

THE CANON PRO AND CONTRA: 'THE CANON IS DEAD-LONG LIVE PICK AND MIX'

HERBERT GRABES

University of Giessen

35

The subtitle of my lecture is taken from an article by Jessica Munns from 2001 called “Cannon Fodder”. This militant pun reminds us not only of similar ones like Lillian S. Robinson’s *In the Canon’s Mouth* (1997), but also of the fact that most of the “canon bashing” within the last few decades took place within the animated American struggle about the revision of the English curriculum that at times turned into veritable “culture wars” (Jay 1997). Leaving aside for the moment the wider ramifications of this development, I will refer to the many arguments against what is again and again simply called “the canon” which deserve closer attention—even if it sounds a bit much when we read that

the list of crimes now imputed to the canon is extraordinary, for example, for a group of graduate students in California: departmental and professional tyranny, frustration of initiative and interdisciplinarity, suppression of the Third World; articulating social and political power; marginalizing women and reinforcing phallogentric gender oppositions; denying history; imposing judgment; repressing subjectivity; declaring works to be classics that are lucky survivors of an anecdotal process.

I have taken this quotation from Jeffrey S. Sammons’ essay “The Land Where the Canon B(l)ooms: There and Here” (Sammons 2001: 127-128), and as the title indicates the topic seems to invite puns. Let us concentrate on the fact that “Anti-canonists see the canon as the vehicle for national, racial and gender superiority”

(Gorak 1991: 235). For though the strife within the American academy was above all about the canon of American literature, this reproach can also easily be upheld regarding the canon of English literature which is my concern in this paper.

Firstly, the view that the literary canon has been used to demonstrate national superiority is all too well founded. At the time of the Renaissance, Britain was still hard put to show that its literary culture was not far behind that of classical antiquity, and above all that it could compete with that of the other early modern European nation states. Thus John Leland in his first history of English literature from the early 1540s presented no fewer than 674 British authors and patrons of learning in order to prove

that not onely the Germanes, but also the Italianes themselfe, that count as the Grekes full arrogantly, all other nacyns to be barbarous + unlettered, sauinge their owne, shall haue a direct occasion, openly of force to say. *That Britannia prima fuit parens, altrix (addo hoc etiam), et iure quidem optimo) conservatrix eum uirorum magnorum, tum maxime ingeniorum.* (Hall 1709: B 8r)

That is to say that it was Britain that first parented and subsequently fostered great and most ingenious men. And John Bale expressly states in his *Scriptorium Illustrium maioris Brytannie, quam nunc Angliam & Scotiam vocant: Catalogus* from 1557 to 1559 with its 1400 entries, that it is also his aim to make the most excellent English writers known “ultra Oceanum” (1557 α 3^v), “beyond the Ocean”, “on the continent”. Even William Winstanley in his *Lives of the most Famous English Poets* from 1687 is content to assert that “we come not behind any Nation in the World” (A 2^v). Yet already in *The Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland*, a literary history published by Theophilus Cibber in 1753, we read that

The British nation, which has produced the greatest men in every profession, before the appearance of Milton could not enter into any competition with antiquity, with regard to the sublime excellencies of poetry. [...] When Milton appeared, the pride of Greece was humbled, the competition became more equal, and since Paradise Lost is ours; it would, perhaps, be an injury to our national fame to yield the palm to any state, whether ancient or modern. (Cibber 1753: 108)

And it is less surprising that we find ample evidence of this sense of superiority in the literary histories from the late 19th century. Let me quote some telling examples from Henry Morley’s *First Sketch of English Literature* (1873) presented by Margit Sichert in her *MLQ*-article on “Functionalizing Cultural Memory” (2003). Here is the first one: “If this be really the strong spirit of the people, to show that it is so is to tell how England won, and how alone she can expect to keep her foremost place among the nations” (Morley 1873: 1; cf. Sichert 2003: 204). The second

one, which also may stand for nineteenth-century racist deliberations, grounds the superiority of the English on the fact that the English race is an ideal mixture of Celtic and Teutonic: "None can distinguish surely the forefathers of these most remote forefathers of the Celt and the Teuton, in whose unlike tempers lay some of the elements from which, when generations after generations more had passed away, a Shakespeare was to come" (Morley 1873: 2; cf. Sichert 2003: 205). Yet in the course of the 20th century such obvious references both to national and racial superiority were to disappear, and what more recently in the US was meant by the nationalist and racist quality of the canon was the so-called "Euro-centrism" of the canon of American literature as presented in the leading anthologies and accordingly taught in the curriculum.

