Canonicity

THE CANONICAL FACTS about the canons of English and American literature are, first, that there are no canons and never have been; second, that there have necessarily always been canons; and third, that canons are made up of readings, not of disembodied texts. What is contradictory in that statement results from play on different connotations of the word *canon*—a critical strategy that is constantly, though often more subtly, in use. As with many another critical term, the first step in understanding *canon* is to unpack its meanings. The "canon question" then proves much more complex than contemporary ideological criticism admits.

The Inappropriateness of the Biblical Parallel

The well-known core meaning of the Greek *kanon* is "rule" or "measure" and, by extrapolation, "correct" or "authoritative." As Rudolph Pfeiffer has pointed out, the first application of the word to selections of authors—by David Ruhnken in 1768—was catachrestic (207). A more nearly precise word than *selection* was so much needed that *canon* quickly became almost indispensable, despite its entanglement with concepts of authority and rule not necessarily relevant to literary canons. Not surprisingly, the normative sense of the term has clung alongside its elective sense: selections suggest norms, and norms suggest an appeal to some sort of authority. However, the criteria for selecting literary texts are derived not from authority but from chosen functions.

The normative sense of *canon* has been strongly reinforced by the application of the term to the accepted books of the Bible, though there is no agreement on the original force of the word even in this application. The processes by which specific collections of Jewish and Christian writings became closed canons in the first century BC and the fourth century AD, respectively, are not only too complicated for useful summary here but, more important, largely irrelevant to the question of the literary canon. In fact, considerable confusion has resulted from the seductive apparent parallel between the creation and closing of the biblical canons and the formation of lists of literary works that, since
Ruhnken, have been called “canons.” Chapter 14 of Ernst Robert Curtius’s European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, a chapter frequently cited in discussions of literary canons, considers early catalogs of authors, aspects of the ever-renewed conflict between ancients and moderns, canon formation in the church, the medieval canon, and finally modern canons. The section on the church and the Bible seems to have encouraged Curtius to use canon for the authorized literary lists, whose variations from period to period and country to country he learnedly surveys. But the section on modern canon formation essentially considers the relations among the works that Italy, France, Germany, and Spain defined as “classical”—an issue that, for Curtius, depends not on degrees of authoritative sponsorship but largely on the degree of romanticism in the literature of each country. It has not been sufficiently noted that this chapter is titled “Classicism,” not “The Canon,” and that it primarily concerns the question of how works somehow come to be regarded as “classic.”

Though there have been many lists of approved authors through the centuries and across Europe, they have differed widely; not even Aristotle has been canonical in the sense of the biblical texts. This is not to deny that there were traditions—usefully traced by Bruce Kimball—in which authors were regarded as “standard” because they seemed to inculcate the right moral and intellectual principles or to demonstrate a mastery of accurate thinking. But the catalogs identifying especially valuable works not only varied considerably, they did not fence others out. The texts that one ought to have read differed from others in degree; they were not absolutely distinct like the biblical books, which very quickly came to be regarded as different in kind. Obviously the very entelechy of the process of biblical canonizing was toward closure, whereas literary canons have always implicitly allowed for at least the possibility of adding new or revalued works.

Though the sense of “unquestionably and uniquely authoritative” that belongs to the biblical canon (and to the theologically derived endorsements and prohibitions churches enforce on members of their faith) continually colors the debate over the modern literary canon, the analogy is more dramatic than helpful. Frank Kermode, whose essay on the subject has become an almost obligatory citation, is among those who use the biblical canon as a model: “The desire to have a canon, more or less unchanging, and to protect it against the charges of inauthenticity or low value (as the Church protected Hebrews, for example, against Luther) is an aspect of the necessary conservatism of a learned institution” (77). The point is unarguable, but despite the assumption in “the profession of English” that some texts are better and some interpretations more reasonable than others, admission into the profession hardly requires the candidate to accept any list of texts as uniquely necessary to the academic equivalent of salvation. The most conservative of our colleagues do not demand that a candidate take, say, Johnson, Coleridge, Arnold, and Eliot as “articles of faith” and abjure Wharton, Dallas, Gosse, and Fish. Nor have universities wielded full authority over the canon since they separated themselves from the medieval church. Until then, of course, the following excerpt from a bishop’s condemnation of heresy in the records of the University of Paris was not untypical:

Let the body of master Amaury be removed from the cemetery and cast into unconsecrated ground, and the same be excommunicated by all the churches of the entire province.... The writings of David of Dinant are to be brought to the bishop of Paris before the Nativity and burned. Neither the books of Aristotle on natural philosophy nor their commentaries are to be read at Paris in public or secret, and this we forbid under penalty of excommunication. He in whose possession the writings of David of Dinant are found after Nativity shall be considered a heretic. (Thorndike 26-27)

The most cogent portion of Kermode’s essay is his suggestion that certain texts somehow become “licensed” for exegesis and are thereafter subject to “interminable” explication (83). What Kermode so aptly describes, however, is canon formation not through a work’s acceptance into a severely limited set of authoritative texts but through its introduction into an ongoing critical colloquy. The analogy with a colloquy or conversation functions in several ways. In a given time and place there are events and topics that everyone presumably knows
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about. Some of these have been of continuous interest, or at least have had a place in a society's cultural discourse from generation to generation; others have recently gained attention and will quickly fade. What proves interesting in general conversation will depend on what the conversationalists are at that time accustomed to discussing. There are topics that sustain no more than a few moments' talk, but the cleverness with which a subject is introduced has a great deal to do with whether it is taken up. While there are conversational unfortunates who wrap everything they say in dullness, others do the opposite, using wit, an ability to see unexpected significances, and intriguing modes of argument to lend at least momentary interest to whatever topic they initiate. Precisely the same distinctions operate within the critical colloquy.

On this analogy, the historical resonance of a text (the degree to which it explicitly relates to other texts), the possible multiplication of its significances (the degree to which it is multivalent), the skill with which it is brought into the critical colloquy (the degree to which it finds fortunate sponsorship), and the congruence between its possible significances and critics' current preoccupations (the degree to which it proves malleable)—all these interact to determine how much interest the text can sustain over how long a period. Instead of stamping works with authority, literary canons propose entries into a culture's critical colloquy. This colloquy is nothing but a corner of that "unending conversation" Kenneth Burke so memorably describes:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him... However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion vigorously in progress.

A Multiplicity of Canons and the Pressures on Them

Alastair Fowler's discrimination of six kinds of canons has met with general acceptance. The potential canon "comprises the entire written corpus, together with all surviving oral literature." The accessible canon is that portion of the potential canon available at a given time. Lists of authors and texts—as in anthologies, syllabi, and reviewers' choices—are selective canons. What Fowler calls the official canon is, I take it, a blending of such lists. What individual readers "know and value" are personal canons. And, finally, the critical canon is made up of those works or parts of works that are repeatedly treated in critical articles and books (98–99). As useful as these distinctions are, it is equally useful to recognize the variety of the principles defining them, the looseness of the resulting definitions, and the need for additional classifications. Fowler's potential canon, for instance, is defined by total inclusivity, but the degree to which what it includes goes beyond traditional definitions of literature will depend on one's critical allegiances. The accessible canon is also inclusive, but only for a single location; perhaps further, it varies with the sophistication of each reader. Personal canons seem made up of an indeterminate interaction between all the works individuals have read and those they prefer to some degree or other. Since official and critical canons are precipitated out of the mass of selective canons, the only canons produced by systematic choice are the innumerable and heterogeneous selective ones.

Additional distinctions suggest themselves as useful, though like Fowler's they rest on no systematic taxonomic principle and therefore overlap at various points. The term canon as applied to a closed, uniquely authoritative body of texts, such as the Bible, fits nowhere in his six classifications; it represents a seventh kind (canon7). If we take Fowler's official canon to mean something like all the authors and titles in whatever reasonably comprehensive literary histories are standard at a given time and if we accept his definition of the critical canon as the texts most written about at that time, the list of works

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commonly taught in high school and undergraduate classes will be not only much shorter than the official canon but also unlikely to correspond exactly to the critical. Thus there is theoretical space for a pedagogical canon (canon_8).

What of the numerous authors who are given special recognition in selection after selection over centuries or at least decades? Or those contemporary authors who have high visibility? In a hap hazard way these tend to be grouped together—in the 1990s a person interested in literature presumably knows not only Ovid, Milton, and Arnold but Ozick, Morrison, and Ashbery. But the glacially changing core is a kind of diachronic canon (canon_9), to be distinguished from a rapidly changing periphery that could be called the nonce canon (canon_10), only a minuscule part of which will eventually become part of the diachronic canon. I leave open the question whether the academy’s hegemony is such that there are no longer truly popular canons rivaling the diachronic and nonce canons of the literary professoriat.

