PART TWO

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 canon[1] 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.

[1] The 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

[2] In 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 over[3] 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

[3] **glozed 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

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

[5]White 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).