Yet the most far-reaching attack on the canon as such has come from the quarter of certain feminist writers like Lillian S. Robinson or Jessica Munns. Not that they were wrong in pointing out that the traditional canon has been, as Robinson writes, "an entirely gentlemanly artefact" (Robinson 1997: 3). As far as the canon of English literature is concerned, women authors fared better in the earlier literary histories than in the later ones. Cibber in 1753 included thirteen, and due to the fact that he was, above all, out for interesting life stories, he gave no fewer than seven of them (Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, Delarivière Manley, Elizabeth Thomas, Elizabeth Rowe, Catherine Cockburn and Laetitia Pilkington) between ten and twenty pages of space—as much as Chaucer, Spenser and Ben Jonson. And though neither Samuel Johnson in 1781 nor William Hazlitt in 1818 counts a single woman among "The English Poets", Robert Chambers in his *Cyclopaedia of English Literature* (1843) at least gives credit to a few, and among the 90 novelists from the period 1780-1840 he mentions, no fewer than 32 are women. This is much more than what we find later until the 1980s, even if in the meantime women authors like Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf had found a place within the core (or elite) canon.

Yet the acknowledgement of women's share in the writing of literature, be it American or English, and the concurrent inclusion of more women authors in "the canon" is not Lillian S. Robinson's objective when she stresses that:

We need to understand whether the claim is being made that many of the newly recovered or validated texts by women meet existing criteria or, on the other hand, that those criteria themselves intrinsically exclude or tend to exclude women and hence should be modified or replaced. (1997: 8)

Starting with the rhetorical question, "Is the canon and hence the syllabus based on it to be regarded as the compendium of excellence or as the record of cultural history?" (11), Robinson goes on to further ask whether feminists are not "calling the idea of 'greatness' itself into question, insisting on radically redefining what

comprises it” (25) and thus “the entire aesthetic discourse [...] is fundamentally challenged by consideration of women’s work?” (26).

It is only fair to say that in Lillian S. Robinson’s view, the traditional literary canon should not be obliterated but rather complemented with cultural history and cultural anthropology in a very wide sense:

I believe I help bring together the culture defined by custom, ritual, daily life, material survival, belief systems —the anthropologist’s culture— with the culture of books, plays, music, and painting —the critic’s culture— in a way that frees and potentially empowers all of us. (102)

Compared to this, then, someone like Jessica Munns sounds much more radical. Just listen:

From the desire to rethink the idea of the literary text to include instead of exclude women as writers, women’s studies have broadened —and destroyed— the traditional canon because they have undermined the categories of inclusion and evaluation on which it was based. (2001: 23)

38

And though realistic enough to admit that —for economic reasons— “anthologies, the modern vehicle of the canon, are for the moment here to stay” (25), she nevertheless ends her programmatic essay in Jan Gorak’s *Canon vs Culture* with a vision:

We can all make our own canon: every teacher their own Norton: is this liberating and exhilarating, or just plain terrifying? I am not at all sure; but I am sure that the emergence of women’s literary studies, allied with computer technology, has made this a potential future. The emergence of an infinity of canons of British literature is, perhaps, the appropriate postmodern solution (or solutions). The canon is dead: long live pick-and-mix. (26)

Now before we start discussing the likelihood, quality and effects of this brave new world, it seems appropriate to reflect briefly on the various meanings of “the canon” in order to understand what exactly it is that has been killed off by the inclusion of women’s writing. Coming from the Greek “Kanôn” denoting a straight rod or bar and then a rule or model in law or in art, the word “canon” was first applied to a list of classical Greek authors by David Ruhnken in his edition of Rutilius Lupus in 1768 (cf. Kennedy 2001: 107). Since then it has been applied in the literary field to collections of the most different sizes and functions: from vast catalogues of national or period writing to more or less comprehensive literary histories; from anthologies or reading lists guiding or determining university curricula to publishers’ series of “classical authors” or more general anthologies like the *Oxford Book of English Poetry*; down to the syllabuses that determine the

teaching of literature in secondary and primary schools. And that we are not only dealing with different quantities but also with different functions becomes clear when we look at, say, Frank Kermode's view that it is the "literary institution" that "controls the choice of canonical texts" (Kermode 1979: 80); or Charles Altieri's, according to which they are "an institutional means of exposing people to a range of attitudes", a kind of "grammar" (Altieri 1990: 27); or the more elaborate one given by Robert Weimann when writing about *Shakespeare (De)Canonized*:

As a cultural institution, a literary canon may be defined as a publicly circulating, usable body of writing which, by definition, is held to be as much representative of certain national or social interests and traditions as it is unrepresentative and exclusive of others. In fact, the very representativity of this privileged body of writing appears as a sine qua non for its function as a tradition or heritage, for receiving and projecting patterns of social, cultural and national identity. (Weimann 1988: 68)

The functional aspect that comes out in these definitions enables us to understand very clearly why —as Paul Lauter, the coordinating editor of the 1990 *Heath Anthology of American Literature* notorious for its canon-broadening, proclaimed: "the question of the canon becomes a conflict of values and therefore, translated into public policy, of politics" (Lauter 1991: 156) or more concretely, as Sandra Lea Meek in her essay on "The Politics of Poetics" has pointed out, "during the past twenty-five years, the literary canon has come under fire for [...] locking out culturally marginalized groups" (Meek 2001: 81).

One further aspect in which canons significantly differ is their degree of validity that reaches from mere information to being obligatory or compulsory. As the comprehensive canons we find in literary histories can generally not be more than informative overviews and the university curricula in most European countries are not tightly regulated, the significance of the war cry to "open up the canon" (Fiedler and Baker 1981) within the American canon debate could only be understood by those who knew the extent to which the teaching of undergraduate literature courses over there is determined by some leading anthologies. This the more so since the canon of "English literature" in particular has in most respects been relatively wide open for a long time, for instance much, much wider than that of "German literature". This has to do with the fact that from the 16th to the late 18th century there existed in Britain two canons side by side. One of them was very wide indeed, if not all authors and texts, then at least all those deemed important from all domains of discourse. While Leland and Bale aimed at being all-inclusive, John Berkenhout in his *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical History of Literature* from 1777 was content with a limited number of entries for specialized canons presenting 'Historians and Antiquarians', 'Divines', 'Lawyers', 'Physicians', 'Poets', 'Philosophers and Mathematicians', 'Grammarians', 'Politicians',

‘Travellers’, and ‘Miscellaneous’. The other, much narrower canon that mostly went under the title of ‘Poetry’, contained only authors of imaginative literature, ranging from an array of slightly more than a dozen names from Chaucer to Spenser in William Webbes’ 1586 *Discourse of English Poesie* to William Winstanley’s 145 entries in his *Lives of the most Famous English Poets* in 1687. This expanded to over two hundred in Theophilus Cibber’s *Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland* from 1753 before being reduced in Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* to just 52 and in William Hazlitt’s *Lectures on the English Poets* to merely 18, although Joseph Ritson in his *Bibliographia Poetica* from 1802 had listed 541 alone from the 16th century.

40 What is more important for an assessment of the more recent situation is, however, that ever since Robert Chambers’ *History of English Language and Literature* (1836), following the lead initiated by Thomas Warton’s placing of imaginative literature within a wide context of cultural history in his first narrative history of English literature from 1774-81, the presented canon has been a compromise between the former two separate ones, that is, a canon privileging imaginative writing yet also including authors and works from almost all domains of writing held to be important for British cultural history. This kind of canon-formation reached its zenith in the 15 volumes of *the Cambridge History of English Literature* (1907-16) which comprise also Latin texts by English authors, sermons, a large number of philosophical, historical and political writings, important works by natural scientists, educational tracts, private letters and diaries, examples of earlier journalism etc. And even literary histories that follow the example of George Saintsbury’s *History of English Literature* (1898) and give priority to aesthetic criteria as a principle of selection, include at least important theologians, philosophers, and historians.