What makes it easy to think of a continuing monolithic canon, to confuse the diachronic and something of the nonce canon with the biblical analogue, is the smoothness with which certain new writers enter the diachronic canon and certain texts and authors move within it from the accepted center to the doubtful periphery (and occasionally back again). That smoothness is born of an interwoven set of processes. What a generation is taught depends on the tastes and interests of the previous generation and on the anthologies and texts created in response to the demands that issue from those tastes and interests. To the selection that it has inherited, each generation adds those works given visibility by either fortunate sponsorship or malleability to current interests. What one generation transmits to the next, however, can hardly be the sum of these two—there is only so much time in any degree curriculum, only so much time for anyone to read. Something has to give. Still, as has frequently been noticed, authors once a part of the diachronic canon generally retain at least a minimal cachet; they may be relegated to a canonical attic but rarely to the trash can. Perhaps, therefore, the diachronic canon is actually divided into two subcanons, a canonical haven and a canonical limbo.

Further perspective comes from recognizing that, until the Renaissance, selective canons in literature were generally of little importance, that selective canons of European vernacular literature blossomed only in the eighteenth century (see Curtius 264–72), and that selective canons of English and American literature are more recent still. The only nonecclesiastical canons that have carried even local authority have been the lists of required readings for specific educational endeavors. In the medieval period, given the aleatory availability of Greek and Latin texts and the practice of studying the ancient poets largely as part of the process of learning the classical languages and acquiring rhetorical skills, the literary works prescribed vary considerably. Knowledge of literature was in any case wholly ancillary for centuries, having little directly to do with the requirements for the bachelor-of-arts degree, which from the twelfth century to the sixteenth were almost wholly in logic. In contrast, the breadth of learning that a Renaissance humanist like Erasmus expected of teachers was less a canon than a summons to universal knowledge: at one point or another, De Ratione Studii mentions Pliny, Macrobius, Gel lius, Athenaeus, Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Plotinus, Origen, Chrysostom, Basil, Jerome, Homer, Hesiod, Ovid, Boccaccio, Pomponius Mela, Ptolemy, Strabo, Lucian, Demosthenes, Herodotus, Cicero, Quintilian, Horace, Caesar, Sallust, Aristophanes, Euripides, Terence, and Donatus. The formalization of curricula after the Renaissance, of course, tended to produce a selective canon in each university. At least in the United States and England, the prescribed literary and humanistic texts remained wholly classical until at least the latter half of the nineteenth century. Thus the Dartmouth “Course of Study” for 1852–53 lists the following more or less literary readings over the four years: Livy, Homer’s Iliad, Coleridge’s Introductions to the Greek Classic Poets, Ovid, Horace, Felton’s Selections from the Greek Historians, Aeschylus’s Prometheus, Tacitus, Sophocles’s Ajax, Demosthenes, Cicero, Plato’s Gorgias, Juvenal, and Terence’s Andria. Vernacular literature did not enter the university curriculum until the nineteenth century. English became a school at Oxford only in 1893, a tripos
at Cambridge only in 1917, and a major at most American universities still later; thus academic canons of English literature developed at about the same time as those of American literature and have gone through parallel twentieth-century revisions.

Comparison of anthologies—a popular academic pastime at present—is informative in several ways. Alan C. Golding’s “History of American Poetry Anthologies” surveys the range of criteria used in anthologies from Elihu Hubbard Smith’s 1793 American Poems, Selected and Original to the 1975 Norton Anthology of American Literature. As Golding points out, an anthologist like Smith, gathering poems from periodicals and newspapers, seeks to preserve, to increase the Fowlerian accessible canon. But what an editor deems worthy of preservation is already a selection. The criteria Golding finds in the earlier anthologies are the promotion of political values, the celebration of an American sense of nationhood, and the provision of moral inspiration; after the middle of the nineteenth century the primary consideration is the maintenance of a formal and conservative tradition; this is followed by the urge to undermine genteel values, and today the most important challengers are feminist, ethnic, and political (primarily Marxist) concerns.

A glance at Victorian poetry collections is particularly useful, since the selection processes are recent. E. C. Stedman’s Victorian Anthology (1895), apparently intended for the general reader as well as the student, offers poems by 329 poets, including George Darley, Barry Cornwall (Bryan Procter), C. J. Wells, William Maginn, William James Linton, Sara Coleridge, Mary Howitt, Eliza Cook, Roden Noel, Cosmo Monkhouse, Dinah Craik, Gerald Griffin, Robert Gilfillan, and Eugene Lee-Hamilton. Given the volume’s date and anticipated readership, Stedman was altogether reasonable in casting a broad net “to make a truthful exhibit of the course of song during the last sixty years, as shown by the poets of Great Britain in the best of their shorter productions” (ix). Who could know which poets of the preceding sixty years would maintain readers’ interest?

