

The Futures of English 2: Firing The Canon

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The purpose of cultural studies was to offer a critique of existing knowledge and its construction whilst creating the conditions necessary for the production of 'organic intellectuals' in the Gramscian sense of those who are not only employed at the forefront of theoretical and intellectual work, but also distinguish themselves by reporting and transmitting the fruits of those ideas to groups outside of the academies (Hall, 1992). There is, however, a distinct difference between ones aims and achievements, and the success that cultural theorists have achieved with the latter part of this agenda is surely debatable. Certainly, Eagleton (1990) oscillates between populist and specialist writing with some success and he regards this process of extending debate and understanding as a political priority. Similarly, prior to his untimely death, Raman Selden sought to open a dialogue with the reading public, but it is rare to discover such texts. In general, the market is dominated by undergraduate introductory guides at one level and highly specialised texts aimed at a select few at the other. However, as publishers seek larger readerships and, correlatively, increased profits, this degree of intellectual insularity is being altered by economic necessity rather than political strategy (Marcus, 1998).

There are considerable dangers to be aware of in such a movement, not least the importance of distinguishing between a high standard of valuable intellectual work within a specialist field and the wilful obscurity

and perversely polemical output of those writers who mistake style for substance. Yet, if market forces and a globalised commodification of knowledge in the service of 'saleability' is to be resisted, as it surely must, then it is equally important to recognise the pressing need for mediation, for extending the dialogue between academia and the public sphere. Unfortunately, however, one of the most successful excursions into this relatively virgin territory came from Harold Bloom (1987) who sought, in a wave of righteous, right-wing revisionism, to overthrow the theoretical advances and political advantages gained over the past thirty years.

The line between the radical and the reactionary is, as I have suggested in a previous paper (Walmsley, 2006), exceedingly tenuous, and throughout his career, Bloom has consistently taken advantage of this ambiguity, projecting himself at every available opportunity as the rebellious, radical, solitary voice of honest wisdom who is standing in brave opposition to the hypocrites and charlatans of academia and the literary world.

Wrapping himself in a veil of human qualities that are generally regarded as admirable and desirable, such as freedom, the individual spirit, common sense and a timeless tradition of aesthetic appreciation of literature, Bloom is an incredibly persuasive advocate. Lawson (1995), impressed by Bloom's academic status, his lifetime's devotion to reading and his hostility towards the "politically correct book police" insisted that "when the great Bloom, after a lifetime's exemplary devotion to literature, describes himself as 'a literary critic in what I now regard as the worst of all times for literary criticism', he should be listened to".

Eschewing, as he does, any thought of method, system of analysis, social or ethical responsibility, Bloom declares that "The only critical wisdom I know is that there is no method except yourself. Everything

else is an imposture” (67), and his resistance, not only to theory but also to debate, is well known. Yet, despite this well maintained and frequently voiced illusion of solitude and independence the truth, Salusinszky (1987) suggests, is radically different. Even though “Bloom styles himself as the pariah of American academic literary criticism”, with both the American public and many of the “younger American critics, no-one is more admired, or more influential, than Harold Bloom”. (47)

The broad base of popular support that Bloom enjoys ought to be sufficient enough reason to take his arguments seriously, and before discussing some of the other contributions to the debate about the relevance of the literary canon, I will be discussing three dominant themes within his work: aesthetic criticism and his defence of the canon, his revisionist theory of literature and his hostility towards any critical approach that deviates from a naïve and incredibly solipsistic empiricism.

Unlike many of his conservative contemporaries, Bloom’s defence of the canon does not rest upon the traditional idea that these works can assist in determining morality and ethical responsibility. Indeed, he treats the idea that reading canonical works can make one a better person with contempt, arguing that, “If we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation”. (29) Similarly, the idea of literature having a liberating, emancipatory effect is, in Bloom’s view, equally ridiculous and “To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgement, to read at all”. (29) The value of the canon, therefore, is located within the individual reader: canonical writers help us to speak directly to ourselves, and the centre of the canon is Shakespeare whose insight into the human condition, and whose conceptual knowledge exceeds any ontological or epistemological theory that

has come after him.

