


Nay here in these ages, such as they are, have we not two more Poets, if not deities, yet we may say honored? Shakespeare and Dante are Saints of Poetry: really, if we think of it, consistent, so that it is impious to meddle with them. The unaided instinct of the world, working across all time in perservering impudence, has showered such works as Dante and Shakespeare, and Shakespeare and Dante are peculiar Two. They dwell apart, in a kind of royal solitude; none equal, none second to them in the general feeling of the world, a certain transcendentalism, a glory as of complete perfection: they invest these two. They are canonized, though no Pope or Cardinals took hand in doing so! —Thomas Carlyle

Beaucoup trop d'hérésie encore dans nos langues, dans les médités — je pense à celui de Bataille —, c'est à dire certaines expressions et faits, qui sont de l'art d'héritier mondial. Doctrine du texte (LA POUSSANCE DU TEXTE) en est contraire comme un effet compensatoire de la valeur guénerale d'une désœuvrerie passagère des écrits de l'écrivain, un arrêt de "caractère" (du courage). —Rilke Barthes, Le plaisir du texte

For Carlyle, lecturing in 1840, the greatest poets were lexical figures, canonized saints of literature, whose names could readily sustain such adjectives as "royal" and such nouns as "transcendentalism," "sorcery," and "protection" (85). Indeed, his concept itself was called "The Hero as Poet." But for Barthes, writing in the early 1970s, the pleasure of the text emerges only when the writer's impulse toward heroism is in abeyance, when valor and courage are overcome. A text is, he says, or should be, like a "flippant person who shows his bottom to the political father" (84). Nothing either is or hero is about this. These two statements, I believe, reveal something of the depth beneath our present debate about canonicity and textuality—and something of what is at stake in this debate.

The debate itself is the occasion of the present essay. If the concepts of canonicity and textuality were not currently active in our critical discourse, there would have been no reason for a discussion of them to be included in this volume. It is important to note, then, that these concepts are not merely active in our discourse but active in an oppositional way. Despite some shared meanings and implications in their etymological past, the two terms now stand in opposition (an opposition embodied in my epigraph), as names (however crude) of two different conceptions of our practice as scholars and teachers: the literary, structured according to the hierarchical concept of canon, and the textual, disseminated around the more egalitarian notion of text. I cannot pretend to impartiality in these debates. I am a textualist. But I shall try, nonetheless, to give a fair idea of what is at stake in this dispute and to avoid excesses of special pleading. Even so, the reader, as always, should be on guard.

Let me begin gently, judiciously, by considering the history of the words canon and text as they have moved through Western culture from ancient times, when they first appeared in Greek, to the present. My survey is partial, of course (perhaps to the point where, in order to bring the subject before you, I shall have to make a claim that is far more simple and detailed than is possible here), but I believe that more simple and detailed study would produce histories much like those I recount. In ancient Greek, we find the two words from which the modern English word "canon" (in its two spellings, canon and canon) has descended: "κανών" (kanōn) "ruler," and "κανονίζω" (kanovizeō) "straighten, bar, order, rule, rule of a woman," rule, standard, model, severe critic, metric scheme, astrological table, limit, boundary, assessment for taxation (Liddell and Scott). Like canon, our word is also clearly a descendant of the ancient kanon, but its history has been simpler and more straightforward than that of its cognate. However, the second of the two Greek words, kanon, has from ancient times been the repository of a complex set of meanings, mainly acquired by metaphorical extension of the properties of canes, which are hollow or tubular grasses, some of which are regularly incised (the bamboo), and some of which have flat outside coverings. The tubular channel characteristic of reeds or canes leads to the associations of the word canons with functions that involve forcing liquids or gases through a channel or pipe, while the regularity and relative rigidity of canes lead toward those meanings that involve measuring and controlling (ruling—in both senses of this word). And it is likely that the ready applicability of canes as a weapon of punishment (as in our verb to cane, or beat with a stick) supported those dimensions of the meaning of kanon that connote severity and the imposition of power.

