

GATHERING FLOWERS IN BLOOM.
THE AUTHOR OF *THE WESTERN CANON*
AS AN ANTHOLOGIST

Bukiety kwiatów w rozkwicie.
Kanon i antologia według Harolda Blooma

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Abstract

The article explores the connections between the notions of canon and anthology. The organizing principles of the anthology are contrasted with the tradition of early modern poetic miscellanea. The discussion focuses on the theoretical assumptions of one of the most prominent critics of the last century, Harold Bloom, as expounded in his seminal study, *The Western Canon*, and his contribution as the author of many important anthologies. In particular, it points to Bloom's ongoing preoccupation with human mortality and his belief in the salvific function of human memory.

Keywords: Harold Bloom, canon, memory, anthology

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia związek pojęcia antologii i kanonu. Idea antologii została zestawiona z wczesnonowożytnymi miscellaneami. Dyskusja koncentruje się na omówieniu poglądów jednego z najważniejszych literaturoznawców minionego stulecia, Harolda Blooma, wyłożonych w jego dziele *The Western Canon* i jego dorobku jako autora lub współautora wielu znaczących antologii. W szczególności, nacisk został położony na powracający w pismach Blooma temat ludzkiej śmiertelności i wiarę krytyka pokładaną w zbawczej funkcji pamięci.

Słowa kluczowe: Harold Bloom, kanon, pamięć, antologia

In memory of Professor Jerzy Limon

This article is a tribute to the great genius of twentieth century literary criticism and author of many influential anthologies, the unforgettable Harold Bloom, who passed away in 2019 at the age of eighty-nine. The reasons why I have chosen the author of *The Western Canon* as the hero of this story are twofold. One was given by the critic himself, who once confessed: “I am... an admirer of anthologies, even an enthusiast for them...”¹ The other is more complex: in what follows, I will try to explain the unspoken reasons for his fondness for anthologies.² The erudite and uncompromising Bloom always spoke forcefully whenever he felt great works of literature were neglected or misread, and he was frequently attacked for ignoring the social, ethical and moral responsibilities of literature. He complained that his intentions were misrepresented by his opponents, responding that only the greatest, canonical texts of profound complexity can nurture cognitive powers and cultivate memory, which, in turn, should foster broadmindedness, magnanimity, and genuine understanding among people. In his book *How to Read and Why*, Bloom explained:

Reading well is one of the greatest pleasures that solitude can afford you, because it is, at least in my experience, the most healing of experiences. It returns you to otherness, whether in yourself, or your friends, or those who may become friends. Imaginative literature is otherness, and as such alleviates loneliness.³

Consequently, he linked the inherent loneliness of a contemporary human to the systematic “dumbing-down that is destroying our literary culture.”⁴ Despite all the controversies surrounding his work, and despite my own doubts concerning many of his interpretations and judgements – including his utterly unfair treatment of what he deemed, not without a trace of spiteful irony,

¹ H. Bloom, Review of *The Oxford Book of Nineteenth Century English Verse*, ed. J. Hayward, and *The Golden Treasure of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*, ed. F. Turner Palgrave, *Victorian Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1965), 68.

² Despite his canonical position in the field of literary criticism, Bloom’s work as an anthologist has not yet received due critical attention.

³ H. Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2001), 19. It seems worth remembering that the cover page of the first edition of this book introduced Bloom as the author of *Shakespeare. The Invention of the Human* and the editor of *Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages*. In the quoted passage, the critic contrasts solitude, a state of being alone which may have a positive impact on the individual, with loneliness, which is unequivocally negative.

⁴ H. Bloom, ed., *Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 15.

“Eliotic sensibility”⁵ – I therefore wish to recall here his tireless defence of aesthetic values. I have decided to take a closer look at some of his anthologies, focusing in particular on his widely acclaimed book of *Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages*: the provocative, highbrow – one might perhaps even say snooty – title of a very special anthology.

