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# The Concept of Canon in Literary Studies: Critical Debates 1970-2000

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2012

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed by me, and that it has not been previously submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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## Thesis Abstract

The present thesis focuses on the critical dialogues on the literary canon developed between 1970 and 2000 in the United States as a crucial juncture for the consolidation of the notion of canon as a scholarly subject matter within the field of literary studies. By taking stock of the abundance of scholarly contributions on the literary canon produced at this time, this thesis pursues two aims: first, it initiates a process of systematisation of the scholarly material on the canon produced during the last thirty years of the twentieth century; second, it focuses on a selection of particularly influential works that have furthered the understanding of specific aspects of the notion of canon.

Two introductory chapters outline respectively the historical and the theoretical background of this research. Chapter One explores the historical framework within which the canon started to receive increasing critical attention inside and outside U.S. academia. In particular, it observes how the historical and cultural phenomenon known as the Culture Wars came to bear upon the way in which the notion of canon was perceived and treated by critics and scholars. Early and later examples of canonical criticism are juxtaposed so as to argue that the absorption of debates about the definition of national cultural heritage within U.S. academia influenced the terms in which the canon was being discussed, privileging oppositional rhetorical strategies over the more moderate tones of early theoretical approaches. Chapter Two draws on Jan Gorak's work in *The Making of The Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (1991) to explore the history of the concept of canon and of its associations with the diverging attitudes adopted by critics in relation to the canon in the period in exam. The second part of this thesis constitutes of three case studies that illustrate the significance for our understanding of the concepts of canon, canonicity and canon formation, of three texts published in the 1990s by Harold Bloom, John Guillory and

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Each chapter observes how these studies contributed to clarify the relationship between the idea of canon and that of tradition, between canon and ideology and, finally, between the canon and the anthology, respectively.

Chapter Three locates Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of Ages* (1994) in relation to his earlier theory of the anxiety of influence and argues that Bloom's account of canon formation relies on his definition of tradition as the agonistic struggle between poets and their predecessors. Chapter Four is a close reading of John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993) and explores the political ideology underlying its selective use of the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci and T.S.Eliot. Finally, Chapter Five engages with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s attempt to establish a canon of African American Literature through his role as editor of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1996).

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my wonderful parents, Alessandro and Annamaria Villa: without their love, trust, generosity, support, and most importantly their wicked sense of humour, this thesis simply wouldn't exist. I wish to dedicate this work to them.

I am thankful to my supervisor, Dr. Alexander Thompson, for supporting this project (and myself) with dedication, intellectual generosity and enthusiasm. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to work with him.

I would also like to thank two of my past teachers: Dr. Adam Budd, for his feedback at the very early stages of this project, and Prof. Gerardo Larghi, for having taught to a very young me some important lessons about the value of literature.

I am thankful to my brother, Marco, my sister-in-law, Shabnam, and their splendid children, Cyrus and Chiara, for their big hearts and smiles, and for making me stronger with their love and encouragement.

Maria Vittoria and Margherita have been my rock and my refuge through the years: I cannot thank them enough for their faith in me, for their patience, phone calls, and visits. As usual, they made everything a little bit easier.

Very special thanks to David and Tammy Tree, and the rest of the Tree clan, for managing to overcome immense distances to make me feel their love and support.

I wish to thank my friends in Edinburgh, who followed the development of this project through tales of joy and tales of woe, inspired me to always go forward, and kept me smiling in the meantime: Ana Salzberg, Christos Hadjiyiannis, Mark Bolsover, Sara Humayun, Lara Day Benjamin, Ana Costa Y Silva, Lee Ann Montanaro, Ersev Ersoy.

Last, but most certainly not least, this thesis owes much to the patience, love and support of graph-making consultant, proof-reader extraordinaire, possibly the only microbiologist in the world to be fluent in canon-ish, and love of my life, Jai Tree. Thank you.

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## Introduction

The desire to identify standards for the evaluation of literature, to provide examples of what 'good' literature is, is prominent, albeit from different perspectives and for different aims, in the work of figures such as Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis and T.S. Eliot. However, despite the long history of discussion about standards, the explicit treatment of the literary canon as a scholarly subject matter is relatively recent.

In literature the canon has traditionally been invoked as a repository of the best possible production that a given literary tradition has to offer. The literary canon sits within the tradition, and influences it from the inside by representing the highest standards of literary production. In keeping with this image of centrality of the canon, the process of canon formation can be understood as the virtual displacement of particular works and authors from the outskirts of the tradition towards its centre.

As this thesis will show, while questions of authority, legitimacy and power have widely defined the study of canon formation, a question that has not received an equally sustained degree of attention concerns the nature of the concept of canon itself. In *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993) John Guillory asks:

where does [the canon] appear...? It would be better to say that the canon is an imaginary totality of works. No one has access to the canon as a totality... What this means is that the canon is never other than an imaginary list; it never appears as a complete and uncontested list in any particular time and place... (*Cultural Capital* 30)

Following Guillory's argument, it can be concluded that the instances of canon with which criticism engages are provisional formulations of what the canon might look like should it be possible to descry it. In keeping with this perspective, Wendell Harris provocatively observes that

the canonical facts about the canons of English and American literature are, first, that there are no canons and never have been; second, that there have necessarily always been canons...(110)

The need for canons, Harris suggests, has allowed us to overlook the fact that the literary canon as we are accustomed to envision it, as an ultimate list of names or works, is strictly confined to the imaginary, as Guillory justly points out. Stealing an image of liminality from T.S. Eliot, the mode of existence of the canon could therefore be described as "caught in the form of limitation, between un-being and being" ("Burnt Norton V" 174).

However, the imaginary nature of an absolute canon should not be interpreted as a point of halt in its study. On the contrary, it constitutes an important conceptual framework for the study of the concept of canon and of its function within literature. As Alastair Fowler explains

...the significance of the literary canon would be hard to exaggerate. Apart from its obvious exclusions and limitations, it has a vital positive influence by virtue of its variety and proportions. Arrived at through the interaction of many generations of readers, it constitutes an important image of wholeness. (100)

This take on the need for a canon is also reprised by George A. Kennedy, who speaks of the "desire for a canon" (229) as a "basic human instinct, perhaps related to self-preservation: the assertion of control over chaos..." (229). Although the totality of the canon cannot be officially articulated, the canon manifests its existence through change and through the forms in which critics, scholars and institutions present it.

It is precisely the preoccupation with the institutional formulations of the literary canon that triggered the intense scholarly debates that developed across the last thirty years of the twentieth century. Such was the intensity of these debates that the ruckus they caused amongst commentators eclipsed the intellectual efforts of those scholars who, registering the circulation of the idea of canon as a new and important subject matter in the field of literary studies, tried to reflect on it with rigour and moderation.

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The following quote by Kennedy aptly describes these debates, their fundamental aspects and the general atmosphere that characterised them:

The attempts of political and social reform through literature and criticism in the late twentieth century have built into them curious features: conservatives, otherwise often supporters of rugged individualism and deregulation, favour a regulated literary canon; liberals, otherwise often proponents of governmental intervention and regulation...resent governmental initiatives to preserve the literary heritage. A weakness of both camps is the shrillness of their rhetoric and their tendency to talk past each other. As Juvenal said of satire: '*Si natura negat facit indignatio versum*' [If nature denies, indignation composes the verse]. (230)

If, on the one hand, it is true that the shrill rhetoric and the conflicting tones of the exchanges about the literary canon did constitute an important obstacle for the parts involved to reach any positive agreement on the role of the canon within academia, it is equally true that the last thirty years of the twentieth century fostered a more methodical approach to the concept of canon as a scholarly subject matter in the field of literary studies.

Indeed, this thesis proceeds from the understanding of contemporary knowledge of the concept of canon in the field of literary studies as strongly reliant on the lessons learnt through the extensive scholarship developed on the subject

between 1970 and 2000, and aims at contributing to the field of secular canonical studies in two distinct ways. First, by initiating a process of organisation of the extensive body of work on the notion of canon produced between 1970 and 2000, and second, by focusing on specific key texts produced during this lapse of time so to observe how they effectively contributed to expand our understanding of the notion of canon itself.

Between the early 1970s and the early 2000s the interpretation of the canon as constituted by literary works embodying the highest standards of literary production within the Western tradition was put under intense pressure. As anticipated in the quote by Kennedy, supporters of the canon maintained that the institutionalisation of particular works of literature was a necessary condition for the conservation and the transmission of the nation's cultural heritage, its opponents interpreted the canon as a means of perpetuation of inequalities and discrimination towards cultural minorities by force of its exclusivity. The embitterment of the debates determined the designation of secular canonical studies as a particularly conflicted field of enquiry.