In Latin we find the same sort of meanings for the word "canon" as were attached to the Greek kanon, with two significant additions, both appearing in Latin. These two additions are due to historical developments that generated a need for new terms. On the one hand, the rise of the Roman Catholic Church as an institution required a Latin term that could distinguish the accepted or sacred writings from all others, so that "works admitted by the rule of canon" came to themselves to be called canonica or, in short, the Canon. In this connection we also find a new verb, canonizare, to canonize. On the other hand, with the importation of gun powder and the development of artillery, the tubular signification of the word led to its becoming the name, in late Latin, for large guns (Lewis and Short). A common theme, of course, in these extensions is power. It is worth noting here that when the Hebrew became People of the Book, the word they adopted for their canonical texts was also a word that meant the Law: Torah. As Gerald Bornhausen argues, the establishment of the Torah as the written Law in Jewish history meant the victory of a priestly establishment...
ence"). And, second, that the Aramaic tradition in criticism involved "trying
to create a new scriptural canon out of poetry." The way we currently use the
word canon in literary studies is very much the way we learned to use it from
Northrop Frye. And it was also Frye who—when very few students of literature
thought of calling their enterprise "literary theory"—told us "that the theory of
literature is as primary a humanistic and liberal pursuit as its practice" (20).
When Frye wrote, the word canon was used in literary studies mainly to refer to
the body of texts that could be properly attributed to this or that author. (Its
significance is acknowledged in the Supplement to the OED). The MLA
annual bibliographies are full of articles with titles like "The Shakespeare Canon"
or "The Defoe Canon." Since Frye, however, and especially in the last decade
literary scholars have come to use the word as the name for a set of texts that
constitute our cultural heritage and, as such, are the sources from which the
academic curriculum in literature should be drawn. This situation is full of
complexities and perplexities. We shall return to the problems of literary canon-
ics after further complicating matters by considering the cultural history of the
word text.

This word has a history that is perhaps even more interesting than that of
canon, in that it has been susceptible to a greater range of fluctuations in
meaning—a process still very much alive. The variability (or duplicity) of the
word is apparent even in its Greek beginnings:


The single theme that runs through all these words and their meanings is that
of creation. In this, the word atak appears central, with its fundamental meaning
of physical or natural production (of children and the fruits of the earth) and
its metaphorical extension to cover all kinds of production. Around this central
core of meaning some curious and interesting extensions play. First, atak, the
pharmakon, or drug, used to make childbearing easier for women. And here,
perhaps, we should note that the two opposed meanings of pharmakon are very
similar to those of our modern English word drug, which refers to both harmful
and beneficial kinds of ingestible substances. Jacques Derrida has made much of
this in "Plato's Pharmacy," but the double meaning of the word was fully noted
regularly in Greek lexicons before Derrida's influential essay. For our purposes
it is important to note another play in the meanings of atak and atak: on the one
hand, the natural—begetting, engendering, and bringing forth—and, on the
other hand, the artificial: the drug that must mitigate the "unnatural" pains of
the natural process, or come to the aid of nature in this instance.

The word pharmakon extends the meanings of atak in the direction of artifice or
craft, by pointing first toward carpentry and other physical (though not natural)
acts of making and finally toward metal creation, production, or authorship. One
facet of this extension is that it tends to obliterate female production as it
moves away from nature and toward art, craft, and authorship. In the least
formulations the role of woman as child-bearer and the earth as feminine bearer
of fruits (regularly portrayed as a goddess rather than a god) were dominated. But
gradually the gender emphasis shifted. In Greek culture, carpentry—a male
occupation—assumed a central position in the paradigmatic structure of this
word and its meanings. In the word that named the master's skill, tekhnê, there
was some room for female handicraft, but the general pattern of thought embed-
ded in this language seems to have aligned women with nature as primitive
producers and men with culture as producers of consciously constructed objects
of daily use and art. The word tekhnê itself was frequently used to refer to metal
work, ship building and other trades associated with male workers. This word,
like pharmakon, has its pejorative sense, too, referring to guile or cunning.
Expressly, and this is especially relevant to our concerns, the meanings of the word
were extended to refer to the methods or systems of the developing verbal
disciplines of grammar and rhetoric.