1. The Forerunners

Before I embark on the discussion of Bloom’s literary preferences, which inform his efforts as an anthologist, I would like to begin with a brief flashback, going nearly half a millennium back in time. This detour will help us highlight, in turn, some distinctive features of a contemporary anthology. I suggest, therefore, that we take a brief look at early modern English miscellaneous collections of the amorous and the didactic. Among the titles of these highly popular volumes we find such a disarmingly unassuming one as *A Handful of Pleasant Delights*, but the majority of printers preferred more remarkable forms of advertisement. Some made use of mythological allusions advocating the poets’ skill: *England’s Helicon* (1600) and *Belvedere, or the Garden of the Muses* (1600); others compared their volumes to an opulent feast with many exquisite dishes: *A Banquet of Dainty Conceits* (1575), or a building where valuable pieces of art were displayed: *A Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions* (1578). Most popular, however, were titles referring to the ancient concept of *silva rerum* and allusions to the art of gardening and the biblical Eden: *The Forest Full of Fancy* (1579), *The Arbour of Amorous Devices* (1597) competed with and *Brittons Bower of Delight* (1591) and, perhaps most notable of all these, *The Paradise of Dainty Devices* (1576).⁶ Shakespeare’s great rival, Ben Jonson, was so fond of the metaphorical suggestiveness of the sylvan metaphor that he used it three times, twice in the titles of his own volumes (*The Forest* and *The Underwood*); he also compiled a miscellany of various texts, entitled *Timber, or Discoveries*, which contained, in his own words,

the raw material of facts and thoughts, *hyle*, wood, as it were, so called from the multiplicity and variety of the matter provided therein. For just as we are commonly wont to call a vast number of trees growing indiscriminately “a wood” (timber); so also did the ancients call those of their books, in which were collected at random articles upon various and diverse topics a wood (timber-trees).⁷

⁵ H. Bloom, Review, op. cit., 68. Bloom not only targeted Marxist, feminist and New-Historicist readings, but was equally hostile towards Eliot’s commitment to conservative, Christian values.

⁶ Cf. W. Wall, *The Imprint of Gender. Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 95.

⁷ B. Jonson, *Timber: Or, Discoveries Made upon Men and Matter*, ed. F. Schelling (Boston: Gin&Co, 1892), 89.

The reader acquainted with the classical tradition will recognize in Jonson's work echoes of the Roman poet Statius whose work influenced the development of scientific writing in seventeenth-century England.⁸ The underlying idea of this volume was therefore to provide information, perhaps even inspire further research, but the "food for thought" included in this volume lacked the refinement of a banquet. As implied by the original Latin usage of *miscellanea*, it could rather be associated with the nourishing although unseasoned, raw food for the gladiators; in other words, a meat hash, hodge-podge.

Most authors, however, disclaimed such unsavoury associations. The author of a 1575 collection, for instance, delivered a colourful and sweet-scented posy straight into his female reader's hands, with a telling title attached to it: *A Smale Handfull of Fragrant Flowers, selected and gathered out of the lovely garden of sacred scriptures, fit for any honourable and woorshipfull Gentlewoman to smell unto. Dedicated for a Neweyeeres gift, to the honourable and vertuous Lady, the Lady Sheffeeld*.⁹ We may feel prompted to say: what a fine combination of piety and sensual delight, but the book contained only evidently didactic verse, advocating constancy, modesty, patience and diligence. The title page informs us about the identity of the printer, one Richard Jonson, and the precise location of his shop, "at the South-west doore of Paules,"¹⁰ where the book could be purchased, while the compiler's name, Nicolas Breton, was reduced to his initials: N.B.¹¹ If Breton chose the title, he may be called an anthologist *avant la lettre*.

As the *Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* tells us, the word "anthology" was first used in the English language in the mid-seventeenth century, so nearly fifty years after Breton's collection, but its etymology implies precisely what his title announced: a collection (from the Greek verb *legein*, to bind together) of the "flowers" (Gr. *anthos*) of poetry. An anthologist picks and gathers together the most beautiful flowers of poetic imagination. One of the first known collections of Greek epigrams, Meleager's *Garland* compiled in the first century BC, opened, accordingly, with the proem advocating the flowers of poetic wit:

To whom, dear Muse, do you bring these varied fruits of song, or who was it who wrought this garland of poets? The work was Meleager's, and he laboured on it to give it as a keepsake to glorious Diocles. Many *lilies* of Anyte he inwove, and many of Moero, of Sappho few *flowers*,

⁸ F. de Bruyn, "The Classical *Silvae* and the Generic Development of Scientific Writing in Seventeenth-Century England," *English Literary History* 32, no. 2 (2001): 347.

