

Second Edition

Falling into Theory

CONFLICTING VIEWS
ON READING LITERATURE

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With a Foreword by
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What We Read

The Literary Canon and the Curriculum after the Culture Wars

NEARLY FORTY YEARS AGO, when I switched majors from biology to English and began my own literary studies, I wasn't sure whether I was sufficiently well read to compete with other English students, but I didn't question what being well read would involve. Those who were serious about "doing" English worked their way through it, systematically or otherwise, through a list of authors and titles, beginning with *Beowulf*.

Some parts of the list were official, like the required reading lists for our classes or the two lists of forty texts we were told to study outside of class for our junior- and senior-year exams. It was important for us to study these works—those who didn't pass the exams didn't graduate—but it was also clear that we were studying them because they were considered important in some more fundamental sense. Importance was quantifiable: the professor who taught my course on eighteenth-century literature handed out a ten-page ditto called the "Slavish Note-Taker's Handy Home Guide to Dates in English Literature 1660–1800," with starred rankings (as in a Baedeker travel guide) to distinguish highly important poets like *****Pope, Alexander*, from figures of minor interest like **Behn, Aphra*. (We were never told precisely how many dates to memorize, but I can still tell you Pope's dates and those of his principal works by heart, while I have to look up Behn's.) Another measure of a literary figure's importance was the number of courses devoted solely to his or her writings: if Pope, stuck in a survey, rated four stars, then Whitman and Dickinson (who shared a course) each rated five, Chaucer and Milton (with

solo billing) rated six apiece, and Shakespeare (with two courses) deserved seven.

All these ratings and rankings seemed self-consistent and incontrovertible; they overrode, though they didn't exactly supplant, individual taste. I knew that I preferred Christopher Smart's mad prophetic rantings to Pope's smooth certainties, but I also knew that I was wrong, just as I was wrong not to care much for Marlowe or Milton or Shelley. The professor who handed out the "Slavish Note-Taker" may have had tastes just as quirky as mine: perhaps he didn't care much for Pope either. Whatever his personal feelings, my professor was as constrained to teach Pope as I was to learn him: the value judgments inherent in the literary canon¹ had an authority that transcended our individual likes and dislikes and expressed something more fundamental, more permanent, about our culture.

The more one learns about literary history, the clearer it becomes that however fundamental these judgments were, they were not permanent at all; they were very much the judgments of a particular age. The canon I learned was that of 1960, and, while there is certainly plenty of overlap between that canon and the canon of 1920 or 2000, there are also a lot of differences. In my student days, the canon of American literature included "classic" works by a fair-sized group of poets—among them John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Eugene Field, Vachel Lindsay, and Sidney Lanier—who are virtually unknown to students entering college today. The textbooks I bought in the 1960s enshrined the works of these poets; today's textbooks no longer have much room for them.

The same is true for English literature. For some reason, the canon seems to have space for six Romantic poets and no more. When the poetry of Blake became canonical around the middle of this century, that of Walter Scott was squeezed out. These days, under pressure from rising stars like Mary Shelley and Ann Radcliffe, the sun is setting even on Scott's fiction. Aphra Behn, who had been given one star forty years ago, would be worth at least two and a half today. Meanwhile, poets like Samuel Butler, Matthew Prior, and George Crabbe (whom Jane Austen so much admired), novelists like Robert Bage and Charles Reade, and playwrights like Arthur Pinero have all dropped in esteem to the near vanishing point: their works are out of print, exiled from most of the newest school anthologies, and can be found primarily in university libraries and antiquarian bookshops. Outdated catalogues of the Modern Library in America or the Everyman's Library or World's Classics editions in England show at a glance the differences between the canon of another day and that of our own.

¹The Greek word *kanon* literally denotes a straight rod or pole; figuratively, it is whatever keeps something straight: a rule. In a further figure, the canon became the list of texts containing the rules—the group of books with full religious authority. The establishment of the canon of the Hebrew Bible was the job of a conference of rabbis at Yavneh early in the second century A.D.; the patristic fathers established the canon of the New Testament in the third century. At Yavneh the scrolls of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs were accepted, after some controversy, into the canon, while the prophecies of Baruch ben Sirach and the chronicles of the Maccabees were relegated to apocryphal status. Similarly, the gospels according to Matthew and Luke were given canonical authority, while the gospel of Nicodemus was discarded. In a third and far more recent figural use, the word *canon* has been applied to those literary texts that are thought to embody the highest standards of literary culture.