As it will be observed at length in the first chapter of this thesis, the dissemination of the notion of canon within American academia followed a quite specific pattern of development. While in the early 1970s it started to circulate with increasing insistence in scholarly forums such as the MLA convention, publications specifically concerned with the notion of canon started to appear later, towards the end of the 1970s. The scholarly interest in the canon grew exponentially in the 1980s and 1990s, in correspondence with the intensification of the debates about the cultural heritage of the United States that are commonly referred to as the Culture Wars. Articles such as Frank Kermode's "Institutional Control of Interpretation"

(1979) and Alistair Fowler's "Genre and the Literary Canon" (1979) epitomise the tone and approach of early publications that were trying to make sense of the increasingly relevant position occupied by the notion of canon in literary studies. The 1980s constituted a time of intense reflection of the role of the canon in the teaching of the humanities. In particular, 1984 can be considered as a year of transition, after which it is possible to register a severe change of attitude towards the canon in American higher education in response to the unabashedly conservative, pro-canonical position of the National Endowment for the Humanities as presented in Sen. William Bennet's "To Reclaim A Legacy: a Report of the Humanities in Higher Education". Between 1984 and the first half of the 1990s, the canon sat squarely at the centre of one of the most heated intellectual controversies of the twentieth century. The debate was carried out in different spheres of the United States' public life, and triggered the interest not only of academics, but also of politicians, journalists and commentators. In 1988 Joseph Berger and James Atlas published two features for *The New York Times* that registered the increasing concern with the canon in academia. Berger's article opens by giving a sweeping portrait of the dualistic character of the ongoing discussions:

Many college professors around the country are rethinking the very notion of what is literature. There are those who continue to uphold a traditional standard of literary quality, arguing that students should essentially read works whose merit has been established over the years. But there is a rising number who contend the idea of an enduring pantheon of writers and their works is an elitist one largely defined by white men who are Northeastern academics and critics. Choosing between Virginia Woolf and Pearl Buck, they hold, involves political and cultural distinctions more than aesthetic ones. (B6)

Talking about the "flurry of articles" (Atlas 24) that appeared in the press early in the same year, James Atlas's feature tries to make sense of the new

vocabulary emerging from academic exchanges and notices how the canon issue was starting to become a topic of general interest:

Canon Formation, canon revision, canonicity: the mysterious, often indecipherable language of critical theory had yielded up a whole new terminology. What was this canon? The books that constituted the intellectual heritage of educated Americans that had officially been defined as great. The kind of books you read, say, in Columbia's famed lit. hum. course, virtually unchanged since 1937: Homer, Plato, Dante, Milton... The masterpieces of Western civilization...

In the academic world, I kept hearing, the canon was 'a hot issue'. 'Everything these days has to do with the canon', one of my campus sources reported. (Atlas 24)

Atlas's observation of the new terminology adopted in critical theory in relation to the canon is particularly poignant, as it points out the intensification of the study of the canon and the diffusion of the specific vocabulary associated with it. This is an important aspect, indicative of the intensity with which an increasing number of critics tried to understand the complexities behind the literary canon and its function.

This can be seen in early 1990s publications such as Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose *The Canon and the Common Reader* (1990), Jan Gorak's *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (1991), Paul Lauter's *Canons and Contexts* (1991), Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (1992), all of which explore contemporary debates while trying to further explore the notion of canon, canonicity and canon formation, albeit from different perspectives. Later in the 1990s, studies about the origin of the canon started to appear, such as Douglas Lane Patey's "The Eighteenth Century Invents the Canon" (1998), Jonathan Kramnick's *Making of the English Canon: Print Capitalism and the Cultural Past* (1998), and Trevor Ross's *The Making of The English Literary Canon: from the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* (1998). Although these works account for origins of the English canon, they do so

against the backdrop of, and in dialogue with, the scholarship produced in the United States which this thesis analyses, and offers interesting models of practical historical inquiry into the formation of canons which has the potential to be transferred onto the study of the canonisation of other literary traditions.

As the century was coming to a close, approaches to the study of the notion of the canon shifted again, this time by beginning to look back at the polemics of the two previous decades in an attempt to return to the study of the canon as a literary phenomenon while taking stock of the impact that the American debate had on its perception. This is the case, for instance, with works such as Dean Kolbas's *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (2001), or Lars Ole Sauerberg's *Versions of the Past, Visions of the Future* (1997). Both works tried to exploit the recent quarrel over the canon as a means to further investigate the notion of canon, although adopting quite different perspectives. Kolbas's study engages with the notions of canon and canon formation and the way in which critical theory, particularly that of the Frankfurt School, can be helpful to explain them, while Sauerberg's engages with the idea of 'the canonical' in the work of T.S Eliot, F.R. Leavis, Northrop Frye, and Harold Bloom.

In keeping with previous enquiries, this thesis opens with an overview of the canon debates. However, it departs from the existing research by casting a more analytical glance at the scholarship developed in the course of the debates and attempts to distinguish between different approaches to the concept of canon by focusing on particularly significant works. In doing so, the thesis seeks to disentangle the concept of canon from the very debates that granted it initial popularity and points out the need to distinguish between the polemical and the scholarly content of



these debates. To do so, it presents three case studies that focus on key texts produced within the debates at hand: Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: the Books and Schools of Ages* (1994), John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s and Nelly MacKay's *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1996).

Each of these scholars joined the discussion about the canon at different times, in different ways, and with different purposes. Bloom approached the notion of canon as a topic most naturally connected with his wider reflections on tradition and intertextual influence, and in *The Western Canon* (1994) he provides an example of canon formation based on the aesthetic evaluation of literature. John Guillory's study engaged with the problem of canon formation as one strictly related to the unequal distribution of cultural capital within the pedagogical system, and proposed a critique not only of the notion of canon, but also of its understanding within contemporary debates. Finally, Gates undertook, together with Nellie MacKay, the task of editing the first *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, which he presented as the ultimate canon of the African American literary tradition, thus providing an interesting case from which to explore the relationship between the notion of anthology and that of canon.

Despite offering different, at times divergent, visions and interpretations of the idea of canon, all the works that are examined in this thesis carry the traces of the ongoing debates. Although to different extents and for different purposes, the analysis of these works that I present in this thesis aims at showing how the tensions articulated by the scholarly debates on the canon came to bear on some of the rhetorical strategies adopted in *The Western Canon* and *Cultural Capital*, and in the

way in which the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* was presented to both the academic community and to the public.

In Bloom's case, his overt hostility towards the 'School of Resentment', as well as the lamentations for the death of the canon, directly responded to contemporary attacks to the canon. In Guillory, the influence of the debates is most evident in the claims of impartiality that defined *Cultural Capital* and its overt preoccupation with ideology, while in Gates, the process of composition of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* self-consciously defines his position as a canonising critic and exploits the popularity of the notion of canon to fulfil personal ambitions. Each chapter aims at isolating these aspects in the work they respectively address and tries to reach the core of each work's argument, so to show just how important these works are and the extent to which they contribute to gathering a better, deeper understanding of the concept of canon.

The analysis of the work of Harold Bloom, John Guillory and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in relation to the literary canon should therefore be read as an attempt at illuminating particular aspects pertaining to the concept of canon. By focusing on their respective interpretations of the notion of canon, on the premises upon which they built such definition, and on the models of canon formation they propose, this thesis aims at contributing to the existing scholarship by observing three modes of existence of the literary canon by testing their implications in the wider field of literary studies and exploring their inner workings.

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The first two chapters provide the background to the present thesis by respectively accounting for the rise of the canon-debates within American Academia

in the last 25 years of the twentieth century and for the complexities that are inherent to the concept of canon.

Chapter One establishes the historical framework of this research and accounts for the central position occupied by the canon as a scholarly subject in American literary studies from the second half of the 1970s to the end of the 1990s by placing it in relation to contemporary debates about the definition of the nation's cultural values. As the Culture Wars moved from the artistic to the academic arena, the notion of canon's centrality in scholarly debates increased alongside its symbolic significance. While recording some of the most important critical contributions on the notion of canon produced at this time, this chapter also aims at outlining important distinctions between the different ways in which scholars approached the study of the concept of canon.

Chapter Two focuses on the history of the term canon and retraces the process of development of its meaning from its early use in Classical Greece to modern critical interpretations. Initially a term proper of architecture and visual arts, through the centuries the term canon has shown great flexibility as it has been progressively adopted by different fields, most importantly ethics and religion, to indicate different things. According to Jan Gorak, whose work frames this chapter, these appropriations have contributed to outline two distinct modes of interpretation of the term canon as either flexible or fixed, or Aristotelian and Augustinian, which he argues still reverberates on contemporary criticism of the notion of canon. This chapter explores the distinction outlined by Gorak and applies it to explain the divergent attitudes towards the canon registered in the debates examined in this thesis

These two preliminary chapters frame the three case studies that constitute the second part of this research. Each of the three chapters analyses one particular aspect in the canonical criticism of Harold Bloom, John Guillory and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Chapter Three looks at Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of Ages* as both an example of a canon shaped by the critical agenda of an individual scholar and as a key moment in the evolution of Bloom's theoretical paradigm as a whole. Against the backdrop of the canon debates that form the context of its publication, *The Western Canon's* early reception – as this chapter shows – concentrated on Bloom's ongoing controversy with what he famously defined as the School of Resentment. However, more recent scholarship has undertaken a process of rediscovery of the more valuable aspects of Bloom's project. In particular, the publication in 2007 of *The Salt Companion to Harold Bloom*, edited by Roy Sellars and Graham Allen, put forth a fresher perspective on *The Western Canon*, not as a manifesto of Bloom's pro-canonical posture, but as a "grand confirmation of Bloom's own theories about literature developed since 1960s and dominated by the theory of anxiety of influence" (Allen 56). This chapter expands on this observation and observes how *The Western Canon* marks Bloom's theory's turn towards a Shakespeare-centric criticism, which was ultimately resolved in the publication of the revised second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence* in 1997.

