



Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* (1987), Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (1990, 1998), Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994), and David Denby's *The Great Books* (1996)": all apologies for the canon – became bestsellers and, thus, were instrumental in letting the specifics and consequences of the debate become widely known (Morrissey 2005b: 1). Taking cognisance of the debate, Stanford University, in 1988, undertook a revision of its "Western Culture" curriculum, the upshot of which, besides a titular redo – "Culture, Ideas, Values" (CIV) – was *one* of its eight tracks requiring Western civilisation to be taught in a multicultural context (Searle 1990). Within two years of the Stanford revision, the University of California (UC) campuses at Santa Barbara (in 1989) and Irvine (in 1990) carried through theirs, this time, to ensure that freshmen are educated in the historical experiences of minorities within the United States (Grandjeat 2006: 29). The debate's success in influencing pedagogy notwithstanding – and perhaps because of it – the five years between 1988 and 1993 would witness critiques of the conditions and consequences of canon formation hitting a production overdrive.

Among the more discussed publications of this five-year period were Frank Kermode's *History and Value* (1988); Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Contingencies of Value* (1988); Arnold Krupat's *The Voice in the Margin* (1989); Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature* (1990); Paul Lauter's *Canons and Contexts* (1991); Henry Louis Gates, Jr's *Loose Canons* (1992), Gerald Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1992), and John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* (1993). A British intervention in an otherwise American debate, *History and Value*, examined the relation between text and context, the conditions of literary survival, and why the canon becomes a historical necessity, while *Contingencies of Value* recommended the replacement – non-controversial for the poststructuralist/postmodernist milieu of the time – of objectivist/axiological models of literary evaluation with contingent – or more accurately, "contingently objective" – ones of utility dependent on, and determined by, social, political, economic, individual, institutional, and historical factors. *The Voice in the Margin* considered the possibilities of (1) no-canon, (2) a canonical revision on ethical-ontological grounds, and (3) a canon based solely on experiential authority, before suggesting a heterodox – by which Krupat means "unity-in-difference" – literature *and* society as the way forward for America and the world at large. An apocalyptic and encompassing title notwithstanding, *The Death of Literature* limited itself to analysing, what Kernan perceives as, the passing of the Romantic and Modernist literature – emphasising authorial authority and textual integrity – and attributed the said death to the combined effects of techno-scientific advances – mainly, the eclipse of print by electronic culture – leftist assaults, and the deployment of radical critical practices such as deconstruction. Essentially, a collection of fourteen previously presented and/or published papers from 1974 to 1990, *Canons and Contexts* focused on (1)

the institutional means of canonising like syllabi, critical orthodoxies, and literary anthologies, (2) the potential of canonising to change social, political, and intellectual practices of evaluation, (3) faculty retrenchment and the exploitation of adjunct labour, and (4) the university's metamorphosis from a centre of learning to a consumer-oriented marketplace of ideas. Less ambitious in scope and scale, *Loose Canons* argued that the acceptance of *race* as a social rather than biological category needs to be supplemented by an acknowledgement that racism is a socially real – and, therefore, consequential – impediment requiring arduous negotiation, and that the emergence of a composite culture, where Euro- and Afro-Americans respectfully coexist, is dependent on African American writers finding their legitimate place in the national canon. Attending to professional anxieties ensuing from the debate, *Beyond the Culture Wars* advocated that conflicts over the canon – which, for Graff, is a sign of academic vitality – must be taught to and argued out in front of the class – in a collaborative and dialogic fashion by warring professors – so that students are informed of the issues, positions, and stakes involved. *Cultural Capital*, which introduced Pierre Bourdieu and the sociology of literature to the American academic scene, considered the importance of social and institutional conditions of canonising and concluded that canonicity is a function not just of identities, but of literacy, language use, critical and aesthetic practices, and political economy (Guillory 2004). It attributed canon trouble and the crisis in the humanities to the rise of a technically trained professional-managerial class for whom literature was no longer a source of cultural capital. The theoretical turn in the humanities, by a similar sociological logic, was ascribed to the humanist's necessity, under capitalist and institutional duress, to adopt a hard, scientific method of analysis.

The next nineteen years of relative lull and retrospection witnessed Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), focusing on literature's role in naturalising nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European imperialism; Robert Scholes, in *The Rise and Fall of English* (1998), advocating English Studies abandoning the Great Books and Western Civ curriculum for a modern trivium of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric; E. Dean Kolbas, in *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (2001), striving to salvage canonicity – by means of Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory – from sociological critiques of literature and the literary canon;<sup>1</sup> Kermode, in *Pleasure and Change* (2004), examining the fluctuant relation between aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic valuation; Lee Morrissey, in *Debating the Canon* (2005), compiling a chronologically ordered, single-volume reader of nearly three hundred years' – i.e., from a Joseph Addison essay in *Tatler* in 1709 (No. 108; Dec. 15-17) to the Azar Nafisi bestseller, *Reading Lolita in*

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1. Subsequent references to *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (Kolbas 2001) are indicated by *CT* and the page number(s).

*Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, in 2002 – disquisitions on canonicity and the canon; and David Fishelov, in *The Dialogues with/and Great Books* (2010), locating canonicity in a text's ability to foster numerous and diverse dialogues – creative, critical, or passive – over time. The period also witnessed the turmoil within English Studies having a knock-on effect on other disciplines, especially history, where the latter's version of the canon wars, the history wars, yielded volumes such as Keith Windschuttle's *The Killing of History* (1994) – decrying postmodern influences in history – J.L. Granatstein's *Who Killed Canadian History?* (1998) – lamenting fragmentation of national history – and Grever and Stuurman's *Beyond the Canon* (2007) – attending to the challenges of devising history for a multicultural audience.

Though the theoretical assumptions behind the major texts – as their digests above indicate – differ, and though those differences remain important, it would not be beside the point if one, without denying the significance of those differences, followed Kolbas and grouped the majority of texts – based on overlapping similarities in their conclusions – into liberal pluralist and conservative humanist. While Kolbas is not alone in offering such denominations – John Searle (1996: 91), for example, speaks of “the ‘defenders’ and the ‘challengers’ of the tradition”, Harold Bloom (1994: 4) of “the right-wing defenders of the Canon ... and the School of Resentment”, and Fishelov (2008: 338-339) of “the school of social power” and “the school of aesthetics” – his account, which focuses on the *literary* canon, is peculiar for situating the debate within a history – beginning in fifth-century BCE Greece – of (the term) canon. In a debate where shared assumptions have been hard to discern, a history of the idea and/or ideology argued for and against offers a site where the pluralists and humanists could productively meet.

Kolbas begins by tracing the term canon to the ancient Greek *kanna* – denoting “types of reed” with straight, firm stems – and the associated word *kanon* (CT 12). Through the literal and figural extension of the use of *kanna*, *kanon* referred to “straight rod, bar, or ruler, as well as rule, standard, and model” (CT 12). In time, “it acquired the meaning of the right measure [in architecture] and ... correct proportion” in the arts; and the latter sense was enforced further when the Argive sculptor Polykleitos, in his (now lost) Doryphoros or “Spear Bearer” (c. 450-440 BCE), shaped (what was deemed) “a harmony of design ... never before attained in Greek sculpture” (CT 12). The admiration for the Doryphoros and its creator – along with the use of *kanon* to denote correct proportion – persisted into the Roman times, so that Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE), in his *Natural History* (77 CE), described Polykleitos as the sculptor who “perfected the art of sculpture” and “the Doryphoros as ‘the statue that artists call the *Canon*, ... [and] draw their outlines from’” (CT 12).

Interestingly, the Doryphoros was a concrete setting into work of the sculptural technique that Polykleitos had expounded geometrically in a (now

lost) treatise titled *Kanon* (c. 454 BCE) (Tobin 1975; Gorak 1991: 10). Once the mathematical proportions of an ideal human figure laid down in the treatise were accepted as exemplified in the Doryphoros, for Aegean sculptors, *Kanon* became the manual, and the Doryphoros the model, of “perfected naturalism” (CT 13). The mathematical basis of the Doryphoros and *Kanon* was instrumental in Plato (429-347 BCE), in his *Protagoras* (380 BCE), endorsing “Polykleitos ... [as] the exemplar of all sculptors” (CT 13), paving the way thus – by virtue of the fact that for Plato “excellence, beauty, justice, and goodness were each forms of the idea of truth, which ideally had to be comprehended by anyone who would be genuinely knowing and just” (CT 14) – for conjoining the “notion of artistic excellence ... with ... knowledge and morality” (CT 14; see also McCague 2009: 26). The use of (the term) *Kanon* to denote exemplary moral behaviour had certain Euripidean precedents, too – in *Hecuba* (c. 425 BCE), for example, after the Greeks had sacrificed Polyxena to the ghost of Achilles, the (erstwhile) Queen of Troy “reflects that ‘good nurturing teaches noble behavior, and if a man learns this lesson well, he knows what is base, measuring it by the standards [*kanoni*] of the honorable’” (CT 14; brackets in the original). The use gained further currency and import when Epicurus (341-270 BCE), in a (now lost) tractate on natural philosophy named *Of the Standard: A Work Entitled Canon*, allied the notion of artistic excellence with truth, morality, and universality (Gorak 1991: 13; CT 14).

The philosophically endorsed claim to universality of the idea of the canon notwithstanding, canonicity, from its beginning, was tied to the practical vagaries of reception, conservation, and transmission of texts and artefacts. From the third century BCE onward, Alexandrian scholars – among them were scholars of the Library of Alexandria, established in the early third century BCE and in place until laid waste in a civil war during the reign of Emperor Aurelian (c. 215-275) in the late third century CE; had a successor, destroyed in 391 CE by Christians – were involved in “cataloguing, copying, and editing texts” (CT 14) as well as in preparing “lists of the most distinguished writers in various genres ranging from poetry and philosophy to oratory and history” (CT 14-15). In forming and affirming the inaugural literary canons of the ancient Western world, both these exercises proved crucial.