Theory of the Canon

Any list of required reading a culture prescribes for its educated elite has to be tailored to fit the span of a human life. Literature, therefore, has an ecology that forbids unlimited expansion: when something is added, something else must go. The debate over the canon began when poets realized that they were competing for fame not merely with their coevals but with all their predecessors. Hence the Roman satirist Horace's remark, "I hate it when a book is condemned, not for being bad but for being new," a sentiment that has been echoed by artists for centuries. But the contemporary debate over the canon is not entirely parallel with the poets' long-standing complaint that there cannot be room in Parnassus for everyone. The new focus is not so much on the facts of literary ecology as on the process by which certain texts achieve canonical status, particularly the relationship between literary value and the more sordid matters of literary economics and politics.

Debate over the canon is something that has evolved, like the canon itself. For over a millennium, from the philosophers of classical times to the medieval and Renaissance followers of Plato, literary excellence was an objective predicate. Quality was defined as a measure of a poem's participation in the eternal forms of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty—ideas that were more truly real than the mutable material universe itself. Disagreements over taste were seen as reflections of the defective nature of human perception and intelligence, its cloudy understanding of the eternal forms. The true canon—however mistily it might be revealed to us—was thought to be a canon for all time.

In the mid-eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the notion of quality as an objective predicate was replaced (in the writings of thinkers such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant) by the notion of taste as a subjective universal. The idea that tastes are universal may seem silly at first. It is hard to find two people who share even a majority of the same tastes. However, such diversity appears only when we compare things on roughly the same level of quality, where the distinctions are fine and the arguments subtle. We might argue indefinitely whether Rembrandt was a greater painter than Michelangelo, but we don't often argue whether a Rembrandt is more or less beautiful than a lump of mud. Our agreement needn't depend on the existence of an objective Idea of the Beautiful: in fact, the reasons that a Rembrandt is more beautiful than a lump of mud are totally subjective. The fact that over centuries and in various cultures 99.9999 percent of human beings have aesthetically preferred a painting by Rembrandt to a lump of mud made sense to Hume only under the assumption that there exists something invariant over time and space called "human nature."

As late as the mid-nineteenth century, in essays like Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve's "What Is a Classic?" (1850) or Matthew Arnold's "The Study of Poetry" (1888), literary value was assumed to be based on human nature:

A true classic [says Sainte-Beuve] is an author who has enriched the human mind, who has really augmented its treasures, who has made it take one more step forward, who has discovered some unequivocal moral

truth, or has once more seized hold of some eternal passion in that heart where all seemed known and explored; who has rendered his thought, his observation, or his discovery under no matter what form, but broad and large, refined, sensible, sane, and beautiful in itself; who has spoken to all in a style of his own which yet belongs to all the world, in a style which is new without neologisms, new and ancient, easily contemporaneous with every age. (1294)

Arnold appealed to "the best that has been known and thought," as though that would be true for all time. By the twentieth century the canon is seen as operating less throughout history than outside it altogether. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), T. S. Eliot speaks of the literary "tradition" as an "eternal order"—a club to which new members, agreeable to the charter founders, are always welcome. Some philosophers still view canonical texts as operating outside history. In *Truth and Method* (1960), Hans-Georg Gadamer, mentor of the reception theorists Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, defended the classic as "a truly historical category . . . a consciousness of something enduring, of significance that cannot be lost and is independent of all the circumstances of time" (255–56). Like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who (in *Introduction to the Philosophy of Art*, 1832) understood the classic as "that which signifies itself and hence also interprets itself" (352), Gadamer feels that the timelessness of the classic is in itself "a mode of historical being" (257).²

Antifoundationalism and Canon Change

While all of these thinkers, from Plato and Sidney to Eliot and Gadamer, may disagree about whether beauty is an objective property of texts or a function of human nature, they all see literary quality as a universal, and they all share a "foundationalist" discourse. That is, they all make strong, essentially unprovable assumptions about the nature of reality or society or human psychological processes that, if contested, leave their theories without explanatory power. In Western philosophy today, foundationalism is very much out of fashion, and most current theories on the canon avoid appealing to principles whose validity can be questioned.

One of the strongest antifoundationalist theories of canon formation and change is that of Barbara Herrnstein Smith. In her essay "Contingencies of Value" (excerpted on p. 147), Herrnstein Smith argues that the public's initial estimation of a literary work's quality is the result of happenstance rather than the

²In this sense, many old and respected works would not necessarily be classics. Trevor Ross argues that the Renaissance idea of a canon is one of texts whose excellence transcends time; it presumes that such texts are unmediatedly available to the contemporary reader. By the eighteenth century, it began to be clear that even educated audiences could no longer unself-consciously enjoy some of the finest specimens of (for example) Old English and Middle English poetry and that the long tradition of English literature was in danger of being cut off from its roots. Around the 1760s, the genre of "literary history" arose (in major books like Joseph Warton's *History of English Poetry*) to help explain and contextualize texts that no longer were "classic" in Gadamer's sense: they didn't "interpret themselves" any longer. For Ross, the idea of a "canon" and the idea of "literary history" are thus complementary. To say that something is "of literary-historical importance" is in effect to say that it is no longer canonical.