Chapter Four is a close reading of John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Canon Formation*. A highly influential study on the notion of canon and canon formation, *Cultural Capital* was welcomed at the time of its publication as a much-needed rational scrutiny of the ongoing debates. By indicating the school as privileged *locus* where canons are shaped and institutionalised, and by making the

problem of representation in the canon only secondary to the problem of access to education, Guillory offered a solution to the impasse reached by the canon debates. The analysis presented in this thesis engages with Guillory's theory of the canon at both macro and micro level. On the one hand, it offers an overview of *Cultural Capital's* argument, particularly focusing on Guillory's translation of the notion of canon into that of syllabus. On the other, this chapter observes Guillory's selective treatment of his sources and argues that it stands as a testimony of the ideological tensions underlying *Cultural Capital*. This can be particularly seen in Guillory's treatment of Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, and T.S.Eliot. In each case, Guillory selects those parts of their writings that more strongly contribute to make his case in *Cultural Capital*, a strategy that, as this chapter argues, betrays the work's claims to neutrality and helps to convey Guillory's strongly political agenda.

Finally, Chapter Five engages with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s efforts to establish a canon of African American literature through the composition of a *Norton Anthology* as a gateway for the exploration of the relationship between the notion of canon and that of anthology. The functional relationship between anthology and canon has been widely explored by Barbara Benedict, who in *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (1996) has described the anthology as functional to the dissemination of the literary canon. Gates's project of canon formation, on the other hand, departs from this definition as he described it in different occasions as a project that would provide African American literature with its ultimate canon. Far from challenging Gates's important contribution to the institutionalisation of African American literature, this chapter challenges the understanding of the idea of anthology as equivalent to that of canon

and uses the methodological framework developed by Benedict to illustrate the long-standing anthologising tradition of African American literature as the one of the key processes which has contributed to create and disseminate a canonical discourse within the African American reading community. Gates's claims to canon making as a circumstantial phenomenon resulting in an anthology as its final product is contrasted with Benedict's interpretation of anthologies as instruments of dissemination of what she calls "a desire for the canon" (4).

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The formulation of particular judgements at specific temporal and geographical junctures reflects what Alistair Fowler has called the "elasticity" (97) of literature: the canon changes, "from age to age and reader to reader" (97). Jonathan Freedman interestingly indicates instances of canon revision as particular moments in which to get a fast and transient glimpse of the existence of the canon:

...what defines the canon most compellingly is the systole and diastole of its opening and closure; for only by the occurrence of both moves can the literary canon give evidence of its continuing life in a world which does not necessarily grant it so vital a presence. (204)

This dynamic recalls Book IV of Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Menelaus recounts his wrestle with Proteus:<sup>1</sup> as much as he and his men tried to pin him down, The Old Man of the Sea proceeded to go through several changes before growing "tired of his magic repertory" (76) and returning to his original state. Shape-shifting is part of Proteus's mode of existence as much as change and a certain degree of

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<sup>1</sup> See Homer:

...with a shout, we leapt upon him and flung our arms round his back. But the old man's skill and cunning had not deserted him. He began by turning into a bearded lion and then into a sneak, and after that a panther and a giant boar. He changed into running water too and a great tree in leaf. But we set our teeth and held him like a vice. When at last he had grown tired of his magic-repertory, he broke into speech and began asking me questions. (Book VI 76)

indecipherability are part of the canon. Therefore, only when this condition of permanent movement is integrated in the understanding of the concept of canon can it become productive for its study.

This, at least, is the perspective that I have adopted in this thesis, where different interpretations of the concept of canon are placed alongside one another and work chorally to contribute, however partially and in the limited space of this research, to illuminate some of the shapes the canon can, and does, assume.

## **Chapter One**

### **The Canon Between 1970 and 2000: Contexts and Approaches**

#### Introduction

This chapter accounts for the central position occupied by the notion of the literary canon in the United States during the last thirty years of the twentieth century. While mapping some of the key contributions to the scholarly enquiry into the idea of canon, it also records the rise of the Culture Wars, and conveys the profuse feeling of political and cultural fragmentation that defined the intellectual landscape of the United States from the second half of the 1960s to the end of the 1990s. In doing so, this chapter establishes a relationship between the rise of the Culture Wars and the increasing attention received by the literary canon as a subject of discussion and as a symbol of the wider debates at play in American academia and society about multiculturalism and affirmative action. In particular, it argues that the intellectual exploration of the idea of canon and of the related notions of canonicity, canon formation and of the relations between the canon and its context that initiated almost spontaneously by individual scholars in the 1970s was temporarily disrupted by the exacerbation of the controversy, only to regain stability towards the 1990s.

While drawing a picture of the historical background of the three case studies presented in this thesis, this chapter also seeks to draw attention to the abundant scholarly material on the subject of the literary canon that American academia has produced in the last thirty years of the twentieth century, thus initiating a process of systematisation of the said material and observing the relevance of secular canonical studies as an autonomous field of scholarly enquiry.



## 1 The Culture Wars

In a recent essay, Herbert Grabes reflects on the interdependency between changes in social and cultural values and the way in which literary canons are perceived:

As there are good reasons to assume that the processes of selection are generally based on evaluation, canons are objectivations of values, either individual or shared. For this reason they possess a considerable amount of prestige within the larger framework of culture. The awareness that this is so is shared keenly by the group of (mostly American) critics who, over the last few decades of the twentieth century, fiercely attacked “the canon”. What these attacks show is that when collective values change, this may effect considerably the validation of canons. (311)

This observation becomes particularly relevant for the understanding of the conditions that determined the increasingly central position that the notion of canon came to occupy within the field of literary studies in the United States during the last three decades of the twentieth century.

This was for the United States a phase of profound intellectual unrest, characterised by a profuse feeling of fragmentation. Historian Daniel T. Rodgers has defined the last quarter of the twentieth century as “...a great age of fracture” (3), a time in which a “dominant tendency...towards disaggregation” (5) was juxtaposed to the “consolidation” of “political and institutional fact and ...social imagination” (5) of the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

The phenomenon generally referred to as the ‘Culture Wars’<sup>2</sup> arose precisely from this uneven landscape as “one of the central political issues of the late 20th century” (Jensen 17). Diverging interpretations of politics, social reality, national

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<sup>2</sup> The definition was coined by James Davison Hunter in 1991 in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*.

culture and identity determined the development of intellectual debates that exacerbated the sense of polarization previously fostered in American society by the debates about the Vietnam War (George and Huyn 9). In their 2009 study on the Culture Wars in America and Australia, Jim George and Kim Huyn trace the trajectory followed by the conflicts in the United States and offer a comprehensive panorama of the different arguments that have been proposed to explain the dualism that defines this period. The approaches examined by George and Huyn consistently highlight the existence of two conflicting cultural and political models within the same country. For instance, while the conservative intellectual Gertrude Himmelfarb described the conflict as that between “two different schemes or systems of morality” (qtd in George and Huynh 25), one tending towards more rigid conservative values, the other being looser and proper of the democratic counter-culture, John Fonte argued that the clash that lay at the basis of the Culture Wars was one between ‘Tocquevillians’ and ‘Gramscians’:

Tocquevillians believe that there are objective moral truths applicable to all people at all times. Gramscians believe that moral ‘truths’ are subjective and depend upon historical circumstances. Tocquevillians believe that these civic and moral truths must be revitalised in order to remoralize society. Gramscians believe that civic and moral ‘truths’ must be socially constructed by subordinate groups in order to achieve political and cultural liberation. Tocquevillians believe that functionaries like teachers and police officers represent legitimate authority. Gramscians believe that teachers and police officers ‘objectively’ represent power, not legitimacy. Tocquevillians believe in personal responsibility. Gramscians believe that ‘the personal is political’. In the final analysis, Tocquevillians favor the *transmission* of the American regime; Gramscians, its *transformation*. (31)

The same dualistic perspective reappears in James Davison Hunter, who in *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991) accounts for the Culture Wars as originating from “century-old religious tensions” (67) whose pluralistic realignment resulted in a clash between divergent worldviews.

The struggle generated by the clash between such ideological divergences affected the cultural life of the United States on several levels; however, as Jensen suggests, Arts and Education were the ones that were most prominently – and publicly – influenced by the Culture Wars. In the following paragraphs, I will look more closely to the ways in which what Republican Senator Pat Buchanan famously defined as a “...struggle for the soul of America” (“1992 Republican National Convention Speech”) developed in and affected these two fields before placing the burgeoning discourse on the canon within this conflicted context.