When we pick up the history of these terms as they appear in Latin, we find
that the notion of joining as in carpentry, or constructing as in metalwork,
has been replaced by weaving, as the guiding concept of textual fabrication.
We can see also that the extension from material handicraft to verbal
construction is reinscribed and extended, taking on specific references to verbal
composition or style (as opposed to weaving). In Latin we find tessera 'weave'; to
join or fit together any thing; to plait, braid, interweave, interlace, intertwine; to
construct, make, fabricate, build; to compose and textum 'that which is woven',
a web; that which is plaited, braided, fitted together, a plait, texture, fabric';
figurative: 'of literary composition, tissue, texture, style' (Lewis and Short). The
meanings related to weaving and woven fabric were to remain with these
words and with many of their descendants (textum, textile, etc.), but the verbal exten-
sions of meaning toward literary style and composition became more and more
important in the history of the word textum itself. In particular, the masculine
textum, which appears first in poetry and in post-Augustan prose, seems to have
taken the favored form for the verbal and stylistic meanings of the word; and
in medieval Latin, in particular, we find the masculine textus carrying specific
adaptations for Christian verbal functions, including, specifically referring to
the New Testament as the textual 'text', wording, contents of speech or
writing; charter; Gospel-book ('Debet rex Serenissima Augusti quattuor
Various meanings for text:

1. Acquaintance with "letters" or books; polite or leisurely learning; literary culture. Now rare and obsolete. (The only sense in Johnson and in Todd (1818).
2. Literary work or production; the activity or profession of a man of letters; the realm of letters.
3. a. Literary production as a whole; the body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or in the world in general. Now also in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect.

We should be attentive to a number of things about this word that has been so important to the enterprise of the Modern Language Association, and to the individuals and institutions connected with it. First, we should note that in Samuel Johnson's Dictionary and as late as Henry John Todd's version of it (1818), literature referred to a learning or culture possessed by an individual rather than to a set of lettered objects or written texts. That is, it was customary to say that a person had literature rather than that a person real literature. Second, the word also came to name whatever texts were produced by a person (clearly thought of as male) who possessed "literature" or book learning. Third, the word, when it did refer to the written or printed texts themselves, included everything, the whole body of writings of a time or place—or of the "world." Fourth, in a process that emerges fully only at the end of the eighteenth century, literature came to mean belles lettres, as opposed to other kinds of writing.

In 1762, in what became an enormously influential textbook in American colleges, Lord Kames proposed a science of criticism. His Elements of Criticism was meant to apply to all of what he called the "fine arts" but was focused mainly on the arts of language as they are displayed in poetry, drama, and some prose. So far as I can tell, in over a thousand pages, he found no occasion to use the word literature. It is also true, of course, that for him the whole art of language lay in finding the proper means for the expression of human sentiments and passions. For him, the imagination was no more than one human faculty, and by no means was it the most important faculty with respect to the fine arts:

Such is the nature of man, that his powers and faculties are soon blunted by exercise. The returns of sleep, suspending all activity, are not alone sufficient to preserve him in vigour. During his waking hours, amusement by intervals is requisite to unburden his mind from serious occupation. The imitations, of all our faculties the most active, and not always at rest even in sleep, contributes more than any other cause to renew the mind and restore its vigour, by amusing us with gay and ludicrous images; and when education is necessary, such amusement is much relished. But there are other sources of amusement beside the imagination.