A further aspect that has to be mentioned is that not only works, but also their authors have traditionally played an important role in the canon and continued to do so at least as synthesizing categories even after having been declared dead by postmodern theorists. Up to the mid-eighteenth century, literary histories consisted in every case of sequences of authors’ life stories with lists of their works, and when Samuel Johnson began to devote one third or even half of the space for each entry to an analysis and assessment of the author’s works, he produced the model for the life-and-letters approach that was to become the standard until the mid-twentieth century. A typical example for subsequent meaning is to be found in the old *Oxford History of English Literature* and the *Pelican Guide to English Literature* where whole chapters are devoted to some eminent authors and the lesser lights are presented within overviews of the literature of a period or a genre.

Thus the fact that the traditional British canon of English literature was rather broad does not mean that there was no clear hierarchy. A core or elite canon of only a few authors within this wider canon has proved to be extremely stable over the last two centuries, always privileging Shakespeare even within this group. Until World War I it comprised—in addition to Shakespeare—Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Wordsworth, Dickens and Tennyson; and later Jane Austen, George Eliot, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett were added. The much larger group of authors held to be important yet not quite as much so has been less stable and betrayed the influence of changes in literary criticism (just think of the Donne-revival earlier in the 20th century). We generally have then a third level of authors and works that at least receive a short commentary, and below this there is still another one consisting of mere name dropping and obviously serving the purpose of showing that there is still so much more in English literary and cultural history than unfortunately can be dealt with.

Thus any canon-formation implies competition, and with the anti-authoritarian tendency prevalent not only but also among critics in the wake of the 1960s, it is no wonder that this kind of competition and the ensuing hierarchy of authors came under heavy attack. Being too intelligent to overlook the fact that there is, however, no real chance of democratizing the arts, the critics of the canon have brought the battle into the field of cultural history (this can be seen in the argumentation of Lillian Robinson and Jessica Munns I presented earlier), that is, they have dealt with literary texts merely as documents of past cultural stages and conditions.

This shift away from the aesthetic or literature as language art of course also included a questioning of the criteria for canonization. The tendency has been to reduce the question to the aspect of social power or prestige. Even the relative disinterestedness espoused by authors of literary texts over the centuries has been interpreted by Trevor Ross as no more than an attempt “to make their practice seem distinctive and their assertions credible” (Ross 1998: 19). This is the kind of logic according to which doctors are above all interested in keeping you ill in order to stay in business. When Frank Kermode thus tries to reduce the difference between works that are in the canon and those that are not, simply to the fact that “continuity of attention and interpretation” was only “reserved for the canonical” (Kermode 1985: 74), he forgets that it first has taken a considerable amount of attention on the part of editors, publishers, readers, critics and educational institutions for a work or author to get into the canon at all. And the mere fact of being included in the canon of literary histories, for instance, by no means guarantees a continuity of attention. All it effects at best is rescue from being totally forgotten; the attention has to be revived again and again by critics, publishers and above all by those who teach at all educational levels.

It is indeed not easy to make a rational claim for artistic excellence; it can to a point be demonstrated yet hardly be proved by argumentation. And as it is more than difficult to explain the effect of colors to the blind, the attempt to convince people who just lack the necessary sensitivity of differences in aesthetic quality sometimes seems hopeless. Acquaintance with a large number of excellent literary works may help to eventually develop a sense of quality, even if there have also been innumerable and quite helpful attempts to somehow grasp the phenomenon on the conceptual level. Northrop Frye has, for instance, pointed out that canonized authors more than others enable the reader “to communicate with times and spaces and cultures [...] far removed from his own” (Sandler 1986: 1). The German scholar-critic Gert Mattenklott thinks that the canon privileges works “whose formal perfection is not bought with a reduction into finitude of the values it contains; whose ethical dimension on the other hand must not be paid for with a loss of its aesthetic sovereignty” (1992: 357).

42

In spite of, or even because of, all the theoretical arguments against the canon and the criteria upholding it, in the last few years for the first time in history a large number of new popular histories of English literature have been published in Britain with a canon made up almost exclusively of imaginative texts, of literature consisting only of poems, plays, stories and novels, as a glance at these histories will show: *Routledge History of Literature in English: Britain and Ireland* from 1997, Michael Alexander’s *History of English Literature* from the year 2000 or the even more recent *Brief History of English Literature* by John Peck and Martin Coyle, published by Palgrave.