⁹ *A Smale Handfull of Fragrant Flowers, selected and gathered out of the lovely garden of sacred scriptures, fit for any honourable and woorshipfull Gentlewoman to smell unto. Dedicated for a Neweyeeres gift, to the honourable and vertuous Lady, the Lady Sheffeeld* (London, 1575).

¹⁰ Most printing shops in London were located at this time in St. Paul's Square.

¹¹ Breton was also the author of the aforementioned *Brittons Bower of Delight*, likewise signed with his initials.

but they are *roses*; *narcissus*, too, heavy with the clear song of Melanippides and a young branch of the *vine* of Simonides; and therewith he wove in the sweet-scented lovely *iris* of Nossis... (emphasis added).¹²

Yet Breton's Renaissance collection was no "anthology" in our sense of the word. It was, as the title precisely announced, merely a *handful* of flowers, presented to the reader. In the prefatory poem attached to his collection, the book speaks itself. It recalls Aesop's foolish cock who preferred barley to gold, and warns the reader not to waste the precious "jewels" included in the volume. Such anxiety, concerning a possible misappropriation of the text, was not, however, uncommon in the early modern period when cheap printed books became accessible to the general public. Breton certainly did not wish to imply that the poems included in the volume were more worthy of readers' attention than other texts; instead, he simply wanted to safeguard his book against puritanical opponents of poetry. Ultimately, the prefatory verse left the judgement to the unknown reader: "But if I might giue counce[il] with the rest, / *First reade, the[n] chuse such fruits as lyke thee best*" (ll. 17–18; emphasis added).¹³ In this case, therefore, the shift from "flowers" to "fruits" seemed to entail more than a repetition of classical commonplace. In contradistinction to the title, which humbly commended the pleasure of reading, Breton's preface entrusted the reader with the responsibility for the morally correct use of the text. Thus, delight and profit, the latter denoting both the reader's moral benefit and the printer's material gain, were the only aims of these early modern collections.

2. The Flower Girl

The original meaning of the Greek words *anthos* and *legein* inspired a German scholar, Thomas Rommel, to develop the following illuminating analogy:

One could imagine a flower shop and Eliza Doolittle, the flower girl, picking out the most beautiful flowers, probably for a special occasion. If this image is applied to literature, and to poetry in particular, one finds that an anthology is a highly subjective selection of poems that share a common denominator. The all-important role in this process is played by Eliza the flower girl, *the editor of the anthology* (emphasis added).¹⁴

This is how we return to the hero of the present discussion, who at this point enters the scene of reading disguised as George Bernard Shaw's Cockney

¹² *The Greek Anthology*, trans. W. Roger Paton (London: Heinemann, 1960), 131. <https://archive.org/details/greekanthology01pato> (acc. 01.03.2021).

¹³ T. Rommel, "Eliza Doolittle and the Virtual Text. The Future of Electronic Anthologies," in *Anthologies of British Poetry. Critical Perspectives From Literary and Cultural Studies*, eds. B. Korte, R. Schneider, S. Lethbridge (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 309.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

flower girl – although I must confess that even in my wildest dreams I could not imagine Harold Bloom running for the job of a florist, and performing the role of the gullible Eliza. When he himself refers to the ancient myth and Shaw's creative appropriation of this story, he employs it as a parable of reading, throwing light on the artist who wanted to breathe life into a statue he had carved. In Shaw's account, it was the educator, Professor Higgins, who played the role of Pygmalion. Bloom, in his turn, instructs the reader: "The poem or a story will not come alive for you if you do not fall in love with it."¹⁵

Yet I think the American critic might accept the comparison with a flower girl, if we remember that it would endow him with the privilege of deciding for us which poems were most beautiful, and on this count most deserving of our attention. "The poems and poets" which the editor deems worthy, continues Rommel, "get elevated to the canonical status by being included in an anthology, excluded texts tend to disappear from the public eye."¹⁶ This sentence brings to mind the proverbial "out of sight, out of mind," and the language of this passage has strongly eschatological overtones: in contradistinction to the "chosen" few, which will live in the memory of future generations, the majority of mediocre writers will be erased from "the scroll of life" (Rev 13:8).¹⁷ Viewed in this light, Rommel's conclusion strikes a characteristically Bloomian note, resounding with his great admiration for human memory and his attachment to the idea of the literary canon. If we are to extend this theological metaphor and include in it a passage from the New Testament, we would have to change Christ's reassuring promise, "In my father's house are *many* mansions" (John 14:2) into its exact opposite: the literary canon, like its material corollary, the anthology, admits very few lodgers.

