

Canon to the right?

By Jim Denham

TEN OR twenty years ago a book of learned essays on 26 indisputably great authors by a Yale professor would hardly have been considered "controversial" — let alone have earned its author a reported \$600,000 advance from the publishers. But Harold Bloom is clearly spoiling for a fight and his publishers (Harcourt Brace) must be well pleased with the jolly little row that *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* has so far stirred up.

Unlike precious literary punch-ups (those great Leavis v. Snow bouts, for example) this one isn't about the interpretation to be put on great authors, or even who is and who isn't "great." It's about whether or not such a concept as "greatness" exists at all in literature. And Bloom's chosen opponent isn't another individual critic or academic: it is a whole current he perceives

as running through American (and, to a lesser extent, European) academe, "The School of Resentment" made up of feminists, Afrocentrists and Marxists ("a rabblement of lemmings") who have, he claims, taken over literary study and are bent on destroying the entire Western canon.

But first, what is this canon? The word comes from the Greek, *kanon*, meaning a straight measuring rod. It came to have religious connotations, denoting the sacred texts.

For literary study and criticism the implication is clear: there is an accumulated body of work whose status as "classic" or "great" should be acknowledged by all right-thinking folk. The squabbles of the old days were about precisely which writers deserved to be in the canon. According to Bloom, the battle is now to save the very concept of a canon and, indeed, the idea

that literature is of importance in and of itself: "Precisely why students of literature have become amateur political scientists, uninformed sociologists, incompetent anthropologists, mediocre philosophers and over-determined cultural historians, while a puzzling matter, is not beyond all conjecture", wails Bloom. In other words, the barbarians are at the gate.

Bloom has staked out his own ground, much to the delight of most of the right-wing intelligentsia. He is unashamedly elitist and Eurocentric (although his *Desert Island* books list — the weakest and least necessary section of *The Western Canon* — contains some token Hispanics

and, more surprisingly, Jeanette Winter-son). This is, in fact, the continuation by other means of the Politically Correct set-piece row. But it seems to me that Bloom is wrong to include Marxists in his "School of Resentment" rogues' gallery of canon-busters. For a start, old Karl himself is, apparently, now fashionably denounced as a DWEM (Dead White European Male).

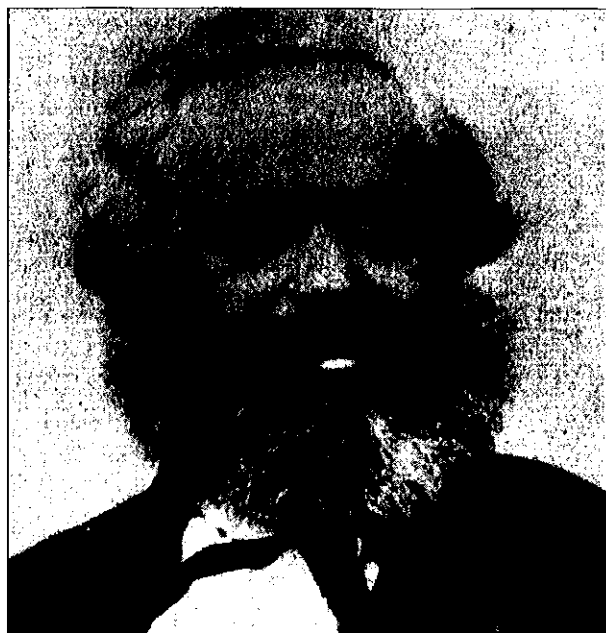
All the evidence is that Marx would have been on the side of "the canon", against the PC relativists. Bloom's real polemic is (or should be) against the structuralists, deconstructionists and "post-Marxists" like Lacan, Foucault, Paul de Man and their babbling followers. When he leaves off posturing, Bloom even shows some signs of slight sympathy with Marxism: "All my passionate proclamations of the isolate selfhood's aesthetic value are necessarily qualified by the reminder that the leisure for meditation must be purchased from the community."

Nevertheless, Bloom is an elitist and a self-contradictory one at that. If it is true that true literary appreciation has always been the prerogative of a gifted few and that "you cannot teach someone to love great poetry, if they come to you without such love", then what does it matter if literature departments are to 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"?

Socialists should defend the idea that some books are innately superior to others and that there is such a thing as a canon. We should champion an education system that makes great literature available and accessible to all. We should reject PC nonsense and its attendant relativism, but we don't need Professor Bloom's over-hyped ramblings to do that. More useful is Ralph Ellison's observation that "Human anguish is human anguish, love, love; the difference between Shakespeare and lesser artists is eloquence." ■



Shelley: yes, his verse is "greater" than the latest commercial lyrics



Marx: a Dead White European Male?