What Kames meant by imagination was simply the "singular power of fabricating images independent of real objects" (3: 386). He has neither our notion of
literature not our sense of imagination. The momentous looking of these two terms, which was necessary for our modern idea of a literary canon to be developed, is primarily not exclusively the work of Romantic writers, especially the Jena Romantics and their followers (among whom we must still, with whatever mixture of emotions, consider ourselves). This Romantic notion of imagination as the primary quality of literature was, of course, given its special potency in English by Coleridge. Coleridge himself thought of literature in the pre-Romantic manner. When, in the Biographia Literaria, he sought to advise young men not to take up literature as a "trade" (129), his list of literary men who had other careers included Cicero, Xenophon, Thomas More, Richard Baxter (the Puritan divine), and Charles Darwin (the poet of evolution). In its fully Romantic usage, however, literature took over the meanings formerly assigned to poetry alone, with the added insistence on the trans-ambient powers of imagination. The crucial distinction thus fell not between poetry and prose but between imaginative writing and writing that lacked this divine spark. The distinction was already nascent in Kant's separation of the fine arts from the useful arts, but the addition of imagination as the decisive criterion made the distinction more inviolate. Imaginative setting—and Coleridge made this especially clear with his description of primary and secondary forms of simulation—connected certain texts directly to Divinity or Absolute Spirit. Materially useless but spiritually precious texts, that is what literature had come to mean when Matthew Arnold conceived the project of replacing dogma with literature—the project excised by Frye in the "Feminological Introduction" to his Anatomy of Criticism. We must be aware, however, that this Arnoldian project was extended by writers as diverse as T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, as well as by the New Critics teaching in American universities after World War II. And it was alive and well in the work of Northrop Frye himself, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith vigorously demonstrates in her essay in an important collection entitled Canons (ed. von Halberg). By the end of the nineteenth century two simultaneous processes (or two facets of the same process) had led to the establishment of a literary canon. One of these was the separate, separate status claimed for works of verbal imagination, which, thus empowered, constituted a literary canon. The other was the professionalization of teaching in the newly established (and in particular the American) universities and graduate schools. As the study of the modern literatures, especially English, replaced the classics and rhetoric at the center of the humanist curriculum at the end of the nineteenth century, authors such as John Locke and Francis Bacon, who had loomed large in our early college curricula, gave way to writers who were more relevant to the sense of that word. For a time, criticism struggled against philology for power within the new English departments, each with its own canon of proper texts for study. In this struggle, philology, which was really an attempt to carry on classical studies without classical texts, was doomed because its canon was based on antiquity, privileging texts in Old and Middle English, while criticism could select its canon so the basis of "pure literary merit.” Actually, of course, this selection required an imitation to debate and thereby canonical choices, and, at the proper moment, the institution came into being. It was called the Modern Language Association. In the profession of literary studies, the canon supported the profession and the profession supported the canon. Likewise, the canon supported the literary curriculum and the curriculum supported the canon. The curriculum also represented the point of application where canonical choices were ratted in the crucible of student response. Works that proved highly teachable (like Shakespeare) remained central in the canon as well as in the curriculum. The revival of John Donne may have been begun by Herbert Grierson and T. S. Eliot, but it continued with such notable success because the New Critics found Donne perfectly suited to their pedagogy, their curriculum, and, hence, their canon. Authors who proved less amenable to critical express (they say, for instance, once once bulked large in the American curriculum) were quietly allowed to drift out of that curriculum and, hence, out of the canon. The most important thing about these processes is not that they went on but that they went on unnoticed. Until the last few decades they were seen as "natural"—or even as not occurring at all. What has happened to literary studies in those decades is a part of larger cultural happenings that can be described (and deplored, if you like) as the politicization of American life. Once upon a time we believed that if the best men (and women) were appointed to the bench, we would get the best judicial decision. Now, we know that one set of appointments to the Supreme Court will give us a set of laws and another set of appointments will give us others. What is happening is part of the evolution of a democratic society. With respect to the literary canon, Frye's statement about Arnold's touchstones was a political bombshell: "We begin to suspect that the literary judgments are projections of social ones." Which we shall want shortly to be a social, and therefore a political, object, the result of a political process, like so much else in our world. Thus the battle lines were drawn, and the battle is still in progress. On the one hand are those who defend a universal standard of literary quality (among whom we may find Frye himself), and on the other are those who argue that standards are always relative, local, and political. There are militant universalists and there are know-nothings or pragmatic relativists. The debate has been complex and lively. And the relativists are divided, also, into chauvinists of different excluded groups, seeking canonical status for their own class of texts, and anarchists or absolute relativists, who would undo all canons in the name of literary history. At this point, I suppose, I should run my own flag, since I cannot pretend to neutrality on these matters. I do not see how anyone can read without standards, but I cannot find any single standard for determining the worth of a text. I do not, that is, believe in literature either as a body of spiritually informed texts or as a...
universal standard of textual value. I have lost my faith (and, yes, I once had it) in literature as an institution. It is not my intention here, however, to preach literary atheism or to make my position clear to the discussion. I mention it merely as a bias the reader may wish to discount, as I move on to what I take to be the best single focus of current canonical disputes. Robert von Hallberg's collection of essays, made under the auspices of Corpus Inquiri in 1984, is an example.

