country," according to each focus group member, from 1950 to 1990. Some graphs have gradually sloping downward lines during the 1980s, some squiggle up and down, and a few (presumably greedy Wall Street bond traders) had upward lines.

Given a choice between Clintonism and Reaganism, however, actual voters (as opposed to poll respondents) in 1994 chose the latter overwhelmingly. Greenberg's misunderstanding of popular sentiment demonstrates the risk you run in trying to interpret poll results—that your own opinion, rather than that of your respondents, guides the outcome.

In this case, what Greenberg apparently never considers is an alternative explanation for voter disaffection with the economy: the impact of the news and entertainment media on public perception of abstract ideas such as "the state of the country." Something should have clicked in Greenberg's mind when his focus groupies started quoting movie characters such as Gordon Gekko's "Greed is good" speech from *Wall Street* to explain their reactions to poll questions about the 1980s.

I'VE RECENTLY BEEN LOOKING AT TRENDS IN both standards of living and Americans' confidence in their own economic prospects, and can only conclude that 1) American living standards have improved steadily during the past three decades, and 2) in their own cases, Americans know that. When asked by pollsters about their financial prospects, American workers today will say they would like to earn more money (who wouldn't?), but they also view their economic prospects as good and admit that they are better off financially than their parents were at their age.

The Consumer Sentiment Index compiled by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center shows that in every single year since the early 1950s, more than 60 percent of Americans said they were better off financially than they were the previous year. Indeed, except for two brief periods—the Watergate and oil-shocks era of 1973–74 and the recession years of 1979–82—more than 70 percent

of all Americans have said they were better off each year. In a 1994 survey, 65 percent of American workers said they were satisfied with their current jobs, while just 10 percent said they were dissatisfied.

The image we often see or hear about of an anxiety-stricken, embittered, deeply pessimistic workforce with little hope for advancement is more a fantasy of political commentators and professional pessimists (both conservative and liberal) than it is the reality in America. How do you square that fact with Greenberg's trusty focus-group reports? Easy. People know about their own economic condition but have little first-hand knowledge with which to judge what's happening to other people. They tend to get that knowledge from the press, which likes bad news more than good news, and popular entertainment, which is dominated by Democrats and political liberals.

Psyched by Clinton's 1992 victory

(made possible more by Republican incompetence and Ross Perot than a new New Deal message), Greenberg seems politically tone deaf in *Middle Class Dreams*. That doesn't mean I didn't find the book a little interesting. My favorite passages have to do with Clinton's rise to power in Arkansas, which Greenberg describes in almost mythic language. "In early 1974, at age 27, Clinton got into his 1970 Gremlin and began searching for any gathering of people that would hear him out," Greenberg writes reverently. Clinton's bull session continues even today—and, thanks to advisers like Greenberg, his choice of platform is still a clunker.   ❦

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Canon Fire
## By Nick Gillespie

The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages, by Harold Bloom, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 578 pages, $29.95

SO MANY BOOKS, SO LITTLE TIME. That is, at rock bottom, every reader's lament. There is simply so much stuff to plow through—and so much more being published by the minute—how can anyone decide what's worth reading, much less the order in which things should be read? Even when you restrict yourself just to literature—poetry, drama, fiction, and criticism of the same—the matter looms larger and more humbling than Everest.

In fact, limiting the discussion to literature raises an even more basic question: Why read *literature* in the first place? The idea that literature is frivolous at best and subversive at worst has a long and distinguished pedigree. Plato, of course, famously banned poets from his Republic because they sacrificed the "truth" for aes-

thetic effect. (Ironically, literature departments are among the few academic outposts in which Plato is still regularly read.) Educational reformers in revolutionary France disparaged literary studies (along with most of the humanities) as irrelevant in a "rational" world order, a charge echoed by contemporary academicians in professional programs and the hard sciences who wonder aloud what the point is of carrying English and comparative literature departments which pull in few (if any) grant or research dollars.

Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* attempts to state authoritatively what's worth reading and why. Bloom is one of the most influential literary critics of the past 30 years. As the Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale and the Berg Profes-
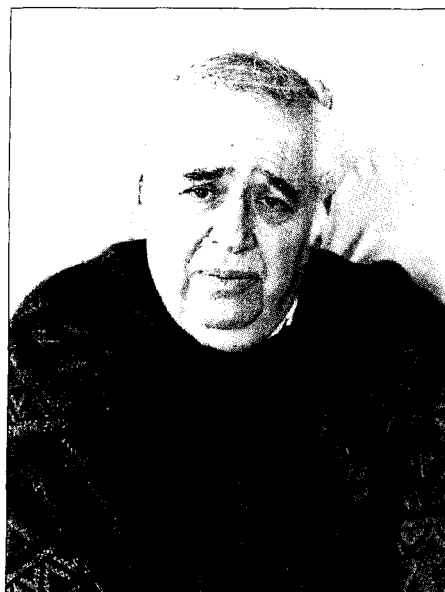
Harold Bloom: "I think that the self, in its quest to be free and solitary, ultimately reads with one aim only: to confront greatness." For him, Shakespeare is the alpha and omega of literature.

sor of English at NYU, a past MacArthur "genius" grant winner, and the author of some 20 books and editor of over 100 more, he is certainly in a position to offer definitive answers—or as close to definitive as we might manage.