work's possession of any absolute quality. Some works happen to meet the cultural and aesthetic needs of a particular reading public. As a society changes, such works take one of two trajectories: downward to oblivion or upward toward canonical status. Most do the former. Herrnstein Smith recognizes that even works that have achieved canonical status can, under unfavorable circumstances, drift into a "trajectory of extinction" — as Longfellow and Whittier seem to be doing. However, she argues that canonical status works to protect a text from this path because "features that would, in a noncanonical work, be found alienating — for example, technically crude, philosophically naive, or narrowly topical — will be glozed over³ or backgrounded" (p. 149). Even when works are racially bigoted or chauvinistic, "there will be a tendency among humanistic scholars and academic critics to 'save the text' by transferring the locus of its interest to more formal or structural features" (p. 149).

How do works get into the canon? It has been widely assumed that respected, magisterial critics like Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and F. R. Leavis had a great deal to do with forming the canons of their day. According to Herrnstein Smith, though, social factors are usually more important than individual agents. Thus, the politics of feminism over the past twenty years has sparked a growth of interest in previously neglected female authors. But the canon has not altered as much as one would expect given the rapid changes in society over the past half-century. Strong conservative forces — including the very idea of a canon — operate to keep the canon constant. Institutional education may be the strongest of these. The literary texts most widely read today are those read in schools, and teachers are likely to teach texts that were valued when they were students. Furthermore, some texts may survive precisely because they are useful to educators: Xenophon's *Epigrapha* may have survived into the nineteenth century not because of its literary quality but because it was a perfect vehicle for teaching children the principles of Greek syntax. Similarly, some poems may be surviving because they are perfect examples of alliteration, symbolism, or other features that today's teachers like to explain.

Many groups are responsible for preserving and altering the literary canon. Since education is an important conservative force, those who compile textbooks and anthologies function — more and more self-consciously these days — as both the preservers and reshapers of a tradition. Henry Louis Gates Jr., one of the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Afro-American Literature*, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, editors of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, have explicitly addressed the issue of their responsibilities as canon makers. Yet while editors of anthologies are indeed tastemakers, their individual tastes are seldom given free rein. A publisher also has suggestions for inclusion and exclusion, and after these are assimilated, the table of contents is sent to a long list of expert reviewers, who have their own notions of the canon. Editors themselves repress their personal taste to sell their books, which happens only if the books provide what the teachers who assign textbooks want.

In this process, we find initiators (the authors of texts), mediators (editors, publishers, marketers, reviewers, teachers), and ultimately consumers

³glozed over: subjected to explanation and commentary; explained away.

(students). The same structure exists for new works of fiction, though here book reviewers (and the editors and publishers who assign books to reviewers) have an important mediating role. None of these accidental factors connects with either a Platonic idea of the beautiful or the notion of a common human nature. Literary quality is simply a function of the current interests of the reading public; each public revises the short lists drawn up by publics of the past in accordance with its own cultural needs. In effect, Herrnstein Smith's analysis leads to the conclusion that a text's acceptance into the canon is and has always been a political decision that can be influenced by interest groups with social and cultural agendas.

An example of the practical application of Herrnstein Smith's theory is presented by Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (excerpted on p. 137). Tompkins discusses the case of Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* (1855), a sentimental melodrama that was immensely popular in the mid-nineteenth century because it defined cultural stereotypes in an intelligible way for a public set adrift by the rapidity of social change. When we read pre-Civil War novelists like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, we should recognize that it was not they but writers like Warner or Harriet Beecher Stowe who most closely defined the interests and tastes of the American public. After the Civil War, Warner's reputation declined and might be entirely extinct except for her revival by recent literary historians and scholars of women's studies. Warner—one of the "damned lot of scribbling women" Hawthorne complained were overshadowing him—was unlucky in her posthumous career.

As for Hawthorne himself, according to Tompkins, all the breaks worked in his favor. Hawthorne's early survival was primarily due to his connections among New England editorial and publishing circles, which kept his works alive through biographies and new editions for the twenty years after his death. After that, his balloon ascended, as Hawthorne's interests in colonial America melded with America's growing fascination with its past. No mere conspiracy of editors could have kept Hawthorne before the public for 130 years, of course. Nevertheless, one need not appeal to any "timeless" quality in Hawthorne. Indeed, according to Tompkins there is no timeless quality to appeal to: instead, each generation of readers has redefined Hawthorne's greatness—and in such inconsistent terms that they don't always seem to be talking about the same author. Tompkins dissolves Hawthorne into his different facets, each of which has been for different social, political, economic, or cultural reasons the darling of successive interpretive communities and interest groups.