When Romans in their admiration for Greek culture began adopting established Greek models in art and literature, the notion of the canon found its way into the nascent Latin high culture. *Kanon* was transliterated into Latin as *canon*, and many a Roman writer – among them, Virgil, Seneca, Plautus, and Terence – claimed a Greek pedigree – by transforming and imitating Homer, Theocritus, Hesiod, Sophocles, Euripides, Menander, et al. – to ensure acceptance for his literary practice (CT 15). The deployment of Greek models and motifs was driven also by the desire to legitimise – i.e., by invoking precedents – contemporary politics (CT 15). Virgil’s glorifying

of the Augustan rule in *Aeneid* (written c. 29-19 BCE) through an epic charting of the imperial lineage unto the Homeric hero Aeneas – *while, at the same time, bringing together numerous strands of legends that had sprung from and accrued to Homer’s Aeneas* – and his divine mandate to found Lavinium, the parent town of Rome, is a case in point (CT 15). And in the current debate, it is the canonical writings’ capacity to justify political practice – the potential for which was inherent in the Greek *Kanon*’s claim to universality issuing from its approximation of truth – that has been subjected to extreme critical scrutiny (CT 15).

By the beginning of the Common Era, “the first explicit distinction of a whole literary canon, as a *collected* body of texts”, was drawn; and in the second century CE, the ground for the future antagonism between the canonical and the contemporary, and the transmutation of the canonical into the classical, was laid (CT 15). This came about when the Roman Aulus Gellius, author of *Attic Nights*, “coined the term *classicus*” to label the exemplary authors of antiquity (CT 15). The coupling of authority and the ancients – which was already at work in Quintilian’s (35-c. 96 CE) counting of Cicero (106-143 BCE) “among the *antiqui*” – led to a hierarchy of ancient/modern, classic/contemporary, major/minor writers being formulated (CT 15). Then on, cycles of writing against the ancients and writing with the ancients – i.e., periods wherein the classics were “rejected and superseded” and periods wherein their authority was upheld and acknowledged – were to shape the history of Western literature (CT 15). Subsequent debates on the worth and merit of a work of literature also had their “roots ... partly in such ancient versus modern distinctions” (CT 15).<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the fourth century CE, the canon was understood as an exhaustive list of books – deemed morally, grammatically, and artistically exemplary, and of both pagan and Christian authorship – employed “for pedagogical instruction in the liberal arts” (CT 16). Though the list did not remain uncontested, it preserved “a remarkable degree of consistency” and was in use in schools across Europe “from the fifth to the thirteenth century and beyond” (CT 16). The writers included in the list were thought of “as *equally* valuable ... timeless ... [and] examples to learn from and to follow”, and, more often than not, they were “Aesop, Homer, Plato, Terence, Cicero, Virgil, Horace, Livy, Ovid, Seneca, Lucan, Statius, Cato, Juvenal, and Boethius” (CT 16; my italics). Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* (written c. 1308-1321) and Chaucer’s *The House of Fame* (written 1374-1385) – both written more than nine hundred years after the list’s initial formulation in the fourth

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2. Zhang Yingjin (2011: 612) observes that “[i]n spite of its long history of usage in the European context, ‘canon’ does not emerge as a key concept in literary criticism until, by some calculation, as recent as the 1980s” – i.e., Kolbas’s statement, “the roots of subsequent *canon debates* lie partly in such ancient versus modern distinctions” is misleading, unless, of course, the claim is exclusively about debates after the 1980s (CT 15; my italics).

century CE – attest to the reverence in which many of the said *auctores* and their model works were held toward the end of the Middle Ages – i.e., for close to a millennium, the list of “secular canonical *auctores*” remained, at least in the eyes of educated Europeans, the source of learning and wisdom, the symbol of moral and grammatical perfection, and the embodiment of artistic and literary excellence (CT 16). And when, with the rise of vernacular literature – first, in Italian, through the works of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, and Tasso – the history of European literature began to segment, a writer’s ability to skilfully deploy Latin and, to a lesser extent, Greek classics often proved the difference between anonymity and canonical prestige – think, for instance, of Dante’s appropriation of Virgil; Shakespeare’s of Plutarch, Seneca, and Ovid; Dryden and Pope’s of Theocritus and Virgil; Racine’s of Euripides; and Molière’s of Plautus and Terence (CT 16). But should not the recurrence of the canonical and its perpetual ghost-writing of writing as literature – i.e., literature as repetition, a rewriting, of the canonical – force us to consider, is there literature outside the canon?

Notwithstanding the changes that the invention of the printing press (in the 1440s) introduced to the production, transmission, and reception of manuscripts, the classical canon retained its pedagogical function among the European elite – as the fit guide of instruction “in all that was required to govern” – until the eighteenth century (CT 17). But in the three hundred years between the fifteenth and the eighteenth century – a period of steady growth in literacy, readership, and industrial publishing – there was a gradual but significant surge in the number of books printed in Europe, and which, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, threatened to reduce the status of the classics to “ever-accumulating print products” (CT 18). Since the stature of the classics was what made the distinction between writing and literature – where “the definition of *literature*, which had formerly embraced any and all written material ... [narrowed] to mean works of a particular quality” – possible and real, an assault on the classics was seen by the intelligentsia for what it was: an assault on learning, taste, perfection, judgement, and authority (CT 18). Their anxieties, which were exacerbated by advances in the natural sciences, shifts in the way history was conceived and employed, and yet another “quarrel of the ancients and the moderns” – this time, brilliantly parodied in Jonathan Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) – found expression, in England, in Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad Variorum* (1728) and Samuel Johnson’s *The Lives of English Poets* (1779-1781) (CT 17-18).<sup>3</sup> Johnson’s essays and *The Lives* – both self-conscious exercises in “investing critical authority [on literature] ... at a time when it was believed