This idea, that Shakespeare somehow prefigures every philosophical, linguistic psychological and political theory available to us is not unknown. Eagleton (1993), for instance, makes a similar point when he suggests that although “conclusive evidence is hard to come by, it is difficult to read Shakespeare without feeling that he was almost certainly familiar with the writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein and Derrida”. (ix-x)

The problem with Bloom is that, unlike Eagleton, he displays no sense of playfulness or irony: he actually seems to believe in Shakespeare’s supernatural prescience and, through a series of evasions and pronouncements based upon the personal authority of a “lifetime’s reading”, he encourages his readers to accept this view unproblematically. Shakespeare’s centrality is both self-evident and self-affirming, and to deny this genius who transcends every discourse, known and unknown, is not only to deny the existence of the canon but also to deny ourselves. Thus, like the religious fundamentalist who eschews debate and discussion by insisting that “God is, was and always shall be”, Bloom offers no argument or theory to deal with question of how a poet and playwright from the Renaissance can provide an encyclopaedia of human thought and knowledge for the future centuries and beyond.

In reality of course, such a position is not only objectionable but also ludicrous. If we discount the idea that the birth of Shakespeare was the Messiah’s second coming, that he was really an alien from the planet Xarg who visited the Earth and left behind a densely codified map of future human achievements, or even that he was capable of time travel or future visions that would put Nostradamus to shame, then the most logical answer to Shakespeare’s centrality and immediacy is not that his

works are overflowing with meaning, but rather that they have been rendered *meaningless*.

This is not, however, to say that they mean nothing at all, but rather to insist that they have been appropriated and misappropriated so many times for so many different reasons, that any specific ideological or cultural context has become subtracted or obscured thus rendering them immensely sensitive to all situations. Context, in other words, determines meaning, and it is this lack of concrete contextual reference that allows the myth of Shakespeare's transcendence to flourish. Holderness (1988) argues that "When we deconstruct the Shakespeare myth what we discover is not a universal genius creating literary texts that remain a permanently valuable repository of human experience and wisdom; but a collaborative cultural process". (13)

The importance of myth in the symbolic recreation of reality cannot be overstated. Myth, Frye (1987) suggests, is the first, primitive stage of theoretical work in any field, preceding any ideology or philosophy and, only through imaginative appropriation, can phenomenon, however concrete or abstract they may be, be mediated. In order to create the illusion of stability, the chimera of order, it is necessary to exert control and influence over those external and internal forces that are determined to transgress and violate the 'natural flow' of things: a sacrifice to the rain god, a treatise on the chaos theory or the canonisation of one text and the exclusion of another. Irrespective of how primitive or sophisticated they are, the underlying principle of all myths is domination. Freud (1991) argues that, through the construction of a singular or series of narratives which allows a thing to be known, and thus to be controlled, a "delusional remoulding of reality" (269) takes place which, in time, renders the necessary and revolutionary leap of faith essential to the construction of any authority into a fossilised, static fiction that becomes

so commonplace that it is almost unquestionable. Holderness (1988) insists that “Myth is not a non-existent fantasy or ideological conjuring trick: it is a real and powerful form of human consciousness, holding some significant place within a culture. (11)

Shakespeare’s unique genius, Bloom declares, is that he makes the strange and alien entirely familiar to us. This is hardly surprising when one considers the lack of originality within Shakespeare’s *oeuvre*. Drawing upon an enormous reservoir of myth, history and folk tale, Shakespeare successfully appropriated, presented and most importantly *confirmed* the commonplace notions of what was natural and desirable. To understand Shakespeare, therefore, is to understand the time, the cultural moment and social forces that produced him and the subsequent forces that produced readings *of* him. This course of action is something Bloom cannot (rather than will not) do, however, because “to challenge the timelessness of the plays is at once to call into question the whole ideology in which they are so deeply embedded” (Margolies, 1988 51) and ideological problematics have no place within Bloom’s vision of literary studies. Indeed, the assumption that writing and reading are solitary acts completely divorced from the praxis of life is Bloom’s initial leap of faith: it is the foundation for his theoretical work, and to admit a social dimension to the production and reception of literature is, for him, an act of unspeakable heresy.

