

on the nineteenth-century commentators on Confucius who tried to discredit the Five Classics and the Four Books by pointing out that they contained two fundamentally contradictory systems of land mensuration.

Princeton University

Works Cited

- Henderson, John B. *Scripture, Canon, and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.
- Lauter, Paul. *Canons and Contexts*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Spence, Jonathan. *The Search for Modern China*. New York: Norton, 1990.
- Wei-ming, Tu. "The Confucian Tradition in Chinese History," Paul S. Ropp, ed. *The Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990. 116-27.

The Aesthetic Factor in Canon Revision: The Case of American Literature

DAVID S. REYNOLDS

I think I am in an opportune position to contribute to the dialogue on the canon. Shaped politically by the sixties, I have been instinctively drawn to noncanonical literature for years and have devoted myself to the discovery of and elucidation on noncanonical writers. Some of my conclusions with regard to nineteenth-century American literature can be applied to other literatures and cultures as well.

The canon itself can be divided into three interrelated questions: 1) What is the relation between politics and literature? 2) What should be the objects of the literary critic's attention? That is, what should we explore in our research? 3) What is good literature, or can we even ask that question?

Lately, the discussion of politics and literature has been galvanized in the expression political correctness. There is the danger of stressing politically correct texts so much that other texts get thrown out altogether. Students often feel shortchanged in such cases. There is the typical case of the Ph.D. recipient mentioned recently in the *New York Times Magazine* who said he felt cheated because in graduate school he had been assigned Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* three times but *Moby-Dick* not once. And then there is the life story of a Guatemalan Indian as narrated at Stanford which is the life story of a Guatemalan Indian as narrated to the feminist writer Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. Some have been pointing out that this story does not at all truly represent the Mayan villagers, as it purports to, but is rather a projection of western radical views onto Latin American culture, since Rigoberta Menchu was a convert to the European radicalism she picked up in Paris.

A major challenge of multiculturalism is to identify and present those texts from other cultures that are truly representative, including those which have had a demonstrable, lasting influence. For instance, how much better informed would our politicians be if in college they had read the Koran, or the Upanishads, or the writings of Confucius, or stories and poems about traditional folk life in Eastern countries — that is, writings that define the mentality of different cultures and, indeed, of an increasing portion of the United States population. In teaching multiculturally there is little point in jettisoning the study of acknowledged Western classics as well. The aim of education should be the expansion of knowledge about *all* cultures, and one should not be taught at the

expense of the others. This remains true even for those who would bring into question the study of European literature. The assault some scholars are making on Western culture is meaningless to their students unless these students have a thorough knowledge of this culture. Criticism unsupported by solid information is empty rhetoric.

Any attempt to reorganize the canon solely for political reasons is problematic to say the least. For example, to make decisions about the canon according to the concerns of special interest groups is difficult because there are so many different groups. To teach in true multicultural fashion, according to the dictates of modern canon revision, one would have to be more or less proficient not only in African American and women's literature but also in Chicano, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and Arabic literatures as well. It might be that some super-scholar could master all these fields, but even then the vision of the literary past would still be distorted and partial, because many other groups are still being excluded. In my research I have encountered literally hundreds of neglected American writings by various groups: Irish-Americans, German-Americans, Catholics, Mormons, working-class advocates. The list could be extended to individual groups who have been marginalized, or oppressed, or left out. To be consistent with their supposedly democratic theories, canon revisers would have to take these and other marginalized groups into consideration.

But to mention the multiplicity of these groups is to highlight a problem with some recent attempts to include such groups: that is, the problems of divisiveness. An unfortunate effect of certain applications of multiculturalism is the reviving of animosities and differences between various ethnic and religious groups. Literature, rightly understood, is a proclamation of the *continuities* between people of different times, places, and social groups. The study of literature need not lead to separatism but to an acknowledgment of themes that bridge gaps between people. By the same token, literary role models need not be confined to writers of one's own race or creed. Emerson and Thoreau absorbed much from the Asian scriptures. The African American writer W.E.B. DuBois wrote eloquently how much he learned from Shakespeare and Dante. The black abolitionist Sojourner Truth expressed her rapturous admiration for Whitman's poetry. Martin Luther King was inspired by Thoreau and Reinhold Niebuhr. America is based on the ideal of exchange and cross-influences between cultures. Perhaps this ideal has not been satisfactorily met in practice, but the study of literature offers us the opportunity to seek themes that bring people together instead of driving them apart.

