Canonical Variations and the English Curriculum

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Our profession has entered an era of radical revisionism. Fueled by what Charles Altieri calls the "hermeneutics of suspicion," our dominant critical postures—interrogation, demystification, and contestation—challenge and repudiate literary values and assumptions that were tacit only a few years ago. Literary studies are being altered in the same way literature itself was altered by the avant-garde movements early in this century. Followers of Thomas Kuhn would say that we are participating in a paradigm shift; proponents of Foucault, in an epistemic transformation. However we name our current situation, the fact that we have been empowered to call traditional presuppositions into question confirms, as Cary Nelson observes, "that the conditions blocking this kind of inquiry are beginning to change" (2).

Because we are caught in the flow of this transformation, it is difficult to locate its parameters. In general, however, we seem to be breaking away from a reliance on "mimesis," from the values and presuppositions of "realism," with its faith in subject-object dichotomies. Put in different terms, we are moving from a focus on product to a focus on process, from a focus on the forms of human "reality" to a focus on that which is formative of those realities. The word we generally use to describe intensive examination of the processes by which we interpret and form our various "realities" is theory, which Gerald Graff observes, "when argument about such terms as text, reading, history, interpretation, tradition, and literature can no longer be taken for granted, so their meanings have to be formulated and debated" ("Taking Cover" 41).

Nowhere is this proclivity for debate and reformulation more evident than in recent discussions of the literary canon. The traditional idea of the canon as a "closed corporation or hierarchy of accepted forms" (Lipking 81) has been called into radical question. Instead, recent theorists contend that canons "are ideologically motivated, politically self-interested, culture-specific, historically relative" (Renza 258) and may mask ideologies that are sexist, racist, even totalitarian. The various positions in this wide-ranging canonical debate may be arranged along a continuum the extremes of which, and a center of sorts, may be summarized as follows.

At the conservative—we may as well call it the right—end of the continuum cluster those academicians and nonacademicians who are unwilling to relinquish the traditional idea of the canon's stable authority or to dislodge many of its existing "monuments." The canon, in their view, constitutes a repository of humanistic values, a veritable "history," in William Bennett's view, "of the Western mind." Like Bennett, many in this contingent, including the academicians E. D. Hirsch, Jr., are partial to lists, whether they be lists of "what every American needs to know" (Hirsch) or of "what every high school graduate should have read" (Bennett). Works by the usual pantheon of white Western males constitute the bulk of Bennett's widely publicized list, although, displaying uncharacteristic sensitivity to affirmative action, the secretary does include works by two women—one black—and a blind man, which resembles a canon less than it does a joke by James Watt. Most of these Arnoldian humanists, who also include Walter Jackson Bate, René Wellek, and Eugene Goodheart, agree that theory has made dangerous inroads into the curriculum and that liberal education has become too, well, liberal. As a result, we are in danger of losing a legacy, "our most valued patrimony," in Harry Levin's telling phrase, "our collective memory" (362). The subtitle of Allan Bloom's unlikely best seller, The Closing of the American Mind, pointedly summarizes the canonical purists' shared alarm over the perceived deterioration of humanistic values: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students.

Also at the right of the continuum, though to be sharply differentiated from the Arnoldians, are those

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critics Graff calls “theoretically minded humanists” (Professing 256). While they are willing to concede that textual meaning “depends for its comprehension on other texts and textualized frames of reference” (256) and while they are mindful of the historically contingent nature of canons, these humanists defend the idea of a canon nonetheless. Unlike the canonical Tories, however, who generally abjure theory, these humanists advance their defenses of the canon in theoretically sophisticated ways. Charles Altieri, for example, arguing that “it is a mistake to read cultural history only as a tawdry melodrama of interests pursued and ideologies produced” (37), maintains that canonical texts “elicit fundamental forms of desire and admiration,” thereby helping us “gain distance of interests pursued and ideologies produced” (111, 141). Like the Arnoldian humanists, then, deconstructionists want to preserve the canon. Unlike the conservatives, however, they do not view canonical texts as stable and self-contained repositories of humanistic values, “the best that is known and thought in the world.” Such texts should be preserved, rather, because they are the most problematic of our literary utterances.

