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Harold Bloom's Concern and "The Touch" that Always Does Wonders

ABSTRACT
This paper deals with the current debates as whether literary canon or classical works are destined to fall into oblivion or survive. The American literary critic Harold Bloom is very pessimistic about the future of literary studies and teaching literature as a whole. In his books, he makes elegiac conclusions about the Departments of English Language and Literature, which are likely to be renamed into the departments of Cultural Studies. His another concern is the literary "isms" and "ologies" which he considers to be destroying literature. The paper also focuses on the nature of reading and its various impacts on the reader, and its significance for literature students. The aim of the paper is to show that despite some grain of truth in Bloom's writings as regards lack of aesthetic value of literary works in the postmodernist period when popular culture has taken over the canon works, there is no reason to worry about the present state of literary studies and literary criticism.
Keywords: Harold Bloom's concerns; canon; enduring literature; popular culture

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Who turned the page? When I went out
Last night, his Life was left wide-open,
Half-way through, in lamplight on my desk:
The Middle years.
Now look at him. Who turned the page?
(Hamilton 2009)

The world of literature has become so rich with its myriads of issues like literary theories, issues of gender, race, sexuality, religion that it is but natural to have a number of points of reservation and concerns in literary criticism. I will try to focus on Harold Bloom's concerns related to literature in general, literary criticism and teaching literature.

I have chosen this unusual critic and instructor because amid the present debates on epistemology, politics, art, literature and morality, his is a distinctive voice, distinctive in that having known all there is to know as regards literature, being an insatiable reader, he is still in love with every book having aesthetic value. He openly and bravely defends the canon and rejects the pieces devoid of literary value. In doing so, he is faithful to his principles and he is far from all kind of self-fashioning, which today has become everybody's concern. There are contradictory things in his writings and interviews but there is a grain of truth as well in much of what he says. Literature has always been a way of life for him.[1] After a survey of Bloom's concerns, I will address "the touch" that always does wonders, the touch that I call "literature" with the capital letter.

The 85-year-old Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University, the giant of American literary criticism, the author of more than forty books on canonical literature for whom "poetry is medicine", has a number of concerns about the state of literature at present as art and about the way we teach it. He is considered the most

[1] See his latest book: Bloom, H. (2012). *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

controversial literary critic of all times, so controversial that many critics sarcastically chant "Bloom and Doom?" (Bloom 1994:75).

Concern number 1. As back as 1994, the critic published *The Western Canon*, his "spiritual autobiography", the book that prompted widespread criticism in literary academia after its publication and the discussion still goes on with more opponents than proponents. Harold Bloom labelled the conclusion of his book "Elegiac". The melodias word "elegy" applied to literature was far from appealing and sounded resentful.

> I do not believe that literary studies as such have a future, but this does not mean that literary criticism will die. As a branch of literature, criticism will survive, but probably not in our teaching institutions. The study of Western literature will also continue, but on the much more modest scale of our current Classics departments. What are now called "Departments of English" will be renamed departments of "Cultural Studies" where Batman comics, Mormon theme parks, television, movies, and rock will replace Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens and their peers (Bloom: 483).

One keeps wondering the state of things after more than two decades since the publication of the Canon.[2] In his recent interviews, he is no less pessimistic. Harold Bloom complains about our digital age (he cannot imagine Dr. Johnson or George Eliot "confronting MTV Rap or experiencing Virtual reality"), which turns our students into visual ones, about preposterous "isms" which destroy literature (Bloom knew Foucault and Derrida personally but considered their influence "pernicious"), about the politicization of literature, and to him, "to read in the service of any ideology is not to read at all, they have nothing to do with the study of literature or with its originality" (Michael 2015).