### 1.1 Stills from the Trenches: Culture Wars in the Arts

The National Council of the Arts and the National Arts Foundation were established in December 1963 by the U.S. Senate, following an executive order of then President J.F. Kennedy, dated 12 June of that same year. After his assassination, the Johnson’s administration continued the project Kennedy had initiated and, by 3 September 1964, the National Council of the Arts was established. In the following year President Lyndon Johnson signed the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965 (Public Law 89-209). At the core of the Act, lay the government’s desire to “create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry, but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent” (qtd. in Henderson 3n9) while acknowledging the importance of the arts and the humanities for the sustenance of the United States pivotal role in international politics:

...the world leadership which ha[d] come to the United States [could not] rest solely upon superior power, wealth and technology, but must be solidly founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the nation’s high

qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas and of the spirit. (qtd. in Henderson 3n9)

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) were established precisely as a response to these points, and their creation determined an important reconfiguration of the landscape of U.S. culture. Indeed, while the distribution of federal financial support across the Arts and the Humanities meant more opportunities for the work of burgeoning artists and scholars, it also entailed the strengthening of the government's role in the definition of the function that art had to fulfil in the wider perspective of the country's public life. This problematic point has been analysed by David A. Smith, who observes that whenever a political establishment offers its support to the arts, it does so with the understanding that both parts will benefit from it (5) and that such

assumption of mutual benefit, no matter how innocuous it may seem, opens a deep and contentious quandary about art's primary function in a democracy. Is it one of personal expression, or does it carry a communal obligation? (6)

Smith argues that these issues are only the front of a deeper, fundamental "tension between the individual and the community" (6), which, in the case of the NEA, was aggravated by the expanding individualism characteristic of U.S. culture from the 1960s on<sup>3</sup> (6) as it started to influence the way in which artists perceived themselves and their work in relation to society. Indeed, Smith explains how "since the 1960s they had been the vanguard of a movement to elevate the individual, a circumstance that would prove to be ripe with difficulties for an agency like the

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<sup>3</sup> As Smith points out, his argument on the increasing individualism of U.S. culture relies on the work of Christopher Lasch and that of Robert Putnam (6). While Lasch described the 1960s and 1970s as the 'apotheosis of individualism', Putnam famously elaborated the idea of 'bowling alone' to describe the gradual decay of aggregative institutions in America. See Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979: 66 and Robert D. Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. A different argument has recently been advanced by Rodgers in *Age of Fracture*, where he departs from both Lasch and Putnam in his attempt to juxtapose the relative stability of communities and public institutions to the more radical disruption and re-thinking of the "ideas and metaphors capable of holding in focus the aggregate aspects of human life as opposed to its smaller, fluid, individual ones" (6).

NEA” (6). Both NEA and NEH came into being as a response to a specific desire of the Johnson Presidency to boost the cultural life of the United States within the larger ambitions of Johnson’s “Great Society” program (Smith 9; 78; 79-99). The hopes that were initially put into the establishment of the two endowments were however soon to be tested against the changing moods and trends of both the arts and the humanities, and the rethinking of the cultural and political landscape triggered by the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s.

Right-wing conservatism’s attempts to outline the country’s moral and social profile in accordance with its religious and cultural heritage – reinforced by the pervasive action of lobbies such as the Christian right – locked horns with left wing liberalism and with the will of artistic agencies promoting freedom of expression and the independence of the arts and the humanities from governmental censorship. This clash is exemplified in the controversies involving photographers Robert Mapplethorpe and Andrès Serrano.

In 1988, a travelling exhibition of Mapplethorpe’s photographs called “The Perfect Moment”, which also featured images of homosexual intercourse, acts of self-inflicted masochism, and infant nudity, was inaugurated at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania. As the director of the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., decided to cancel the exhibition in 1989 fearing that “...Congress would object to an institution funded by the National Endowment for the Arts sponsoring an exhibition that could be construed as obscene” (Danto 61), the case exploded, sanctioning an unavoidable collision between political and artistic domains. The case was not isolated. Soon after Mapplethorpe’s, the work of another photographer, Andres Serrano, was to receive massive public attention. Serrano’s

“Piss Christ”, a photograph portraying a crucifix immersed in a urine-filled jar, not only – as in Mapplethorpe's case – triggered the already bitter controversy between artists and the government but also opened the door for religious lobbies to intervene in the debate, thus enhancing the pressure on institutions to protect the nations’ core values from artistic abuse and blasphemy. Mapplethorpe’s explicitly sexual photographs and Serrano’s provocative portrayal of a religious symbol functioned as a catalyst for the explosion of a vexatious debate about the relationship between arts and morality, national culture and politics.

Because the NEA had funded both artists<sup>4</sup> a governmental intervention ensued aimed at defining a set of regulations about the content of the artistic productions it was funding. The debate reached the Senate, where on 18 May 1989 Republican Senator D’Amato famously tore a copy of Serrano’s picture apart in front of all his fellows Senators. This dramatic gesture marked, according to Robert Hughes, the start of the American Culture Wars “in matters of Visual Arts” (155), whose early dynamics are thus summarised by Bolton:

Liberals generally argued that any attempt to restrict the work of the NEA would ultimately violate the First Amendment rights of artists. Content restrictions proposed for grants to artists were seen as censorship, pure and simple, as part of a larger plan to control artists politically... conservatives...defined the issue as one of the government sponsorship rather than censorship. They argued that Congress has the responsibility to spend tax dollars wisely and that placing restrictions on Endowment money is a reasonable exercise of that responsibility. (3)

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<sup>4</sup> As Robert Hughes aptly summarises

...Serrano had received a prize of \$ 15,000 from the South-Eastern Centre for Contemporary Art (SECCA) in Winston-Salem. SECCA had received the money for this award—before its jury decided to give it to Serrano—from the National Endowment for the Arts...It came without strings, and nobody in the NEA had the least role in choosing Serrano as winner. Nevertheless, Serrano had indirectly wound up with government money... (157-58)

## 1.2 Campus Wars

Concurrently, the humanities were engaged in a struggle of their own. Higher education was particularly affected by the dispute about the undergraduate curriculum that stormed several campuses across the U.S., a dispute that was the result of the increasing concern about, as Rodgers puts it, “the weakening of a common American culture” (210), a concern which, despite “the exaggerations, the false nostalgia, the racial and ethnic mythmaking” was “genuine and palpable” (211) on both sides of the conflict. At the core of the Campus Wars, there were diverging responses to questions of national identity, multiculturalism, community, social and cultural values and, most importantly, the role that the university had to assume in relation to these questions. In Hunter’s words, it was a struggle to translate the “*ideal*” (213, emphasis original) mission of the modern university to be “a sanctuary in which knowledge and truth might be pursued—and imparted—with impunity, no matter how unpopular, distasteful or politically heterodox the process might sometimes be” (213) into practice. During the Culture Wars, he argues, the battle regarded the “content of knowledge and truth” (Hunter 214), and arguments about what type of knowledge and truth the curriculum should transmit were exacerbated by the radically different views in which these issues were understood politically. While conservatives denounced the gradual loosening of the ties that connected the United States to the past of Western civilization, liberals pushed for a more inclusive approach to the teaching of the humanities. According to them, this had to be one that would take into account the increasingly multicultural character of American

society<sup>5</sup> and the university population. Indeed, major changes in American demographics played a pivotal role in the struggle for curricular revisions.

After War World II, the economic growth experienced by the United States positively influenced the process of the integration of American minorities with the white population. This was particularly evident in the black community's newly found social mobility and in the development of a "substantial" (Waters and Eschbach 420) black middle class. Such a situation is an example of the hopeful perspective offered by the post-war economic boom (Waters and Eschbach 420). Together with African Americans, other minority groups experienced positive changes in post-war U.S. In particular, the amalgamation of the "children and grandchildren of members of the waves of migrants who had flooded to the United States from Europe before and during the early decades of the century" (Waters and Eschbach 420) witnessed a remarkable boost.

The rapid economic growth registered after the war came to a halt after the 1960s and the hopes for "further progress toward equality" (Waters and Eschbach 420) halted with it. However, new waves of immigration started in the 1960s and continued throughout the 1980s, thus redefining the United States' "racial and ethnic map" (Waters and Eschbach 420) once again.<sup>6</sup> By then, the university population had changed quickly and extensively on two levels. On the one hand, students' ethnic profiles became more and more heterogeneous as second and third generations of immigrants gained access to higher education as a consequence of new social

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<sup>5</sup> See Rodgers, 210-212; Hunter, 215 -216; and Jensen.

<sup>6</sup> Waters and Eschbach explain that "in 1990 7, 9% of the US population was foreign born"; according to the American Bureau of Census, the number of immigrants registered in the 1980s was so high that, "44% of the total 1990s foreign-born population arrived in that decade" (qtd. in Waters and Eschbach 421).



mobility; on the other, the increasing presence on campus of scholars from a non-white background contributed to bring attention to the need for more inclusiveness in curricular revisions. While in the 1980s minorities were finally establishing themselves as an integral part of the academic community via the increasing relevance given to affirmative action as a way of facilitating social integration and of granting equal opportunities, between 1975 and 1985, American humanities witnessed a period of profound crisis (Geiger 50-72).

It is within this conflicted background that the notion of canon started to receive increasing attention.

## 2 Early Canonical Criticism

The earliest reference to the canon in relation to problems of tradition and revision of the humanities between 1970 and 2000 is found in the 1970 collection of essays *The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English* edited by Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter. The collection expresses the collective desire of its contributors to raise important questions regarding the teaching of literature and its political commitment, or lack thereof. Most papers in the collection share a concern with the pedagogical legacy left in American academia by the New Criticism and its disregard for political and historical contexts in the teaching of literature. The essays are characterised by their dissident energy, which is channelled by the contributors in the deluge of dismissive comments on the tradition of ‘great works’. In “Up Against the Great Tradition”, Sheila Delaney argues:

If you teach English literature, you may find it more difficult to relate left political convictions to teaching than do your friends in the social sciences,

for your job is to disseminate the monuments of a culture many of whose central values you reject. (308)

Similarly, Bruce Franklin's "The Teaching of Literature in the Highest Academies of the Empire" offers a satirical portrait of the teacher of great literature and of his role within society:

He is white and he is male...He believes that his work is very important, because in every century there is a handful of men, and perhaps one or two women, who have written great works that only he and few others can understand. It is important to understand and explain these works...because these works are supreme human achievements. They stand above time and constitute the furthest advances of culture and civilization... He believes that great literature, like himself, stands outside social classes and their sordid struggles, commenting upon them with an Olympian overview...He is the scholar-critic-professor of literature.