Seventeen years later another anthology not intended specifically for the classroom, Arthur Quiller-Couch’s Oxford Book of Victorian Verse, omits about seventy-five of Stedman’s poets, while adding a few American writers. Christopher Ricks’s New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse, published seventy-five years after Quiller-Couch’s, offers only 113 poets. Granted that neither the editors’ intentions nor the publishing exigencies can have been quite the same for these volumes, a two-thirds reduction in the number of poets is nonetheless a dramatic winnowing.

Editors of classroom texts have found the pressures for reduction of the number of authors even greater. Assigning three hundred, two hundred, or even fifty poets to an undergraduate class would be a daunting and probably an unfruitful undertaking. Thus a true textbook like George Benjamin Woods’s Victorian Poetry (1930) offers only sixty-nine poets for instructors to choose from. That number was cut to fifty-four in the 1955 edition of Victorian Poetry and to forty-seven for the 1965 edition. (The three editions do not greatly differ in the number of lines of poetry they contain; additional poems by the poets who have been retained take up the space.) Bowyer and Brooks’s Victorian Age: Prose, Poetry, and Drama (1954) offers poems by forty-nine writers; Bloom and Trilling’s Victorian Prose and Poetry (1973) by just twenty-one (including only one poet, John Davidson, who does not appear in Bowyer and Brooks). Among the forces driving textbook anthologists to restrict their selections is what can be called “the principle of academic recirculation.” Academics tend to teach what they have been taught, what is easily available in print, what others are writing interestingly about, and what they themselves are writing about; what is written about tends to be what one is teaching or others are writing about.

Selective Canons: Criteria and Functions

Sorting the criteria used in drawing up selective canons requires as much attention as sorting the definitions of the term canon itself. The criteria also tend to overlap, and it is difficult to imagine a selection truly being made on one alone. Any editor of a collection titled “Writing by American Women, 1990” would clearly have to apply criteria beyond those stated in the title. Moreover, un-
recognized assumptions underlie both explicit criteria and unacknowledged intentions. Thus the New Critical argument that poems cannot be paraphrased was developed into the claim that poetry has no propositional meaning; the ultimate implication of that position is the futility of critical discussion. Similarly, as R. S. Crane points out, the tension valued in New Criticism all too easily passed over into the automatic ascription of universal oppositions to any text the critic valued.9

In explicitly seeking "the best that is known and thought," Arnold intended either to impose the uniform moral and social values of his own class (a common interpretation today) or (as it is possible to argue) to set in motion a constant process of revaluation, behind which lay assumptions grounded in a belief in the necessity of a hierarchical society (now the usual view) or (as it is also possible to argue) the necessity of breaking through the class structure.10

To some extent one can avoid the problem of differentiating specific criteria and basic assumptions in a critic's or theorist's work by investigating the functions a particular selection was apparently intended to perform. Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues that all evaluations of literary texts are actually judgments of how well the texts in question satisfy the changing needs of individuals and societies, that is, how well they fulfill particular functions. To analyze the criteria on which a selection appears to have been made, critics must seek such functions, always keeping in mind that they recognize these through processes that reflect their own changing needs.

Arnold having been mentioned, it is appropriate to begin with his influential effort to disentangle the evaluative criteria—the kinds of "estimates," in his terms—on which selections are made. The two against which Arnold warns can easily be defined by their functions. The "personal" estimate attempts to achieve congruence with individual needs and experiences (an aim that presumably represents the evaluative component of Fowler's personal canon). The "historical" estimate, by which Arnold means the literary-historical, seeks to provide signposts to mark forks and turns in the historical development of genres, new subject matter, and formal features. In urging the "real" estimate, however, Arnold begs the question by looking for hallmarks rather than functions; perhaps he intuitively knew that if he looked for functions he would find all too many for his purposes.

The personal and literary-historical estimates are but two among countless others. While an exhaustive list of the functions of selective canons would probably not be either possible or useful, it is easy to suggest a sufficient range of examples to caution against reductive generalizations.