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3. On the Italian and French origins of the “quarrel” – in the writings of Alessandro Tassoni, François Boisrobert, and Charles Perrault – its introduction to England by the French expatriate Charles Saint-Évremond, and the English contributions – mainly, from Sir William Temple, William Wotton, Jonathan Swift, and Richard Bentley – to it, see Schueller (1960: 315-316).

to be threatened by the growing deluge of printed material” – in their success in affirming a canon of English literature, also announced the arrival on the scene of an *éminence grise*, the professional critic, who, in the years to come, would prove central to the life of literature (CT 18).

The growth in industrial publishing, together with that in literacy and readership, led to the emergence of two new careers in eighteenth-century Europe: professional writing and professional criticism (CT 18). Concurrent to the said professionalising, in England, a decade of intense lobbying by the Stationers’ Company resulted in parliament replacing the relapsed (in 1695) Licensing Act of 1662 with the Copyright Act in 1709 – with France and Germany following suit in 1777 and 1794 respectively – which, in addition to recognising books as “the property of their authors, legally protected [them] as commodities for exchange little different, in principle, from manufactured goods” (CT 18-19). Once the commercial logic took over, the forces that stood to gain from commercialisation – writers and publishers – sought to maximise their profit, and in a society tending toward equality and democracy, the avenues for which lay in catering to the interests and tastes of a numerically significant ordinary readership. The latter’s preference for the readily consumable, in time, led to writers and publishers exiting the distant, difficult, and sophisticated world of Greek and Latin classics and investing in the less forbidding provinces of the national vernacular. Finally, when the third pillar in professional publishing, the critic, began employing the tools of scholarly text editing on vernacular writings – investing them thus with critical authority – the stage was set for the modern, secular-democratic treatment of the classical on a level with the vernacular (CT 18).

With the emergence of modern European states, nationalist ideologies bestowed on literature a certain significance – as hypostatising the character, culture, and historical experiences of a people – and which, in conjunction with developments within publishing as well as professional criticism, led to the establishment of national literary canons. While the French and English attempts to delineate a national canon commenced in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – i.e., “when the economic power and national identities of France and England were becoming established” (CT 19) – in Germany, such efforts began a century later, in the nineteenth, when, due to the events surrounding the Prussian capitulation to Napoleon Bonaparte at Jena (in 1806) and the efforts of poets like Ernst Arndt (1769-1860) and educators like Friedrich Jahn (1778-1852), German nationalism came into its own. Of the three, the literary canon in France arose at a time when popular, non-judgemental “worldly anthologies” – such as the anonymously published *Recueil des plus belles pièces des poètes français* (5 vols.; 1692) – were, in prestige and usage, being eclipsed by the judgemental and, therefore, exclusionary “pedagogical anthologies” – like Goujet’s *Histoire de la littérature française* (18 vols.; 1740) (Dejean 1988: 27-31). The latter anthologies – fashioned in response to eighteenth-century French commen-



tators' demand for a standardised national education capable of disabusing students of their "provincial prejudices" *and* instructing them in the essentials of Frenchness – had as their objective the civic *and* religious perfection of Frenchmen (Dejean 1988: 30-31); that is, in early modern France, the notion of education – one of re-education: a disciplining, civilising, and refashioning – fed off, furthered, and fostered the notions of literature and model citizenship. Across the Channel, in England, the quest for a national literary canon resulted in a section of (the south transept of) Westminster Abbey, "the coronation church of the English kings", metamorphosing into a dedicated, posthumous resting place for celebrated writers (Sanders 1994: 1). The revered section – Poets' Corner – in time, expanded to include busts, cenotaphs, slabs, statues, and even tablets, and one such monument, "a spectacular mural cenotaph, [designed by William Kent and] carved by Peter Scheemakers, was erected to the honour of William Shakespeare", the later-centre of the English canon, in 1730 – i.e., a hundred and twenty-four years after his unremarkable burial in Holy Trinity Church in rural Stratford-upon-Avon (Sanders 1994: 2).<sup>4</sup> Before long, benefitting from Augustan adaptations of his plays and ceremonies like the Stratford Jubilee of 1769, the stature of Shakespeare reached such heights that "his works [became] 'national treasures'" (CT 19) and he, "the transcendent personification of the national ideal" (CT 20). Likewise, in Germany, events such as the Schiller celebration of 1859 – organised a decade after the failed revolutions of 1848-1849 and *explicitly* positioned and utilised by the celebrants (1) to affirm a distinct national and cultural identity, (2) to articulate the aspirations of German people, and (3) to emphasise German cultural unity – performed much the same functions that the anthologies and Poets' Corner had performed in France and England, so that not long after, Little Germany (*Kleindeutschland*) – by now, the principal power on the continent (i.e., after the Treaty of Frankfurt [1871]) – had a canon of its own (Hohendahl 1989: 179-180).