Somewhere to the left of the canonical purists are the canonical pluralists. Made up of Marxist, feminist, black, and/or poststructuralist critics, these theorists advocate opening the canon to works by previously marginalized or silenced authors. But pluralization of the canon is not sufficient in and of itself. As important, Christine Froula explains, is the recognition that the inclusion of heretofore excluded texts “implies and effects a profound transformation of the very terms authority and value—cultural and aesthetic or literary—that underwrite the traditional idea of the canon” (323). Yet, because the general absence of theory from the undergraduate curriculum renders it difficult to help students make what Graff calls “the requisite connections and relations between courses” that will lead to theoretical sophistication, students may have difficulty achieving the recognition Froula commends. Instead, Graff predicts, their responses are likely to be “confused . . . , which antitheorists will quickly take as proof that theory is inherently over the head of the average student” (“Taking Cover” 44).

What Gary Waller calls a “powerful silence” at the heart of the English major has become an increasing concern for theorists. In “a period when literary studies have gone through the most fundamental conflict of principles in their history,” Graff laments, “that conflict has informed very little of the average student’s study . . .” (Professing 251). James Kincaid agrees, contending that “[w]e leave it to the student to infer theoretical models, methods, approaches; instructors seem to do all they can to keep such things secret” (11). This secrecy, Kincaid suggests, approaches prevagination: “To pretend that there are innocent, untheoretical approaches, which somehow just happen or are justified by nature or common sense, is, to use the kindest possible term, dishonest” (11). Less inclined toward palliation, Cary Nelson charges that “English in America . . . is often a pervasively sexist, racist, and anti-intellectual discipline. . . .” [T]he curriculum in many departments is as a whole either alienating or irrelevant to women and minorities and a general em-
barrassment to the theoretical state of the discipline” (5, 6).

The common culprit in all these indictments is the field-coverage model, “an impoverished and preposterous goal” (11), according to Kincaid. This model, Graff persuasively argues, actually takes the place of theory in the department. “The theoretical choices [have] already been taken care of in the grid of periods, genres, and other catalog rubrics, which [embODY] a clear and seemingly uncontroversial conceptualization of what the department [is] about” (“Taking Cover” 43). Potentially threatening innovations such as feminism or Marxism are easily diffused and sealed off by simply converting them into courses that are then added to the existing aggregate of fields to cover.

One need not be a Marxist to recognize the affinity between the field-coverage model as Graff and others describe it and modern capitalistic society. The ability of each to diffuse and co-opt dissent is remarkable. One need only recall the facility with which the marketplace converted the symbols of sixties protest into commodities. The same middle American revulsed one day by long-haired hippies in faded pants paid thirty dollars to have his hair styled long and more than that for tie-dyed designer jeans the next. Sensitive to the co-optive power that has protected underenrolled page and the book into the institutional practices and social structures that can themselves be usefully studied as verbal, polemical as well as seductive, must be taken as the occasion for further textualization. And textual studies must be pushed beyond the discrete boundaries of the page and the book into the institutional practices and social structures that can themselves be usefully studied as codes and texts” (16–17).

Canonical anarchists do not intend to trivialize or demean literature. To the contrary, they have expanded its domain. The literary is not “a marginal phenomenon,” maintains Jonathan Culler, but “a ubiquitous logic of significature.” No longer “the property of a canon of ‘correct’ and again underwrite the hegemony of canonical thinking itself or the way canons, even were they to become institutionally egalitarian, propagate the intentionality of reading all works according to a subsumed and relatively unchanging ideal of ‘major’ literature” (262). If Renza is correct, canonical pluralism doesn’t dispense with power. “New Feminism,” sniffs Edward Pechter, “is but Old Priest writ large” (170). Of course, such charges can be answered. Nonetheless, canonical pluralists must walk a narrow divide between their desire to valorize, indeed, to canonize, certain marginalized texts, on the one hand, and their attempt to unmask the ideologies that contribute to textual valorization, on the other.