For Bloom, the meaning of every poem is a precursor text. Writers must free themselves from their poetic precursors through an act of creative *misprision*, through striving to overcome the achievements of other poets. In other words, the would-be strong or great poet suffers from an acute anxiety regarding their ability to force open the canon, and they can only make way for themselves by revising the precursor poem in such a way that it corrects, amends, improves or offers a significant

variation upon it. Frequently misunderstood as a form of Oedipal rivalry between writers, Bloom insists that his theory is based upon texts rather than personalities, although this claim is, as we shall see, slightly misleading:

The anxiety of influence is not an anxiety about the father, real or literary, but an anxiety achieved by and in the poem, novel or play. Any strong literary work creatively misreads and therefore misinterprets a precursor text or texts ... Poems, stories, novels, plays come into being as a response to prior poems, stories, novels and plays, and that response depends upon acts of reading and interpretation by the later writers, acts that are identical with the new works. (p. 8–9)¹⁾

This basic idea that each text is bound up in a complex network of ultimately untraceable intertextual relations is, in itself, relatively uncontroversial and one that can be easily assimilated and understood. In his children's novel, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1991), Salman Rushdie illustrates the dynamics of intertextuality in a clear and lucid manner, and the creative weaving of new stories from previous works is a standard feature of children's word processing packages such as Microsoft's *Creative Writer*. Similarly, as I have previously suggested, the key to Shakespeare's universality lies in his skilful manipulation and presentation of familiar myths, legends, folk tales and histories. What Bloom attempts to do, however, is to give this idea a dramatic twist, and wherever possible isolate a specific poem, play or story as the focal point of anxiety: Wordsworth, for instance, did not want to write *The Prelude*, he wanted to write *Paradise Lost* and *The Prelude* is a partially successful attempt to appropriate this poem for himself. In other words, whereas

most accounts of intertextuality focus upon a vast array of texts, upon a community of writing, Bloom seeks to individualise the process, to reduce the relationships to a personal one-to-one basis, thus offering the hypothesis that originality is little more than an act of imaginative plagiarism, and the greatest writers (who, according to Bloom, are the only ones worthy of study) are the most successful plagiarists.

This is an incredibly subtle move, because not only does it create an uneven playing surface that allows Bloom to discriminate between texts easily, it also isolates acts of literary production and reception into an internalised, individualistic struggle. History, politics, social and inter-personal relations are almost completely erased, and this potential vacuum is filled with the idea of the agonistic struggle: a mental contest with the poem and the precursor text, the writer and his or her predecessor, the reader and the writer. A potential problem with this attitude is that there are many cases in which the writer's identification with political causes is so strong that work is indissociably bound up with their lives.

Bloom, however, makes no serious attempt to deal with this difficulty, preferring instead to side-step the issue by insisting that, not only do one's politics bear little or no relation to one's writing but, on the contrary, one's writing determines one's political convictions, and there is no cause the great writer will not betray, no ideology or belief they will not forsake, if such activities or philosophies prove to be real or potential impediments to the creative process. If Bloom's vision of a great writer is an anti-social, cynical, narcissist revelling in his or her solipsistic glory then the individualised and grossly isolated reader who "does not read for easy pleasure or to expiate social guilt, but to enlarge a solitary existence" (518) is the perfect companion for them as we shall see when we examine Bloom's hermeneutics.

The sole criteria for judging a text (and this idea of judgement dominates Bloom's writing) is through aesthetic value. The aesthetic, Bloom tells us, is "an individual rather than a societal concern" (16) and is validated through the authority of personal experience, rather than through the discourses of "pseudo-sciences" or "shamanism". Unlike the theoretical discourses which dominate the academies, aesthetic reception is completely self sufficient and renders all context immaterial. All that matters is the text and those unique individuals, living in perfect isolation, who can produce or appreciate literature in all of its splendour. Whilst others might find such hysterical elitism embarrassing or objectionable, Bloom revels in this distinction, seeing it as a liberating mark of originality. (58) Thus, in a world that is becoming increasingly deadened and sterilised through mass consumerism, arcane specialisms and political correctness, aesthetic criticism reaches back to antiquity to celebrate the individual over the herd, the virtues of conflict over conciliation, and most importantly, the value of competition and self betterment over social and ethical responsibilities.