Nationalism, at times, transmuted into imperialism, and on such occasions and when the aggressor deemed it fit, the canon became the cane with which to discipline and acculturate subjugated peoples. In the English context, such

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4. Here, there is more than an indication that, in England, a national literary tradition was more a work in progress than an achieved reality in the early- to mid-eighteenth century. For an analysis of how central the marginality experienced by English-language writers within a European literary tradition dominated by Italian, Spanish, and French writers was in shaping the English-language literary culture of eighteenth-century Britain, see Yadav (2004). Yadav's study suggests that eighteenth-century Britain's imperial ambitions, raucous nationalism, and xenophobia are more usefully understood as the attempt of a self-consciously provincial culture to transcend its marginality within Europe, than – as so far has been the case – as the assured self-expression of a metropolitan culture.

culturing and disciplining began in the mid-eighteenth century, in Scotland, when the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow decided to employ texts of English writers to teach rhetoric and belles-lettres (Sanders 1994: 7-8).<sup>5</sup> The arrival of English as a university subject, a significant moment in the history of English canon formation, was intended to counteract Scottish provincialism and the threat of Jacobite risings (CT 20) – which persisted from 1688 to at least 1745 – by introducing Scots to the “refinements of the classics and ... the superior felicities of modern English stylists” (Sanders 1994: 8). The integrationist, progressivist, and moral thrust of Scottish English was imported back to England when two newly established colleges in London, the University College London (UCL) (established in 1826) and the King’s College (established in 1831) – the former inspired by a utilitarian and the latter by an evangelical spirit – instituted chairs in English with the titles “English Language and Literature” and “English Literature and History” respectively (Sanders 1994: 8; Hawkes 1991: 928). Whereas the UCL, in consonance with its founders’ outlook, adopted a practical approach to the teaching of English – and thus ended up emphasising composition and language studies – the King’s, in line with its evangelical heritage, treated the study of literature as an ethical and intellectual enterprise (Hawkes 1991: 928). The inclusion, by the end of the 1850s, of a mandatory paper in English language, literature, and history in the London BA examinations notwithstanding, and irrespective of the appearance there of histories of English literature – such as Thomas Arnold’s *A Manual of English Literature* (1862) and Joseph Angus’s *The Handbook of English Literature* (1865) – the future of literature within the academy remained precarious until the older universities of Oxford and Cambridge endorsed the academic study of literature as worthy, respectable, necessary, and viable (Sanders 1994: 8).<sup>6</sup> And when, in 1894, the University of Oxford – which had a chair in Anglo-

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5. Half a century later, the English turned to literature again to “civilise” the natives of British India. When, after the Charter Act of 1813, Britain formally assumed the responsibility of Indian education, it became the responsibility of the British to introduce Indians to useful knowledge and to proper – i.e., Christian – moral and religious sentiments. However, a stated policy of secularism, the missionary antagonism toward secularism, and the fear of a joint Hindu-Muslim uprising against compulsory education in the Bible forced the British to strike a balance and introduce, in place of the Bible, a curriculum of great English writers. For more, see Viswanathan (1989).
  6. While Arnold’s *Manual* and its expanded version, *Chaucer to Wordsworth: A Short History of English Literature, from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (1868), were prescriptive and exclusionary, Angus’s *Handbook* was non-restrictive, factual, encyclopaedic, and chronological. It offered no canons, spoke nothing of literariness, and was entirely devoid of any theory of literature (Sanders 1994: 8-9).

Saxon since 1849 – finally came around to the view that the “chatter about Shelley” could indeed become an academic subject, this volte-face was accompanied by a commitment to philology and “the close study of Old and Middle English literature” (Hawkes 1991: 928-929; Sanders 1994: 9). It was not before 1917, when the University of Cambridge, at the high tide of wartime nationalism, established a School of English – decoupling language from literature and emphasising the latter – that the triumph of the national canon – and of English literature – finally came about.<sup>7</sup>

The Cambridge English tripos – as institutionalised in 1917 and subsequently reformed in 1926 – remained *the* model for teaching English until well into the 1970s; its influence exceeded the cultural and geographical borders of England to penetrate – and spawn clones and cross-breeds in – the deep interiors of a wobbling British Empire.<sup>8</sup> The School allied the Romantics’, especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s, belief in the humanising power of poetry (Hawkes 1991: 930) with the Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold’s conviction that poetry “exemplifies ‘culture’ and culture, like religion, transcends all other interests, especially the particular interests of any social class” (Strickland 1991: 699). The social, spiritual, and evangelical mission envisioned for literature by Coleridge, Arnold and, later, the government-appointed Newbolt Committee was amalgamated – mainly, through the critical writings of I.A. Richards, one of the founding fathers of Cambridge English – with a “commitment to the close, cool analysis of texts and a carefully tempered, ironic probing of their nuances” (Hawkes 1991: 932). However, the iconic figure who defined the character of British and, to an extent, American and global English – i.e., at least until the arrival of Raymond Williams, another Cambridge critic – did not begin to teach in Cambridge until the tenth year of the commencement of the programme; but when he did begin – as a probationary lecturer, that is – F.R. Leavis (1895-1978), with his intense moral seriousness, commitment to close analysis of texts, and passion to place literature at the centre of academic life, at once set out to assault the belletrist English practised and popularised by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, the first King Edward VII professor of English literature at Cambridge and author of the popular *The Oxford Book of*

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7. Terry Eagleton ([1983]2008: 26) attributes the dissociation of language from literature to the events of the First World War. Since the British viewed philology as an essentially Germanic discipline, no “self-respecting Englishman” wanted the study of national literature to be in any way linked to – let alone dominated by – “a form of ponderous Teutonic nonsense”.