Will *The Wide, Wide World* enter the canon of American literature? Will *The House of the Seven Gables* be demoted? It is significant that for all the feminist interest in Warner and her midcentury sisters, Hawthorne's popularity continues unabated. Perhaps Hawthorne's own highly charged representations of women in the grip of patriarchy (in *The Scarlet Letter* and elsewhere) have found enough attackers and defenders among feminist readers to keep him in the forefront of critical attention—yet one more lucky break for the sage of Salem. As for *The Wide, Wide World*, Susan Warner's novel (like many other

once forgotten works by women) is in print for the first time since the nineteenth century and available as a textbook for university courses.

Conservatives responding to the various movements to expand the literary canon tend to quarrel at least implicitly with antifoundationalist assumptions such as those of Herrnstein Smith and Tompkins. For example, Denis Donoghue, in "A Criticism of One's Own," argues that

The most obvious merit of feminist criticism is that it has drawn attention to writers and writings that have been neglected. . . . But the question of literary merit, as distinct from sociological interest, is rarely raised by feminist critics. . . . We are to believe that literary criteria are incorrigibly man-made values, and are compromised by the power they enforce. (32)

Donoghue's move is to appeal to the idea of "literary merit" as a quality that can be defined independently of "sociological interest." He rejects Herrnstein Smith's antifoundationalist argument that "literary merit" has no meaning distinct from a society's "interests," sociological or otherwise.

Is it possible to find value and meaning in a literary canon from an explicitly antifoundationalist perspective? The most interesting attempt along these lines has been made by Charles Altieri in "An Idea and Ideal of Literary Canon." Altieri argues that Herrnstein Smith is correct in claiming that the literary canon reflects nothing more or less than a society's "interests" but wrong to conclude that the current canon therefore has no legitimate authority. The key question is how one defines *interest*. Altieri insists that society's interests are broader than "the desire for power over others" and "the pursuit of self-representations that satisfy narcissistic demands." In any heterogeneous society, Altieri argues, the literary canon is broader than any individual or group would wish and thereby exerts pressure on each reader to "undergo through imagination protean changes of identity and sympathy" (43). This gives readers access to other "possible worlds," other visions, and other values.⁴ Altieri is arguing that acceptance of a traditional canon leads to a pluralistic society, with individuals' egoism and group interest tempered by their having walked (as readers) in the shoes of various Others. The alternative, rejection of a common ideal of a literary canon and promotion of "countercanons" by special interest groups engaged in "identity politics," can lead only to a society of narrow interest groups engaged in a war of each against all.

The Politics of Alternative Reading Lists

Apart from a relatively few white male Christian heterosexuals of Western European descent, most American readers belong to at least one of the special-interest groups engaged in "identity politics."⁵ As Lillian S. Robinson points

⁴In the next section of this book, Annette Kolodny argues in a similar way from an explicitly feminist perspective (see p. 302).

⁵White Anglo-Saxon Protestants are in fact a minority group—though hardly a disenfranchised one—and they too have created a discourse of "identity politics" in such writings as Richard Brookhiser's *The Way of the WASP* (1990).

out in "Treason Our Text" (reprinted on p. 153), the existence of the canon as a cultural monument from which writers from our own group (or groups) are either totally excluded or underrepresented creates a series of dilemmas. Should we accept the canon as it is but work to get this or that writer into the canon or promoted from minor to major status? Or should we reject the established canon (as did the French Impressionists in their *Salon des Refusées*), proclaiming an alternative countercanon of texts by women, by African Americans, and by Latinos, and by working-class writers? These are not easy choices: the latter practice may lead to the ghettoization of "minority" texts; the former implicitly concedes the validity of the master's rules. And what about the criteria for excellence themselves? Robinson argues that the dominant culture's supposedly neutral aesthetic values are framed in ways that make it difficult or impossible for disadvantaged groups to enter the canon. She nevertheless sees that trying to define alternative aesthetic criteria has many pitfalls. One may produce a new Great Tradition that includes some of the authors disenfranchised by the old one but systematically excludes members of other disenfranchised groups. Robinson's own solution to these dilemmas is to work toward admitting literature by women and minorities into "the" canon by systematically contesting the cultural biases of the values on which the current canon rests. Not everyone agrees with this solution, but even those who do not will appreciate her cogent and candid overview of the interlocking dilemmas surrounding evaluative issues.