Because critics at the far left of the continuum are acutely aware of the will to power that may lurk perfidiously in all human structures, they refuse to perform this balancing act, advocating instead a kind of canonical anarchy. Not only must traditional notions of the literary canon be abandoned, but traditional notions of literature itself will also have to go. “Is what we call literature anything other than a cultural accident, an artificial category created for the benefits, psychological and political, of those in power?” asks Kincaid, in the first of a series of questions clearly intended as rhetorical. “Can any of us satisfactorily define what is not literature—is there any principle of exclusion?” (12). Decidedly not, most canonical anarchists would insist. Even Robert Scholes, whose intellectual sobriety has induced many skeptics to consider the potential merit of certain literary theories, agrees. “Our favorite works of literature need not be lost in this new enterprise,” Scholes begins solicitously enough, “but the exclusivity of literature as a category must be discarded. All kinds of texts, visual as well as verbal, polemical as well as seductive, must be taken as the occasion for further textualization. And textual studies must be pushed beyond the discrete boundaries of the page and the book into the institutional practices and social structures that can themselves be usefully studied as codes and texts” (9).
An illusory by-product of the logocentric myth. Critic and text do not relate as subject to object. Rather, critic, text, author, indeed, world, are all predicates, intertextual nexus caught in an infinite regress and pro-gress of difference and misprision. Even the book itself, J. Hillis Miller informs us in his MLA Presidential Address, can never be fully encountered, can never be authentically read. “We do not see the paper for the words,” he writes; nor do we see the words, presumably, for their signification, our idea of what they mean. The material world itself recedes ineluctably from our grasp “because it is always mediated by language . . . .” (289). The names we attach to things, continues Miller, whose taste in canons may be mid-percentile but whose ideas are decidedly avant-garde, are in truth nicknames, catachreses, which replace the named object from which “we are forbidden ever to have direct access” (289). The lovely world, W. D. Snodgrass will be disappointed to learn, is not real but merely a sobriquet.

This free-fall through textuality, the element in which we are “always already” (the obligatory refrain of contemporary heterodoxologies) suspended, should not be a source of despair, however. To the contrary, the textualized universe constitutes a vast expanse of freedom through which our catacritical minds may romp like the mind of God—or Jay Gatsby. It’s time to cross the border and close the gap, as Leslie Fielder declared two decades ago. What the heck? “We sort of know what we’re doing,” writes Kincaid, “—or we ought to—or we’re learning more about it; and there’s no reason why a medical, legal, historical, or philosophic text should not be as fair a sport for us as Milton is” (12).

One can only speculate what a curriculum designed according to canonical anarchistic principles might look like. Perhaps it would include the range of subjects Edward Pechter wryly proposes: “Milton; Judith Krantz; the semiotics of Paris Match and Penthouse; Casey Stengel’s influence on the oral discourse of Yogi Berra; the ontological status of Jorge Luis Borges’ Fictions” (168). For, as Pechter also realizes, when our intellectual focus shifts from text to context, from “an object-oriented kind of interpretive or practical criticism” to “the consideration of methodology and theory” (168), it begins to matter little what the objects to be studied are. Kincaid could not be more explicit. “We need to teach not the texts themselves but how we situate ourselves in reference to them” (12), a passage Graff quotes approvingly to conclude Professing Literature. If a department engaged in this kind of study sounds like something other than an English department, that’s okay, too. Traditional English departments are bureaucratic excrescences, for which, Kincaid believes, there is “no justification . . . except that they could perform archaeologies or histories of the now-dead illusion of literary study” (12).