This ignorant, self-deceived parasite, perfect butt of the satire he so admires, does indeed have an important role in the twilight hour of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. He is in charge of molding opinion as to what books are good and bad, what books should be read or avoided, and what we are to learn from the good books we ought to read. (101-102)

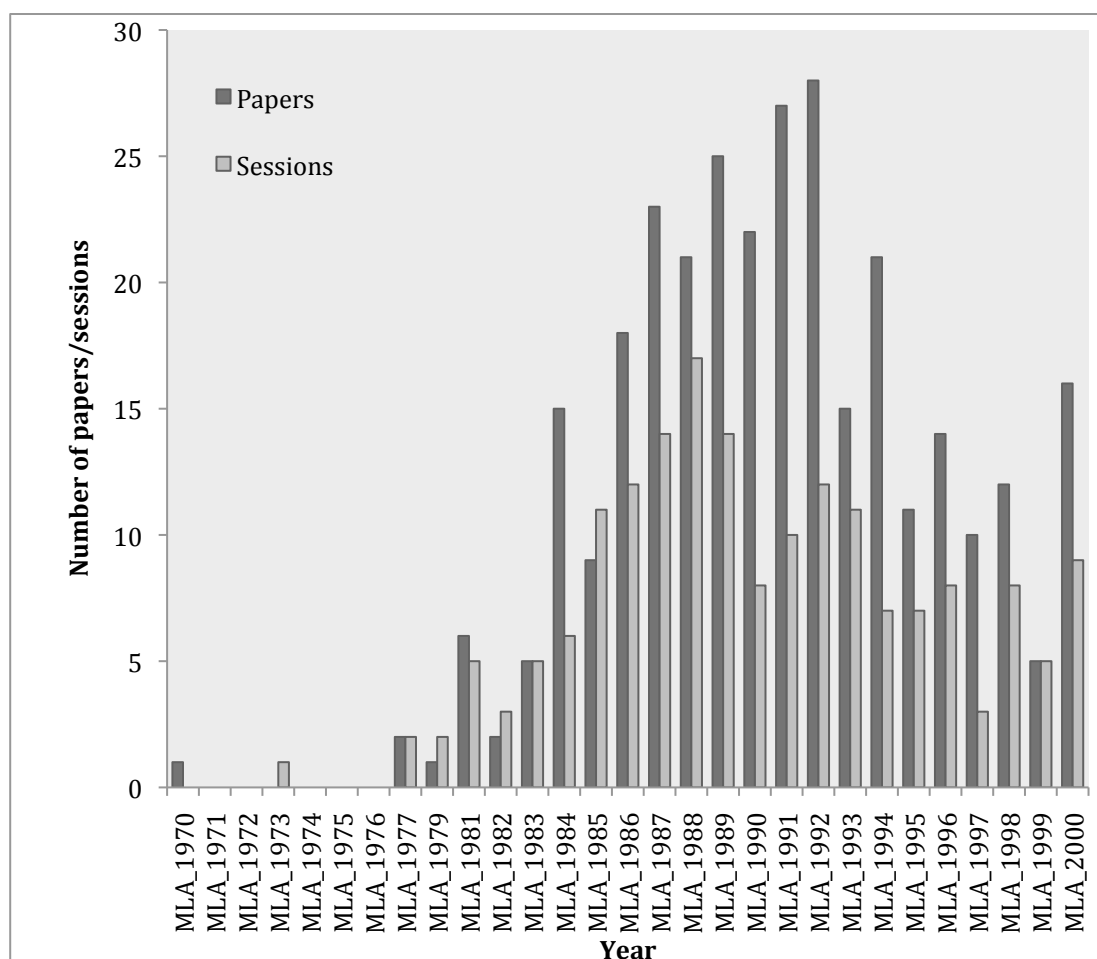
Throughout his essay, Franklin mentions "great literary art" (102), "great literary achievements" (103), "the greatest works of literature" (104), "great works" (104), and "great literature" (104). While there are plenty of peripheral references to the canon, and some of the papers in *The Politics of Literature* anticipate several of the central themes that characterised later scholarly treatment of the notion of canon that I will soon observe, the term is used only once in the collection, almost in passing, in Katherine Ellis's "Arnold's Other Axiom":

The rationale that underlies the canon around which English departments are organized is based on a distinction between 'high' and 'popular' culture, a distinction that sets the leisure of the masses...over against the leisure of the great, without which the monuments of our Western heritage could not have been patronized or written. (162)

To these early references, there followed an increase in the interest received by the topic of the literary canon within the academic community at professional forums

such as the Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association of America.

Fig. 1 illustrates the number of sessions and papers on the subject of the canon occurred at the MLA convention from 1970 to 2000. As it can be observed, papers and sessions on the subject of the canon started to appear in the program of the MLA convention at the beginning of the 1970s and augmented progressively throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in correspondence with the intensification of the canon debates<sup>7</sup>, which I am going to describe in the next paragraphs.



**Fig.1:** Numbers of papers and sessions on the subject of the literary canon presented at the MLA convention between 1970 and 2000.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix A and B for the complete lists of titles of sessions and papers on the subject of the canon presented at the MLA Convention between 1970 and 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Source: "Program of the Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association of America". *PMLA* 94-115.6 (1970-2000).

## 2.1 1979: Frank Kermode and Alastair Fowler

As the subject of the canon started to circulate within academia, examples of scholarly enquiries directly addressing the notion of canon started to appear in academic journals later in the 1970s. The origins of the critical dialogue<sup>9</sup> on literary canons that emerged in this period are rather vague, as they cannot be identified in the work of one specific author or of a specific critical school. For this reason, they should more appropriately be interpreted as the result of a collective reflection on both the role and the nature of literary canons that was ignited by during the 1970s. As early publications on the topic show, scholars interested in the study of canons started to display different styles and approaches.

Frank Kermode was one of the earliest scholars to engage with the notion of canon in his work during the 1970s. While the 1975 monograph *The Classic: Literary Images of Permanence and Change* touched upon the subject of canon formation and canonicity in relation to the more complex idea of the literary classic, his 1979 “Institutional Control of Interpretation”,<sup>10</sup> was one of the first articles to participate in the emerging dialogue on the notion of canon. Here, Kermode describes the canon’s pivotal role in the control of exegesis and hermeneutics within the university:

[the canon] controls the choice of canonical texts, limits their interpretation, and attends to the training of those who will inherit the presumption of institutional competence by which these sanctions are applied. (“Control” 176)

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<sup>9</sup> I think it is important to establish a distinction between *dialogue* and *debate* on the notion of canon as it allows for the definition of two specific approaches to the study of the canon. This semantic differentiation facilitates the observation of the increasing polemical tension that came to characterise the study of the canon. As will be shown through this chapter, while 1980s and 1990s tensions about canons triggered a number of generalist commentaries that partook in the ongoing *debate* on the canon, there are many examples of scholarly treatment of the same subject that approached the notion of canon as the focus of a new *dialogue* amongst scholars of literature.

<sup>10</sup> Henceforth, “Control”.

This observation relies on Kermode's interpretation of the notion of literary canon as related to that of biblical canon, a point of which the second chapter of this dissertation dwells on at length. Following Ernst Curtius's argument in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1<sup>st</sup> English Trans. 1953), Kermode aims at highlighting the complex relationship existing between the canon and the "historical situation of the institution which establishes it" ("Control" 177). A more "shadowy affair" ("Control" 177) than the biblical one, the literary canon finds itself trapped in a wider web of "contenders for inclusion" ("Control" 177). Reflecting on the contemporary situation, Kermode notices how already at the time when he composed the essay, the program of the annual MLA conference was displaying a tendency towards innovation, a "willingness to respond to legitimate pressures from the (political) world outside" ("Control" 179) which translated into sessions dedicated to "Black literature, ...neglected women writers, ...discussions of relatively avant-garde critical and theoretical movements" ("Control" 179) and so forth.<sup>11</sup> Despite observing that changes in the canon "usually depend on the penetration of the academy by enthusiastic movements from without" ("Control" 179), Kermode maintains that changes can become effective only after having been validated by the institution, i.e. the university. Only after this institutional validation occurs, texts are "licensed for professional exegesis" (Kermode, "Control" 180), a definition which in Kermode's terminology comes to correspond to the more popular 'canonical'.