Just as Attierr is not responding directly to Smith, Guillery is responding not directly to Altbeth but to the general position that Altbeth represents. His discussion traces the path from Els's reconstruction of the canon of English literature in his early essay to the institutional understanding of that very canon by the New Critics through such books as Cleanth Brooks's Modern Poetry and the Tradition (1939) and The Well-Wrought Urn (1947). Guillery shows how this process functioned as a subtle and more attractive alternative to Matthew Arnold's attempt to replace dogma with literature. He does this by arguing that what Els's essay suggested and the New Critics institutionalized was the replacement of dogma with paradox. Under this regime, canonical texts were seen not as expressions of truth and beauty but as embodiments of a discourse so ambiguous that it could not be defused and applied to anything practical or dogmatic end. The study and teaching of the new canon of specifically non-cognitive texts would of necessity fall to those trained to show that they are canonical precisely because they resist reduction to dogma or dogmatism. Those who taught such texts, Guillery argues, became members of what Calloway calls a "marginal elite,", an elite based on a canon of texts that "protrayed neither to scientific nor didactic stance but to a literary purity defined explicitly as the absence of such ambitions.

Nevertheless, literary "culture" has aspired to canonical coexistence, an illusion reinforced by the cognitive silence of the literary work, the silencing of difference. Very simply, canonical authors are made to agree with the aesthetic and literary language means nothing less than the disutility of the canon. I now want to examine this role of canonical self-similarity in a "modern" sense, which implies that it is not the essential difference in the work of literature. Instead, it is a function of orthodoxy and the study of the canon, and that this orthodoxy may be seen as an ideologically driven movement that is the canonical moral elite and as an instruction in the marginal relation of the poem to itself.

To document this, Guillery looks at Brooks's crucial treatment of Donne's poem "The Canonization"—a truly over-determined choice by all concerns, including myself. Guillery sees Brooks as having the poetic status of poetry on its ability to offer and to inhabit a realm removed from and "above" the world of power and cognitive insertion.

The ideological function of Brooks reading concerns the disavowal of spiritual realms between the traditions of power and the creation of fact. The spiritual realm is defined by the audience to the essays, the modes in which the creative thought of an age of apostolic succession, at the moment of transition between E11or and Brooks, as representative figures of literary culture. The mosaic empty is
relocated within a stable social structure: the ecclesiastical institution. The idealized reading of the lovers' withdrawal must be understood as symptomatic of the professional commitment to the preservation of values just as the lovers instigate love in their act of renunciation, so it is the marginality of value which is both deployed and established by the idealization of literature. (156)

As he has observed earlier in the essay, "in teaching the canon, we are not only inventing a set of texts with authority, we are equally instituting the authority of the teaching professor" (151). Guillery's point is partly that we should not choose a canon for a certain critical distance in determining our own stake in maintaining a canon, but he also means to suggest a possible direction out of New Critical orthodoxy into a "state of hermeneutics where the done of literature is not a paralysed alliance to a hidden god but a reaching that will exact discursively the struggle of difference" (159–60).

This is a brave conclusion to an elegant essay, but it seems to me dangerously close to simply replacing the New Critical canon with a new set of texts privileged by their hermeneutics or their enactment of the "struggle of difference." The problem, I believe, is that "difference" is itself a notion that has gained its privileged position in recent American theory partly because it allowed an easy transition from New Critical paradigms. Believing, for instance, that the best texts are mere "deconstruction (or)," is just a step from equating paradox with literary value. It is a useful step, to be sure, but my own feeling is that something simpler is necessary: not texts that embody difference but just different texts. Perhaps this is what Guillery means, but I am wary of the tendency of American literary deconstruction to lead back to a canon more traditional than even that of the New Critics. Certainly the compatibility of a certain sort of deconstruction with traditional literary values is very large in J. Hillis Miller's much quoted statement, "I believe in the established canon of English and American literature and in the validity of the concept of privileged texts. I think it is more important to read Spenser, Shakespeare, or Milton than to read Bongs in translation, or even, to say the truth, to read Virginia Woolf" (qtd. by Froula in von Hallberg 152).