The general morphology of our continuum should be clear. Whereas canonical purists would preserve the canon and canonical anarchists eliminate it, canonical pluralists would displace its current bourgeois-patriarchal values with ideologies that are more egalitarian and less imperialistic. Whereas purists want to preserve Arnoldian definitions of literature and pluralists want to democratize them, canonical anarchists wish to explode such definitions, to extend them beyond bellettristic confines to the entire universe of discourse. Whereas purists tend to locate literary authority in the text or in the text’s author and whereas pluralists tend to locate it in the text’s social and ideological context, anarchists tend to locate literary authority in language itself.

Despite the aridity of tone with which I describe canonical anarchists, I often find their arguments the most challenging and, indeed, the most interesting among current literary theories. For intellectual as well as ethical reasons, we should rid our literary canon of discriminatory and imperialistic ideologies, and we should continue to learn how to interpret the literary text in terms of its and our cultural texts. But to abandon the useful and, I think, still meaningful notion of bellettristic literature as a distinctive and powerful mode of discourse is, in my view, to throw out the baby with the bath water. So I am happy to report that, based on its examination of the undergraduate English curriculum in America, the ADE Ad Hoc Committee on the English Curriculum has found the anarchists’ influence on English programs to have been negligible so far. Though the success of pluralists has been modest, the future, I believe, is theirs. But for the time being the purists continue to exert the greatest degree of influence on the English curriculum, especially the English major.

The basic configuration of the major, as I reported in the Winter 1986 ADE Bulletin, seems to have changed only slightly in the last two decades, which should please the traditionalists. But if the impact on the undergraduate curriculum of recent developments in literary theory remains less pervasive so far than the impact of the old New Criticism four decades ago, some inroads may be discerned. As the persistent commitment to coverage suggests, little in the required English curriculum leads to an interrogation of traditional notions of canonicity, although, as I shall point out, some important exceptions were noted by the committee. Among elective courses, in contrast, the canon has been significantly extended. Courses in women’s studies, minority literature, literary theory, and cultural approaches to literature continue to be added to the catalog. Some of these appear to be quite nontraditional. For example, at a midwestern regional state university whose literature curriculum is otherwise traditional to the point of staidness, a section of Contemporary Feminist Literature focuses almost entirely on
lesbian writers and "female eroticism in literature by women," as well as on "woman identification and feminist consciousness in literary theory and practice."

Less common than courses in literature by women and ethnic minorities, but a part of many curricula nonetheless, are courses in popular genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and the detective novel. In general, however, these courses do not seem to be theoretically well-informed. While courses in literary criticism appear in most catalogs, the preponderance of these courses are traditional surveys of Western male critics from Plato to the early twentieth century. Only about a third of the course descriptions furnish evidence of any attention to recent literary theory at the undergraduate level.

In the ad hoc committee's examination of course syllabi, the committee did find that, in a few instances, instructors' descriptions of courses with traditional titles and catalog descriptions displayed both the central concerns and the rhetoric of recent theory. Such descriptions reveal a self-consciousness about both the situation of interpretation and the idea of canonicity as well as about the very traditionalism of the course format (see Karen Lawrence's article in this issue, p. 15). Not surprisingly, the major factor determining the extent to which theory informs the curriculum in a given department is the orientation of individual faculty members. Often the person (frequently a junior faculty member, it appears) who described an American survey in terms that suggest the influence of the new literary history, for instance, is also the faculty member teaching a course in theory or women's studies. The young woman whose courses in women's literature I described above also taught a section of a course entitled Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Literature and Culture. Half the authors she assigned were women, and one of the course's goals was "to compare male and female points of view on different cultural issues." Other sections of the same course taught at this midwestern institution focused on more traditionally canonical, which is to say male, authors.