If this looks like a rescue operation in view of the more recent neglect of the aesthetic in cultural studies, it should not be discredited by stamping it as revisionist. I will return to the most interesting relationship between literary history and cultural history in a moment —right after I have referred to the various functions the literary canon has served and perhaps still serves.

As I have already mentioned, the oldest function that led to the first formation of a canon of English literature as far back as the 16th century was a patriotic one. And in the nineteenth century the importance of a national canon of literary heroes for identity formation and the furthering of internal unity was fully recognized. “In our common reverence for a Shakespeare, a Milton, a Scott”, writes Robert Chambers in the preface to his *Cyclopaedia of English Literature* (1843), we have a social and uniting sentiment, which not only contains in itself part of our happiness as a people, but much that counteracts influences that tend to set us in division” (Chambers 1843: Preface). Perhaps the most tangible proof of the strong belief in this function of the canon can be seen in the fact that a three-hour exam on English literature became part of the public examinations for entry into the

Indian Civil Service in 1855 and for entry into the Home Civil Service not much later—something made possible only by the new literary histories of Chambers and Craik, and soon special “Manuals” were produced by Craik and Dobson and others with the right sort of canon to prepare for this exam. In my personal opinion, it think it would not hurt if candidates for the civil service today had to pass not only a physical examination but also had to show some acquaintance with the culture of the society for which they want to work and by which they want to be employed (a vain hope, though). As Paul Ricoeur has pointed out, by its canon-making “a community recognizes what is consistent with its own existence, what finds it” (Ricoeur 1977: 35), and Aleida Assmann in a hyperbolic way stresses its identity forming function: “[...] whether voluntarily chosen or enforced in educational institutions, canonical texts are written into memory and into the bodies. The canon is an embossing press of identity, whether one wills it our not, whether one acknowledges it or not” (Assmann 1998: 59).

It may just have been the increased awareness of the finally coercive function of the canon as a “hidden persuader”, as an indirect (and therefore most probably even more effective) medium for the dissemination of certain sets of values and finally of particular world views, that led to its discrimination as an instrument of ideology. And it seems understandable that at a time when the individual was considered to be caught “in the prisonhouse of language” and to be largely “written by” culture, the reaction following this awareness was extremely negative. The canon appeared as just one more sinister ploy to suppress any freedom of choice still left to the individual, the choice to determine which books to read. The fact that the wider canon of literary histories at least also had the opposite function of informing about how much there actually was to choose from, and what generation after generation had been thrilled by, was, however, lost sight of in this process.

The canon’s function as a medium of dissemination of values also explains why the canon debate was seen as a conflict of values and as a political issue. And in order to show that it has been such an issue not only since yesterday I cannot refrain from quoting again William Winstanley who in his *Lives of the most Famous English Poets* written in 1687 from a Tory perspective, allotted Chaucer 10 pages and Surrey and Sidney 7, yet Milton only the following few lines:

John Milton was one, whose natural parts deservedly give him a place amongst the principal of English Poets, having written two Heroick Poems and a Tragedy; namely *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regain’d*, and *Sampson Agonista*; But his Fame is one out like a Candle in a Snuff, and his Memory will always stink, which might have ever lived in honourable Repute, had not he been a notorious Traytor, and most impiously and villainously bely’d that blessed Martyr King *Charles* the First. (Winstanley 1687: 195)

The issue in the canon debate was, of course, not the lack of loyalty to a King but the lack or inadequate representation of the ethnic minorities in a multicultural society such as the United States and of one half of the population, namely women. And as you cannot have failed to notice, this is where “the canon” both of the anthologies for teaching and of literary histories has undergone considerable changes in the last few decades. This also holds true for the canon of English literature as presented in British literary histories. It is, of course, impossible to change history itself in retrospect although we can rewrite it; and the diminished opportunities for women writers in a patriarchal society have caused an irremediable waste of talent. Yet, as a result of these recent changes, at least more of what has been produced by women writers has found acknowledgement, even in a very conservative literary history like the *Short Oxford History of English Literature*. And when one looks into Peck and Coyle’s recent *Brief History* one can also see that the idea of inner-British devolution with its heightened respect for cultural difference regarding Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the importance of so-called diaspora writing and feminist ideas have left their traces.