The Western Canon consists of essays on the 26 post–classical-age authors Bloom considers central to Western literature. Bloom's literary dream team—Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Montaigne, Molière, Milton, Samuel Johnson, Goethe, Wordsworth, Austen, Whitman, Dickinson, Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Freud, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, Borges, Neruda, Pessoa, Beckett—contains no surprises (except perhaps by omission). The book ends with a series of appendices in which Bloom lists another 800-plus writers, from the Gilgamesh poet to Tony Kushner, whom he feels are also worth browsing through.

But even without the provocative list at book's end, it's clear that Bloom is padding the count. For him, Shakespeare is the alpha and omega of literature. "Shakespeare is the Canon. He sets the standard and the limits of literature," writes Bloom. Shakespeare's genius is so overwhelming, in fact, that he "recenters" Western litera-ture, says Bloom. All literature, whether written before or after Shakespeare, must be measured against the literary yardstick left behind by the Bard of Avon (and inevitably found wanting).

Well, sure. But asserting that Shakespeare is the tops is like saying Babe Ruth was the greatest baseball player of all time: It's an eminently defensible position, but it ultimately provides no guidance on what to do next. Should we stop playing and watching baseball (whether with true major leaguers or replacement scrubs)? Given our limited reading time, should we confine ourselves just to Shakespeare? This is counsel that Bloom, a self-confessed "addict who will read anything," manifestly ignores; he is conversant even about books he thinks are junk.

And indeed, Bloom ultimately seems less interested in boosting Shakespeare's reputation (which hardly needs the lift) than in besmirching the current lit-crit scene. Bloom is an entertaining, hyperbolic stylist, quick to spout fashionably anti-P.C. soundbites: "We are destroying all intellectual and aesthetic standards in the humanities and social sciences, in the name of social justice," he writes at one point. These are "the worst of all times for literary criticism," he insists at another. Such claims fairly beg for clarification and qualification—are we destroying "all" standards, or merely altering the ones *Bloom* values?—but he doesn't deign to fill in the details.

THE WELLSPRING OF BLOOM'S DISCONTENT is what he calls "the School of Resentment," the "academic-journalistic network...who wish to overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed (and nonexistent) programs for social change." He identifies six branches of this particular *école* (Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, and Semioticians), each of which seeks in its particular way to recast "great" literature as the product of some impersonal, material cause (gender politics, class ideology, etc.) rather than of transcendent genius.

And so, for instance, "Shakespeare criticism is in full flight from his aesthetic supremacy and works at reducing him to the 'social energies' of the English Renaissance, as though there were no authentic difference in aesthetic merit between the creator of Lear, Hamlet, Iago, Falstaff and his disciples such as John Webster and Thomas Middleton," says Bloom. This is, in fact, an overstatement. Even critics who chalk up *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to social energies generally admit that those social energies are better than the ones that scratched out, say, Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* or *The White Devil.*

"To read in the service of any ideology is not...to read at all," says Bloom. Fair enough, but he himself spins out a personal party line as reductive and blinkered as the overtly political ones he derides. Shunning voguish extra-literary criteria such as race, class, or gender, Bloom insists instead on "the autonomy of the aesthetic," by which he really means *his* aesthetic, the "anxiety of influence."

"The anxiety of influence," writes Bloom, "is...an anxiety achieved by and in the poem, novel, or play. Any strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts." Great literature, says Bloom, is inherently "agonistic" and cannot be "detached from its anxieties about the works that possess priority and authority in regard to it."

While this approach can yield interesting results with writers and critics who are explicitly obsessed with their place in literary history (such as Milton, Samuel Johnson, or Bloom himself) it is less helpful in explicating authors who seem uninterested in such matters—including, ironically enough, Shakespeare. As Bloom notes, "Shakespeare puzzles us in his apparent indifference to the posthumous destiny of *King Lear*; we have two rather different [source] texts of the play, and pushing them together into the amalgam we generally read and see acted is not very satisfactory. The only works Shakespeare ever proofread and stood by were *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, neither of them worthy of the poet of the Son-

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nets, let alone of *Lear, Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth.* How can there have been a writer for whom the final shape of *King Lear* was a careless or throwaway matter?"