Generally speaking, then, the configuration of the English major seems to have remained basically the same for decades, although the beginnings of change—in the texts selected for study and in the approaches taken to those texts—may be discerned, especially in elective courses. My sense is that most of our theoretical battles will have been fought and the ideological casualties buried before the curriculum itself, especially the English major, reflects in any significant fashion the results of those battles. The curriculum is tied intimately to our institutions' bureaucratic structures. The field-coverage model, a mirror, as Graff argues, of departmental organization, makes it easy to add new courses but difficult to reconceptualize and reconstruct an entire curriculum. Theorists of every stripe still occupy a minority position in most departments. In cold political terms, the votes necessary for a thorough restructuring of the curriculum are not yet there. It is far more practical and, at least in the short run, probably more effective to wage the curricular battle in guerrilla fashion by adding a course in theory here, a course in women's studies there and by unofficially redesigning traditionally described courses by teaching them in theoretically up-to-date ways.

In time, the paradigm shift that has already changed the way many of us think and talk about literature at our professional meetings and in our professional publications will filter down to the curricular level. When that day comes, however, theory will probably have ceased to be in crisis. It will no longer need "to struggle to define its enterprise and mark its similarities to and differences from other theories" but will "[imagine] itself coextensive with the discipline it addresses" (Nelson 1). In short, as Nelson points out, it will no longer count as theory, having made the transition from the profane to the sacred that past heterodoxies such as modern languages, modern literature, American literature, and, of course, the New Criticism have also made. Today's theorists are tomorrow's "golden codgers," to use Yeats's phrase. But, make no mistake about it, by then newer heterodoxies will have developed.

Like the literature and language we study, our discipline is marked by excessive "formal discontinuity." In our profession, as Graff's history makes clear, the more things stay the same, the more they change. It is the task, perhaps the fate, of the English scholar not just to solve problems but to actively seek new problems to solve. These he or she can find only by exposing him- or herself to intellectual disorientation. Why can't we simply rest on our intellectual laurels, as self-proclaimed traditionalists would have us do? Because the intellectual knows that without the unsettling spark of cognitive dissonance, intellectual growth would cease. In a curious way, the proponents of the new—beleaguered, sometimes reviled—are the real traditionalists in our discipline. English is and has always been amorphous, a bit untamed, inconsistent to the point of contradiction—the Walt Whitman of disciplines. Perhaps, when all is said and done, that is the tradition most worthy of conservation.

Note

1 According to Miller, "The deconstructive critic seeks to find . . . the element in the system studied which is illogical, the thread in the text in question which will unravel it all, or the loose stone which will pull down the whole building. The deconstruction, rather, annihilates the ground on which the building stands by showing that the text has already annihilated that ground. . . . Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the struc-
ture of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself . . . " ("Stevens' Rock" 423).

**Works Cited**


The English curriculum is based on the belief that language learning is critical to responsible and productive citizenship, and that all students can become successful language learners. The curriculum is designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills that they need to achieve this goal. It aims to help students become successful language learners. The study of literature and the media provides students with an awareness and appreciation of the culture that surrounds, challenges, and nourishes them. The word parents is used in this document to refer to parent(s) and guardian(s). The national curriculum for English reflects the importance of spoken language in pupils’ development across the whole curriculum cognitively, socially and linguistically. Spoken language underpins the development of reading and writing. The quality and variety of language that pupils hear and speak are vital for developing their vocabulary and grammar and their understanding for reading and writing. All pupils must be encouraged to read widely across both fiction and non-fiction to develop their knowledge of themselves and the world they live in, to establish an appreciation and love of reading, and to gain knowledge across the curriculum. Reading widely and often increases pupils’ vocabulary because they encounter words they would rarely hear or use in everyday speech. Only looking to the past isn’t a bad thing for an English teacher looking to build a curriculum. Indeed, it is where we should start. But I would start by going much further back than 1950. For me it is about creating a narrative order, a chronological story, that helps students see how canonical literature has shaped modern literature and the stories of their multi-media rich world. How can you teach Beowulf without drawing upon a vast array of monsters, ancient and modern? How can you watch Jaws and fail to appreciate the influence of its Anglo-Saxon original?