Similarly to Kermode's essay, Alastair Fowler's "Genre and the Literary Canon" (1979) challenges the idea of the literary canon as static. The main objective of Fowler's article is to observe the similarities between changes in the canon and the

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<sup>11</sup> See Fig.1.

cyclical revision of the hierarchical ordering of literary genres and to explain how, in both cases, change follows the ebbs and flows of ages, readers, literary fashions and taste (97). Most importantly, Fowler's analysis breaks down the notion of canon into six types, and has since "...met general acceptance" (Harris 112).<sup>12</sup> Fowler's classification indicates first an "OFFICIAL CANON" (98, capitalisation original), which is "institutionalized through education, patronage, and journalism" (98); second, a "PERSONAL CANON" (98) defined by the selection of works that each individual knows and ranks as valuable; third, Fowler defines a "POTENTIAL CANON" (98), which constitutes of the wider paradigm of all works written. Because it is not possible to access the potential canon in its entirety, Fowler refers to "ACCESSIBLE CANON" (98), as the corpus of works made potentially accessible through their conservation via bibliographical filing. The last two types of canon defined by Fowler strictly depend on the accessible canon, from which

...further systematic preferences have often been exercised, leading to SELECTIVE CANONS. The selective canons with most institutional force are formal curricula, whose influence has long been recognized... But reaction to an official curriculum may issue in an 'alternative' curriculum, equally strict, but until recently less examined by literary historians. And always there is a briefer, more rapidly changing, unseen curriculum of passages that are familiar and interesting and available in the fullest sense. Such selections are all responsive in one way or another to the CRITICAL CANON. (99)

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<sup>12</sup> In 1991 Wendell Harris expanded Fowler's classification and defined three additional types of canon:

The term canon as applied to a closed, uniquely authoritative body of texts, such as the Bible... (canon<sub>7</sub>). If we take Fowler's official canon to mean something like all the authors and titles in whatever reasonably comprehensive literary histories are standard at a given time and if we accept his definition of the critical canon as the texts most written about at that time, the list of works commonly taught in high school and undergraduate classes will be not only much shorter than the official canon but also unlikely to correspond exactly to the critical. Thus there is theoretical space for a *pedagogical* canon (canon<sub>8</sub>). What of the numerous authors who are given special recognition in selection after selection over centuries or at least decades? Or those contemporary authors who have high visibility? In a haphazard way these tend to be grouped together... But the glacially changing core is a kind of *diachronic* canon (canon<sub>9</sub>), to be distinguished from a rapidly changing periphery that could be called the *nonce* canon (canon<sub>10</sub>), only a miniscule part of which will eventually become part of the diachronic canon. (112-113, emphasis original)

Both Kermode's and Fowler's articles stand as examples of early scholarly approaches to the analysis and the study of the notion of canon. The two essays present quite distinct approaches, which show how even at these early stages, the analysis of the canon developed along two main tangents. On the one hand, Kermode's essay reaches *outwards* as it explores the role of the canon within its context. On the other, Fowler moves *inwards*, seeking to provide a better, more layered definition of the term 'canon' as it increasingly started to circulate within the field of literary studies.

## 2.2 1981 - 1983: *Opening up the Canon* and *Critical Enquiry's* "Canons"

Alongside the work of individual scholar, around the end of the 1970s the canon started to be approached chorally, particularly in collections of essays and journals' special issues that discussed the function, form and constituencies of the literary canon. This is the case of *English Literature: Opening up the Canon* (1981), a selection of papers presented at the 1979 English Institute meeting and collectively published in 1981 under the supervision of Leslie A. Fielder and Houston Baker Jr. The relevance of this collection for the place it occupies in the discussion on literary canons has been observed *a posteriori* by, amongst others, John Guillory, who indicates *Opening up the Canon* as the work that marked the emergence of the problem of representation as an institutional topos in the debate about the politics of canon formation (*Cultural Capital* 343n5). The tone of *Opening up the Canon* is unabashedly confrontational. Indeed, the collection aimed at challenging the academic establishment by escaping from what co-editor Leslie Fielder calls "the

parochialism” (vii) of the English Institute’s meetings. Although not all the essays addressed canon formation directly, all of them were, in one way or another, concerned with the centrality of the English tradition in academia from both a linguistic and an institutional point of view.<sup>13</sup>

The early 1980s marked a moment of transition for the study of the notion of canon, as it is then that its newly found prominence starts to be consolidated. As Frank Kermode recalls in the prologue to *An Appetite for Poetry* (1989), “the topic of canon had quite spontaneously risen to somewhere near the top of the theoretical agenda” (2) by 1983, the year in which *Critical Inquiry*’s special issue, “Canons”, was published. Kermode recalls the surprise of the then editor of *Critical Inquiry*, W.J.T Mitchell, upon the reception a number of unsolicited contributions on the notion of canon “as if the existence of the topic, and its contentiousness had mysteriously and simultaneously declared itself everywhere and to everybody” (*An Appetite for Poetry* 2).

The special issue presented contributions by some of the scholars who, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, had embraced the polemic on the canon, and others whose theoretical reflections on the problem of canon formation are still very relevant to this day. Amongst them was Barbara Herrnstein Smith, to whose anti-canonical stances I will soon return, and whose essay “Contingencies of Value” – which was expanded in 1988 and turned into a monograph carrying the same title – opened the collection. Another remarkable contribution was John Guillory’s “*The Ideology of Canon-Formation: T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks*”, which inaugurated Guillory’s career one of the most widely known theoreticians of the canon, and was

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<sup>13</sup> The essay that most directly deals with the literary canon is H. Bruce Franklin’s “English as an Institution: The Role of Class”: 92-105.



later turned into a chapter in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Canon Formation* (1993), Guillory's monograph on canon formation and central focus of the fourth chapter of this thesis. Similarly, Arnold Kuprat's "Native American Literature and the Canon" marks the beginning of Kuprat's enquiry into the relation between canon-formation and Native American literature, which culminated with the publication of *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (1989).

Lawrence Lipking's reflection on female figures neglected by tradition, entitled "Aristotle's Sister: A poetic of Abandonment", appeared in "Canons" against the backdrop of the substantial reflection on the function of canons as an instrument of the systematization of the arts of which he had articulated in *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (1970), while Charles Altieri's "An Idea and an Ideal of a Literary Canon", which I discuss at greater length in Chapter Two, remains to this day arguably one of the most thought-provoking, as well as one of the most referenced, essays to have dwelt on the notion of canon.

In the introduction to the issue, editor Robert Von Hallberg explains how the contributions reflected "some of the range of current thinking about canon-formation in different areas of interpretation" (iii). In particular, Von Hallberg identifies three main perspectives adopted by the contributors:

...how artists determine canons by selecting certain styles and masters to emulate; how poet-critics and academic critics, through the institutions of literary study, construct canons; and how institutionalized canons effectively govern literary study and instruction.(iii-iv)

The dominance of the second and third approach in most of the essays conveys the urge felt by some scholars to elaborate on the problem also by taking into account the "social, political, and economic forces" (Von Hallberg iv) at play in the process of canon formation. However, although some of the essays openly presented a

revisionist agenda, the general atmosphere of “Canons” is still very far from the confrontational tones that will characterise the treatment of the same subject in the late 1980s.

In different ways, the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* and the collection *Opening up the Canon* are useful examples of how the term ‘canon’ started to circulate among critics and to be integrated in the professional vocabulary. On the one hand, “Canons” related to the notion of canon directly, and established a critical platform from which to further study different aspects of the process of canon formation. On the other, *Opening up the Canon* positions itself more subtly: while the literary canon *per se* was not the focus of most of the essays presented, the sole fact that the canon features in the title of the collection could be read as an effective rhetorical choice that registered the blooming popularity of the term.

As the 1980s progressed, the role of the notion of canon became progressively symbolic within the university. As a consequence of the pressing demand for a thorough reformation of English Literature departments across the United States, the terms in which scholars related to, and discussed, about the canon changed, starting to reflect the same tensions that were storming the field of literary studies as a whole.

### 3 1984-1988: Bennet and his Legacy

In 1984 the then chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, senator William Bennett, expressed his anxieties about the status of higher education in “To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education” (1984). The report presents the results of a study group composed by 31 “prominent teachers,

scholars, administrators, and authorities” (i) in the field. The goal of the group was to provide questions about “the condition of learning in the humanities” (Bennett i), its nature and future perspectives (Bennett i). The report opens with a foreword in which Bennett makes a point of establishing the panel’s impartiality. “The members of the study group” he says

came from research universities, land grant colleges, coeducational liberal arts colleges, women’s colleges, historically black colleges, two-year colleges, and secondary schools. They included presidents, vice presidents, deans, and professors, as well as officials of educational and scholarly associations, a journalist, a foundation officer, and a school principal. They were...as diverse as the enterprise of education itself. (ii)

The panel, Bennett seems to suggest, was a miniature replica of American society itself. Despite its diverse composition, the “lively discussion” (Bennett ii) and the odd debate, it eventually managed to find “common ground on a number of important points” (Bennett ii): the country did, after all, have some hopes left.