Lawson (1995) suggested that *The Western Canon*, "is the literary critical equivalent of the Michael Douglas movie *Falling Down*: the howl of a man pushed too far", and the analogy is an appropriate one. Like the Douglas character (who is known only by his car number plate D-FENS), Bloom is unable to accept the passing of time and the redundancy of his agenda. This inability to recognise that one must hear as well as speak in order to engage in any meaningful dialogue leads to a sense of paranoia reminiscent of the Leavises towards the end of their careers: the world is neatly divided between those who are for him or against him; those who are right and those who are wrong; those who are literary critics, and thereby able to recognise and confront greatness, and those who are merely cultural theorists so intimidated by the prospect of

greatness that they resent the possibility of its existence and reduce everything to ideological over-determination.

There is another striking similarity between the outraged Bloom and Douglas' portrayal of D-FENS. Douglas engages our sympathy and understanding for a sane, reasonable individual who is understandably overtaken by rage and violence when confronted with the collective insanity of 'real life', and a similar movement is detectable within Bloom who not only seems to find himself "surrounded by professors of hip-hop; by clones of Gallic-Germanic theory; by multi-culturalists unlimited" but is also forced to concede that "the Balkanisation of literary studies is irreversible". (517) Like D-FENS, Bloom has no concrete answers, no alternative propositions as such, merely a constant feeling of betrayal, wondering how he has become "the bad guy" whilst he obsessively attempts to fold time back on itself, to create a small sphere of influence and stability that cannot be touched by reality. With D-FENS, it is the delusional idea of reconciliation with wife and family that spurs him on towards the tragic resolution, with Bloom it is the family of readers, those 'gifted individuals' who are relatively unsullied by "the School of Resentment" that he hopes to reach by increasing the stakes, escalating the violence to apocalyptic levels, and destroying the opposition with his aesthetic *jihad*. Fuelled by the old maxim that the strongest form of defence is attack, Bloom attacks mercilessly, hailing literary criticism as "an ancient art" that is being destroyed by the cancerous growth of cultural criticism which is little more than "another dismal social science". (521-2)

Again, as is so often the case, an either/or scenario is erected: we can have the canon or we can have post-structural, linguistic and emancipatory theories, but we cannot have both. Yet this principle of separation is intellectually unsustainable. To judge greatness, as Bloom

so obviously suggests we do, is to imply a criteria, a body of work that is somehow inferior, and to erase the existence and value of those texts is to undermine the idea of greatness at a structural level. Thus, Bloom's insistence that the only relation to great texts worth bothering with is their relation with other great texts fails dismally on several levels. To begin with, whilst he is probably correct in stating that value judgement cannot be completely suspended, and that reading is an activity that requires solitude, he is incorrect in his assumption that there is no social aspect to aesthetic reception.

To be effective, aesthetic judgement demands consensus and any appeal to consensus automatically becomes a societal concern. Bennett (1990), for instance, reveals how the universalism of aesthetic discourses is dependent upon the presupposition of a transcendental valuing subject, an existing body of knowledge and an artistic public sphere to provide an object of contemplation. Thus, he argues, that although an assumption of disinterestedness is an *a priori* condition of universal judgement and taste, such disinterestedness is based upon an idea, or to be more specific, an *ideology* of a common valuing subject, and those who dispute such an ideology, those who do not agree with or conform to its judgements must be persuaded or penalised. (165)

Like a stage magician seeking to make an elephant disappear with the aid of mirrors and misdirection, Bloom blatantly ignores such arguments as he forces his readers to focus upon the vast display of texts at his disposal. These works exist, he tells us, these are the texts that have endured the ravages of time and are the only authority we should ever need or want. Whilst certain texts currently being championed enjoy a brief and temporary popularity they will undoubtedly fail the ancient test of canonisation, which, he informs us, is compulsion. The canonical work, unlike the politically correct text, exerts an unbearable,

almost supernatural influence that draws readers to it, and “unless it demands rereading, the work does not qualify”. (30)