Providing Models, Ideals, and Inspiration. Though the furnishing of examples is one of the oldest functions of selection, there are evidently models of many different kinds. The Alexandrians chose texts demonstrating the best grammatical usage, while the Ciceronian and Quintilian concepts of the orator-leader required texts embodying various social virtues. Models of belief and conduct are of course constantly shifting. What serves as a model of morality for most readers in one period may at another time be regarded as a model of self-righteousness; one person's inspirational clarion is another's intolerable cant. Gol ding describes Rufus Griswold's *Poets and Poetry of America* as based on "the conviction that American poetry should be represented by specimens of the utmost moral purity, that poetry's function is inspirational" (288), but the challenge to the poetry that Griswold assumed filled that function—and the rather similar poetryanthologized by Bryant, Emerson, and Whittier—came primarily from Whitman, whose champions could equally describe him as moral and inspirational. *Moralizing* and *inspiring* are currently rather out of fashion as honorific adjectives for literature, but the functions they designate are still fully operative. Marxist and feminist arguments are no less appeals to assumed moral values than are Pope's, Wordsworth's, or Holmes's; the working-class writers sponsored by Paul Lauter in "Caste, Class, and Canon" offer no less a commentary on how the world should be than do the writers honored by the New Critics.

Transmitting the Heritage of Thought. Another canonical function is the provision of what is regarded as the basic cultural knowledge necessary to interpret past texts, see current issues in historical perspective, and orient oneself to the aesthetic achievements, social and political changes, and
philosophical debates that have gone on for centuries. The Philology of Martianus Capella’s fifth-century *Marriage of Philology and Mercury* is the bride who brings this ability to Mercury (eloquence). At one level the goal is “cultural literacy” in the specific sense of the ability to read texts written by writers who have assumed such literacy—as most serious writers have. 11 Harry Levin’s more ambitious description of knowledge as “our most valued patrimony, our collective memory,” expresses the use of such knowledge.

Higher education, across the centuries, has constituted a continuous dialogue between the minds of ancestors and contemporaries. If we, the latter, know any more than the former, it is because we have learned so much from them. As T. S. Eliot remarked, “They are that which we know.” Naturally we may react against them, and the reactions would not prove unproductive if they pointed towards a dialectical synthesis. (362)

In fact, what appear to be efforts to overthrow the present canon are often endeavors to expand it, to enlarge our patrimony and enrich the “collective memory,” that is, communal knowledge and awareness.

**Creating Common Frames of Reference.** It is possible to argue not that any particular canon is justified but rather that *some* canon is necessary to provide common reference points. If it is true that all interpretation of texts depends on a community’s sharing interpretive strategies, it may be equally true that, as Howard Felperin argues, “the institutional study of [literature] is inconceivable without a canon. Without a canon, a corpus or cynosure of exemplary texts, there can be no interpretive community, no more than there can be a faith-community without a gospel” (46). This conception of the function of the canon does not directly offer criteria for text selection, but it tends to favor a limited selection from the diachronic canon.

**Logrolling.** Writers have gained entrance into the nonce canon not only by the power of their writing (for “power” one may read “appeal to extant societal or critical interests”) but by their active espousal of texts or criteria congenial to their own aims. Wordsworth does this transparently enough in the 1802 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*; Arnold was creating a place for his own poetry even in condemning his “Empedocles on Etna.” Writing about the Victorian canon, G. Robert Stange states that the principal agents of canon formation are the poets themselves who alter the poetic tradition by disvaluing some accepted “classics,” giving authority to certain earlier art that has special meaning for them, or redefining in the interests of their own practice . . . the nature and responsibilities of poetic language. (159)

Alan Golding reminds us that “Bryant, Emerson, and Whittier all agree that the six most important poets in America are themselves, Longfellow, Lowell, and Holmes” (292). Hugh Kenner comments, “The Modernist canon has been made . . . chiefly . . . by the canonized themselves, who were apt to be aware of a collective enterprise, and repeatedly acknowledged one another” (374); and, of course, Eliot’s championship of Donne was no less strategic than sincere.

**Legitimating Theory.** The New Critics provide a dramatic instance of the influence of critical theory on selection: while the function of their explanation was presumably to exhibit meaning as fully as possible, their selection of works to be explained had the implicit function of exhibiting the power of their approach. Deconstructionists, it hardly needs to be said, prefer texts with almost invisible seams that can be pried open to suggest gaping contradictions, while neo-Marxists, including most of the new historicists, are partial to texts that can be shown to reveal unsuspected workings of political power. Practiced New Critics, deconstructionists, and Marxists can, of course, read almost any text in a way that supports their own allegiances, but the texts each group is most likely to select are those for which it can provide the fullest, most dramatic, and most convincing readings.