Preoccupied with the loss of prestige of the humanities and the drop of registrations for humanistic courses, Bennett’s report advocates for the return of Western civilization’s traditional subjects and texts in the undergraduate curriculum, and for the enhancement of teaching standards. Throughout the report, the need to ‘return to the West’ by placing the study of its civilization “at the heart of the college curriculum”(Bennett 4) is reiterated and exalted as one of the key interventions necessary to rescue the humanities from their imminent collapse. In the section entitled “Why study the Humanities?”, Bennett reflects in Arnoldian terms on the nature and function of the humanities and pays particular attention to the “qualities that make them uniquely important and worth studying” (5):

...I would describe the humanities as the best that has been said, thought, written, and otherwise expressed about the human experience. The humanities tell us how men and women of our own and other civilizations have grappled

with life's enduring, fundamental questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended? What is courage? What is noble? What is base? Why do civilisations flourish? Why do they decline? (5)

The moral dimension Bennett attaches to the humanities strengthens the ties between the ongoing conflict within academia and the conflicts that were taking place on a national scale regarding competing worldviews that I have hinted at earlier on in this chapter. The political agenda behind Bennett's interpretation of the function of the humanities becomes particularly evident as one notices that the values that Bennett claims the humanities ought to transmit (courage, nobility, etc.) mirror the system of values characterising conservatism as described by Himmelfarb: "hard work, thrift, temperance, fidelity, self-discipline [and] godliness" (qtd. in George 24). By teaching such values, "...the humanities can contribute to an informed sense of community by enabling us to learn about and become participants in a common culture, shareholders in our civilization" (Bennett 6) by fostering in the students the knowledge of "a common culture rooted in civilization's lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations, and its heritage" (Bennett 6). The key problem lies, therefore, in the definition of such ideals, aspirations and heritage, which for Bennett can be transmitted by those "works and authors [who] virtually define the development of the Western mind..." (15):

[Americans] are a part and a product of Western civilization. That [American] society was founded upon such principles as justice, liberty, government with the consent of the governed, and equality under the law is the result of ideas descended directly from great epochs of Western civilization – Enlightenment England and France, Renaissance Florence, and Periclean Athens. These ideas, so revolutionary in their times yet so taken for granted now, are the glue that binds together our pluralistic nation. The fact that we as Americans – whether black or white, Asian or Hispanic, rich or poor – share these beliefs aligns us with other cultures of the Western tradition. It is not ethnocentric or chauvinistic to acknowledge this. No student citizen of our civilization should be denied access to the best that tradition has to offer. (Bennett 38)

An increasing number of universities, however, were moving towards curricular reformations that would have more suitably represented the multicultural character of the country, in keeping with what Bender calls the “Americanization of academic culture” (17) that had started towards the mid-1960s:

Academic intellect in the 1950s and thereafter increasingly located itself in a larger international arena and began actively to study contemporary societies beyond the Northern Atlantic, but at the same time it turned inward to the study of the United States. While the influx of European émigré scholars Europeanized certain fields to a degree...there was a simultaneous proliferation of interdisciplinary American studies programs that later became the staging ground and model for initiatives on behalf of African-American studies, women’s studies, and ethnic studies.

Gradually, but especially in the past quarter-century, the core intellectual tradition of general education that had earlier been presumed to represent the best of European culture was increasingly supplemented by engagement with the art, ideas, and experience of Americans. This shift partly explains the identification of the university with society in 1968 and afterward... This blending of the university into society (or vice versa) today provides the context for many of the battles over historical representation and literary canons. (17)

### 3.1 Post-Bennett Responses: Two Issues of the *Yale Journal of Criticism*

As Bennett’s *To Reclaim a Legacy* urged a return to the roots of Western Culture and Literature in the shaping of the undergraduate curriculum, the demand to establish a level of consensus about what and how it should be taught in the humanities, and of the role the canon ought to assume in this process, became a central concern for academics.

In 1987, the *Yale Journal of Criticism* dedicated a substantial section of its first two issues to the theme of canon formation by publishing a selection of the proceedings of two different symposia held at the Whitney Humanities Center at

Yale University: “The Humanities and The Public Interest” (5 April 1986) and “Literary Theory and the Curriculum” (5 May 1987).

In the first case, the extracts selected were by Norman Podhoretz, A. Bartlett Giamatti and Jonathan Culler. Each of them related differently to the question of defining a new rationale for the teaching of the humanities against the backdrop of recent debates. On the one hand, Podhoretz claims that a canon of literature representative of aesthetic values should function as a means of cultural unification by being as inclusive as possible and by being rendered as accessible as possible (184-185). On the other, Giamatti contests this vision by stressing the necessity for the humanities to be taught in a way that would take into account their ethical and political implications, and not just their aesthetic ones (185-186). Finally, Culler urges the humanities of the future to give priority to their “critical function” (189) as a way of definition of a new, less dogmatic and more productive rationale.

These idiosyncratic interpretations were given coherence by editor Peter Brooks, who in his essay expresses the need for academics to articulate their positions in more constructive terms by making the most of the challenges laid down by Bennett. As he put it

...to ignore these challenges would be a grave error, especially since humanists in the university on the whole do fail to articulate the rationale of their pedagogical enterprise and the curricula in which it is carried forward. They have thrown out the canon and relinquished authority without making clear the imperatives of change and redefinition, the necessity to recognize the shifting boundaries of intellectual traditions and conceptual systems. (“The Humanities and the Public Interest” 183)

Brooks' remarks assume an altogether graver tone in the next issue of the *Yale Journal of Criticism*. Introducing the extracts from the next symposium, “Literary Theory and the Curriculum”, he observes that although the occasion gathered “an

array of eminent theorists and critics to debate the impact of theory on the act of teaching, and on the larger collaborative act of constructing a curriculum...”

collaboration was

markedly missing from the proceedings of the symposium, which rapidly became synecdochal of theoretical and ideological collisions at work in the field of literary studies today. As a result, only few of the speakers actually addressed the idea of a curriculum, and used it instead as a trope for the profession... (161)

Brooks' observation of the curriculum's tropological function is very effective, as it conjures the idea of a larger-than-life controversy that went so far as to overwhelm the actual meaning of the terms it wanted to re-negotiate. The same tendency can be observed in canon debates: as the controversy continued and the Canon Wars ensued the following year with the Stanford demonstrations,<sup>14</sup> the interpretation of the concept of canon as a metaphor for contemporary professional and cultural debates became increasingly influential.

### 3.2 1988: The Canon's *Annus Horribilis*

Traditional courses, such as Stanford's 'Western Culture', underwent a radical process of revision due to the public demonstrations organized by pressure groups such as the Black Student Union, whose demands for a curriculum more inclusive of both female authors and authors from a non-white background were taken on board by Stanford's faculty, to Bennett's great disappointment (Atlas 24).

The tensions between the NEH and some universities were not limited to curricular revisions: they also focused on the approaches adopted by some

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<sup>14</sup> Several sources indicate the Stanford demonstrations as arguably the episode that brought to national attention the canon-debate. See Rodgers 210; Hunter 216; and Rachel Donadio's "Revisiting the Canon Wars" in *The New York Times*. 16 September 2007. *Nytimes.com*. Web. 28 September 2008.

universities for the teaching and researching of the humanities. The 1988 exchange between Bennett's successor at the head of the NEH, Lynne V. Cheney, and the then President of the Modern Language Association, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, illustrates the extent to which the two institutions were moving in opposite directions as far as teaching and research methodologies were concerned.

In a report entitled "Humanities in America" (1988), Cheney drew a less-than-flattering picture of the current state of the humanities in America and indicates two factors that might have contributed to push them to the crisis they were experiencing. On the one hand, Cheney argued, the increasing politicization of teaching and interpretation challenged the role of "literature, philosophy and history" (7) in the teaching of "what it means to be human" (7) by shifting the focus of their teaching from general humanistic questions to a narrower analysis of power-relations within society. Engaging directly with Marxist critique, she argued that the expanding tendency to consider "the political perspective...as the absolute horizon of all reading and interpretation" (Jameson qtd. in Cheney 7) challenged notions of "...truth – and beauty and excellence..." (7) by interpreting them as "transitory...devices, used by some groups to perpetuate 'hegemony' over others" (7). On the other hand, Cheney observes how over-specialisation and jargon-based academic writing resulted in the alienation of academia from what she calls "parallel schools" (8), that is, other key-institutions for the transmission of national culture, e.g. libraries and museums. Specialisation, according to Cheney, was also proving to be problematic for the professional development of future scholars interested in generalist subject matters. The collapse of the job market and the resulting competition forced such scholars to stick to the mainstream direction taken by



scholarship – that is – specialisation (Cheney 8), thus reinforcing the already dominant trend. Cheney also noticed how peer reviews were more likely to be conducted by increasingly specialised reviewers, often reducing the chances of generalist scholars to see their research published and disseminated. If “overspecialisation frequently ma[de] the academy a target for outsiders” (Cheney 9), the Modern Language Association’s policy of favouring an over-specialised, jargon-based approach of humanistic research stood as examples of “how trivial academic study of the humanities ha[d] become” (Cheney 9).

Herrnstein Smith replied to Cheney’s attacks during her 1988 presidential address by expressing her preoccupation with the fragile *liaison* between academia and the NEH and the possible consequences of Cheney’s “negative assessment ” (290). Herrnstein Smith’s main concern had to do with the power imbalance the NEH and MLA, as the decisions of the former could potentially stifle the intellectual liberty of the latter. In her address, Cheney’s report and her institutional role are perceived as a threat with the potential to “impact on the future of the profession, humanities education and research, and the intellectual climate in [the] nation” (291).