This assumption, whilst superficially compelling, is an incredibly facile argument. Bloom is not the only person who has spent a lifetime reading, many of the critics he castigates have the same credentials and, indeed, this “ancient claim for canonicity” can easily be dispelled by anyone who cares to study the contents of their bookshelves. For instance, I am aware of one woman who, for as long as I have known her, reads and re-reads Catherine Cookson’s novel *The Dwelling Place*, and yet it is unlikely that anyone will bestow canonicity upon this text. Similarly, amongst the books that I have returned to for several years are *Macbeth*, *Heart of Darkness*, *London Fields*, *1984*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Midnight’s Children* all of which have some claim towards canonical status, but I also find myself returning to texts such as *The Godfather*, *The Pelican Brief*, *The Parsifal Mosaic*, *The Communist Manifesto* and *The Prince*. The area of commonality indicated by these texts has little to do with any conception of greatness, but rather a fascination with power, power-relations and the oppressive abuse of authority: a pre-occupation that, to a certain degree, predetermines not only my reading but also any product of that reading including this paper.

Another feature of these texts, and there is undoubtedly a strong correlation between the two, is that the works which hold the greatest fascination for me, are predominantly written by male authors. A logical conclusion, therefore, is that in a subtle act of psychic and political transference I promote myself, my interests and ideologies onto the texts that I support and oppose, and whilst having this surrogate self praised and acknowledged, however indirectly or discreetly, offers a degree of narcissistic pleasure, it would be arrogant and delusional at best, and megalomaniac at worst, for me to assume that my selection, and the

motivations that determine it, can be universalised. Yet this is the assumption that Bloom makes: because he is essentially elitist, elitism becomes “a condition of the spirit, as it is a condition of literature” (69); his obsession with Shakespeare determines Shakespeare at the centre of the canon; because he is a Romantic at heart, he champions Romanticism and, because his article of faith is the sanctity of the Western Canon he declares in all sincerity that “without the Canon, we cease to think” (41) without pausing to consider the obvious fact that even his Canon is the product, rather than the originator, of imaginative thought.

Indeed, when we consider his rejection of historicism, philosophy, politics, psychoanalysis and sociology to name but a few of his targets, it could just as easily be argued that Bloom’s obsession with the canon is a serious impediment to serious thinking in any field, literary or otherwise. Like *DFENS*, he is running on empty, working purely by instinct, substituting passion for reason and, through the elevation of a naïve empiricism above all else, he celebrates alienation, isolation and the capitalist ethos as unquestionable virtues:

It is a mark of the degeneracy of literary study that one is considered an eccentric for holding that the literary is not dependent upon the philosophical and that the aesthetic is irreducible to ideology or to metaphysics. Aesthetic criticism returns us to the autonomy of imaginative literature and the sovereignty of the solitary soul, the reader, not as a person in society but as the deep self, our ultimate inwardness. (10–11)

There are two other points that Bloom raises that ought to be dealt with, both of which revolve around the strange assumption that any literary critic, pedagogue or student who finds Marx, Lacan, Freud,

Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Barthes, and a host of other key contemporary figures useful in their readings are nihilistically seeking to destroy “all aesthetic and intellectual standards ... in the name of social harmony and the remedying of historical injustice”. (7)

The School of Resentment, Bloom asserts, has no interest in literature and certainly no love of Shakespeare. They are intellectual Borgs driven by a compulsive collectivism, seeking to assimilate and destroy any spark of individualism that they encounter. This claim, which baldly states that anyone in the grip of theory ignores, devalues or seeks to erase Bloom’s ‘sacred’ texts is more easily dealt with because it is blatantly untrue. Theory is created through direct critical engagement, and the multitude of books, journals and symposiums at our disposal all stand testimony to the fact that current theoretical perspectives have created new openings and opportunities for readers to examine and relate to the texts that Bloom claims are being ignored or devalued. Indeed, rather than ignoring or destroying the canon, contemporary literary and cultural theories have, in many ways, enriched it. Culler (1997) argues that “theory has reinvigorated the traditional literary canon, opening the door to more ways of reading the ‘great works’ of English and American literature. Never has so much been written about Shakespeare; he is studied from every angle conceivable”. (48–9)