Whatever the canonical status of their writings, disadvantaged minority groups write what French critics Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call "minor literature." In "What Is a Minor Literature?" (excerpted on p. 167), Deleuze and Guattari take time from their study of novelist Franz Kafka to theorize about the special character his writing derived from his being a Jew in Prague, writing not in Yiddish or Hebrew (the languages of his ethnic group) or in Czech (the language of a majority of the natives of Prague) but in German (the language of the Austro-Hungarian elite who ruled the province of Bohemia). This language, when used by a Prague Jew, is "deterritorialized": it speaks not for a country or province but rather for people of a diaspora living as an Other in a land not their own.⁶ Within such minor literatures "everything . . . is political" (p. 168) and "everything takes on a collective value" (p. 168) as every observation speaks about the hegemonic society from the perspective of the silenced members of the minority. Deleuze and Guattari conclude paradoxically that there is no major literature except minor literature, for poetic value resides precisely in the tensions inherent in using the language of the oppressors to speak for the oppressed.

A contrary view is expressed in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s "Canon-Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to the Told" (excerpted on p. 175), which explicitly rejects the notion that what is best about African American literature harks back to its use of white language. For Gates, the African American writer is torn between two traditions: the written tradition of Western European culture into which African slaves

⁶Deleuze and Guattari explicitly compare Kafka's Prague German with "what blacks in America today are able to do with the English language" (p. 168).

were forcibly transplanted and the oral tradition of Africa that survives in the songs, legends, and stories of the people. In the last century, educators like Alexander Crummell tried to demonstrate their equality with whites by learning classical Greek syntax and writing a prose indistinguishable from that of the best white models. For Gates there seems something artificial—and a bit pathetic—about this educational achievement or about those literary texts that try to “pass” by assimilating themselves to white models. Nevertheless, despite the power of the oral tradition, Gates finds that many works of African American literature are “dead on the page” (p. 182)—relatively ineffective, that is, as visual printed texts lacking the sound of performance. In creating his prestigious *Norton Anthology of Afro-American Literature*, Gates has not only included work songs and blues lyrics, legends and stories, but a tape cassette as well so that the “reader” can listen to the texts as performed.

There is a certain irony in the fact that, like Crummell, Gates himself began by mastering a “master discourse”: he rose to fame as the first theorist of color to use the newest structuralist and poststructuralist methods for the analysis of the African oral tradition within African American texts. Gates points out this irony himself. A deeper question, however, is whether Gates may be unfairly slanting the African American canon by privileging texts with the strongest oral roots at the expense of those that use a “deterritorialized” English indistinguishable from that of the oppressors to exploit to the full the “double consciousness” Deleuze and Guattari value. (For Gates, it would be Paul Laurence Dunbar’s dialect poems, such as “Little Brown Baby” and “When Malindy Sings,” that would most fully express the tradition; for Deleuze and Guattari, it would be his poems written in standard English, like “We Wear the Mask.”) As a Harvard professor and leader of a large and growing African American intelligentsia, Gates is in a position to relish the richness and power of the African American vernacular, but, as Donald Gibson points out in a critique of Gates’s essay, nineteenth-century African American intellectuals like Frederick Douglass, Alexander Crummell, and W. E. B. Du Bois were in an earlier stage of the social struggle and were men for their times just as Gates is for his.

The question of the canon has a very different relevance to another disadvantaged group: gays and lesbians. For various historical and social reasons, women and African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are poorly represented in the British and American literary canon, but many canonized authors (including Shakespeare and Marlowe, Walt Whitman, Henry James, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Oscar Wilde, Hart Crane, and Virginia Woolf) were either gay or bisexual in orientation. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests in *Epistemology of the Closet* (excerpted on p. 183), the problem is not that gays are inadequately represented in the canon but that their sexual orientation is treated as a guilty secret to be hidden from students. When teaching Shakespeare’s sonnets addressed to the unidentified “noble youth,” I used to tell students to imagine the sonnet as addressed to a woman if they couldn’t cope with the sexual orientation of the poet’s passion. But as Sedgwick reminds us, this sort of practice is unethical. It is not only intellectually dishonest; it collaborates with the homophobia in today’s society to let students who are actively antigay (or even merely squeamish) off the hook in this facile way.

Identity Politics on the Margins

The university as currently constituted is much more ready to accommodate pressures to change the curriculum by creating a new women's studies or African American studies course or program than by changing the content of the survey courses in English or American literature. But as Barbara Smith⁷ points out in her well-known polemic "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1982), anybody who is a member of more than one disenfranchised group can easily fall through the cracks. Women's studies courses, according to Smith, tend to focus on literature by and about white women, while African American studies programs tend to be run by and to study literature primarily by African American males. As an African American lesbian feminist, Smith feels triply marginalized, since some feminist critics (including leaders like Elaine Showalter) have been suspiciously harsh on lesbian writers (like Virginia Woolf) and have tended to downplay the lesbian orientation of the women writers they discuss.