8. In a former British colony like India, the imprint of the Cambridge School is still discernible in most of its graduate and undergraduate programmes in English. For the specifics, see the UGC-NET Bureau prescribed English (subject code: 30) syllabus made available at the University Grants Commission website, <<http://www.ugc.ac.in/net/syllabus.aspx>> (30 May 2013).

*English Verse, 1250-1900* (1900). Influenced as he was by Arnold, Eliot and, for a time, Ezra Pound, Leavis believed that “in the new conditions of mass literacy exploited by propaganda and commerce, ‘the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition’ and the ‘implicit standards that order the finer living of an age’ could only be renewed and passed on by an educated minority” (Strickland 1991: 700). Leavis identified for this task the students and teachers of English, who, by engrossing themselves in the “great tradition” of English literature – for national literature, it was held, bodied forth national culture – and by endorsing the moral tenets exemplified in it, were to bring their “influence to bear as effectively as possible in the world” (Strickland 1991: 700). The responsibility for identifying “the lines of development” of that tradition was taken up by Leavis himself, and in a series of essays published in the journal *Scrutiny* (1932-1953) and through books such as *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936) and *The Great Tradition* (1948), he did accomplish that task by the middle of the century (Sanders 1994: 10-11). The outcome of that unrelenting polemical and scholarly enterprise, in Eagleton’s words, was this:

[Leavis] redrew the map of English literature in ways from which criticism has never quite recovered. The main thoroughfares on this map ran through Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jonson, the Jacobean and Metaphysicals, Bunyan, Pope, Samuel Johnson, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Austen, George Eliot, Hopkins, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence. This was “English literature”: Spencer, Dryden, Restoration drama, Defoe, Fielding, Richardson, Sterne, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson, Browning, most of the Victorian novelists, Joyce, Woolf and most writers after D.H. Lawrence constituted a network of “B” roads interspersed with a good few cul-de-sacs. Dickens was first out and then in; “English” included two and a half women, counting Emily Bronte as a marginal case; almost all of its authors were conservatives.

(Eagleton [1983]2008: 28)

Despite the odds, English and its great tradition, as conceived and popularised by Leavis and the Scrutineers – Q.D. Leavis, his wife, L.C. Knights, D.A. Traversi, R.G. Cox, D.W. Harding, W.H. Mellers, H.A. Mason, James Smith, John Peter, and Denys Thompson, among others – withstood the assault of their detractors until, in the 1970s, the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams and an array of critical practices drawing on French Poststructuralist thinkers Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida began influencing departments of English on both sides of the Atlantic. However, the academic study of literature in the United States – which languished under the shadow of oratory, rhetoric, and the Greek and Latin languages until the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Graff [1987]2007: 19), and which, in spite of Emerson’s admonition in 1837 (in “The American Scholar”) “that Americans had listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe” (*CT* 20), did not deem it necessary to institute a

national literary canon until the outbreak of the First World War – before it was waylaid by a host of theorists and thinkers reacting to, among others, “Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (1948), Wellek and Warren’s *Theory of Literature* (1949), and Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957)” (McDonald 2006: 216) had managed to erect – through the efforts of Mortimer J. Adler, Robert M. Hutchins, and the Encyclopædia Britannica Inc. – a momentous, fifty-four-volume series titled *Great Books of the Western World* (1952).<sup>9</sup> Though the grand compilation – ironically, published within a decade of the conclusion of a war (1939-1945) where the Western world nearly destroyed itself in each other’s hands – could be construed as a product of the time Adler had spent as professor of the philosophy of law at the University of Chicago (1930-1952), its genesis lies more properly in the “Contemporary Civilization”, “Honors”, and “Literature Humanities” courses introduced (in 1919, 1920, and 1937 respectively, and as part of the Core Curriculum) at the University of Columbia – where Adler was a student and, later, a teacher. Reflecting the spirit of the times – exemplified, for example, in E.R. Curtius’s *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* ([1948]1953) and Gilbert Highet’s *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (1949) – the courses and the *Great Books* envisioned Western literary tradition as the outcome of a series of conversations conducted principally between Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, German, British, American, and Russian writers – that is to say, great literature, for the most part, was the great powers’ literature.<sup>10</sup> And in the American culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, it was the recognition of this literature-power nexus – where power fashions writing as literature, and the