**Historicizing.** Literary texts have been so traditionally thought to cast light on the periods in which they were written—and historical and contemporary events to affect the proper interpretation of texts—that arguments over the relation
of literature to history have primarily involved questions of emphasis. How fully are Chaucer’s pilgrims representative of fourteenth-century England? How reductive, how much confined to a single class, is the “world picture” Tillyard found in the Elizabethans? While one of the accepted values of literature, one reason for selecting older works, has been to convey a sense of how the world was then, recent “historicizing” has shifted this emphasis to an analysis of the unconscious assumptions of earlier writers (as revealed by the conscious psychological or political assumptions of the critic) or—as Annette Kolodny writes, citing Jane Tomkins—to an analysis of “how and why specific texts have power in the world’ (or do not attain power, as the case may be) at any given moment’ (304).

Pluralizing. Though the attention given to literature written by, or representing the experience of, women and ethnic minorities may seem especially characteristic of the 1970s and 1980s, there was a better balance at the turn of the century than now. The 1890s in England were a strongly pluralizing time in which writers expressing the points of view of the Irish, the Scots, women, and the poor were selected precisely because they represented perspectives outside the dominant one. Stedman’s 1895 anthology includes, for instance, sections for poets of Australasia and Canada and, among those who would now be called poets of the people, Thomas Cooper, Ebenezer Elliott, and Ebenezer Jones. A full third of the poets included are women. By contrast, in Quiller-Couch’s 1912 Oxford Book of Victorian Verse only a sixth of the poets are women (a fraction maintained in Christopher Ricks’s 1987 New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse), Irish poets are less frequent, and Indian and Australian poets have largely disappeared. In “Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon” Paul Lauter notes a similar phenomenon in anthologies of American literature, with the percentages of black and women writers declining markedly between 1919 and 1950. Though Lauter elsewhere sees the invisible hand of monopoly capitalism in canon selection, he here lists the causes as “the eastern male elite’s professionalization of the teaching of literature,” the formalist aesthetic, and the “historiographic organization of literature into conventional ‘periods’ and ‘themes’” (440).

At present, pluralization appears to have real, if unstated, limits. For instance, there has been no rush to defend the sentimental description and inspirational storytelling that delighted our grandparents. The generation educated early in this century still happily quoted “Little Orphant Annie,” “Excelsior,” “Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight,” “Casabianca,” and “The Good Time Coming,” but the antielitist impulse has yet to rehabilitate Mrs. Hemans or Charles Mackay.

The Selection of Texts as the Selection of Readings

Whatever the functions governing selections, it is important to recognize that although a canon is nominally made up of texts, it is actually made up not of texts in themselves but of texts as read. When the church found ways of accommodating pagan authors to Christian belief, what it admitted to its selection of Greek and Roman philosophers and poets were particular readings of the texts. Augustine thus compares the acceptable teachings of the pagans to the “vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing which the Israelites took with them secretly when they fled, as if to put them to a better use” (75).

Leaping to the present, one can cite The Catcher in the Rye, which owes its continuing place in the nonce canon to its mimetic function as a portrait of adolescence but which can be selected, according to Richard Ohmann’s reading, as a neo-Marxist text that intends to reveal the omnipresence of capitalist ideology. Again, as Annette Kolodny argues more clearly and explicitly than most other critics seeking to expand the canon, the reading of unfamiliar literary texts and unfamiliar types of criticism should not merely make one comfortable with new texts but defamiliarize the texts in the current critical and pedagogical canons. While her already influential 1985 essay argues for expansion and pluralization of the official canon, it implies as well that future selections should include only those works from the present critical and pedagogical canons whose texts as read after defamiliarization meet whatever selection criteria are applied.
The Ultimate Function of Canons Is to Compete

If we have not one canon of literature but many, no canon formation but, rather, constant processes of text selection, no selection based on a single criterion, and no escape from the necessity of selection, to attack The Canon is to misconceive the problem. Similarly, to attribute all selection processes to the influence of power is radically simplistic, unless power and influence are defined so broadly that they include all social motivation. The dominant conventions in a particular society at a particular time obviously derive their power from some source. But the possible sources are many—political, economic, moral, aesthetic, metaphysical, religious, and psychological—and since they appear to be closely intertwined, the question of which, if any, underlies all the others remains moot. One can argue that all human choices are at root political, or economic, or moral, or aesthetic, or metaphysical, or psychological, but little is illuminated by this tactic.