Smith makes an excellent case for a strong and continuous African American female tradition that stands apart from that of African American male writers. And it is hard not to sympathize with the pain of exclusion she feels at the common notion that "women" are white, that "African Americans" are male, and that she is therefore nobody. But a countertrend is clearly setting in against aggressive manifestations of the sort of "identity politics" that underlies Smith's position. "The Politics of Knowledge" by Palestinian scholar Edward W. Said (reprinted on p. 189) gets to what may well be at the heart of the problem.

Said's most famous work, *Orientalism*, is a critique of Western European intellectuals who "essentialized" the Arabs, Indians, and Chinese with whom they came into contact, creating the concept of a "Chinese mind" (for instance), which was totally different from the "Western mind." Differences that were minor and marginal, matters of degree, were turned into differences in kind. Since "Orientals" were distinctly Others, not like Ourselves, they could be ruled from outside rather than (like Westerners) trusted to rule themselves. The West's colonial rule over Asia and Africa is past, or nearly so, but one legacy of this essentialism remains with us, as each African and Asian nation clings to the nationalistic spirit, emphasizing its own differences from each of its neighbors and from the Western nations, as though these were differences in kind.

As I write today, it is clear that the political results of essentialism in places like Iraq, Rwanda, and Kosovo have been disastrous, as other forms of difference (the religious sect, the tribe, the ethnic group) that occur within once unified nations lead to bloody civil wars with potentially genocidal outcomes. In Rwanda and Kosovo, at least, "identity politics" has already resulted in genocide.

No one would suggest that a similar catastrophe is likely to result from our own current battles over the curriculum, but certainly there has been, in

⁷Barbara Smith is an African American scholar who co-founded (with Audre Lorde) the Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press. Barbara Herrnstein Smith (p. 147) is white and teaches at Duke University.

letters as much as politics, a spirit of separatism that would divide the world of art into increasingly smaller and more defensive camps. Such a separatism falsifies what Said calls the "worldly" links that bind West to East. Said suggests that a novel such as the Sudanese Tayib Salih's *Season of Migration* is related, through its central themes, not only to other Arabic novels (those of Mahfouz and Idriss) but to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and that it will benefit Salih and other Arabic authors if we consider their works in the global context in which they were created, rather than ghettoizing them as specimens of fragmentary national literatures. The celebration of difference may please proponents of identity politics, but in the end Said argues that the world we all live in is interconnected, and separatism bears heavy costs. I find it hard to disagree with Said's calm warning that in literature as in politics, "marginality and homelessness are not . . . to be gloried in; they are to be brought to an end, so that more, and not fewer, people can enjoy the benefits of what has for centuries been denied the victims of race, class, or gender" (p. 198).

Reading for Class

The public debates about the canon and the curriculum were more overtly based on political issues that arise from our cultural preoccupations with race, nationality, gender, and sexual orientation and on the feeling that literary excellence should not be limited to dead white European males. But the canon has been challenged in terms of class, too, due in part to the influence of cultural studies, which has broadened the spectrum of the kinds of materials that are studied and taught as "texts" in English courses. Janice A. Radway's classic treatise in culture studies, *A Feeling for Books* (excerpted on p. 199), examines the history of the Book-of-the-Month Club and the revolution it fostered in the marketing of culture to middle-class consumers in America. Her subject is the culture of books as much as the club's selections.

For Radway, the middlebrow best-sellers she bought from the Book-of-the-Month Club promised pure enjoyment, while the canonical texts she was being taught to prefer came with an implicit threat: if she did not appreciate those texts the way she was supposed to, it was because she did not measure up to the level of taste a professor of literature ought to have. In learning to love James, Faulkner, Pound, and Pynchon and more generally to value intricacy, ambiguity, and irony over the sensation of being captivated by an imagined world, Radway was "reading for class" in two different senses. She was not only obliging her teachers at Michigan State, where she received her Ph.D.; she was also distancing herself from middle-class suburban New Jersey, where she grew up, and pledging her loyalty to an international aristocracy of taste. But Radway's conversion to what she calls "the secular religion of great literature" was "imperfect" (p. 203):

Although I inferred from seminar discussions that I ought to prefer Henry James to Anne Tyler, Faulkner to John Le Carré, Pound to Carlos Castañeda, and *Gravity's Rainbow* to *The Thorn Birds*, I could not always discipline my preferences as I thought I should. I still liked the books I read at night a lot more than the books I read for my classes. . . . Those books

prompted physical sensations, a forgetting of the self and complete absorption in another world. (p. 201)

As a reader and critic, Radway occupies two roles simultaneously. She is the coldly knowing cultural analyst—aware of the commercial ruses used to sell middlebrow culture to socially mobile suburbanites hungry to display what passed for “good taste,” contemptuous of the flabby political thinking they fostered, and aware of the inferiority of that middlebrow version of “good taste” to the high modern and postmodern texts she learned to enjoy in graduate school. She also, however, cannot forget her own avid consumption of those best-sellers and of the pleasure they gave her, down to the physical smell of the books and feel of their paper. My own version of Radway’s confession would be slightly different, partly because I didn’t need to be persuaded that intricacy and irony were fun and partly because I come from a working-class background and read Dorothy Sayers as much for her information about fine wines, incunabula, and other tastes you needed money to indulge as for the mystery, adventure, and escape. (You might say that in a sense I was always reading for class.)