Overemphasis of the political tends to slight other key themes in literature. Take Walt Whitman, for example. That triumvirate of contemporary criticism — class, race, and gender — are indeed important factors in understanding his poetry, but also important are such matters as religion, science, art, music, the

background of popular poetry and journalism, and the literary marketplace. Political themes are important, yes, but not *exclusively* important: to say so is to falsify the historical record.

A related problem is that we tend to project our own, supposedly enlightened political concerns backward on literature instead of recreating the political milieu of a given period. For instance, in discussing Whitman and politics, it is misleading to impose current-day radical views on his career. More pertinent is the recovery of specific political events in his own time, such as the collapse of the Second American Party System in the early 1850s or the rise of the anarchist movement. I have found that his literary radicalism stemmed directly from subversive writings of social protest of his own time.

With regard to the second question — what should be the object of our research? — my suggestion is quite simple: everything in sight. There is now an excellent opportunity for scholars who want to roll up their sleeves and dive into the exciting lost world of the noncanonical. Not only is writing literary history back in fashion: it is almost *de rigueur*. In Stanley Fish's words, today's literary scholar has "an agenda: what has been marginalized must be brought to the centre; what has been forgotten or left out must be brought to consciousness (309)." Or, as Annette Kolodny has argued, we must defamiliarize ourselves by immersing ourselves in the forgotten literature of the past (302-03). I applaud these statements. But I find that they too often go unheeded by those who are talking loudest about marginal literature.

True, American literary studies is making strides in the recovery of certain kinds of lost literature, such as the sentimental novel and the slave narrative. But there is more, much more out there to be studied. Many of today's literary historians are guided by a worthy impulse to be radically democratic, to expand their vision to the lost writers of the past. But what frequently happens is that they fetishize a handful of lost texts to the exclusion of others. They risk replacing one narrow canon by another narrow canon. This new elitism, by which certain popular texts are artificially inflated to the exclusion of others, smacks of clubbiness and exclusivism.

For example, let us look at the period 1845-1860 in American literature. During this period, many now familiar works were written, including *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, *Walden*, *Leaves of Grass*, and Dickinson's early poetry. Recently scholars have turned their attention as well to a half dozen or so noncanonical writers, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass. Many nowadays who read these half dozen or so noncanonical writers feel satisfied about being part of the "in crowd" of canon bashers, particularly if they manage to knock Hawthorne off their reading lists while admitting a Warner or a Jacobs. They feel they are being democratic and are defying the hegemony of canonical works that have long been imposed on them.

But how democratic, really, are they? Not very, in light of the facts of publishing history. By my count, an average of 150 new books were published each year between 1845 and 1860. Over the entire fifteen-year span, that makes over 2,000 books that have been lost from view — all of them certifiably noncanonical, all of them in some sense marginal. Selecting six or eight works from the 2,000 hardly makes us radical revisers of the canon. I have read virtually all 2,000 and have learned some things in the process.

The most obvious lesson is that not everything can be taught. In an ideal world perhaps, with eternal classes and endless publishing resources, everything noncanonical would be exposed to our students and fellow scholars. In the real world of limited time and funds, however, we are forced to make selections.

The main question is: how to select? From all the thousands of noncanonical books of the past, which ones do we choose to focus on, and why? Some have suggested that new entries to the canon should be decided upon with reference to the amount of "cultural work" they have performed. But this is a loose criterion. Hundreds and hundreds of books of the past have done important cultural work — and yet, ironically, most of them are ignored by those who tout cultural work as the surest gauge for canon revision. Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*, for instance, outsold *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and spurred the Social Gospel movement through its moving depictions of urban poverty. It did crucial cultural work and led directly to social change. Why are not the promoters of the cultural work theory clamoring for its admission into the canon? How about the vast effect that Timothy Shay Arthur's temperance novels had on American culture? Is not that cultural work? The same could be asked about any number of best-sellers of the past.