Whatever the motivation of canon selection, it remains important to contest the constrictive tendencies of the critical and pedagogical lists. Given the forces generating the professional recirculation of texts, we risk intellectual stagnation if we do not champion new selections based on new criteria. It is something else, however, to read as an ideological censor. Much contemporary commentary on the diachronic canon seems intended to discredit any text that arguably supports authority, elitism, or capitalism. But simply to emphasize the "elitist" and "capitalist" assumptions of older texts seems designed more to invoke magical exorcism than to do anything else. As Murray Krieger writes:

To reject our revered masterpieces, then, is really to reject the political institutions at work in the cultures that produced them. It is as if, by turning against an aesthetic monument . . . the anti-elitist critics somehow can wish out of existence the reactionary political context that may have been thriving when the work was created.

Charles Altieri similarly questions "the hermeneutics of suspicion": "It is a mistake to read cultural history only as a tawdry melodrama of interests pursued and ideologies produced" (37).

Though ideologically oriented critics frequently cite the relativity of "truth," they must, of course, assume that their own social and political beliefs are, if not absolute, a great deal less relative than others. In contrast, those of a somewhat more consistent indeterminizing persuasion hold that, since there are no absolute truths, or at least no way to discover them if they do exist, no text is to be preferred for its presumed truth-value. Such a position is perennially open to the objection that it must accept as absolute the relativity of all truths and values or fall into a version of the liar paradox (all beliefs are relative, including the belief that all beliefs are relative), but it has a long history, beginning no later than Heraclitus and given sanction by Socrates, who is forever seeking, not promulgating, truth. What Bruce Kimball calls the "philosophical" (as opposed to the "oratorical") tradition of liberal education is based precisely on this argument, asserting itself against any standard selection of authors (auctores) on the ground that there can be no authorities since there can be no final truth. Nevertheless, critics, however relativist, must choose what texts they wish to talk about, just as readers must choose what ones to read.

At the practical level, there will always be competing canons: it is impossible to avoid the question of which texts one wishes to share or discuss in one's anthology, or critical article, or syllabus, or polemic. Recent textbook anthologies have fattened noticeably in their editors' attempts to represent greater cultural diversity, but the length of semesters has unfortunately remained the same. As teachers of literature we have thus again had to become more consciously selective. This is all to the good to the extent that it makes us recognize the clarification of a literary text's functions as the necessary prolegomenon to the process of selection. Critics continue to agree with Bacon, if one can judge from what they write, that two of the primary activities of criticism are providing "brief censure and judgment of authors; that men may make some election unto themselves what books to read" and setting an order of studies so "that men may know in what order or pursuit to read" (86, 182); the requisite qualification is that
“judgment and censure” and the preferable order of reading depend on criteria that depend on purposes.

None of the functions I have outlined is either nefarious or trivial. It is well to have some knowledge of major literary-historical influences on texts and some familiarity with the sources of the literary and philosophical allusions authors have expected their educated readers to share. It is well to bring some historical perspective to contemporary debates: to see the scandals of television evangelism against the background of the Pardoner’s Tale, contemporary theological disputes against Pope’s *Essay on Man*, questions of the limits of individual freedom against Mill’s *On Liberty*, and arguments over corporate responsibility for the environment against Ruskin’s essays on political economy. It is well to recognize that much of our literature assumes male, Anglo-Saxon, competitively individualistic biases. It is well to encounter models of prose that persuasively use traditionally effective rhetorical devices and well to encounter individualistic, counter-cultural prose. But no selection of texts that can be fitted into the one literature course, or perhaps the two or three, taken by the average undergraduate—or into the dozen or so literature courses taken by the baccalaureate major—can adequately provide all that background. We need more than ever, then, to be honest with ourselves and with our students about the limited purposes both of individual courses and of the requirements for our degrees—to be honest about what our selection of texts and our approach to them does not accomplish. If The Canon no longer lives, the reason is that it never did; there have been and are only selections with purposes. If anything has been clarified by the last twenty years of critical alarms and excursions, it is the multiplicity of possible purposes.

Notes

1 Under the heading “canon” in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Samuel Davidson summarizes three opinions: in ecclesiastical use *canon* originally meant a list of “the books publicly read in Christian assemblies,” or one that was canonical in the sense of “excellent as a model,” or one that embodied a regulative principle.

2 Kimball’s *Orators and Philosophers* is a masterly survey of the tensions and later confusions between the “oratorical” (*artes liberales*) tradition that sought to imbue leaders of society with the proper virtues and the “philosophical” tradition underlain by a skepticism that required an unending search for ever-elusive truths. Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian are key figures in the first tradition; Plato, Socrates, and Aquinas in the second.

3 By way of comparison, the sixth of the thirty-nine Articles of Religion of the Anglican Church reads, “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.”