The Greek word *kanon* originally meant a "measuring rod," we might say: "a yardstick," and so the etymology of the word complies with the fact that the aesthetic value of any literary text is measured by the standards set by the canonical masterpieces. The connection between the anthology and canon formation was highlighted in Barbara Mujica's discussion of "Canon, Controversy, and the Literary Anthology," where she argued that

the very format of an anthology prompts canon formation, for while miscellany invites short, disconnected readings, an anthology invites prolonged study. Anthologies convey the notion of evolution (the succession of literary movements) and hierarchy (the recognition of masterpieces).¹⁸

¹⁵ H. Bloom, ed., *Stories and Poems...*, op. cit., 18.

¹⁶ T. Rommel, op. cit., 309.

¹⁷ Bloom's last book, published posthumously, was entitled *The Bright Book of Life. Novels to Read and Reread* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2020).

¹⁸ B. Mujica, "Canon, Controversy, and the Literary Anthology," *Hispania*, vol. 80, no. 2 (1997): 203–204.

The necessity of discernment which allows one to distinguish between a work of literary genius and a badly written text was crucial for Bloom's critical practice. In 2003 he reacted with anger to the news that the National Book Foundation's annual award would go to Stephen King, rather than Cormack McCarthy or John Don DeLillo:

I began as a scholar of the Romantic poets. In the 1950s and early 1960s, it was understood that the great English Romantic poets were Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, John Keats, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. But today they are Felicia Hemans, Charlotte Smith, Mary Tighe, Laetitia Landon, and others who just can't write. A fourth-rate playwright like Aphra Behn is being taught instead of Shakespeare in many curriculums across the country.¹⁹

The following year saw the publication of his anthology, *Best Poems of the English Language*, which, in contradistinction to Adrienne Rich's selection of *The Best American Poetry* published in 1996, represented only the "dead white European and American males." In fact, Bloom's anthology was his deliberate response to the book edited by Rich. Advertised as a significant contribution to the issues of "social justice, human community," and an assembly of "voices of poets outside the literary mainstream," her anthology marked a significant departure from the traditional concept of the canon. The publisher put forward reasons for this change: "More African-American, Native American, Asian-American, Latino, and gay and lesbian poets are represented here than ever before, and their pieces weave a lush and exquisite tapestry of thought and feeling."²⁰ In Bloom's view, however, this anthology was a volume "of a badness not to be believed, because it follows the criteria now operative: what matters most are the race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, and political purpose of the would-be-poet."²¹

3. The Shadow of Death

One may think that the motive behind Bloom's scathing attacks on other anthologists was self-aggrandizement, but, in fact, it was precisely the opposite; self-esteem was not a factor in his criticism. I would rather say that his stance betrayed his acute awareness of human mortality. In countless interviews, he invoked the opening lines from Andrew Marvell's poem, "To His Coy Mistress":

¹⁹ H. Bloom, *Dumbing Down American Readers*, 9/24/2003. <http://www.public.asu.edu/~atsjd/bloom.html> (acc. 15.02.2021).

²⁰ A. Rich, D. Lehman, eds., *The Best American Poetry 1996* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). <https://www.bestamericanpoetry.com/pages/volumes/?id=1996> (acc. 01.03.2021).

²¹ H. Bloom, "On The Best of the Best American Poetry, 1988-1997," *Boston Review*, April 24, 1998. <http://bostonreview.net/archives/BR23.2/bloom.html> (acc. 01.03.2021).