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9. The *Great Books* had a precursor in *The Harvard Classics* (51 vols.; 1909) edited by Charles William Eliot, President of Harvard University from 1869 to 1909. In Eliot’s collection, unlike in the *Great Books*, a few works from outside the Western world also found a place. The notion of the classic was popularised further when, with the advent of imprints such as Penguin Classics, Oxford World’s Classics, Everyman Library, and the Modern Library, renowned works began to be available in low-cost hardback and paperback editions.
10. In the *History of European Literature* (Benoit-Dusauroy & Fontaine 2000), a conscious attempt to redraw the map of European literature by going beyond the well-known, western European writers, and by situating the history of European literature within, what the editors describe in the preface as, a “global exchange of ideas” has been made. With contributions from more than a hundred and fifty specialists from across Europe, the volume provides useful digests – from a transnationalist perspective – on Austrian, Belgian, British, Bulgarian, Czech, Dutch, Flemish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Swedish, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine writers and literary movements, among others.

latter legitimises the force and exclusion that structure itself into *what it is* by concealing the inability of literature to ground itself (absolutely) in itself (or, for that matter, outside itself); variously explored and critiqued by feminists, deconstructionists, psychoanalysts, postcolonialists, new historicists, and queer theorists, among others – that animated and united the radicals in their battle with the traditionalists.<sup>11</sup> The differences among the radicals – indicated in the summaries of texts provided at the beginning – notwithstanding, they all agreed on, and succeeded, by the end of the century, in making the majority of English professors and graduate students agree to the following:

[T]he history of “Western Civilization” is in large part a history of oppression. Internally, Western civilization oppressed women, various slave and serf populations, and ethnic and cultural minorities generally. In foreign affairs, the history of Western civilization is one of imperialism and colonialism. The so-called canon of Western civilization consists in the official publications of this system of oppression, and it is no accident that the authors in the “canon” are almost exclusively Western white males, because the civilization itself is ruled by a caste consisting almost entirely of Western white males. So you cannot reform education by admitting new members to the club, by opening up the canon; the whole idea of “the canon” has to be abolished. It has to be abolished in favor of something that is “multicultural” and “non-hierarchical”.

(Searle 1990)

The move to abolish the canon that came to a head in the 1980s in America was contributed to and supported by a few African writers, too. Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, and Ngugi wa Thiong’o were each critical of the universalist claims of Western cultural norms (see Fanon [1961]2005), of the metropolitan critics’ tendency to denigrate as provincial those African writers whose object it was to be the *earnest and assertive* voice of their native culture (see Achebe [1974]2005), and of the kind of education offered in schools and universities across Africa, where the language, literature,

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11. Following Searle (1993: 28-30), one may describe the defenders of the canon – who, in most cases, happen to be defenders also of the traditional liberal education – as those who share the following assumptions: (1) a canonical work becomes one due to its intellectual and historical significance; (2) standards of truth, rationality, quality, and judgment are intersubjective; (3) education enables one to move beyond the contingencies of birth, wealth, culture, and community; (4) commitment to individualism *and* universalism is a persistent characteristic of Western tradition; (5) enabling personal and social criticism is one of the primary tasks of liberal education; and (6) spells of idealism, relativism, and scepticism notwithstanding, it is realism that has dominated the history of Western intellectual tradition, and the tradition’s significant intellectual achievements – those, for example, in the natural sciences – are attributable to that dominance.

history, and culture of the colonialists – mainly, Britain, France, and Portugal – were at the centre, and those of Africa, either absent or misrepresented (see Ngugi wa Thiong’o [1972]1995, [1981]1995). Further strengthening the African, African American, and Afrocentric voices in American universities, in 1987, Martin Bernal, an adjunct professor of Near-Eastern Studies at Cornell, published his *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, which, in addition to claiming that the roots of Greek – and, thus, Western – civilisation were in Egypt and Phoenicia, attributed the denial of those roots – which, the author claims, was accepted and acknowledged until the end of the eighteenth century – to a nineteenth-century milieu permeated by notions of Romanticism, racism, and progress. The cumulative effect of the suggestion of a multiculturalist origin for Western civilisation, the theoretical turn in the humanities, the metamorphosis of English literature into Literatures in English, and the postcolonial theorists’ displacement of “the European metropolis from the traditional center of comparatist attention” (Damrosch 2009: 510) was that, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the traditional, two-tiered canon of major authors and minor authors was transformed into a more populous – all the same, exclusionary and hierarchical – order, which the comparatist David Damrosch characterises thus:

In place of this older, two-tiered model, our new system has three levels: a *hypercanon*, a *counter-canon*, and a *shadow canon*. The hypercanon is populated by the older “major” authors who have held their own or even gained ground over the past twenty years. The counter-canon is composed of the subaltern and contestatory voices of writers in less-commonly-taught languages and in minor literatures within great-power languages .... [Lastly, there is] the old “minor” authors who fade increasingly into the background, becoming a sort of shadow canon that the older scholarly generation still knows ... but whom the younger generations of students and scholars encounter less and less.

