are there many Anglophone critics - above all from faculties of English rather than modern languages - who have shown the openness towards foreign-language literatures, including lesser-known ones, that Bloom has manifested in embracing Spanish-, Portuguese- and Catalan-language writers. His interest in Latin American literature even connects him to the wider area of postcolonial studies (this aspect could be usefully strengthened were Bloom to pay more attention to the parallel phenomenon of Indian and 'Anglo-Indian' writing, from R.K. Narayan to the likes of V.S. Naipaul, Anita Desai, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Manju Kapur or Salman Rushdie, which has, like Latin American writing before it, achieved worldwide recognition not by quotas but by merit). Indeed, even if Bloom would no doubt reject the concept of 'postcolonial studies' as such, the global reach of his interests can objectively bear linking with the concerns of that movement; and there are even curious similarities between his technique, in 'The Western Canon', of revisiting and reinterpreting classic texts, and the method operated by Edward Said in certain passages of his book 'Culture and Imperialism', which is now recognised as a basic text for postcolonial studies.

Meanwhile, there is no rational justification for the 'fascist' (!) label pinned by the Stanford audience on someone who is an ardent promoter of a card-carrying communist like José Saramago, and who, as we have seen, has described Franco's regime as 'abominable' and Salazar's as a hell on earth. Indeed, one might legitimately wonder how many of Bloom's Stanford opponents knew more about General Francisco Franco than could be written on the back of a postage stamp, and how many had so much as heard of António de Oliveira Salazar.

It may nonetheless be argued that Bloom has by now said everything useful that he could say on the issue of political correctness, and that it could be time for him to move on. The whole PC question has, besides, now been magnificently explored in fiction in 'The Human Stain', the remarkable Clinton-era novel by Philip Roth (himself a Bloom favourite). Roth's novel is centred on the academic world, and his character Delphine Roux, the French ex-structuralist converted to PC, is a wickedly telling caricature of Bloom's real-world opponents. The question remains whether there is much more to say of interest on the subject, and whether it might not be a more valuable exercise for all concerned to move away from confrontational positions and start building bridges. The cosmopolitan slant of Bloom's literary interests suggests that he and his adversaries may actually have more in common than either would wish to admit. The biggest objective stumbling-block is probably Bloom's insistence that works of literature should be judged on merit rather than on the gender, colour, etc. of the people who wrote them; his opponents would no doubt counter-argue that his concept of merit is itself a white male construct, but given that many of the modern writers whom he

champions are not precisely from 'central' or hegemonic cultures, it should surely be possible to evolve some more inclusive definition of merit which might satisfy all parties.

Political correctness, despite its tangible excesses and rigidities as pinpointed by Bloom and Roth, has at least had the not insubstantial merit of keeping literary studies alive in universities. While the aesthetic has to a large extent been displaced by the ideological, the world does still have humanities departments populated by people who believe that at least some creative writing is valuable enough for its study not to be pushed out of the university curriculum altogether. One may wonder if Bloom is, today, necessarily identifying the right enemy: political correctness may in fact pose far less of a danger to literary studies than does the insidious ideology of vocationalism.

By vocationalism, in the context of the humanities, I mean the ideologically motivated subordination of arts courses to reductivist, technicist, instrumentalist and parodically positivist and empiricist labour-market criteria and to crudely demagogic and populist pseudo-philosophies of 'relevance'. This can take the form of contaminating humanities courses by injecting totally alien discourses (one possible example, taken at random, being behaviourist psychology), or, in the case of modern languages courses, of downgrading and devaluing the literary component as being 'irrelevant' or 'useless'. This kind of wholesale poisoning of educational systems may, in the long term, prove far more inimical to the humanities than political correctness could ever be. The time is surely ripe for an international campaign against vocationalism, to be conducted above all on-line and in as many languages as possible, targeting in particular unnecessary vocationalist elements on first-degree courses (allowing that postgraduate vocational courses may in some cases form a legitimate bridge between the knowledge-oriented first degree and the empirical realities of the workplace). Such a project would in no way be incompatible with a Bloomian reading of literature, for anti-vocationalism is surely implicit, on one level or other, in every word that Harold Bloom writes.