I would argue that the aesthetic factor is the only viable measure of worth in the selection of new works for the canon. The more noncanonical works I read, the more I recognize that there indeed *are* gradations of style and skill in characterization that can be perceived. The most stylistically inept work I have encountered is a pamphlet novel by one Waldo Howard entitled *The Mistake of a Life-Time: or, The Robber of the Rhine Valley*, which appeared around the same time as *Moby-Dick*. Artistically speaking, Howard's novel is the polar opposite of Melville's. *Moby-Dick* is polyvalent and linguistically charged; it is the repository for many levels of discourse that had been circulating in Melville's culture; it opens up continually into mysteries of psychology and metaphysics. *The Mistake of a Life-Time* is totally monologic. Good and evil are easily bifurcated. Its characters are lifeless stick figures since there is no individualism in the description of them. Its style is completely devoid of resonance or energy. Linguistically speaking, we might say that Melville's signifiers almost always have a kind of shadow around them — they point to some undefined, elusive, yet energetically pursued signified. In contrast, the signifiers of a novel like *The Mistake of a Life-Time* have no shadow — they

repose in a bland conventional sunlight, as though all signifieds were comfortably in view and not an ounce of energy need be expended in their pursuit.

I have found that between *The Mistake of a Life-Time* and *Moby-Dick* there are many gradations of linguistic energy and metaphysical suggestiveness among the hundreds of forgotten works I have surveyed. Perhaps now that noncanonical literature is the rage, teams of scholars will dig into the tremendous mountain of lost writings, not only in the area of nineteenth-century American literature but in other literatures and cultures as well. In doing so, however, they need some measuring stick for selection. It is not sufficient to say that since everything is a text, a Melville or a Shakespeare are the equivalent of pulp newspapers. If this is done, then the selection of classroom readings becomes completely arbitrary, detached from any kind of disciplined methodology.

Political imperatives are an unreliable guide in canon selection because literary works normally are poor vehicles of political ideas. The literary text is a discursive field in which various ideas (some political, some not) are suggestively aired, in which different emotions are tapped, and varied idioms are mingled. To try to cram literary texts into neat political cubbyholes is to do a profound disservice to the multivalence of the artistic work. We gain a sense of the specialness of literary texts if we compare Emily Dickinson with the American women's rights novelists of her day. The novels of Laura Curtis Bullard and Lillie Devereux Blake make far stronger statements on behalf of political feminism than do any of Dickinson's poems. From the standpoint of political correctness, Bullard and Blake, who were not only novelists but were also very active in the women's rights movement, would get far higher marks than Dickinson. A novel like Lillie Blake's *Fettered for Life* endorses every tenet of the nineteenth-century feminist agenda: it advocates equality in marriage, greater job opportunities, liberal property laws, and the vote for women, and it openly attacks several forms of patriarchy. If politics were a viable measuring stick of value, then surely *Fettered for Life* would be exalted as one of the greatest works of American literature, while the cryptic Dickinson, who explicitly disavowed connection with the women's rights movement, would shrink into insignificance.

But, as I am trying to suggest, politics is not a viable measure of literary value. *Fettered for Life* is a fascinating repository of radical feminist thought, but it fails precisely where Dickinson's poetry succeeds — on artistic grounds. The handful of poems in which Dickinson dealt explicitly with gender issues suggests that she observed her women's culture attentively but came to no uniform pronouncement about its political program. Instead, she allowed contrasting claims on gender issues to circulate in her poetry and to be recombined in wholly original metaphors. Rather than make clear, unequivocal statements on women's issues, as do Blake and Bullard, Dickinson exercises her

artistic powers through tonal fusions and resonant images. For example, her poem "I'm 'wife'" — I've finished that — "shows her incorporating both positive and negative views of marriage. Many antebellum women writers had studied the first to fuse contrasting views of marriage in a single text and individual metaphors. The mixed message of the poem, if any can be gleaned, is that marriage is an ambivalent state in which woman gains safety and comfort but at the same time loses the self-sufficiency of maidenhood. More striking than the poem's message, however, is its stylistic verve. How concisely Dickinson communicates the treatment of wife as the husband's objective possession through the use of quotation marks around 'wife' and 'woman'! How subtle are the tonal shifts in the poem, as the persona wavers between enthusiasm and skepticism about marriage! As always in Dickinson's poetry, the highest triumphs here are stylistic. The great majority of Dickinson's poems become distorted if we try to make them try to fit any single political agenda, feminist or otherwise. Her great achievement is the fabrication of unusual images that dazzle while they suggest, and that triumphantly proclaim artistic power.