4 I am using *significance* to contrast with intentional *meaning*, following the distinction developed by E. D. Hirsch in *Validity in Interpretation*.

5 Older works that had not become part of, or had dropped out of, the diachronic canon may of course enter it belatedly if they are fortunate in their sponsorship—Eliot’s sponsorship of Donne is the standard example—and sufficiently malleable to be linked to current cultural and critical interests.

6 There seems at least a short-term popular canon in the area of fiction and nonfiction: Harriet Doer’s *Stones for Ibarra*, Tony Hillerman’s Navajo mysteries, Gerald Durrell’s autobiographical stories of animal collecting, and Cleveland Amory’s tale *The Cat That Came for Christmas* may perhaps be other examples of more or less recent books that, though appropriately advertised, have been known primarily through the recommendations of one reader to another.

7 As stated in 1252 by “the masters of the English nation, teaching in Paris,” the requirements for the bachelor-of-arts degree were attendance in “lectures in arts for five years or four at least at Paris continually or elsewhere in a university of arts,” at which the student should have heard lectures on a large portion of Aristotle—the *Praedicamenta*, the *Periarmeniae*, the *Topics*, the *Divisions*, the *Elenci*, the *Prior Analytics*, the *Posterior Analytics*, and *De anima*—together with the *Sex Principia*, the eighteen books of Priscian’s grammar, and the *Barbarismus* of Donatus (Thornside 53–54).

8 It is worth noting that E. C. Stedman similarly drew on ephemeral publications in compiling his *Victorian Anthology* a hundred years later.

9 Gerald Graff’s chapter “What Was New Criticism” in his *Literature against Itself* succinctly sums up the contradictions within the New Critical program. Examples of the “all-embracing dichotomies” Crane cites are “good and evil, love and hate, harmony and strife, order and disorder, eternity and time, reality and appearance.” Crane comments, “Of such universal contraries, not restricted in their applicability to any kind of work, whether lyric, narrative, or dramatic, it will be
easy enough for us to acquire an adequate supply, and once we have them . . . it will seldom be hard to discover their presence in poems as organizing principles of symbolic content" (123-24).

10 For a presentation of the second set of views of Arnold, see Harris.

11 It is instructive to note how frequently arguments against the possibility of a shared culture nevertheless rely on one. Clifford Geertz, for instance, argues that the "enormous multiplicity" and the "radical variousness of the way we think now" make the transmission of a core of shared cultural knowledge impossible (161). What gives his article depth, however, is the multiplicity of his own allusions to the presumed knowledge of the educated reader. He appears to expect appropriate responses, for instance, when he mentions Copernicus, Freud, Bach, Ptolemy, Einstein, Malinowski, Boas, Whorf, the Tewa language, Bertrand Russell, Kant, Berkeley's Esse est percipi, the Pyrenees, William James, Henry James, Yeats, C. P. Snow, mandarins, and Eden.

12 For instance, Jonathan Dollimore writes in the foreword to Political Shakespeare: "Finally, cultural materialism does not pretend to political neutrality. . . . Cultural materialism does not, like much established literary criticism, attempt to mystify its perspective as the natural, obvious, or right interpretation of an allegedly given textual fact. On the contrary, it registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class" (viii).

13 In one sense, whatever exists, including all cultural beliefs, conventions, artifacts, and conditions, can be described as demonstrating the triumph of one force or power over another: the power of tradition, education, religion, political structures, science, logic, capitalism, socialism, selfishness, hatred, ignorance, benevolence, self-interest, advertising, propaganda, personal experience, the press, the constitution of the human mind and body, the knowledge of the brevity of life, the need for love and approval—the list is endless. All the powers or forces influencing human decisions interact to produce the total social structure of any given moment. The canonical status of a literary text—like the economic status of a rock musician, the reputation of a painter, the purity of the air and water, the desirability of consumer goods, or the majority positions on taxes, abortion, and nuclear power—can only be understood as the result of multiple causes. To attribute any cultural phenomenon to a single "power"—that of capitalism, or male prejudice, or political corruption, or economic greed, or moral idealism—is as naive as to think such powers can be ignored.

14 See Bruce Kimball's tracing of this "philosophical" orientation from Plato to the present. The second part of the seventh chapter of Walter Pater's Plato and Platonism emphasizes (and perhaps magnifies) this aspect of Plato's thought, carefully outlining the "dialectic method, this continuous discourse with one's self" (185), and the spirit "which to the last will have its diffidence and reserve, its scruples and second thoughts" (196).

Works Cited