The difference between Bloom’s reverential attitude towards the Canon, and the way canonical texts are being treated by contemporary critics who apply more sophisticated methodologies, is one of perspective. Bloom, and other neo-conservatives are primarily exclusive. They seek to guarantee the purity of literature by maintaining a form of aesthetic apartheid, whereas one of the greatest benefits that the ‘theory wars’ have brought is a willingness to be inclusive, to democratise the literary agenda. The very act of refusing to freeze the syllabus, of opening up

the canon and reintegrating less venerated texts and authors, of addressing themselves to those works that actively engage the interests of the reading public is, in itself an act of good faith and one that could prove to be a vital step towards developing a dialogue between academia and the reading public. In contrast, the Bloomian line of defence is a discourse of silence: it is not negotiable, it has very little to say and there is no possibility of progression. The Western Canon are the books, plays and poems that anyone of developed sensibilities shall read and the dialogue stops there. Bloom, of course, is not the only defender of the canon and there are other, infinitely more reasonable positions available. Nixon (1990), for instance, addresses the same concerns as Bloom although from a less emotive and much more rational position.

The principle objection to the canon, Nixon states, “derives from our conviction that students model, consciously or unconsciously, the values articulated in texts” (85), and the underlying values that are inherent in many canonical texts are, he acknowledges, imperialistic, racist and sexist. To abandon the canon and “replace it with titillating and faddish stuff attractive only for fleeting political and ideological agendas” would, however, prove to be a fatal error that forfeits “our literary birthright and [rids] ourselves of aesthetic standards”. (86)

Where Nixon differs from Bloom is his acceptance of literature’s social role and the value of theory in opening up these texts. The value of the canon, he asserts, is not that it provides a fixed moral framework that must be rigidly adhered to but its ability to illustrate the unlimited potentialities for human idealism:

... the values articulated in the best literature are not prescriptive but descriptive; the best literature not precise answers but unlimited possibilities, not solutions but ways in which we can negotiate solutions;

it creates opportunities for exploration and discovery; it broadens ourselves and liberates our mind-forged manacles from provincialisms, parochialisms, and prejudices. Such claims are most successfully and comprehensively realised in the works that comprise the traditional canon. Within them we find the most effective expressions of the social injustices and inequalities, the plight of the disenfranchised, matters of ecology, historical and literary relevance, the imaginative exploration of ethical and moral issues, aesthetic value, models of good writing, and more than an ample supply of vital images. (87)

Thus, rather than abandon the canon, or open it up completely to any “faddish” text that comes along, Nixon argues that we should maintain and engage it on two fronts: first, as “a tradition that promotes high ideals” in a world of growing pessimism and increasing scepticism, and also on a more localised plane of inquiry, as a means of discussing specific problematics such as race, gender, nationalism and subjectivity. Furthermore, Nixon argues, it is no longer possible or even desirable to valorise the canon in the same manner as Bloom, and the preservation of the canon also brings with it acceptance of pedagogical responsibility. The price of preserving and maintaining the canon, he suggests, is the assumption of adversarial criticism. “Clear, critical readings”, he states, “should cause us to recognise, discuss, and check the will to power sponsored by any text” but there is, he maintains, no good reason why such criticism cannot be taught and learnt through a direct engagement with those texts that also provide “the best literary models of what we should become, cherish, and avoid”. (86)