Along with the positive effects of the digital age, its negative impacts cannot be overlooked of course. One of those undesirable effects is the fact that popular culture took over the canon, in other words, took over "the good old great books" and what we call "good

[2] It is encouraging to see that the departments of English Language and Literature in Turkey have not been renamed into "Cultural Studies" departments. There are still thirty-seven (37) departments of English Language and Literature in Turkey.

culture". The consumption of popular culture is going on around us every day. However, there are critics who speak about the beautiful things in popular culture as well. Some titles in the contents are enough to give one creeps: *The Best Serial Killer Novel*, *The Best Website for Men Who have Sex with Men*, and *The Best Villain in Xena: Warrior Princess: Alti Sara Gwenllian Jones*. According to the editor, we, intellectuals, know very little about popular culture, know only what Harold Bloom and others like him say about it but do not know the culture itself (Alan 2006:1-2). Leslie Fiedler, the American literary critic, calls the pop culture "ours" and sees nothing wrong in reading popular literature on rape and violence. They provide *the shameful pleasure* we all feel "…in contemplating images of terror and pain, with or without erotic overtones – indulging, vicariously, in the dangerous and the forbidden" (Fiedler 1982: 49). But most intellectuals and academics go on complaining that "One would have to have a passion for sameness, amounting to mania, if after six years of viewing *Coronation Street* or *Hawaii-Five-O*, one still looked forward eagerly to the next episode" (Livingstone 1998: 54). There is so little consolation to offer in this case. A new way of thinking brought by postmodernism accepts man as a product of his culture, and this culture inevitably causes a shift of paradigms, notions and associations. In 1970s, the name *Rita* brought to mind the gorgeous Rita Heyworth, today, it has turned into Hurricane Rita[3], the name Grace reminded of the rare beauty of Grace Kelly, which took one's breath away; today, it reminds of hurricane Grace.[4]

As regards his second concern, Bloom is not alone in terms of his elegiac conclusions, dealing with "isms" and "ologies". Elizabeth Jenkins too is far from seeing the bright future for literature anticipating "prose elegy for the death of literature in our times":

> This is not an age favourable to the development of artistic genius; it may be that for a time all forms of art will pass away into the domination of those who think

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[3] See: *2005 Hurricane Rita*, retrieved from http://www.hurricanescience.org/history/storms/2000s/rita/

[4] See *Hurricane News*, retrieved from http://www.hurricaneville.com/grace.html

> that a good picture can be painted only if the artist's political views record with theirs, and that it is only possible to write a good novel provided the author follows the rules they have laid down (Jenkins, in Kirkup 2010).

Terry Eagleton, in a way, shares Bloom's concerns about the *status quo* in universities. Like Bloom, he is worried about the decline of values in our teaching of literature, worried about "the growth of courses tailored to whatever is currently in fashion among 20-year-olds" (Eagleton 2015). "In my own discipline of English", he woes, "that means vampires rather than Victorians, sexuality rather than Shelley, fanzines rather than Foucault, the contemporary world rather than the medieval one" (Eagleton 2015: par. 17). Marjorie Perloff, one of the foremost critics of contemporary, modern, and avant-garde poetry goes even further, stating that "One of our most common genres today is the *epitaph* for the humanities" (par. 1). She quotes Robert Weisbuch, a distinguished professor of English at the University of Michigan: "Today's consensus about the state of the humanities – it is bad, it is getting worse, and no one is doing much about it – is supported by dismal facts" (Weisbuch 2016). Among these facts are the decrease in financing faculty research, the decline in the percentage of undergraduates majoring in humanities and lack of interest in literature (cited in Perloff 2016: 1). The famous Turkish philosopher Cemil Meriç's statement is in full accord with Bloom's idea: "'Isms' are the straitjacket forced on our thinking" (Meriç 2016: 319).

Given this state of things, one might think that all these pessimistic statements are in tune with the present situation in our literary world, others that they are out of tune, and either of them may be right, so the answer to the question "Are these concerns justified" is "yes" and "no."

I will start with "no", first. Like Plato who dismissed poets and other artists from his ideal republic, blaming them for poor imitation of goodness and beauty, Bloom seems to be against all the literature devoid of aesthetic value and aesthetic beauty. The "isms" mentioned above and the critical jargon might be difficult for our students to get oriented among the novels but literature in all its forms, with its canon

as well as with all the avant-garde and unorthodox, exists and will go on touching us and doing wonders. We will be equally touched by Emily Bronte's poetic beauty and all the possible peripeteias of "isms" whose representatives are called 'resenters' by Bloom. New critical theories as new forms of exploration and interpretation foster and expand our understanding of literature, philosophy and religion. The following statement of critics can hardly be questioned:

> …far from having a sterile effect on our reading, new ways of seeing literature can revitalize our engagement with texts; that if we are to be adventurous and exploratory in our reading literature, we must also be adventurous in our thinking about literature (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker 2005: 4-5).