While no one would claim that *Marjorie Morningstar* and *The Thorn Birds* have been elevated to the canon, they have certainly become a plausible part of today’s academic curriculum. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, resulting from the growing interest in cultural studies. Aside from pioneers like John Cawelti, few of my professors thirty years ago gave courses in the detective story, the gothic novel, the western, or science fiction; today such courses are offered everywhere. Film studies has become integrated with literary studies on many campuses, and courses centering on “texts” even further removed from standard literary culture—such as television cartoons and music videos—have become common. But as Alan Purves’s “Telling Our Story about Teaching Literature” (reprinted on p. 211) clearly illustrates, the techniques we use for analyzing a comic strip are no different, really, from the ones we use for analyzing difficult lyric poetry of the most “highbrow” sort. An antifoundationalist may be more likely to argue that these are skills that students should be learning—regardless of the content.

The Madonna studies phenomenon demonstrates how allusive, ironic, and transgressive the commodities of the contemporary cultural marketplace have become and what critical scrutiny we need to unpack them. The trendiest academic subject of the early 1990s was singer Madonna’s performance style, lyrics, rock videos, and films, which were analyzed using New Critical formalism and Derridean deconstruction, Freudian and Lacanian psychology, and the cultural criticism of Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard, along with various theories of gender politics. To the traditionalists at the time, it may have seemed absurd to work at Madonna studies. But young theorists are trained in the doctrine that most forms of culture can be analyzed as “texts.” It is not strange at all that they should find it hard to resist the urge to study the objects and practices contemporary culture actually values rather than those it merely enshrines. The oppositional stance of cultural studies toward the methods and products of contemporary corporate America thus veils what might otherwise be taken as worship of its success.

The Canon as Cultural Capital

Based on Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of culture and class, John Guillory interprets the canon wars as a symptom of a slow but massive shift in the class structure of the Western democracies. In *Cultural Capital* (excerpted on p. 218), Guillory insists, in the first place, that the function of the school as institution is not peripheral but central to the class structure of capitalist society. Schools not only train the young in the specific information and skills they need to operate in a utilitarian society under capitalism; they also reproduce the structure of that society by creating young heirs to take their places within the social hierarchy. The class basis of culture requires the reproduction of "cultural capital" from one generation to the next, and in a society based on inequalities the distribution of such capital is unequal: some people get more than others. The acquisition of a certain quantity of cultural capital is needed to produce the vision and discourse of a member of the ruling class and to distinguish him or her from social inferiors. There is no rule that allows one to predict precisely which forms of cultural capital will be valued in a particular time and place. Mandarins of the Ming Dynasty were required to know literary classics from the previous millennium, aristocrats of the Enlightenment were required to be able to compose Latin and Greek verses, and members of the upper bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century were required to know and revere the classics of Western literature from Homer and Virgil through the early modern period. Needless to say, things are different now. Guillory writes that

At the present moment, the nation-state still requires a relatively homogeneous language to administer its citizenry, but it no longer requires that a distinctive practice of that language identify a culturally homogeneous bourgeoisie. That class has long since been replaced by a culturally heterogeneous New Class, which has in turn been fully integrated into mass culture, a media culture mediating the desires of every class and group. In this "new phase of civilization" the historical function of the literary curriculum—to produce at the lower levels of the educational system a practice of Standard English and at the higher levels a more refined bourgeois language, a "literary" English—is no longer important to the social order. (*Cultural Capital*, 263)

The flight of young men and women in the universities away from specializing in literature, history, and other traditional liberal arts subjects—a movement commonly referred to in the media as the "crisis of the humanities"—is thus a purely utilitarian reaction. Students' future employers will want them to calculate market shares and perform multiple regressions, so the time they spend developing expertise in the liberal arts is mostly wasted. Guillory argues that professors of literature experience themselves as powerless precisely because they have become functionless. The allusive literary language that was once the possession of every successful businessman and bureaucrat is no longer a prerequisite for success. Contemporary capitalism now largely values English departments for their role in training students in composition and rhetoric. The art of incisive expository writing with "proper" diction and

syntax, almost universally neglected at the primary and secondary levels of schooling, is still a necessary component of the education of the professional-managerial elite, one that in fact differentiates those who will rise to executive management positions from those who will stay at the lower sales and technical levels of the corporate structure. The reason so many successful businessmen were once English and history majors has little to do with the subjects they learned but a lot to do with the continual practice in reading and writing they received.