44

Many other changes that the canon of “English literature” has undergone in the last few decades as part of the university curriculum have a lot to do with what Trevor Ross has called “presentism”: the fact that “works from the distant past could be deemed canonical only if they could be shown to contribute to the productivity and stature of the present age and to the circulation of contemporary values” (Ross 1998: 9). Ross is mistaken, however, when he writes that this view is restricted to the period determined by rhetoric, that is, before the 18th century; he overlooks the fact that it came back—together with the revival of rhetoric—in the later 20th century. Presentism became powerful in the 1960s under the name of “relevance”, the criterion according to which works from the past had to prove that they were not only worth being stowed away somewhere in the archive of cultural memory, but also being kept alive in collective memory. This was, after all, a wonderful occasion for critics and teachers to demonstrate their interpretative ingenuity, for even the most deliberately nonsensical text could be given a “relevant” meaning by means of a kind of negative dialectic, and soon deconstruction opened up the further possibility of focusing on what was admittedly not in the texts, and therefore must have been suppressed, but could at least be discussed on the level of mere potentiality. Anyway, if in Germany—as Karl Kraus wrote in the 1930s—revolutions are carried out by changing street names, in Britain they are achieved by devising “alternative Shakespeares”. Further, presentism has effected the inclusion of more and more works by women and postcolonial writers in the teaching canon, at least in Germany, and I assume also in other European countries and the US.

The most important function of the canon in its various shapes has, however, hardly been touched on so far in my presentation. It is, after all, the function to keep the literature from the past (and mind you, the past begins yesterday and even today will already belong to the past tomorrow) within cultural memory, that is, in the archive of works deemed to be sufficiently significant for a particular culture—in this case British culture—or even for European or world culture; or even worth being kept alive within the operative collective memory of the nation, the respective wider cultural sphere, or at least potentially the whole world. For it must not be forgotten that poems, plays, stories, books depend for their survival on their being preserved, reprinted, read and re-read, on being propagated, taught, interpreted again and again and discussed in order to not sink into relative or utter oblivion. Therefore literary canons are first and foremost rescue operations, attempts to keep alive what tends to become of itself no more than the contents of dusty shelves. Those who edit and publish older works, read and love them, teach and discuss them, those who put together canons in literary histories and defend them in articles and lectures—that is, you and I and our likes—are the only ones who ensure that our cultural memory is filled not only with history in terms of politics and military power. We propagate a cultural memory that also consists of an awareness of texts that can give us more insight into past mentalities, can mirror concretely past views of the world and the self and give us insight into past discrepancies between desire and the real.

And because the main function of the canon is to implant literature in and keep it within cultural and collective memory, we should think twice—or rather much more often—before demanding its dissolution.

To be well integrated in cultural memory entails, however, certain structural requirements. A canon has to be more than a wild assortment of names of authors and works for it to be easily memorized, and as cultural memory is largely determined by the chronological view of general historiography, it also has to be structured in a roughly chronological way for it to be more easily integrated. That is, the vast archive of extant literary works has to be turned into the usable past of the canon, not only by selection but also through a particular structuring, through a grouping of authors and works into periods and genres. We are so used to this that it sounds like no more than stating the obvious, but for almost three centuries of canon making through the writing of literary histories—more exactly from the 1540s to the 1830s—this was not the case. With the exception of Thomas Warton—who actually was the first literary historian in Britain to work with the concepts of periods and genres in his *History of English Poetry* but was much too fond of extensive excursions into cultural history to get further than the mid-sixteenth century and to establish something like a clearly discernible canon—any extensive body of information about earlier English literature was in the form of an either

chronological or alphabetical listing of authors, with no further structuring whatsoever.

Thus when nineteenth century writing of literary histories began in 1836 with Robert Chambers' *History of the English Language and Literature*, the most important innovation regarding the integration of literary history within the larger frame of general and cultural history was the splitting up of the chronological account of the literary heritage into smaller units of historical "periods". And as a first step towards a realization of the relative autonomy of the development of literary forms and genres we also find here already a rough subdivision of the literature of a period into separate genres. There is no space here to give further attention to the problems and pitfalls of literary periodization, especially since you will find them discussed in the next volume of the literary yearbook *REAL* due to appear in a few weeks' time (and there will be even more on the subject in next year's volume entirely devoted to the relation between literature and cultural memory). Yet it can be said that in most cases periodization has been conceived of in such a way that a linking with the structures of general and cultural history is made easy.