The recent years have seen a wide range of new theories and approaches such as trauma theory, life writing, film adaptations, to name but a few.

In fact, "isms" do not relate only to literature or philosophy or aesthetics; it is not only we, academics, who are obsessed with them; they dominate politics, religion and our social and intellectual life. Arthur Goldwag, in his book with a very odd name *Isms and Ologies* has 450 "isms", and he quotes a suggestive passage illustrating obsession with "isms", a paragraph embodying the words "nomadism", "post-feminist", "racism", "masculinism", "patriarchy", and "the tongue-twisting phrase 'possible homologation in an allegedly gender-bending postmodern flux of identities'" (2007: xv). The book is remindful of Thomas Edwards' book *Gangrena* in which he tried to list all the religious sects and segments in the seventeenth century but failed because

> history outran the historian. Even while the first volume of *Gangrena* was passing through the press, enough new sects sprang up to call for a second volume; and after a third volume, Edwards gave up in despair (Abrams & Greenblatt 1968: 864).

So is the case with new "isms". Interestingly, the number of students choosing "isms" for their masters and doctorate thesis is increasing; According to the Thesis Center of Higher Education Council of Turkey, only in 2014 there were thirty thesis on "isms". Nick Turner (2010), the writer of *Post-War British Women Novelists and the*

Canon, is wondering what we would say to a student who is in a quandary choosing between Elizabeth Jane Howard, an English novelist and Zadie Smith, also a British writer and essayist (34). The answers will vary, of course, but the writer thinks that "Zadie Smith pushes all the right critical buttons while Howard lies someone forgotten and unread" (11).

The pessimistic prognosis of some writers in terms of the death of some genres have not come true either. Philip Roth, the famous American writer (a favourite of Bloom) spoke about the decline of readers and the death of the novel in twenty-five years. Another American writer Paul Auster proved to be right in disagreeing with him. But it was Anthony Burgess, the great English critic and painter who spoke prophetically more than eighty-seven years ago: "So long as human society continues to exist, the novel will exist as its mirror, an infinitude of artistic images reflecting an infinitude of life patterns" (Burgess 2016). Anthony Burgess would be pleasantly or unpleasantly surprised by the newly sprung fiction types and literary terms such as hysterical realism, neuronovel, prison literature, xeno fiction and many others. The genre of biography was not accepted as a literary work by the representatives of New Criticism and those of Modernism, not to mention Ronald Barthes's theory of "the death of the author" in the 20th century. Supporting the idea of separation of text and life, T. S. Eliot claimed: "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (qtd. in Lee 2009: 94). Reality proves the opposite to be true, however. Over the last decade, the genre of biography has become a flourishing genre and an established academic discipline under the umbrella term "life writing" including biography, memoir, memoirs, personal essay, travel writing, reality shows and interviews.

It goes without saying that we will go on teaching all the new "isms" and movements and approaches, which forever have changed the face of literary criticism. Their variety and range are but energizing. "The house of fiction has … Not one window, but a million" (James 1996: iv). However, one cannot help thinking of

Harold Bloom's complaint about lack of "aesthetic value" of literary work and overdoing "isms" when the critic does her best to reduce the innocent friendly feelings of James's Isabel to the lesbian relationship with Madame Merle (Solomon 1996:444). Psychoanalytic interpretation seems to be impossible without exaggeration. Another famous critic, by using a sort of deconstruction method, turns Jamesian Isabel into "a wicked stepmother" (Perloff 1969). "Isms" become confusing, misleading and dangerous only if or when they are exaggerated. Bloom himself, unfortunately, tends to exaggerate things when he, for instance, considers Alice Walker's *Colour Purple*, the 1983 Pulitzer Prize Winner in fiction, to be "of no aesthetic interest or value whatsoever" and the writer herself to be "an extremely inadequate writer" (Bloom 1991). Bloom is hard on feminist writers, too. "I am very fond of feminist critics, some of whom are my friends", he says, "but it is widely known I'm not terribly fond of feminist criticism" (Weiss n.d.). He blames them for focusing on already famous writers like Jane Austen, George Eliot, Emily Dickinson or Willa Cather. However, it is not the case. Feminist critics do deserve recognition and admiration for "wiping the dust off the grave," to use Charlotte Bronte's words, of so many undeservedly neglected women writers beginning from the 16th century and onwards. Lady Mary Wroth, Eliza Haywood with her novel *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless***,** without which perhaps we would never know Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet, not to mention Aphra Behn, Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle whose works are gaining more and more recognition thanks to our feminist critics. Without S. Gilbert and S. Gubar we would never look differently at *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979) and *The Mad Woman in the Attic After Thirty Years* (Federico, 2011). All these literary developments, some of them being revolutionary, make literature more colourful and thought provoking and the touch of literature more meaningful.