Some argue that the existing literary canon represents a hegemony of works selected by biased critics. But the idea of a hegemony is a myth. The American literary canon has long consisted *not* of bourgeois mainstream writers but rather men and women who were, in the main, rebels, or subversives on the margins of society. And the canonization of their texts was no hegemonic process. It resulted from a tremendous process of evaluation and sorting out by reviewers, creative writers, critics, and general readers of all political schools. No single ideological viewpoint was responsible for the canon. Those responsible for the existing canon are not politically uniform but highly diverse, and in many cases have in fact leaned to the left.

In the mountain of noncanonical material I have mined there are any number of texts that are historically important but, frankly, only a few that *perform* well. We should not be ashamed to appreciate a masterful literary performance, nor should we be unwilling to point out stylistic crudities when we find them. In everyday life we are constantly making discriminations between skilled performances and less skilled ones. In selecting new texts for the canon, it is only natural that we do the same. Who would deny that *The Scarlet Letter* is more powerful than certain other works by Hawthorne, such as *Little Daffydownilly* or *The Village Uncle*? Who prefers Whitman's lachrymose short story *Little Nell* to his dazzling poem "Song of Myself"? Why, then, shy away from making these kinds of comparisons when talking about noncanonical writers? It does not diminish the sociological importance of a popular writer like Lydia Sigourney to say that her poetry is not as powerful as Emily Dickinson's, nor does it diminish the cultural achievement of the immensely popular Augusta Jane Evans if we concede that she was not as good a writer as Kate Chopin. We

can appreciate the historical significance of popular writers without pretending that all of them are on the same artistic level, either with each other or with more familiar writers.

There is a bizarre tendency among some critics today to pin the label *conservative* on anyone who speaks of craft, of style, or creative genius. If the devotion to craft is conservative, then virtually every skilled writer who ever lived could be viewed as a stodgy reactionary. Can you imagine Walt Whitman, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, and Adrienne Rich viewed in such a way? Yet all are careful writers who persistently honed their style.

One hallmark of the literary text is a multivalence that encourages us to contemplate the complexity of life itself. Literature is above all about life in its variegated aspects. It is about the subtleties of social relations, about psychological change, about the relationship between humanity and nature, or about death. Emily Dickinson said she knew a poem was good if after reading it she felt like the top of her head were taken off. Indeed, the literary text can often have this kind of dizzying effect, for it opens up to the mysteries of life. A related feature of the literary text is philosophical suggestiveness, the kind of thing Melville had in mind when he saw in Shakespeare "those occasional flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth...; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality" (Norton 2135). In the literary text philosophy is enlivened by the idioms of a particular time and culture, and it is shaped by the original creative sensibility. Particularly among American writers, a common sign of the literary is a comprehensive use of idioms, from the highest to the lowest. As Emerson says, the writer of literary texts "traverses the whole scale of experience" (Norton 1985). We see this comprehensiveness, for instance, in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, where street slang is conjoined with concepts from European and Asian philosophy.

Mentioning Whitman brings me to a final hallmark of literary texts: what he called *personalism*. "The great poet," he wrote, "absorbs the identity and the experience of others ... but he presses them all through the powerful press of himself ... his own masterly identity" (Marginal note in an 1848 review of R. M. Milnes's *Life of Keats*; Whitman 120). This idea is in line with Bakhtin's notion that literature must be grounded in the dynamic, concrete-historical context of personal human experience, in *one's own experience* as a being "in the world." On the other hand, literature is frequently a repository for a full range of images and allusions from previous texts, both canonical and noncanonical. On the other hand, such images become new when they are fused and transformed by the individual imagination.