VII - PORTBOU: A HOLLYHOCK BLOOMS

Vocationalism is typically justified by reference to a simplistic notion of linear 'progress'; and when one speaks of linearism and wishes to criticise it, the example of Walter Benjamin inevitably springs to mind. It is curious that Bloom, when he speaks of the affinity between the Jewish and Catalan cultures, does not mention Benjamin, a Jew who died in tragic circumstances on Catalan soil in 1940. Benjamin's non-linear model of history, as unforgettably expounded, through the key image of the constellation, in the last work he wrote, the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', offers a devastating critique of the false gods of 'progress'. His work in literary and cultural studies, whose crowning glory, the vast, unfinished 'Arcades Project', is now finally available in English, is grounded in a project of building bridges - of rescuing lost fragments of popular culture from oblivion and teasing out their latent significance, while at the same time not destroying, Taliban-like, the great artefacts of high culture, but re-reading and reappropriating them so that they can serve to liberate, and not oppress, the men and women who make up today's ordinary humanity. The kind of bridge-building exemplified by Benjamin's life's work could now form a valid pointer for a future-oriented evolution, in his own hands or others', of Harold Bloom's ideas. Meanwhile, at the cemetery in Portbou, on the Catalan side of the Franco-Spanish frontier, at the feet of the Pyrenees and overlooking the blue Mediterranean - there where the sea ends and the earth begins, right on the edge of Saramago's stone raft - next to the marble plaque

raised in memory of Walter Benjamin, a bright pink hollyhock waves each summer, symbolically in bloom.

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Afterword:

A first version of this text was posted on rec.arts.books (Usenet) on 30 November 2002. The present revised version dates from June 2005. Some of the biographical material is taken from: Larissa MacFarquhar, 'The Prophet of Decline: Harold Bloom's Influential Anxieties', 'New Yorker', 30 September 2002, pp. 87-97.

A new book by Bloom, the physically and intellectually weighty (and unfashionably titled) volume 'Genius', came out as I was finishing the first version of this article (Harold Bloom, 'Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds', London: Fourth Estate, 2002, xviii + 814 pp., ISBN 1-84115-398-2). It includes, among the one hundred writers examined, ten from the Iberian/Iberoamerican cultural area - three from Spain (Cervantes, Lorca, Luis Cernuda), one from Mexico (Octavio Paz), one from Cuba (Alejo Carpentier), one from Argentina (Borges), three from Portugal (Camões, Eça de Queiróz, Pessoa) and one from Brazil (Machado de Assis). The Machado de Assis reference significantly further opens up Bloom's Luso-Hispanophone discourse to embrace Brazilian literature (the reading list to 'The Western Canon' mentioned another Brazilian, Carlos Drummond de Andrade). Concerning Bloom's reception in Brazil, one may mention the appearance of a regular series of his articles, translated into Portuguese by Arthur Nestrowski, in 'A Folha de São Paulo' in the 1990s (see: www2.folha.uol.com.br/biblioteca/).

Saramago is not present officially in 'Genius', since the book's rubric excludes living writers. Nonetheless, in an introductory chapter Bloom names the Portuguese novelist as a figure 'of palpable genius' (p. 11), and does not fail to express his admiration for Saramago even when speaking of his compatriots: writing on Pessoa, he goes so far as to declare: 'I am a literary critic trying to reeducate myself, as I go on seventy-one, with the help of the master Saramago' (p. 519).

Also while the first version of this article was being written, the English translation of Saramago's 'A Caverna' ('The Cave') was published. Since then, Saramago has produced 'O Homem duplicado' ('The Double') and the outstanding 'Ensaio sobre a Lucidez' ('Essay on Lucidity', not yet translated into English).

The concept of 'building bridges' between cultures through literature, which I advanced at the end of this article, has since then found definitively eloquent expression in a ground-breaking comparative study, by the Spanish scholar Dora Sales Salvador, of transcultural literature in the Indian and Latin American contexts, focusing on the Peruvian José María Arguedas and the Indian English-medium writer Vikram Chandra, 'Puentes sobre el mundo: Cultura, traducción y forma literaria en las narrativas de transculturación de José María Arguedas y Vikram Chandra' ('Bridges over the world: Culture, translation and literary form in the narratives of transculturation of José María Arguedas and Vikram Chandra' - Berne: Peter Lang, 2004); see my review of this outstanding book - to which I trust an open-minded Bloom would not prove unsympathetic - at: www.seikilos.com.ar/DoraPuentes_en.pdf.