“Had we but world enough and time...” (l. 1).²² The problem, he insisted, was that people did not have enough time to read everything. This is because at our backs we “always hear / Time’s winged chariot hurrying near / And yonder all before us lie / Deserts of vast eternity” (ll. 21–24); an eternal wilderness without books and libraries. So, simply put, life is too short to be wasted on badly written texts. The limited span of each anthology, and the limited time of each course of literature taught in universities, brings us face to face with the same dilemmas. As he wrote in his preface to *The Western Canon*, “a book about twenty-six writers is possible, but not about four hundred.”²³ It may seem that in the times of digital humanities this statement no longer holds true – digital anthologies can store thousands of items – but the aim of the anthology is not simply to store pieces of literature. As has been said, the editor of the anthology is expected to present us with *selected* flowers. Readers will always look for such guidance, since, as Bloom repeats restlessly, “there is literally not enough time to read everything, even if one does nothing but read.”²⁴

This brings us to the distinction drawn by an American poet, Rachel Hadas, between two kinds of anthologies:

There are the hefty tomes like the various Norton anthologies – books in uniform, as it were, with double columns of text marching down pages of a tissue-paper thinness, designed, no doubt, to accommodate as much of the rapidly expanding canon as possible,” and “anthologies that mysteriously hit the spot, that work, prompt reverie and digression.”²⁵

Among the latter she mentions *The Wind and the Rain*, co-edited by Harold Bloom and John Hollander in 1961. The English readers of the volume may be inclined to associate the title with Kenneth Grahame’s book for children, *Wind in the Willows*, but in fact it was taken from the song “The Wind and the Rain” in Shakespeare’s *The Twelfth Night*. The texts in the anthology are arranged by seasons. Its informing principles are the passage of time and the cycles of nature. *Chronos*, the linear time of clocks and calendars, meets here with *kairos*, opportune time; that which is now and always, the circular time without beginning or end. Disguised as a book for young people who wish to taste the joys of reading, *The Wind and the Rain* thus articulates the most profound existential problem at the heart of Bloom’s vision of humanity.²⁶

²² A. Marvell, “To His Coy Mistress,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44688/to-his-coy-mistress>. In Marvell’s time, the words “lie” and “eternity” formed a perfect rhyme.

²³ H. Bloom, *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994), 2.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 15.

²⁵ R. Hadas, “On Poetry Anthologies,” *New England Review*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1998): 126.

²⁶ Bloom’s preoccupation with death also informed the thematic focus of his anthology *Till I End My Song. A Gathering of Last Poems*, ed. H. Bloom (New York: Harper Collins, 2010).

Nearly half a century later, Bloom presented his readers with another precious gift, an anthology entitled: *Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages*. The similarity between these two editions, acknowledged in the Preface, may betray the author's desire to revisit the past, despite the inevitable flow of time. Here, as in *The Wind and the Rain*, the reader is invited to contemplate the passage of time epitomized by the changing seasons of the year; the four seasons depicted in this volume also symbolize human life. The first section, entitled "Spring" opens, therefore, with John Keats's "The Human Seasons," followed by "The Song of the Four Winds" by a minor English Romantic poet, Thomas Love Peacock. This arrangement implies that spring, the season of hope, contains all seasons to come: the budding trees will bloom in summer, bring fruit in autumn, and finally lose their leaves and be muffled by hoarfrost when winter takes its toll. Most poems included in these four sections lack the complexity of "the strongest," strictly "canonical" works; their chief merits being "directness and relative simplicity," but certainly not naïve optimism. Winter landscapes are presented, for instance, by the tragic figures of English Romanticism, John Clare and Thomas Lovell Beddoes. Clare suffered from severe mental illness from the age of forty-four and spent the last twenty-three years of his life in St. Andrew's asylum. Beddoes undertook the study of medicine to find the secret interface between the immortal soul and the mortal body – a project which brings to mind the Cartesian claim that the soul is located in the pineal gland. Throughout his life, he was obsessed with death, and took his own life at the age of forty-five. One critic opined that the poet had wasted his genius on a theme that haunted his imagination.²⁷ I cannot help wondering, though, if Bloom's amazingly versatile and erudite wit was not propelled by the same focus on mortality which stifled Beddoes's great talent.

Although neither Peacock nor Beddoes and Clare merited a single mention in *The Western Canon*, their poems proved worthy of the attention of "extremely intelligent children of all ages." The editor of the anthology juxtaposes Clare's portrayal of violent snowstorm, included in his two sonnets under the same title, with the enchantingly calm and soothing "Snow-flakes" by Longfellow. Whereas Clare's "Snowstorm" shows the uncanny and wild face of nature and marvels at the changes brought about by heavy snowfall, Longfellow surprises the reader with airy-light white down shaken "Out of the bosom of the Air, / Out of the cloud-folds of her garments shaken" (ll. 1–2). Yet the poem is first and foremost an exercise in expressing grief, as the last stanza reveals: "This is the poem of the air, / Slowly in silent syllables recorded, / This is the secret of despair, /

²⁷ L. Lanzen Harris, *Nineteenth-century Literature Criticism* (New York: Gale Research Company: 1981), 90.