Perhaps the most significant development in the field of literary studies, and one that Bloom laments with monotonous regularity, is the

emergence of feminism. Any discussion on the relevance of the canon ought, therefore, to include the feminist perspective on this issue. Contrary to Bloom's assumption that feminists resent great literature and are against the canon *per se*, even the most cursory examination of feminist engagements with this subject clearly illustrate that Bloom's position is a grotesque parody of the situation. Waxman (1990) for instance, makes the point that "Modern education should equip students with the knowledge that enhances democracy" (160) and argues that feminism plays a vital role in democratising the classroom. It is, she argues, the process of canon formation rather than the individual texts - great or otherwise - that are included in such a formation which causes the greatest problems. Literary history, she stresses, is subjectively conceived and a responsible pedagogue who introduces students to literature must also make them realise that the texts and anthologies they work with are chosen for specific purposes, and they are neither neutral nor obvious selections. Indeed, the reverse is true, and a great deal of thought and contemplation has gone into their construction. In other words, literary studies should not only be concerned with the interrogation of selected texts, they should also bring into question the process of selection itself, and raise the consciousness of the students to the fact that, rather than being the timeless and transcendent body of work that Bloom would have us believe, the literary canon is an historical and political phenomenon and any "individuals who find the means and the power can change the canon". (151)

Promoting this acceptance of the canon as a product of negotiation and compromise is an incredibly positive move away from the passivity of mere appreciation, and one that realigns the authority within the classroom, thereby creating the conditions necessary for developing an interested and equal community of readers with a common desire to

share the text rather than advocating a strategy of teacher and student, expert and lay-person, master and acolyte. It is this latter, dictatorial orientation to literary studies that Bloom wishes to reassert although, ironically, it was a very similar attitude that proved to be one of the greatest flaws in the Leavis approach.

“To become a disciple of Leavis and Queenie” Myers (1997) wrote, “was to commit to a religious sect with a taste for martyrdom” (18), and the patriarchal religiosity and tyrannical intractability of such a position was fundamental in the desire for achieving a complete and total break with the discourse of tradition. Yet, such a move, as Belsey (1982) correctly states, is one that is fraught with difficulties and is almost certainly doomed to failure:

To desert the institution in the present state of things is simply to hand it over to the Leavisites, whose influence is already dominant. A more constructive strategy is to treat English as a site of struggle, to generate a new critical discourse, to re-read the great tradition not for the sake of valorising it, but in order to release its plurality. (130)

There are several interesting points to note here: first, which is a stark contrast to the counter-argument by the neo-Conservatives such as Bloom and Brooks who assume that the ‘School of Resentment’ occupy a position of supremacy, is the sense of being under siege, of being a minority grouping fighting for a critical space that can only be attained by exorcising the influence of Leavis’ dictates on the Tradition: secondly, there is the emphasis on pluralism and critical reasoning which challenges the authority of singularity and assumptions of greatness upon which all dogmatic discourses are based, and finally, Belsey’s insistence on re-reading the tradition suggests that feminism does not seek to throw

out the literary canon, but searches for ways to re-open the dialogue between reader and text in a less judgmental and more positive manner.

Robinson (1989), in her survey of feminist criticism and their approaches to literature raises several interesting points regarding the idea of a canon. The canon, she argues, amounts to little more than a 'gentleman's agreement' about "established standards of judgement and taste" (616), and is lacking in any formal criteria or significant economic investment whatsoever. Furthermore, she argues, this 'agreement' doubly inscribes patriarchy through the initial selection of authors and the decisions that are made regarding what counts as great literature on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the proliferation of female figures in the predominantly male-authored texts which "contributes to the body of information, stereotype, inference and surmise about the female sex that is generally in the culture". (617) Thus, within the canon, we are confronted with images of women within writing, rather than encountering women writing images.

Feminists, Robinson suggests, deal with this problem of lack of female representation, coupled with an over-abundance of male generated gender images, in two specific ways: they either seek to re-read the tradition in much the same way that Belsey suggests, or through acts of literary recovery, they seek to force open the canon to include lesser known, newly discovered or frequently ignored women writers. Both strategies are flawed, however, and undermined by a significant difference between the unlimited potentiality of a canon, and the restrictive practice of creating a syllabus. Consequently, Robinson suggests, rather than offering a direct challenge to the 'normal' masculine tradition, feminism risks becoming a sub-genre, a pacifying supplement to mainstream literary studies. Nor, she suggests, can the idea of a feminist counter-canon be effectively sustained because, under the rubric

of feminist criticism, other significant and important areas of investigation and recovery are under way:

Black feminist criticism has the task of demonstrating that, in the face of all the obstacles a racist and sexist society has been able to erect, there is a continuity of black women who have written and written well ... Black women's literature is also an element of black literature as a whole, where the recognised voices have usually been male. A triple imperative is therefore at work: establishing a discrete and significant black female tradition, then situating it within black literature and (along with the rest of that literature) within the common American literary heritage. (623)

One could also include writings from other ethnic minorities, working class women, lesbian literature, etc., and if we widen the scope to include male as well as female writers, as well as taking into account literary genres and sub-genres, we are forced to ask the question how many canons or traditions do we need or even want? Would it not be better to abandon the idea of canonicity and pragmatically accept the impossibility of unifying the heterogeneous body of literature altogether? Again we find ourselves in an either/or situation, and although such dichotomies are convenient in theory, they rarely work in practice.

There is, for instance, a validity to Williams's (1989) argument that "the term *English* literature itself rests on an ancient political and cultural scandal" and any "notion of a single, central tradition, however useful as a means of accounting for the obvious and crucial interconnectedness of writings we hold major, is simply not sustainable" (28–9), but it is equally true to state that the creation of canons, and the establishment of traditions, can be a proactive force: a statement of rebellion and denial by

disenfranchised, marginalised and/or previously oppressed groups who seek to affirm their independence and identity.

It is also interesting to note that the canon, by providing a focal point for dispute and debate, is as important to those who oppose it as it is to those who support it, and this latter perspective supports Kermode's (1990) argument that the idea of the canon is a structural necessity of literary studies which, despite its unpleasant associations and complicities with various questionable ideologies, makes the past open and accessible to the modern and "if we want the monuments, the documents we value, we must preserve them in spite of their evil associations and find ways of showing that their value somehow persists in our changed world". (20) The process of canonisation, Kermode contends, freezes and estranges texts, divorcing them from time and effectively transforms the individual texts into chapters of *the* book thus enabling us "to handle otherwise unmanageable historical deposits". (20)

The problem it would seem, is not with the idea or the existence of the canon, but the way in which such an idea is used. After all, each reader constructs their own canon of desert island books according to their tastes, interests and sensibilities, just as each area of specialism or theoretical inquiry creates a body of essential works. It is, however, one thing to acknowledge the presence and usefulness of a canon and quite another thing to establish it as an unquestionable authority. To erect the canon as the final court of appeal within literary studies is to accept a national and cultural identity that is based upon privilege and exclusion. The canonical texts might very well be the greatest books ever written, but unless they can be discussed on terms other than their greatness, then we shall find that there is little else to say about them.

To hold something as sacred, in other words, is to demand acquiescence and enforce silence. It is only when the profane, secular elements

are placed in conjunction with the sacred, when we acknowledge the interdependence of both modes as essential to a literary community of writers and readers, that dialogue and discourse is possible. Contrary to Bloom who, as we have seen, insists upon the notion of dead giants as the primary source of literary influence, Butler's (1990) idea that however "much an artist is indebted to the mighty dead, he or she almost certainly borrows more from the living" (12) appears to be the more reasonable of the two.

Writers do not live or work in a vacuum. They have social lives and forge personal and professional relationships and rivalries that have a direct influence on their writing and a sensible, and responsible approach to literature must surely acknowledge and investigate these contemporary relationships. Furthermore, as Butler rightly states, to ignore the literary community that these canonical writers inhabited is to deny the opportunity to test the validity of claims for their status as 'major' writers whilst devaluing in significant ways the texts that they have produced. If, the future of English does not lie in the move towards cultural studies, (Walmsley 2006) then it is also possible to state that a retroactive defence of re-establishing the canon as a monolithic authority is equally untenable. If there is to be a future for English, then it ought to be one that is able to incorporate political and ethical responsibility, aesthetic pleasure, a degree of value judgement, critical analysis underpinned by a rational and acceptable theoretical framework and a community of readers united by a desire to share, preserve and discuss the texts of the past and present without prejudice. It is highly unlikely, however, that any approach other than an acceptance of difference and plurality, an acknowledgement of literary studies as a free sphere of engagement will satisfy these requirements.

Notes

- 1) See Bloom (1973) for a full and detailed explanation of his aesthetic theory.

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