For Guillory, the tussles over the curriculum, so heated in the 1980s, were symptoms of a profession thrashing about because its central preoccupation, literature, no longer has the same significance for society it once did. The humanities professoriate imagined it could recover its usefulness within the educational system if it could only redefine the curriculum or replace it with other objects of study. The problem, Guillory argues, is that the texts that multiculturalists want to substitute for the old Western canon in fact constitute not a different form of cultural capital but the same form: they are just different novels, plays, and poems.

Canon and Curriculum

Last year the Education department asked me to "facilitate" a seminar on the literary canon and canonical change for chairs of English departments at New York City high schools. I worked up a presentation on the ways the canon has changed and the reasons it changes, focusing partly on what happened to Shakespeare in the eighteenth century⁸ and partly on feminism and multiculturalism and how they had shifted the canon since 1970. As the department chairs responded, it became clear that what they were really interested in talking about were the new books they planned to use in place of the books they had used last year. What they really wanted to talk about was not the canon but the curriculum. High school reading lists are still chosen, not because the books represent the best that has been known and thought in the world, but because they have interesting stories with themes that adolescents can relate to and, sometimes, be induced to think and write about. There is some canonical material—Shakespeare and Dickens and Twain—mixed with a mass of middlebrow fiction like *Of Mice and Men* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Chosen*. I was a bit disappointed in the high school teachers' focus on next year's curriculum rather than the long term, until it dawned on me that this was an oc-

⁸In 1667, when Dryden published his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, Shakespeare was considered one of the three most important Elizabethan dramatists, along with Ben Jonson and John Fletcher, and Jonson was considered the most artistically correct of the three. By the time of the bicentennial in 1764, Shakespeare was unquestionably considered not merely the finest poet of his generation, but *the* national poet. One reason for this soaring status beyond mere canonization was surely Shakespeare's deep interest in national history at a time when Britons were defining their own identities in terms of the idea of the nation. His cycle of chronicle plays running from the reign of John through that of Henry VIII is unmatched by any other contemporary dramatist, and his presentation of the unity of English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh peoples within a single imperium (such as we see in *Henry V*) seemed to prophecy the political unification of the British Isles then under way.

cupational hazard at every level and that what we English professors had called the "canon wars" had been primarily a quarrel over the curriculum.

The curriculum fight, like the culture wars, is essentially over, and the result is that the university curriculum has been unhitched from the literary canon. The long list of books everyone had to read is gone, and the Slavish Note-Taker has been put out of business. In their place is a long list of options, many of which weren't known in my day. Fewer professors are doing research on the texts most central to the canon; many more are working on the popular writing of the past or the present day.⁹ Over the last thirty years, the canon—as opposed to the curriculum—has changed somewhat, as it always does, but it would be my guess that it hasn't changed much more than it usually does over that length of time. If the popular media are anything to go by, the most important figures retain the respect they always had. Shakespeare is certainly in no danger: two recent *Hamlets*, an *Othello*, a *Lear*, a *Romeo and Juliet*, a *Much Ado*, a *Twelfth Night*, a *Midsummer's Night's Dream*, and the 1998 Academy Award-winning *Shakespeare in Love* testify that the Bard is still big-time box office. Three Jane Austen novels were recently filmed, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion*, and *Emma*, along with a Beverly Hills knockoff of *Emma* titled *Clueless*. And to judge from recent productions of *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Washington Square*, and *The Wings of the Dove*, Henry James seems to do far better in Hollywood story conferences than in the latest edition of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*.

Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (excerpted on p. 225) opens and closes with two elegies for the canon, prophesying with the voice of a Jeremiah that "what are now called 'Departments of English' will be renamed departments of 'Cultural Studies' where *Batman* comics, Mormon theme parks, television, movie, and rock will replace Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens" (p. 226). But note the paradox: the publication of Bloom's book by Harcourt, rather than a university press, and its immediate best-sellerhood, suggests that the public still believes in a canon based on Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and all the rest and wants to read what Bloom has to say about those texts (as a preface to reading them—or as a symbolic substitute for doing so). The moral seems to be that the "wars" over the canon of Western literature have left the canon largely intact, except at the universities where it has traditionally been taught, studied, researched, and understood. The academic study of literature is at most two hundred years old; the textual explication of professors like Bloom has been done for at most a century. We students of literature like to think we are important, but the canon got along without us for millennia. We may need it more than it needs us.

⁹The shift of research projects toward minor figures and popular culture predates the canon wars. In the 1960s, if not earlier, graduate students were actively discouraged from working on Shakespeare or Milton or Dickens: too much had been written about these figures. If one found something original to say, it might take years to discover that it really was original and not something that had been said a century ago.

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