HISTORY AND THE VERTICAL CANON:
CALVIN’S INSTITUTES AND BECKETT

Ernst van den Hemel

In his *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994) Harold Bloom discusses the absence of Gore Vidal’s literary work in the literary canon. Bloom suggests that it is because Vidal’s oeuvre consists mostly of ‘historical novels’ that the spirit of the times denies one of Bloom’s favourite authors a place in the canon. Our age no longer values historical novels greatly: “History writing and narrative fiction have come apart, and our sensibilities seem no longer able to accommodate them one to another.”1 Vidal’s failure to achieve truly canonical status problematizes Bloom’s project of providing a canon of Western culture because it points to the shifting form of the canon. In admitting that for our age the ‘subgenre’ of the historical novel is “no longer available for canonization,”2 Bloom has to answer once again the question of the dangerously temporal nature of forming a canon: What is the value of the canon if it is merely a discursive snapshot of a zeitgeist? Is the canon not merely a reiteration of dominant values? Bloom’s problem is that he writes a canon in the period that Bloom calls the Chaotic Age (the other two ages that Bloom forms his canon with are the Aristocratic and the Democratic). The Chaotic Age contains such writers as Freud, Proust, Joyce, Woolf and Kafka. The section in which Bloom describes this age starts with a diatribe against Marxism, Freudian and Foucauldian theories of interpretation, and it ends with a warning that a great writer such as Beckett should be saved from these “New Theocrats”3 that see in literature nothing more than class-struggle, sublimation or power-structures. The message is clear: The Chaotic Age tries to do away with canon-formation. Bloom explicitly wants to depart from Foucauldian, Derridean, post-modern criticisms of canonicity. These exponents of the ‘School of Resentment’ are, according to Bloom, for a

2 Ibid., 21.
3 Ibid., 514.
large part responsible for the deplorable state of literary criticism in our Chaotic Age. Bloom is, he writes with self-pity, “a literary-critic in what I now regard as the worst of all times for literary criticism.” 4 Bloom presents himself as the savior of canonicity in a time of cultural relativism. In order to do this, however, he needs to separate literature from the claims of history. Over against the ‘anti-canonizers’ Bloom asserts the eternal supremacy of that which makes a literary work a literary work: its “irreducible” aesthetic quality. The prime example is, of course, Shakespeare:

You cannot illuminate him with a new doctrine, be it Marxism or Freudianism or Demanian linguistic skepticism. Instead, he will illuminate the doctrine, not by prefiguration but by postfiguration as it were: all of Freud that matters most is there in Shakespeare already, with a persuasive critique of Freud besides (...) Shakespeare’s eminence is, I am certain, the rock upon which the School of Resentment must at last founder. 5

Shakespeare needs to be saved from the resentment of those who see in canonization nothing but an affirmation of power-structures: “Shakespeare, whose aesthetic supremacy has been confirmed by the universal judgment of four centuries, is now ‘historicized’ into pragmatic diminishment.” 6

In short, what Bloom’s introduction brings to light is the inherent tension in the idea of literary canon-building in the Chaotic Age: in order to write a proper canon of literature, one has to incorporate eternity into linear time, and our time has rigidly separated the two. In order to save literature from these historical arrogations, Bloom presents the truly literary work as absorbing history, as resisting history’s attempts to totalize it: “something irreducible does abide in the aesthetic.” 7 But here important questions are left unanswered: if the literary work is indeed irreducible to linear time, is then not the linear nature of the canon obsolete? What are the implications of this for the practice of the historian who works with literary texts? Is the ‘irreducible’ element in literary texts completely out of reach for the historian, or is it possible to incorporate non-linearity in the practice of history? If Shakespeare can contain fin-de-siècle Freud, 20th-century Marxism as well as deconstruction, shouldn’t history be able to make the same leaps and bounds? If Bloom is concerned with the status of literature in the Age of Chaos, what of the practice of history? Bloom

4 Ibid., 22.
5 Ibid., 25.
6 Ibid., 23.
7 Ibid., 24.