THE TOUCH THAT ALWAYS DOES WONDERS

I have picked up Henry James's favourite word "touch" from Dickens's generous wish "Have a heart that never hardens, and a temper that never tires, and a touch that never hurts" (Dickens 2013). What is literature if not a touch that always does wonders?

According to V. Nabokov,

> Three forces make and mould a human being: heredity, environment, and the unknown agent X. Of these the second, environment, is by far the least important, while the last, agent X, is by far the most influential (1980:126).

This agent X, changes from person to person, but for the instructors of literature it is probably literature that shapes them mostly. Have you ever thought how different we, instructors of literature, are from those teaching science? It does not mean that the domain of science is devoid of passion and emotion. Steve Jobs had it in abundance but we have so many ways, with the help of the wonderful instrument called language to touch the hearts and minds of our students, to open their eyes to the wonders and mysteries of human psyche, remind them Shakespeare's words that man is a masterpiece,

> how noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals.
>
> (Shakespeare 1603:Hamlet Act II, Scene 3)

And this beauty of the world became a better one thanks to reading; the reading of great novels, great books which are called "canon" and "classics", not through reading popular culture, even if some writers claim that there are beautiful things in this culture, too.

Much has been written about the process of reading, the nature of reading and its impact; how to read and how to teach reading but there is still more unsaid because it is such a complicated process changing from reader to reader. Virginia Woolf who was the insatiable reader ever born, is famous for her powerful definitions of reading:

> sometimes I think heaven must be one continuous unexhausted reading. It's a disembodied trans-like intense rapture that used to seize me as a girl, and comes back now and again down here with a violence that lays me low.
>
> (qtd. in Lee 2005: 45)

And the other one: "Love is so physical, and so is reading." Though Marjorie Perloff doubts that "art makes one a better person, that literature teaches you the meaning of life," she nevertheless emphasizes "the sheer pleasure of the text — the sheer joy in all the different values of literature, fictive or poetic — these are the greatest things" (cited in Bruns 2011:14). In his book *An Experiment in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis, the famous British novelist and literary critic sees much deeper;

> the nearest I have yet got to an answer is that we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself … we want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own" (137).

Later in his book he adds that "literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality" (140).

How many readers today would say that they feel the same about reading? Probably very few. Even fewer will say what one of Orhan Pamuk's characters says in his novel *The New Life:* "I read a book one day and my whole life was changed." Today's students are much luckier than those in the nineteenth and even early twentieth century. Things were not as bright as today in terms of reading at that time. Hermione Lee speaks about vertical and horizontal reading: "the first regulated, supervised, orderly, canonical and productive, the second unlicensed, private, leisurely, disreputable, promiscuous and anarchic" (Lee: 46). Reading in bed was considered unfeminine and indecent. Today, we can read everywhere: in bed, at a table, in a library, on the bus, in line, even lying flat on a rug, if you like.

Harold Bloom, in his pedagogical book *How to read and Why?* (2001) proclaims reading as the most healing of pleasures and counts its benefits:

> Reading alleviates loneliness; strengthens the self in solitude; relaxes our will-to-power when we open a book; develops the capacity to form one's own judgments and opinions, frees us from the cruelties of life, acquaints us with wisdom.