(Damrosch 2009: 511)

Is it the case, then, that an apocalyptic tone and constant talk of revolution, paradigm shift, and the other notwithstanding, the latest debate, in its essence, was no different from the numerous anti-canon uprisings bespeckling the history of Western tradition – for example, the twelfth- and eighteenth-century quarrel between the ancients and the moderns and the seventeenth-century move against humanism and scholasticism? If Damrosch’s observation and Searle’s (1996: 93) contention that the hallmark of Western tradition is its tendency to be self-critical are correct, then, yes – we had a rebellion, and like any rebellion worth its name, this too had its five minutes of fame, effected a little tweak to the canon; but for all that, the canon remains and is none too different. But was not such an outcome inevitable when all inquiries into literature, literariness, and

canonicity operate within – and can operate *only* within – a pre-theoretical grasp of the category literature, thereby negating the possibility of an outside to literature, from where the latter could be located, accessed, framed, and mastered, and the resulting conclusions judged? The circularity of the enterprise, and the fact that any ground unearthed for literature by means of a “what is x?” question can be problematised further and shown as a retrojection from within literature intimate to us that the ground, in its groundlessness, remains contingent and that the obsession with grounding, though not entirely useless, remains entirely so, unless it awakens to the contingency and, in that, gets transformed. This transformation, while it presents no answer to the question we began our inquiry with – i.e., what is x? – takes effect when the contingency and circularity within which our thinking operates – and which our thinking always is – is realised as that which lets us be the kind of beings that we are – i.e., beings *in possession of* meaning and, hence, language. For a period that was obsessed with language and meaning, was this transformation a hallmark of the strains of thought that strode against each other in the American culture wars? No. How could it be when the exponents mostly began by and stuck to the “what is x?” question, answered it with either an essence or quality, or, on failing to find either, jumped hastily to the conclusion that literature is nothing but race, class, and gender propaganda – as if man could decide in advance, and by herself alone, what literature is? But how could this deciding be if man were not already *in possession of* the yardstick to decide, and how could the yardstick itself be the yardstick that it is if it arose from man’s arbitrary willing – for should not the yardstick have a claim upon us as it in fact has, and is it not this claim that averts man’s slide into an infinite regress, where each instance of “willing” calls for yet another to determine whether the standard willed is appropriate for the event or not – a matter decidable only if (and only when) the event in question strikes us as the event that it is? If man’s grasp of literature, in it not being her handiwork, reveals to us the passivity that our actions and cogitations are, then, wherein lies the possibility of man, by herself alone and for all times, actively constituting and controlling the essence of literature; wherein lies the sense of a critique that attributes to man the power to fashion her own and a people’s way of thinking – and by an extension of that logic, the power to amend and abolish thinking by means of a new, “enlightened” way of thinking? Equally, in striving to be a thought on thought that, from its exterior, locates and irons out its imperfections, is not this critique presupposing and affirming an absolute/contingent distinction, and, thus, bisecting reality into two distinct regions – i.e., the world as it is and the world as it appears? If it is, by what criterion would thought determine whether this literature-proper/literature-apparent distinction is itself tenable, a determination dependent on each being perceived as what it is? Further, what should prevent us from demanding a standard to decide whether our perceiving of the in-itself and



in-thought as the in-itself and in-thought is itself legitimate? But then again, given that the sense of a doubt that doubts the legitimacy of the yardstick that the appearance is lies in presupposing a disjunction between the appearance and that of which it is an appearance (i.e., the real), is not a doubt that doubts our perceiving of this very disjunction senseless? If the attempt to doubt that which is manifest is senseless, are the attempts to reduce it to a variant of the formulaic explanation “x is nothing but ...” any different, for all explanans, be they transcendent or divine, do they not belong to the web of thought as the manifest, or else, how could they be posited at all? Does it not follow, then, that it is when thought, heedless of the fact that the explanans belongs to thought and not the other way round and definitely not to its outside, strives to reduce the web of thought into the single, absolute, ahistorical ground that the explanans is taken to be, that the paradoxes and difficulties typical of the pursuit of a “what is x?” question arise? The resolution of such paradoxes lies, then, in man, instead of persisting with the grounding enterprise, bringing the question and the explanans back to the meaningful mesh of thought that they are a part of, so that the root of the theoretical bafflement, the desire to unearth the one principle that can explain everything for all times, is done away with. The dissolution of the metaphysical project, the realisation that man neither creates nor controls meaning but belongs to it, and the awareness that the assorted network of patterned activities that a people’s way of life is does not itself stand in need of another, firmer ground – together, they release us from the pathologies of essentialism, subjectivism, scientism, solipsism, nihilism, and the like.

If that which is manifest can be neither doubted nor explained, it follows that the attempts to deny the category literature and the attempts to postulate the explanans literature-in-itself for the explanandum literature-thought were misguided, and so, those who denied the category literature and those who attributed a timeless essence to literature were both mistaken. Equally mistaken were those, who, misconceiving man as an autonomous subject, attributed the origin and endurance of the category literature to a collective will or conspiracy. Those who held literature to be a cultural practice, and those who, *inspired* by Derrida (cf. Olson 1990: 11), demonstrated the groundlessness of the ground were right in doing so; but insofar as such critics failed to emphasise (and realise even) that the contingency of the ground is not a deficiency but is the reason for us not being automatons – for possibilities, decisions, and freedom can take hold only within a contingent ground – and insofar as that failure led many a graduate student and professor to the conclusion that there is no such thing as literature, and if there is, it is a conspiracy, their dictums were misleading and counterproductive. The drive to include and protect the other and construe it as ethics is a continuation of the subjectivist project of “willing values into being”. There is more in common between the “naïve” Cartesian and the

“enlightened” neo-Nietzschean than either is willing to concede. That concession, though, will be the end of Theory, as we know it today.

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