Long in the cloudy bosom hoarded / Now whispered and revealed / To wood and field" (ll. 13–18).²⁸

Beddoes has four poems in this anthology, and all of them appear in the last section of the anthology devoted to winter. All are informed by the same intense and irresistible call of darkness. Turpid visions of "the body... / that has mouldered away in the sea" (ll. 8–9) or the corpse of a maiden "that lay so young / 'Mong the thistles and toadstools so hoary" (ll. 13–14) haunt the lines of his "Old Ghost."²⁹ His "Dirge" is sung by the voices that rise from "beneath the grass" (l. 1), unheeded by mortal passers-by, and celebrating the uncanny "delights" of the dead in their "graves by glow-worm night"³⁰ (ll. 5–6). The eponymous phantom-wooer in his ballad seduces a fair lady with a "poisoned note": "The little snakes of silver throat, / In mossy skulls that nest and lie" repeat the same call over and over again: "Die, oh! Die" (ll. 8–10).³¹ Last but not least, his fourth poem, "The Carrion Crow" features old Adam and Eve, or rather their carrions, responding to the ghastly whistling of two devils who "blow through a murder's bones" (l. 11 and 23).³² Each and every one of these poems resounds with the same ominous call. As Bloom asserted in *The Visionary Company*, the author of these lines seeks no triumph over death, chance and time, but surrenders his being to them.³³ In poems written by Beddoes, "every metaphor resolves itself as another figure of death."³⁴

Consistent and appealing as all these shifting portrayals of wintertime, snow, wind, frost, stillness, sadness or calm, grief or tranquility, melancholy, distress and so many other phenomena and sensations are, one is prompted to ask what these reading exercises have to do with the formation of the literary canon? In what sense do these anthologies "convey the notion of evolution (the succession of literary movements) and hierarchy (the *recognition* of masterpieces"? Their layout defies strict chronology, focusing, instead, on the decisive moments in human life: birth, growth, ripeness and death. There are no apparent reasons, either, to believe that the inclusion of Beddoes and Clare in *The Wind and the Rain* as well as *The Stories and Poems for Extremely Intelligent Children of All Ages* reflected the editor's desire to revise their status as peripheral figures of English Romanticism. Despite their "extraordinary individuality," they remain for Bloom witnesses to "the twilight time of English Romanticism," and he calls

²⁸ H. Bloom, ed., *Stories and Poems...*, op. cit., 414.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, 444.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 446.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 510.

³² *Ibidem*, 444.

³³ H. Bloom, *The Visionary Company. A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1971 [1961]), 440.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 433.

them “ruins of given circumstance.”³⁵ His critical assessment of Clare refers first and foremost to the poet’s debt to Wordsworth and Coleridge: “it does not lessen him to say that much of his poetry is a postscript to Wordsworth’s, even Beddoes’s.”³⁶ The notion of hierarchy, of descent and pedigree, originality and influence play a crucial role in Bloom’s account of English Romanticism. So how can we connect his non-canonical anthologies with his vision of a literary canon and its vital role in the life of the individual and the society?

The answer is very simple. The poems included in these anthologies were meticulously chosen and then re-assembled in a deliberate way in order to enhance the reader’s receptivity and aesthetic competence. They are not children’s literature, but, as the title of the latter collection announces, “stories and poems *for extremely intelligent children*.” Their “lovely enchanting language” – to borrow George Herbert’s description of poetic idiom – consisting of ingenious metaphors and delightful rhythm, of “sweet phrases,” “sugar-cane / honey of roses” (ll. 19–20)³⁷ gathered from poets’ gardens, is meant to provide a foretaste of great masterpieces whose glory they recall. This is why in the order of reading Beddoes and Clare come before Wordsworth and Coleridge; Robert Herrick and George Wither before Donne, Herbert and Marvell; Lewis Carroll and Kipling before Dickens. Thomas Love Peacock’s “The Four Winds” foreshadows the reader’s future encounter with the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley. In particular, the last section of the poem abounds in echoes of Shelley’s “Ode to the Western Wind”: in Peacock’s poem the wind from the west resounds with Shelley’s “autumnal deep” (l. 19), stirring “the mighty wave / of ocean bounds o’er rock and sand; / the foaming surges roar and rave” (ll. 25–27) and “the mingled rage of seas and skies” (l. 33).³⁸ Short songs from *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* are the school of reading for Shakespeare’s great comedies and tragedies. In teaching children to read, as in nurturing them, one should offer them milk, before they can fully digest the solid food that is for the mature. Bloom’s two anthologies provide precisely this: the best milk of the word, so that his readers can later enjoy Dante, Cervantes, Wordsworth and Jane Austen, Proust, Joyce and Woolf; not to mention Shakespeare, “the son of memory and mother of the muses,”³⁹ who is the centre of the canon, the beginning and end of reading. Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and Pardoner deserve to be compared with Shakespearean characters; Milton’s Satan is juxtaposed with Macbeth;