As I have demonstrated in *Beneath the American Renaissance* the historical critic reconstructs as completely as possible the socioliterary milieu of literary works through the exploration of a broad array of forgotten social and imaginative texts, paving the way for responsible reinterpretations of canonized

works and making possible the discovery of lost literature. Literary works give certain popular elements new emotional resonance and artistic meaning by intensifying and ordering cultural materials that in their native state are often formless, contradictory, or indeterminate. Even when a literary text subverts itself, as it sometimes does, its self-subversion is carefully arranged and therefore is epistemologically meaningful. Although the literary text lacks a transcendental signified, its uniqueness lies in the potency of its efforts to find replacements for a transcendental signified, to restore suggestiveness by filling desiccated cultural images with the refreshing waters of human feeling and artistic order.

How, finally, can the canon be revised? Scholars can continue to excavate vigorously in the literary coal mines of the past, discovering more and more lost texts and presenting them for widespread discussion. Creative writers and general readers will be important participants in the evaluation of these texts. In canon revision, there can be no overnight wonders, no decisions made by individual critics or groups of critics. Those texts that prove to have enduring appeal and influence over a sustained period among readers of many different viewpoints will be worthy of admission into the canon.

Let us be wary of critical conformity that masquerades as diversity, critical orthodoxy that pretends to be leftism, and elitist separatism that presents itself as openness. What Thoreau said in *Walden* about fashions in clothes could be said about fashions in criticism. He wrote: "The head monkey at Paris put on a traveller's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same" (*Norton* 1648). What we need today are literary scholars who think for themselves and do not rush to do what some head monkey is doing. In the effort to escape a mythical old hegemony we are flocking toward a new hegemony as confining as any that has gone before. We must think for ourselves and rebel against the systems of the new orthodoxies. In doing so, we will be following in the footsteps of our world's great authors, nearly all of whom have been rebels against systems and affirmers of a shared humanity free of dogma.

City University of New York

Works Cited

- Fish, Stanley. "Commentary: The Young and the Restless," H. Aram Veeser, ed. *The New Historicism*. New York: Routledge, 1989. 303-16.
- Kolodny, Annette. "The Integrity of Memory: Creating a New Literary History of the United States," *American Literature* 57 (May 1985): 291-307.
- The Norton Anthology of American Literature* 3rd ed. Nina Baym et al., eds. New York: Norton, 1989.
- Whitman, Walt. *The Complete Writings*. Richard Maurice Bucke et al., eds. New York: Putnam, 1902. Vol. IX.

Canon Harassment

ANNA BALAKIAN

Through the kind auspices of Professor Milan V. Dimić and the *Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, a group of us, varying in age and literary interests, examined five years ago the issue of canon variations from the perspective of literariness. In the interim the question of what books to choose has acquired a very political flavor as it has deviated from strictly literary values and become compromised with diverse definitions of multiculturalism, human rights, and gender and ethnic differentials. The issue is no longer whether to dare or not to dare make the veil of the sacrosanct canon tremble but whether to rip apart completely the veils that protect its mysteries. To quote Professor Ross Chambers on a developing attitude: "We would be better off, politically and intellectually working against that system (canonization) so that it can eventually be replaced by a less mystified approach to the general questions of discursivity" ("Irony and the Canon," *Profession* 90, 18).

In the current series of articles, Professor Dimić, drawing from his immense resources as a Comparatist, tells us how the very notion of a canon was established through the centuries and how it moved along with literate times and cultural developments. Professor David Reynolds responding to the need to replenish the canon of American literature reveals the difficulties of arbitrary choice among the enormous volume of contenders for inclusion in the canon from the popular subcultural sources of the native soil. And Professor Alvin Kernan not only *fears* the breaking of the thread of a perishable heritage but points to the realization of such fears before our very eyes. All signs indicate that the notion of the canon as it pertained to literature is at risk. Now ponder the fact that my proposal to the Bellagio Foundation for a Conference on the matter has twice been rejected, despite a star-studded roster of prospective participants. To its panel of judges, interested in vital, current issues, the canon issue apparently was already history. In the wake of such prevailing attitudes the books are already burning and for actively practising teachers the command is *sauve qui peut* from the conflagration as far as syllabi and book orders for courses in literature are concerned.

I used to rationalize that if our teachers became herded into some kind of "political correctness," surely the publishers who are practical men and women would hold the line; they have the habit of recognizing literary merit and would