DIALANGUE

BULLETIN DE LINGUISTIQUE
volume 11, avril 2000

Unité d'enseignement
en linguistique et en langues modernes
Université du Québec à Chicoutimi

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SELF-OVERHEARING OR DIALOGUE?

READING BLOOM READING SHAKESPEARE[1]

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"For I am nothing if not critical"
Othello

Harold Bloom is a Herculean critic, a tireless fighter whose career may be easily divided in terms of battles rather than interests. Thus, after settling accounts with the New Critics and the deconstructionists, he decides now to take arms against a sea of "resenters,"[2] and by opposing end them. In this sense, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, his latest book, is less a fresh reading of Shakespeare's plays than an act of war against the "resentful theorists," the "fashionable ideologues," and the "gender-and-power freaks." And the excessive dotage on Shakespeare displayed throughout the book is no more than a reaction (a very strong one) to those who like to reduce the Bard and some of his sublime creations to mere products of social energies. This somehow recalls Tolstoy's famous attack on Shakespeare: the object of the Russian novelist's rage was less Shakespeare's art than the excessive zeal of his Romantic bardolators. Although written in the critical tradition of A.C.Bradley[3], *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* could not have been written in the age of Bradley simply because Bloom seldom gets inspired by his friends; it is his enemies, rather, who orient his choices.

Far from being "very nearly perfect," as one reviewer has called it, Bloom's book is overstated, repetitive, and abounds in contradictions; and the greatness of Shakespeare in it, like the greatness of God, is a matter of faith rather than evidence. Bloom scarcely takes the pain to define his terms or support his arguments with textual evidence. The readers are obliged to believe everything that Bloom is saying, and must let themselves be led by him through a wilderness of hyperbolic praises. Nevertheless, the importance of the subject and Bloom's place in contemporary criticism are more than enough to make of the book a literary event worthy of everybody's consideration; and ignoring it, as it seems to be the watchword in the academy, is hardly justified.

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1. A slightly-different version of this paper was presented at the 28th annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Montreal, 6-8 April, 2000.
2. Bloom's term for new historicists, cultural materialists, and feminists.
3. Author of the very influential *Shakeapearean Tragedy* (1904)

The main thesis of Bloom's book is that Shakespeare's plays are the indisputable source of modern identity:

> Literary character before Shakespeare is relatively unchanging; women and men are represented as aging and dying, but not as changing because their relationship to themselves, rather than to the gods or God, has changed. In Shakespeare, characters develop rather than unfold, and they develop because they reconceive themselves. Sometimes this comes about because they *overhear* themselves talking, whether to themselves or to others. Self-overhearing is their royal road to individuation.... The plays remain the outward limit of human achievement: aesthetically, cognitively, in certain ways morally, even spiritually. They abide beyond the end of the mind's reach; we cannot catch up to them. Shakespeare will go on explaining us, in part because he invented us, which is the central argument of this book.
>
> (Bloom 1998: xvii-xviii)

To be sure, this extreme view of Shakespeare's cultural authority has little to do with the Bard's notorious ability to depict aspects of human nature with astonishing accuracy, a commonplace in Shakespearean criticism at least since Samuel Johnson's famous "Preface" (1765). The implication here is that Shakespeare should be credited with nothing less than "the invention of the human." And his major characters are not merely complex and lifelike individuals; they are "extraordinary instances not only of how meaning gets started, rather than repeated, but also of how new modes of consciousness come into being" (xviii).

Apart from the notion of the "invention of the human," which seems to be Bloom's fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world and was content to lose it, the book has its great moments of insight and is not wholly unconnected to current criticism. To some extent, it participates in the revival of character criticism advocated recently by certain contemporary moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Charles Taylor, and by those who draw on their work. And it is this aspect of the book in particular in which I am interested. I have no wish, in a short paper like this, to stage a debate between Bloom and his others; what I seek rather is the Aristotelian mean between these two extremes. In other words, I attempt to link Bloom's "old-fashioned" criticism to some aspects of what certain scholars call "the turn to ethics in the 1990s" or "Shakespeare and character in the twenty-first century." I also believe that Bloom's demarcation from current criticism is sometimes only a matter of terminology.