³⁵ Ibidem, 438.

³⁶ Ibidem, 445.

³⁷ G. Herbert, “The Forerunners,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50701/the-forerunners> (acc. 01.03.2021).

³⁸ H. Bloom, ed., *Stories and Poems...*, op. cit., 26.

³⁹ H. Bloom, *The Western Canon...*, op. cit., 160.

and the last chapter in *The Western Canon* reminds us that we always end where we began: “Beckett... Joyce... Proust... Shakespeare.” All the stories and poems included in Bloom’s anthology serve to endow each individual reader’s memory and intellect. None of them can be called “didactic” – indeed, nothing was more abhorrent to Bloom than narrow-minded didacticism – but the anthology evidently served a large educational purpose: to teach readers *how to read and why*.

Reading, as Bloom constantly repeats, is a solitary occupation. It starts with an intimate, personal encounter with the text which later resonates in our demeanour among other people (and never the other way round, so literary criticism cannot rely on the unfolding of any ideological stance). By and large, the issue at stake is the “invention” and development of the human. In the poem which I have quoted above, George Herbert speaks about the ominous portents of death. Like the harbingers who mark the door of the house where the king is expected to come with chalk, death sprinkles the reader’s hair white, foreshadowing the coming of winter. But for the speaker in this poem, more dreadful than death seems the loss of memory and language: “But must they have my brain? Must they dispart / Those sparkling notions, which therein were bread? / Must dullness turn me to a clod?” (ll. 3–5).⁴⁰ Herbert’s speaker prays to God to alleviate his fear and show him mercy. Harold Bloom, I suppose, would prefer to follow the advice of the Cavalier poet, Robert Herrick: “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, / Old Time is still a-flying; / And this same flower that smiles today / Tomorrow will be dying” (ll. 1–4).⁴¹ Yet what Herrick meant as an appeal “To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time,” as the title of his poem revealed, in the context of our discussion may be appositely linked to the anthologist’s task in his lifelong strife against the passage of time and the loss of our culture’s memory embodied in the canon.⁴² “Seizing the day,” Harold Bloom would certainly agree, always includes reading good literature.

⁴⁰ Herbert ingeniously plays here on the verb to “dispart,” which means “to throw open” and “release from confinement,” suggesting that old age is like a surgeon who performs brain surgery, opens the skull, and scatters the “sparks” of wit contained therein. In effect of this operation, the “sparkling” intellect grows dull.

⁴¹ R. Herrick, “Gather ye rosebuds,” in *Works of Robert Herrick*, vol. 1, ed. Alfred Pollard. London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1891, 102. <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/herrick/tovirgins.htm> (acc. 01.03.2021).

⁴² Bloom’s penultimate critical book, the last one to be published during his life, was entitled, most fittingly, *Possessed by Memory: The Inward Light of Criticism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2019). In his preface, Bloom confided that he conceived his own work as “a dialogue” with his “dead friends.” He called the title he had chosen “the book in a single phrase,” and posed the following questions: “What is it to be possessed by memory? How does possession differ in these: to possess dead or lost friends and lovers, or to possess poetry and heightened prose by memory?” And he stated: “Memory contains the composite triad in which the Kantian summa – Freedom, God, Immortality – transmutes into poetry’s countersumma: individuating voice, drawing down or augmenting a waning God, and bestowing upon us the Blessing that is more life,” ix–xx.

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