Those who have read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* perhaps remember the characters' discussing the notion of "the accomplished lady" who should have "a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages" and many other qualities, to which Darcy (in fact Jane Austen) states that "…to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (Austen 1999:27). The words "bibliotherapy", "reading therapy" or "a literary clinic" are not neologisms in fact. It emerged during the First World War when the patients were healed through reading. Today, bibliotherapy is getting popular in treating cases of trauma, depression, anxiety and dementia. And it is worth mentioning that the books recommended are "not pleasant stories that make you forget yourself. They must be searching, drastic, stinging, relentless novels". Among them are Jane Austen, Bernard Shaw and A. K. Narayan (Dovey 2015).

What about our students in terms of reading? We, instructors of literature, unfortunately keep complaining about our students' poor reading and lack of interest in reading. Bloom attributes this lack to the force of circumstances, our life style so to say.

> A childhood largely spent watching television yields to an adolescence with a computer, and the university receives a student unlikely to welcome the suggestion that we must endure our going hence even as our going hither: ripeness is all. Reading falls apart, and much of the self-scatters with it (Weiss, 2008: par. 4).

Despite this condition, he considers it to be the job of universities to teach students discernment: how to discriminate between works of aesthetic value (the canon) and those without it (mass culture). Bloom is not alone in his criticism. The German philosopher and popular public intellectual Jürgen Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* supports Bloom's that "The problem as he sees it is that the producers of popular culture have control over what is consumed" (McKee 2007:5). Our literary

academia is well aware of the problem. A long list of books on how to teach literature is an indication that not everything is OK as it seems. Glenn C. Arbery's *Why Literature Matters*, Mark Edmundson's *Why Read?*, Frank Farrell's *Why Does Literature Matter?*, Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature*, Mark William Roche's *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, Daniel R. Schwartz's *In Defense of Reading*, Dennis Sumara's *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters*, Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction*, are but only few of them (Bruns 2011: 153-156).

Our approaches to teaching literature and its worth are also questioned. According to Bloom, we lack "the poetic touch" to what we teach. Some foreign instructors in Turkey criticize the tradition of having students make presentations in class on set topics, which has nothing to do with creativity or language acquisition. What Laurence Raw, an instructor at Ankara Başkent University, says for his department actually goes for the majority of instructors:

> Our department seems obsessed with the idea of learners giving "presentations," where they stand at the front of the class with a PowerPoint slideshow and talk about topics previously assigned to them by the educator. Originality of thought is actively discouraged: instead learners should try as much as possible to keep to the ideas propounded in their textbooks or previously given to them by their educators (Raw 2016: par. 3).

Cristina Vischer Bruns in her 2011 book *Why Literature?* suggests a variety of approaches to teaching literature and creating emotional connectedness with the text. Here are some of them: keeping reading journals in which "students gather their initial reactions to the literary works we read", by which writing on a daily basis is encouraged; to have students answer open-ended questions; searching for outside information connected with the work in question; memorizing and reciting, a long forgotten literary device which encourages "students to make a portion of a text literally "their own" through choosing a passage from one of the texts" (144-151).

We teach differently depending on our knowledge, experience, love and passion for what we teach, depending on our students' attitude to literature. We go through joys and trials, good days and bad

days in our teaching but we never give up inspiring those young people, students of literature anticipating miracles. Each time we reread the classic or modernist books with them we get freshly touched with the undying beauty of masterpieces Bloom is so expressive about. Have you ever wondered where we would be without literature today? One thing is definite; we would be in a much more chaotic world than we are today. However, I want to conclude on an optimistic note with Ian Hamilton's poem "Biography." What is literature if not a biography? Like a human life, it has the beginning, it is ever-changing, it is getting older, but unlike a human life it is immortal. Though many books do not endure the passage of time and fall into oblivion, "it is a truth universally acknowledged" that it is only classic works or Bloom's canon that challenges ages. "Who turns the page?" We, instructors of literature, turn the page. And it does matter how we turn it, and how we touch it. To those who are cynical about literature, and to those who think that it is a waste of time to devote oneself to literature, Nabokov's answer is reassuring: "It seems to me that in every mind, be it inclined towards the artistic or the practical, there is always a receptive cell for things that transcend the awful troubles of everyday life" (Nabokov 1980: 381). And to excite those receptive cells is *our* job. So, Bloom's concern is hardly justified. We go on turning the pages of touchstone books. And it will go on forever.

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