Harold Bloom is right when he says that Shakespeare cannot be rivalled in the creation of individuals; however, individuation has less to do with "self-overhearing" than with what Charles Taylor, following Bakhtin, has called the "dialogical character" of human life (Taylor 1996: 33). Shakespeare's characters become full individuals capable of change not so much because they "overhear themselves talking, whether to themselves or to others" (Bloom 1998: xvii) as because, like any other individuals, they are engaged in a continuous dialogue, or dispute, with those who matter to them, their "significant others." Although Bloom seems to imply that all Shakespeare's great characters "reconceive themselves" through "self-overhearing," what he appears to have in mind is one character in particular, Hamlet, who does indeed develop every time he speaks to

himself. But even in his most intimate soliloquies, Hamlet never lacks an addressee, or rather a super-addressee beyond his existing interlocultors. Like the hermit who is in a continuous dialogue with God, and the solitary artist who keeps talking and listening to his eventual public, Hamlet's interlocutor is no other than the person who appears to have more significance for him than any other person: his dead father. In this, Hamlet is hardly different from the rest of us, for our parents seem to be the interlocutors with whom we never stop conversing, even when they disappear from our lives (Taylor 1996: 33).

Yet such a dialogue with the significant others is possible only within a framework of preferences, that is to say, a moral space within which the individual is able to decide what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what is not. Individuation here is linked to preference and orientation, for to be an individual is to belong somewhere, to "exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth" (Taylor 1986: 3). In this sense, subjectivity is inseparable from ethics, for knowing what kind of person you want to be implies both having a particular idea of virtue, and being ready to play the role that embodies that virtue.

Bloom's analysis of *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, is centred upon the idea of role-playing: Cleopatra "never ceases to play Cleopatra," whereas Antony at the end "almost stops playing the part of Antony" (Bloom 1998: 548-560). According to Erving Goffman, all individuals in society are players; however, some are so taken in by the part they play that it becomes their reality, while others play a role but never forget that it is just a role. Antony, for instance, belongs to the first category, those that Goffman calls "sincere" individuals, who "believe in the impression fostered by their performance" (Goffman 1959: 18). Bloom says little about the nature of the role played by Antony or its real implications:

> romantic love can be said to have hastened Antony's Osiris-like dismantling, yet it would be difficult...
> to demonstrate it either as value or as catastrophe, on the basis of his decline and fall. (550)

What Bloom fails to explain to his readers is why it is difficult to demonstrate whether Antony's fall is a triumph or a disaster. In my view, the difficulty lies in the fact that, as Nietzsche says, "there are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena." Which implies that whether Antony's actions are good or bad depends on our own morality. And one of Antony's major problems is that those who speak about him (friends, Romans, and critics) tend to impose on him their own moral values. It is crucial then for a better appreciation of the play to understand Antony's own view of what is good or bad, what is of significance and what is not. Such understanding would be possible in my view only if we explored Antony's moral space.

Antony's moral space and the framework against which all his actions and decisions should be explained is the life of chivalry with its ethos and particularities. The role that Antony never ceases to play is that of a Romantic hero, the kind of hero that Don Quixote has in mind: strong, generous, honourable, and capable of great and intense love. That is Antony's idea of virtue; and his character in the play is the result of a continuous dialogue with those who recognise in him this virtue (Cleopatra and the dead Julius Caesar), and a continuous struggle with those who fail to recognise it (Octavius Caesar). Is Antony's death a triumph or a catastrophe? The answer depends on where you stand.

What is certain, however, is that it is less a result of his infatuation than the result of his anachronism. Antony is a Renaissance character who lives according to an outmoded code of behaviour and has adopted the virtues of another time (the heroic age) and another society. And you simply cannot transport the virtues of another time and another community into your own, because there exists no possible method by which these can be successfully detached from the social structure of that time and that community (MacIntyre 1981:116).

By insisting upon "self-overhearing" and calling it the "royal road to individuation," Bloom seems to underestimate the dialogical character of human life and the role that otherness plays in shaping people's personalities. Bloom himself would not have been the kind of critic he is now had he not been actively engaged throughout much of his career in a passionate dialogue (dispute, in his case) with his significant others. And despite his attempt to present his book as a monologue (xvii) *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* quivers with consciousness of the other, and owes much of its success to the "resenters" from whom Bloom tries to distance himself. There is no such thing as a monologue; words are always uttered with the hope that someone, somewhere will understand them:

> The monologic utterance is, after all, already an abstraction... Any monologic utterance... is an inseverable element of verbal communication. Any utterance – the finished, written utterance not excepted – makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn.
>
> (Bakhtin 1986:72)

Bloom cannot be unaware of this aspect of human life, for, quite early in his book, he identifies both his interlocutors and the framework where he belongs: "I am disheartened by much that now passes as readings of Shakespeare," he says referring to post-structural and political reading strategies, "I seek to extend a tradition of interpretation that includes Samuel Johnson, William Hazlitt, A. C. Bradley, and Harold Goddard..." (xviii). Sometimes, one gets the impression that "self-overhearing" is only a rendering of Bakhtinian and Taylorian "dialogism." To put it in Bloomian terms, "self-overhearing" may turn out to be no more than a strong misreading of a previous text (Bloom 1973).

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