More to the point, doggedly pasting the same stencil over every work of literature tends to obscure precisely what Bloom claims to value above all else in great literature: "strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange."

So while he is right to chide "resentment" critics for their overarching, overbearing, and overdetermined grand theories, Bloom's own approach to literature differs only in degree, not kind. The tendency toward "totalized" systems (to use a trendy but nonetheless accurate term) is an occupational hazard among literary critics, and Bloom falls into the trap as readily as the next fellow. Feminists chalk everything up to gender, Marxists to class conflict, New Historicists to social energies, and Bloom to the anxiety of influence.

Trying to match the predictive power and ever-rising institutional prestige of the hard sciences, and taking methodological lessons from people such as Marx and Freud, some literary critics feel a need to create the aesthetic equivalent of a unified field theory, a single system by which every work ever written (or yet to come!) can be perfectly and fully explicated.

L IKE MANY A NASCENT SCIENTIFIC THE-ory, literary "theories" often start off as promising explanations for a particular set of phenomena, only to become increasingly tortured as they try to make sense of more and more disparate data. But like their counterparts in the social sciences, literary theories are notoriously difficult to disprove. The supply of data—or texts—is essentially infinite and infinitely manipulable. The result is often that a provisional hypothesis intended to guide observation and analysis becomes instead an ironclad conclusion that weeds out or ignores contravening evidence. Once that point is reached, literature—the purported

object of study—becomes dispensable to the whole operation. Texts only become "interesting," or "great," or "exemplary" to the extent they confirm a foregone conclusion.

Of course, that's not to say literary theories can't be "disproved." They may fail to excite interest among other readers, they may become outdated as new information about an author or historical period becomes available, or they may collapse under internal contradictions. Bloom, for instance, acknowledges his failure in passing in his first chapter. The "Western Canon," he writes, "is anything but a unity or a stable structure. No one has the authority to tell us what the Western Canon is....It is not, cannot be, precisely the list I give, or that anyone else might give."

There are, in other words, as many canons as there are readers. This is as it should be—individuals negotiating with the past and present and, by their choices, laying the groundwork of the future. And, to the degree we collectively recognize a common list of texts, a canon, we should understand it to be a fluctuating, provisional, evolving affair, with no endpoint in sight.

And what of the more difficult question: Why read *literature* in the first place? Bloom dismisses out of hand right-and left-wing notions that reading certain texts under certain circumstances will inculcate "the seven deadly moral virtues" or hasten progressive "social change." "Reading the very best writers—let us say Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Tolstoy—is not going to make us better citizens," says Bloom.

Bloom denies a social purpose to literature (he endorses Oscar Wilde's maxim, "Art is perfectly useless") and insists instead on reading as a "solitary" act. "I think that the self, in its quest to be free and solitary, ultimately reads with one aim only: to confront greatness. That confrontation scarcely masks the desire to join greatness, which is the basis of the aesthetic experience once called the Sublime: the quest for a transcendence of limits. Our common fate is age, sickness, death,

oblivion. Our common hope, tenuous but persistent, is for some version of survival," writes Bloom.

In a sense, Bloom is absolutely correct: Reading the *Divine Comedy* or *War and Peace* will not necessarily make us more or less likely to help old ladies across the street, more or less likely to vote or pay our bills on time. But literature can certainly have a great effect on the social sphere. A quick example: In *The Western Canon*, Bloom makes several dismissive remarks about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel that did so much to define and galvanize northern opposition to slavery.

Perhaps the social and the individual are not truly separate categories, as Bloom holds. In fact, even in the passage quoted above, he implies they are complementary, shifting as he does from the first-person singular (*I think*) to the first-person plural (*Our common fate, our common hope*).

Indeed, it strikes me that we read by design as individuals, but not in pursuit of freedom or solitude. To the contrary, we read to become absolutely engaged with our world and its history. We read to connect to other people, places, and times, and to realize that our hopes, pains, and aspirations are not entirely original to ourselves. Literature, which has remained accessible and intelligible over the ages, provides such a bridge.

As F.A. Hayek pointed out in *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, it is "only" through the study of literature and languages (Hayek included history, as well) that one gains "knowledge of society, its life, growth, problems and its values." Literature, says Hayek, opens up "the great storehouse of social wisdom, the only form indeed in which an understanding of the social processes achieved by the greatest minds is transmitted."

We read, then, not to confront "greatness," however defined, but to learn from it. We read not to transcend our limits, but to better understand them. ❖

Nick Gillespie is assistant editor of REASON.