The issue of canonicity turns finally on the notion of literature itself, as, for instance, Arnold Knapp suggests in his discussion "Native American Literature and the Canon," in which he makes the following point:

In our own time, the canon is established primarily by the professionals, by teachers and critics who variously—passively or actively but for the most part—support the existing order. As Leslie Fiedler has remarked, "Literature is effectively what we teach in departments of English; or, conversely, what we teach in departments of English is literature" (Fiedler and Badek 73). Roland Barthes has offered a similar observation in "The Fashion of Literature." Barthes said, "If I were to categorize literary norms and values into one, it would be 'l'enseignement du livre,' the teaching of the book." Barthes uses "l'enseignement du livre" as a way of saying that the professional canon includes from the past and from current production generally

and substantially works to justify the present and to legitimate an established hegemony. (170)

Knapp's position is necessary to his argument that by attending to Native American works in the curriculum, we will also establish them in the canon. Others in the volume who would not deny the connection of the curriculum to the canon would see the mechanisms of canonization as being more complicated. Alan C. Golding, for instance, brings to our attention the way that over the past century and a half American poetry anthologies have played a vital role in shaping the canon, but he, too, notices that over the decades curricular needs have become more influential even on the anthologies. Similarly, Richard McKim, examining contemporary mechanisms of canonization, describes a complicated process but suggests that the greatest power lies with a class that stretches from the marginal elite of the universities to a less marginal elite group in the magazines and publishing houses.

In another important essay in Canons ("When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy") Christine Froula, reminds us of how the canon has functioned as an instrument of domination, argues that the proper answer is to both add new textual voices to our curricula and to read the old texts in a different way.

Few of us can free ourselves completely from the power ideologies inscribed in the idea of the canon and in many of its texts merely by not reading "canonical" texts, because we have been reading the patriarchal "architect" all our lives. We can, through strategies of retreating that expose the deeper structures of authority and through interplay with texts of a different stamp, pursue kind of collective psychoanalysis, transforming "beagle" that hides invisible power into investments both visible and alterable. In doing so, we approach traditional texts not as the mystifying (and self-limiting) "texts" that has been thought and said in the world but as visible past against which we can teach our students to imagine a different future. (171)

This volume on canons, which in turn points to other important discussions of the question, is certainly the place for later inquiries into canonical matters to begin. My own conclusion, however, after examining both this book and many of the texts cited therein, is that as long as we refrain from challenging the hegemony of literature itself, the essentially conservative and patriarchal processes of canonization will continue to function in much the same way. In a conceptual and typically essay in this volume, "The Making of the Modernist Canon," for instance, Hugh Kenner develops a literary standard that enables him to relocate Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner to secondary status as "sterile" and to largely ignore such writers as Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Richardson, Jean Rhys, and Dionysus Buck's notice. They are so much both his notice. They are so much

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"Text" derives from tezze, to weave or compose, and in its expanded usage it designates a texture or network of relations interwoven with the problem of language. Its critical role is to problematize conventional distinctions and hierarchies, such as that which presents the text as a simple, which is the formula for modernism, yields a literary canon in which the oppressively absolutist and patriarchal tendencies of canonization are more visible than ever before.

Specifically, the modernist canon installed by Pound, Eliot and their followers in English departments in this country called for, on the one hand, an aggressively innovative approach to literary form and, on the other, a learned appropriation of mythological and poetical texts drawn from the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance canons. This modernist notion of literary excellence worked powerfully (and "naturally") against women who had no easy access to classical education and for whom the traditional verbal forms were in themselves experimental, in that they had never before been used to express the experience of women in a world of possibilities opening all too slowly but opening nevertheless at the end of the nineteenth century. A novel like May Sinclair's Mary Olivier (1919), for instance, shows us both how painfully difficult and how profoundly radical it was for a provincial woman to adapt to her situation the hitherto untried form recently energized by D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce. The result is a novel that is powerful and important but will never match the canonical works of the modernist masters by their own literary criteria. And this is just one example of countless texts in which marginal voices have found expression in forms too humble for canonization or already discarded in the relentless modernist search for innovation.

My point is not that modernism itself was some sort of error but that it represented the culmination of a process of literary canonization begun by the Romantics—a process that is now unworkable because it has become too visible and because we have at last become aware of its social costs. In response to this situation I (and it must be obvious that these are not the conclusions of the MLA itself) would argue that we need to scrutinize critically and if possible undo the privilege we have so long granted to the notion of literature itself. This is why the opposition of text to work and of the interior to literature is so important. As we have seen, the history of the word text and its cognates is not so different from that of canons. Both sets of signifiers passed through alliances with the significations offered by history, both took on Christian significance in the Middle Ages, and both have some specifally verbal significations in our own world. But where canon has persisted in its exclusiveness and hierarchical functions, allowing only such qualifications as Alston's Fowler's potential, accessible, and selective canons (all literature, literature currently in print, and approved literature)—discussed by Goldberg, in von Hallberg (1979), text has acquired, especially at the hands of French theorists like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, some new significations that are programmatically subversive of canonical functions. The new meanings of text are usefully summarized in the introduction to Dominick LaCapra's Rethinking Intellectual History:

This poststructuralist notion of textuality is based on the semiotic and deconstructive projects of Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Jacques Derrida, in which human interaction with the world is understood as always mediated by signs that can be interpreted only by connecting them to other signs, without ever leading to some final and definitive place of interpretation that might be called Reality or Truth. This we may think of as the strong sense of the word textuality as it is used in contemporary literary theory. It is this sense to which Derrida referred in his famous statement about there being no outside to textuality: "Il n'y a pas de texte hors du texte," which means that we can "make sense" of things only by establishing our own connections within the network of textuality that enables our thinking and perceiving in the first place—as I have just done by taking Derrida's phrase. As LaCapra warns us, however, it is a mistake to take this metaphor of textuality literally—a mistake that can only be made by ignoring the way that the idea of the "literal"
is read out by the metaphor itself. The function of this sense of textuality, then, is to restore the reading or interpreting of texts in a more creative or, as Derrida says, "exorbitant" mode. But what is a text?

Here, Roland Barthes is our liveliest guide—and within the metaphor of textuality, liveliness contends with reliability (some would say supercedes it—but not I) for the most important attribute of guidance. In one of his most influential essays, "Fictions Work to Text," Barthes uses the opposition raised in his title as a way of situating his new criticism in opposition to the old. His method of accomplishing this at text seems to align Barthes's nonsense critique with the American New Criticism as John Guillory described it. Barthes tells us that

the text is that which goes to the limit of the rules of enunciation (rationality, readability, etc.). Not a theory that entered, made for some "heretic" effect: the text tries to place itself very exactly behind the limit of the dead (its not general opinion—constructive of our democratic societies and powerfully aided by mass communications—defined by its limits, the energy with which it excludes, its censorship!). Taking the word literally, it may be said that the text is always paradoxical.

(Image 157-58)

What makes Barthes's formulation quite different and in certain respects opposed to American New Criticism, however, is his specific opposition of the text to the work.

The difference is that the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the text is a methodological field... [The work can be seen in three parts: as the work of the original writer, the version of the text after its transcription, and the version of the text after its interpretation].

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In American New Criticism, the boundedness of the literary work, its organic unity, its status as a "verbal icon" supported the role of the literary critic (or teacher) as a quasi-priestly exegete, introducing outsiders into the hermetic mysteries of literature. The notion of textuality weakens the boundaries of the individual textual object and reduces the extent of its connection to an individual author or a specific situation, in order to emphasize the intertextuality of every such object and the freedom of the reader to establish connections among many texts at many levels. This notion also changes the critic or teacher from a figure of automatic authority to one reader among others, whose performance of the reading act will have to be its own justification. The criteria for judging such performances may well include, we might say, include such traditional interpretive virtues as learning, attention to detail, and intensity of thought, but they will now also include range, creativity, and even exorbitance along with the traditional virtues. With this extension of the reader's range comes also a new freedom to take with equal seriousness (and playfulness) texts outside the "selective canon" of literature and indeed outside "literature" itself.

Perhaps the simplest and most radical implication of the concept of textuality is that it breaks down the barriers between verbal objects and other kinds of signification. The word text is useful—and indeed necessary—if we are to discuss the common semiotic properties of pictures, films, plays, operas, jokes, graffiti, poems, songs, stories, speeches, advertisements, novels, essays, and other... other what? Well, other things, of course. A text is a cluster of signs or potentially signifying entities that can be connected by an act of reading to other such clusters.

A few years ago when a consortium of teaching organizations (the English Coalition) sought foundation support for a conference on the future of English studies from kindergarten to graduate school, one powerful foundation refused to consider supporting the proposal until the word text in the proposal was replaced everywhere by the word literature. The author is repeating a true story, and it suggests that these matters, which may seem like trivial questions of terminology that concern only scholars and teachers, really do have political and economic consequences. In this opposition, text is linked with the extension of democratic social, economic, and political processes and power with the maintenance or recovery of more hierarchical structures. At their extremes, these two positions may imply anarchy and absolutism. In the middle, where most of us work and struggle, they may only be jeffersonianism and Federalism. In any case, we may be certain that concepts of canonicity and textuality are themselves imbedded in the larger processes of our social text.