46

What is not so easy is to negotiate the relationship between literary history, in the narrower sense of a history of language art, and cultural history, especially in the shape of the history of written culture, when it comes to the selection of authors and works for the canon. Cultural history is, of course, a much broader field of investigation, which on the textual level comprises all kinds of different discourses. And if we want to see the dominant ideas, values and mentalities of past phases of culture represented, we have to include at least the more influential texts which disseminated theological, philosophical, political, historical, legal, economic, scientific and aesthetic ideas in the canon. The imaginary works of literature are, of course, also in many ways representative of the world view of the time of their creation, yet through various strategies of presentation and the greater freedom of the imaginary quite a few of them are able to transcend the limits of the culture they have grown out of. This becomes, of course, most obvious in the impact they still have on later generations, and the so-called "test of time" has been a reliable criterion for canonization. Though there is, of course, room for a history of culture that reads literary texts only for their documentary value, and also room for a history of literature focused on the development of forms of expression and almost devoid of cultural deliberations, for reasons I could only hint at, a combination of the two turns out to be much more fruitful —both for those more interested in cultural history and those more interested in the specific impact of literature. From the perspective of someone intensely engaged in the pursuit of cultural history, Catherine Belsey has stressed the specific value of literature, because it

confronts the outer edges of language, and thereby the limits of the culture inscribed in language. It thus marks the finitude of all culture, and the relativity of all cultures, and in the process the finitude and relativity of the subject that is their effect, as well as pointing to a relation of difference between language and the real that resides beyond the purview of culture. (Belsey 2001: 47)

Therefore, while the pragmatic canon combining more important works from various domains of discourse with a broad range of literary texts as we find it in the more traditional British literary histories may be in need of change due to, for instance, its undue neglect of writings by women and marginalized social groups, it seems to me in principle a better solution than many others. At least it appears to be more open to reform because it is less founded on strict theoretical principles. Provided that the canon has a future at all.

Regarding the relatively broad canon of literary histories, I am pretty confident that it will survive. Even at a time when there was one theoretical attack after another on existing canons and canonization as such, new histories of English literature were published and older ones reprinted as if nothing had happened. There seems to be a need for this kind of usable archive of cultural memory. What is less certain is the survival of a sizeable canon as a storehouse of collective memory—even with those who study English. In Germany at least, in the wake of the 1960s survey, lectures were discredited, and reading lists were withdrawn because they were held to be suppressive. In the meantime, however, even in the always rather politicized “Germanistik”, a new affirmation of the canon has set in with the aim of correcting some of the mistakes made in the last 30 years, and the effect of the abolition of the canon has been described as “literary waywardness” (“literarische Verwahrlosung”; cf. Klaus Laermann quoted by Vöhler 2003: 39). The slogan “long live pick-and-mix” sounds liberating; it is so, however, only for that older generation that is still acquainted with a sizeable canon of works to pick from. Yet where is the freedom of choice for Jessica Munns’ students who have nothing else to choose from than her individual mix? And what about communication between anglicists whose acquaintance with English literature has been totally determined by the arbitrary picking and mixing of their teachers? The result of such a “liberation” has already become discernible in conferences and especially in articles by theorists. In the former case you find now any number of minute analyses of works which hardly any one in the audience has ever read and in the latter case the canon of works used for the demonstration of theoretical issues has shrunk to one author: Shakespeare. I know that there would not be much chance of coming to an agreement even about a core canon, and some agreement would be necessary for a canon to work because it is by definition a collective enterprise. Two or three dozen authors, each with their most important work on a reading list for a three

or four year course of study would at least be a common ground for comparisons or pertinent examples. Even a dozen would be better than the swan of Avon alone. Such a core canon could perhaps also function as a kind of provocation, for with everybody just picking and mixing *ad libidum*, where's the rub? There is, after all, an "anxiety of influence", not only with every new generation of poets but also with readers. Both want to assert their identity by intensely trying to be different. And in order to do so they have to be acquainted with what they decide to distance themselves from, as they have, for instance, with quite a few of the habits, preferences and values of the generation of their parents. For that reason alone we should give them a chance and allow them to become acquainted with a fair number of works held for a long time now to be particularly innovative and attractive. They could then still wait for the next instalment of Harry Potter—not only, but also. A reasonably small core canon would certainly leave space for the more trendy items among the novelties that beset them and us.