Criminal Justice

By Thomas W. Hazlett

Why fresh-squeezed O. J. is best.

I'LL ADMIT TO BEING PREJUDICED against O.J. Simpson. My lifelong animosity began late one afternoon in November 1967. The Juice ran for 64 yards off left tackle, enabling his despised USC Trojans, ranked No. 2 in the national polls, to eke out a flagrantly undeserved 21–20 victory over my beloved UCLA Bruins, ranked No. 1. Not since that bitter moment has my football team returned to such a prestigious ranking, and so I would be demonstrably unfit to serve in judgment of the accused in *The People v. O.J. Simpson.*

But I can certainly write a column about the lying, murdering, despicable weasel. I'm a tad hasty to convict? Oh, maybe you're right—after all, Rosa Lopez saw the Ford Bronco at the Rockingham house with her very own eyes.

Barbara Amiel, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, very nicely summarized the O.J. trial as a social calamity in its deviation from simple justice. Of the many things on trial in Judge Ito's courtroom, the issue of whether or not Orenthal James Simpson murdered Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman on June 12, 1994, appears to be only one of the minor ones. Depending upon the moment, the trial is all about "battered woman's syndrome." Or racism in America. Or LAPD incompetence.

Not even Tom Wolfe could make this stuff up. It is a raging bonfire of the vanities, with every social interest pouring on fuel and justice going up in smoke. It is an ugly sight, and the fumes may be toxic.

Take one of the smoking guns hired by the defense, the Honorable Professor Alan Dershowitz. A man of considerable talents and even occasional ethics, he boldly argued against the admission of O.J.'s

wife-beating past into the motive phase of the case. His brief was statistical: While there are 2 million or so spousal abuse incidents in the United States annually, only 2,000 Americans are murdered by their spouses. Ergo, there is only a 1-in-1,000 chance that a man who beats his wife will kill her—far too slim a connection to admit such "highly prejudicial evidence."

Attorney Dershowitz has engaged in the foulest sort of numerical trickery. The 1-in-1,000 probability is nonsense, because it tosses out the most important and least disputed fact of the entire trial: Nicole Brown Simpson has been murdered. Instead of predicting what the chances are that a battered wife will be slain, we have two pieces of evidence and ponder a third: Given that Nicole was battered and that she was murdered, what are the chances the crime was committed by the ex- who battered her? Of the 2,000 such victims per year, one would think an overwhelming proportion—90 percent? 99 percent?—are murdered by those who abused them. (Looked at another way: What are the chances that a person who is severely abused will be murdered by someone other than the abuser?)

This logic is intuitively obvious. Indeed, the reason that defense counsel proclaimed the O.J. beatings highly prejudicial to the jury was that the jury would be wont to implicitly employ this logic of conditional probabilities. But isn't good evidence supposed to be prejudicial? Not even the proverbial smoking gun proves that *A* shot and killed *B*. It merely provides a "highly prejudicial" inference.

JUDGE ITO DIDN'T FALL FOR DERSHOWITZ'S folderol, and lanced this defense balloon. (Note: Do not be shocked to see an appeal filed on this point.) *Why* does such an esteemed scholar even attempt to put forth such a ludicrous argument? Because it is his job to attempt to fool the judge.

That's the adversarial process! We might say Alan is a better lawyer that he is a statistician.

What we really mean is that he is doing well for his client by making up absurd statistical theories to sneak past the judge. We could go much further and boldly assert: Dershowitz would be no lawyer at all if he failed to pin the tail on this jackass of a brief.

Shortly after O.J.'s inspirational cruise down I-405 in the Ford Bronco, I heard a learned legal commentator opine that such erratic behavior was not a bad way for the defendant to kick off his legal defense, in that an insanity plea was the most *logical* way for Mr. Simpson to go.

Who, precisely, is nuts? Barbara Amiel's alert piece on the O.J. trial carried a curious pull-quote: "Railroading a guilty man...is as bad as railroading the innocent." Say what? Railroading guilty men is the *ideal* system of justice. The danger is that, in this effort, innocent bystanders will be swept under that steaming locomotive.

The faux pas is ultimately revealing. In focusing on the rights of the guilty, and in countenancing virtually any sort of conduct by esteemed members of the Harvard faculty in the pursuit of procedural fairness, we end up with a spectacle.

It is not simply a social eyesore. It diminishes respect for law, loses real criminals through the cracks, and even ensnares many an innocent—all because it costs so much to adjudicate the obvious when there are no penalties for advancing idiotic theories or wild-eyed objections.

But, of course, none of this logic or evidence should be part of the debate over criminal justice in America. It is far too prejudicial. ❦

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