One final word. While I still have some control over this collection of words—before, that is, they enter the web of textuality even further—I would have to engage the reader who is actually reading this.
like to make a disclaimer. The notion of text deployed here is no panacea. It should be, at best, a stimulus to rethinking our enterprise. There is, I suppose, a possible curriculum of textuality that many writers on these quests could specify. And what, you may well ask, prevents that set of authors and works from becoming a canon just as exclusive and oppressive as the old one? I have two tentative answers to this very pertinent question. One is that, insofar as what we are considering is a set of theoretical writings, they are bound to be largely subsumed (augurghed?) by later theoretical writings. The other is that to the extent that we have really made it legitimate to consider—and study in our courses—any kind of textual object from graffiti to The Making of Americans, we have gone beyond canonization, because a canon requires that there be much more outside of it than inside. Without a canon, of course, we shall have to live our academic lives on an ad hoc basis. Individually, we may all be governed by habit and inertia more than we should, but perhaps we won’t think that our hobby horses are cast in the mold of some Platonized Pegasus.1

Brown University

Notes

1For too much heroism still in our language, in the best—I think of Bunyals’s—enthusiasm license irreverence of certain expressions and finally a sort of madness however. The pleasure of the text (the joy of the text) is on the contrary an abrupt erasure of laborious toil, a momentary devaluation [healing off of the writer’s spur], a stoppage of heart (of courage?) [Hartley, Plate 50; trans. mine].

2In citing dictionaries and lexicons, I do not give page numbers because the words serve as their own locators. I also abbreviate and omit freely, in the interests of controlling what still seems like an ungrЯdable amount of philological matter, though I think it is necessary to the discussion and may be useful beyond the immediate context.

3In preparing this essay I have received any amount of useful advice from anonymous readers and some very specific and extremely helpful criticisms from John Mueckel of the University of Florida. While teaching a course in canonicity, he located and drew my attention to the quotation from Carlyle that serves as the last epigraph. He also pointed to a number of weaknesses in an earlier draft, which I have done my best to remedy. For all this assistance I am extremely grateful.

Works Cited and Suggestions for Further Reading


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DONALD G. MARSHALL

Literary Interpretation

HEGEL characterizes a profession as an institution that mediates between the individual's work and an encompassing social structure. One way in which this is done by offering models that exemplify the practices of competent professionals. The scholar and the critic are two traditional models for literary professionals, and the theorist is a recent addition. Yet the absence of these figures obscures a professional practice that pervades all three and gives literary study its special character: the practice of interpretation. Few literary academics would identify themselves as "interpreters," yet most spend much of their career, training students in the practice of interpreting, presenting interpretations of literary works to students and to one another, and trying to make their own practices as interpreters subtle and penetrating enough to respond to the capacity of serious writing to provoke endless thought.

What is interpretation? The term's use outside literary study may furnish some guiding hints. Interpreters is the ordinary name for someone who translates, particularly in face-to-face situations. Similarly, an interpreter is one who translates spoken words into sign language for the hearing impaired. In the performing arts, critics and audiences want to hear how a performer interprets a well-known musical composition or play. At parks or restored historic sites, an interpreter explains the sights or exhibits to visitors. Despite variations, we find here a basic structure. An interpreter is someone who helps another understand the meaning of something. What is to be understood is already there, but it is subtle and requires the interpreter to speak for itself. Its message needs mediation through the interpreter's special knowledge and skill. In Latin, the word interpret means a messenger, as well as to explain. The name for reflection on interpretation, hermeneutics, comes from a Greek word meaning variously to translate, to put into words, or to explain.

Literary interpretation is another specific instance of this basic structure. The literary interpreter helps someone understand the meaning of a text. Knowledge of the text's language and of relevant historical contexts and references is presupposed, but it is still the interpreter's task to make the text speak again. This task is accomplished by "reading" the text and by helping students learn to read it. Interpreting is reading, what makes professional literary study distinctive among the academic disciplines is its deployment of extremely complex skills of reading. What then is "reading," and where does it go wrong or fall short so that it needs the disciplined help interpreting gives it?