Additional Note

48

The publication of this paper has been financed by the M.C.Y.T. (Ministerio de Ciencias y Tecnología)/Plan Nacional de Investigación Científica, Desarrollo e Innovación Tecnológica, and FEDER (Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional). Reference BFF2002-12309-E.

Works cited

-
- ALTIERI, Charles. 1990. *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern U. P.
- ASSMANN, Aleida. 1998. "Kanonforschung als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft". In von Heydebrand, Renate. (ed.). *Kanon Macht Kultur*. Stuttgart: Metzler: 47-59.
- BELSEY, Catherine. 2001. "The Possibility of Literary History. Subject, Object and the Relation of Knowledge". In Collier, Gordon, Klaus Schwank and Franz Wieselhuber. (eds.). *Critical Interfaces. Contributions in Philosophy, Literature and Culture in Honour of Herbert Grabes*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier: 43-54.
- CHAMBERS, Robert. 1843. *Cyclopaedia of English Literature*. Edinburgh.
- CIBBER, Theophilus. 1753. *The Lives of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland, vol. II*. London.
- FIEDLER, Leslie A. and Houston A. BAKER, Jr. (eds.). 1981. *English Literature: Opening Up the Canon. Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. P.

The Canon Pro and Contra: 'The Canon is Dead-Long Live Pick and Mix'

- GORAK, Jan. 1991. *The Making of the Modern Canon. Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea*. London: Athelone.
- . (ed.). 2001. *Canon vs. Culture*. New York: Garland.
- HALL, Anthony. (ed.). 1709. *Commentarii de Scriptoribus Britannicis*. London.
- JAY, Gregory. 1997. *American Literature and the Culture Wars*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell U. P.
- KENNEDY, George A. 2001. "The Origin of the Concept of a Canon and Its Application to the Greek and Latin Classics". In Gorak, J. (ed.): 105-116.
- KERMODE, Frank. 1985. *Forms of Attention*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1979. "Institutional Control of Interpretation". In *Salmagundi*, 43: 72-86.
- LAUTER, Paul. 1991. *Canons and Contexts*. New York: Oxford U. P.
- MATTENKLOTT, Gert. 1992. "Kanon und Neugier," In Griesheimer, Frank and Alvis Prinz. (eds.). *Wozu Literaturwissenschaft? Kritik und Perspektiven*. Tübingen: Francke: 353-64.
- MEEK, Sandra Lea. 2001. "The Politics of Poetics". In Gorak, J. (ed.): 81-102.
- MORLEY, Henry. 1873. *First Sketch of English Literature*. London: Cassell.
- MUNNS, Jessica. 2001. "Canon Fodder: Women's Studies and the (British) Literary Canon". In Gorak, J. (ed.): 17-27.
- RICOEUR, Paul. 1977. *Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation*. Berkeley, Calif.: The Center.
- ROBINSON, Lillian S. 1997. *In the Canon's Mouth*. Bloomington: Indiana U. P.
- ROSS, Trevor. 1998. *The Making of the English Literary Canon From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's U. P.
- SAMMONS, Jeffrey S. "The Land Where the Canon B(l)ooms: There and Here". In Gorak, J. (ed.): 117-133.
- SANDLER, Robert. (ed.). 1986. *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*. New Haven: Yale U. P.
- SICHERT, Margit. 2003. "Functionalizing Cultural Memory: Foundational British Literary History and the Construction of National Identity". In *Modern Language Quarterly*, 64: 199-217.
- VÖHLER, Martin. 2003. "Der Kanon als hermeneutische Provokation". In *Akten des X. Internationalen Germanisten-Kongresses Wien 2000, vol. 8: Kanon und Kanonisierung als Problem der Literaturwissenschaft/Interpretation und Interpretationsmethoden* [Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik, Reihe A, Band 60]. Bern: Peter Lang: 39-44.
- WEIMANN, Robert. 1988. "Shakespeare (De)Canonized: Conflicting Uses of 'Authority' and 'Representation'". In *New Literary History*, 20: 65-81.
- WINSTANLEY, William. 1687. *Lives of the most Famous English Poets*. London.