If both Bennett’s and Cheney’s reports manifested the conflict between part of academia and the NEH, several other works produced within the professoriate showed that the problem of curricular revision was increasingly determining a schism between intellectuals. As the curriculum started to be reshaped in order to be adapted to the new national and academic ethnic map, scholars started opposing one another “with such ferocity that they redefined the discipline itself in ways that were alien to general education and what had formerly been considered humanistic learning” (66), as Geiger put it. The “collapse of any consensus over content”

(Geiger 65) was indeed one of the main signs of the expansion of the culture wars into the field of higher education. While scholars such as Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in *Cultural Literacy* engaged with the effects of multiculturalism in the definition of the curriculum, by praising the importance of teaching the Great Books so as to transmit and somehow preserve the nation's core cultural and literary heritage, other works concentrated on the negative effects caused by the pervasive influence of politics on contemporary academic practices.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the huge commercial success of both Bloom's and Hirsch's books, their position was received by part of academia with the same hostility reserved for *To Reclaim a Legacy* and *Humanities in America*. The level of tension reached in the debate about curricular revision shows, for instance, in the strongly polemical tones displayed by the more progressive side of the quarrel. The 1988 conference jointly organised by Duke University and The University of North Carolina entitled "Liberal

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. New York: Free Press, 1991; Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990; and the more recent *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (1997) by John M. Ellis', whose line of argument squarely places the importation and the subsequent misreading of French theory in the United States amongst the reasons underpinning the crisis the humanities experienced in the period in exam. Together with a "sharp" (207) move to the left, according to Ellis critical fashions played a major role in the revolution that invested American universities and, as a result, the unchallenged rise of race-gender-class criticism happened. Ellis lists other factors - namely, affirmative action, contempt for bourgeois society and professors' self contempt - that contributed to make of American academia a particularly receptive ground for the issues at discussion in the Culture Wars to be fought over. In his critique of affirmative action and of the consequences that it bore on literary studies, Ellis maintains, similarly to D'Souza and Kimball, that "what began as a program for social justice in hiring has long since developed into hiring to service a teaching program that is *about* the themes of affirmative action" (216, emphasis original). Ellis also observes the post-1968 tendency displayed by many leftist professors to indulge in what he calls "bourgeois baiting" (Ellis 214). These intellectuals expressed bias of Marxist theories of interpretation manifested its consequences in a systematic "hostility to business and the middle class" (Ellis 214), thus contributing to interpret the study of the humanities in increasingly elitist terms. Criticism therefore became more and more a self-absorbed practice, a point which he illustrates by making the example of Stanley Fish, whose "gyrations...are the mark of someone anxious to be recognized for his own performance rather than as an explicator of someone else's" (Ellis 215), a point which echoes the concerns expressed Cheney in *Humanities in America*.

Arts Education in the Late Twentieth Century: Emerging Conditions, Responsive Practices”, makes for a good example of the disregard with which the concerns expressed by Bennett and Cheney, together with Bloom and Hirsch, had been received by part of the professoriate. The essays presented at the conference were first published in 1990 in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*,<sup>16</sup> and then re-published in 1992 in the volume edited by Darryl J. Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *The Politics of Liberal Education*.<sup>17</sup> In their “Introduction”, Gless and Herrnstein Smith explain that the conference “was designed to respond to attacks on current humanities teaching and curricular reform” (1-2) and that such an agenda justified the defensive stances expressed by most of the contributors (2). The hostility that some of the essays displayed towards the “Killer B’s...” (Pratt 15) –Bloom, Bennett, Bellow (who wrote the introduction to *The Closing of the American Mind*) – “...plus a C”(Pratt 15) – Lynne Cheney, that is – conveys how neat the separation was between the ‘cultural left’,<sup>18</sup> and those who argued for a more traditional vision of the curriculum. Richard Rorty describes the general atmosphere of the conference: “...[the audience] responded readily and favourably to notions like ‘subversive readings’, ‘hegemonic discourse’, ‘the breaking down of traditional logocentric hierarchies” (233) while it “...chortled derisively at mentions of William Bennettt, Allan Bloom, and E.D. Hirsch, Jr. ...” (233).

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<sup>16</sup> 89.1 (1990).

<sup>17</sup> The quotations I use are taken from this edition and are referenced accordingly.

<sup>18</sup> As John Searle observes, the term ‘cultural left’ was widely used by the contributors as an umbrella term in which they almost unanimously identified. However, Searle himself was suspicious of the term as a “well defined notion” precisely because of the diversity of perspectives it unites: “1960s-style radicals, feminists, deconstructionists, Marxists, people active in “gay studies” and “ethnic studies,” and people of left-wing political persuasion who happen to teach in universities.” (“The Storm Over the University”)

The division was profound and each stance was articulated in such radical terms that it became almost impossible to find any agreement to a possible solution on how to mend the precarious state of the humanities. As John Searle noticed in “The Storm Over the University”(1990), although the problems were real, tangible, and most importantly in need of being solved, the exasperated rhetoric of the debate not only prevented the parties involved from working towards a solution but also obscured the significance of the whole controversy.

The embitterment of the struggle for curricular reform during the Culture Wars bore important consequences on the ways in which the canon came to be regarded. From the second half of the 1980s onwards, the intellectual efforts of the previous decade to engage with the idea of canon as a fundamental concept pertaining to the study of literature were overshadowed by the rhetorical force of ideological debates. What had started as a spontaneous movement towards the exploration of the notion of canon and of its implications, swerved towards the transformation of the canon into a symbol of the conflicted state of American higher education.

#### 4 1990s and Beyond

However, not all the material produced at this time should be dismissed as the result of a strictly political controversy amongst academics, as it has been suggested by, for instance, Robert Hughes who defined the debate on the canon as utterly “inconclusive” (88). On the contrary, the positive effects of multiculturalist demands for “opening up the canon” as a way of defining new curricula allowed for more inclusive policies to be adopted towards the literature produced by minority groups

whose status as integral part of American literary culture would have otherwise been destined to never be acknowledged. The publication of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990) celebrated such diversity because of the commitment of its editor Paul Lauter, whose theoretical work in the previous years had been strongly concerned with canonical reformation and multiculturalism.<sup>19</sup> Another positive outcome of the increasing attention received by the idea of canon and, more broadly, by the exchanges fostered by the Culture and Canon Wars is that, throughout the 1990s, several works appeared all of which attempted to explore the concept of canon by explicitly departing from the polemical tones of the ongoing controversy. To a certain extent, it looks as if by the 1990s the time had come to take stock of the existing intellectual legacy on the canon and to inaugurate a new phase of its study which would both take into account the lessons learnt during the most heated phases of the debates and prepare the field for future scholarship.

A key text on this topic is Jan Gorak's *The Making of the Modern Canon. Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (1991), which widely informs the second chapter of this dissertation and which furthered the exploration of the meaning of the notion of canon from distinctly non-ideological grounds. Another important example is Wendell Harris's article, "Canonicity" (1991), which explores the concept of canon by shifting the focus from the controversy and, instead, forming a dialogue with some of the key-texts in secular canonical studies, such as Kermode's "Institutional Control of Interpretation" and Fowler's "Genre and the Literary Canon", both of which I have mentioned earlier in this chapter.

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance Lauter's articles "Society and the Profession 1958-1983". *PMLA* 99.3 (1984): 414 - 426 and "History and the Canon". *Social Text* 12 (1985): 94-101. See also Lauter's collection of essays *Canons and Contexts* (1991).

In hindsight, the 1990s seem to be the decade that more solidly contributed to consolidate the role of secular canonical studies as an autonomous field of scholarly enquiry. The range of monographs that appeared in this decade alone conveys the enthusiasm that surrounded the topic and its popularity. The approaches adopted were diverse. Works observed the canonisation of particular authors<sup>20</sup> and of regional literatures;<sup>21</sup> they explored the relationship between the canon and literature by women,<sup>22</sup> between the canon and queer literature,<sup>23</sup> and between the canon and ethnic minorities.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, in the late 1990s, a number of studies started to deal with the historical dimension of the process of canon formation. 1998 alone witnessed the publication of three of the most influential studies on the subject: Jonathan Kramnick's *Making of the English Canon. Print Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700 – 1770*, Trevor Ross's *The Making of The English Literary Canon: from the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* and Douglas Lane Patey's article "The Eighteenth Century Invents the Canon". The three works whose

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<sup>20</sup> See for instance Newcomb, John Timberman. *Wallace Stevens and Literary Canons*. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1992; and Scharnhorst, Gary. *Henry David Thoreau: A Case Study in Canonization*. Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> See Pease, Donald E. *Revisionary Interventions into the Americanist Canon*. New Americanists. Durham, N.C.; London: Duke University Press, 1994; Golding, Alan. *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry. The Wisconsin Project on American Writers*. Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995; Morris, Timothy. *Becoming Canonical in American Poetry*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995

<sup>22</sup> See amongst others Haselkorn, Anne M. and Betty Travitsky. *The Renaissance Englishwoman in Print: Counterbalancing the Canon*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990; Lonsdale, Roger, Alvaro Ribeiro, and James G. Basker. *Tradition in Transition: Women Writers, Marginal Texts and the Eighteenth-Century Canon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996; Fendler, Susanne. *Feminist Contributions to the Literary Canon: Setting Standards of Taste*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997; and Kilcup, Karen L. *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance Hawthorne, Mark D. *Making It Ours: Queering the Canon. Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Studies*; V. 2. 1st ed. New Orleans: University Press of the South, 1998 and Woodhouse, Reed. *Unlimited Embrace: A Canon of Gay Fiction, 1945-1995*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

<sup>24</sup> See Judy, Ronald A. T. *(Dis)Forming the American Canon : African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993; Palumbo-Liu, David. *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

analyses lie at the core of this dissertation were also published during the 1990s. John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* appeared in 1993, followed by Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* in 1994, and Gates's *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* in 1997. As I will be showing later, while all three instances were, to different extents, influenced by the ideological rhetoric of the Canon Wars, they succeeded in departing from the more general aspects of the controversy and contributed to illuminate specific aspects of the notion of canon and of its implication with other notions such as that of cultural capital (Guillory), of intra-literary influence (Bloom), and of anthology making as an instance of canon formation (Gates).

## Conclusion

Although it is a common assumption to read the material about the canon produced during these troubled years as a by-product of wider and deeper ideological struggles, it is also true that important reflections were produced during the Culture Wars which contributed to furthering the discussion about the meaning of the notion of canon and of the place it occupies within the wider field of literary studies.

In accounting for the centrality occupied by the notion of canon in literary studies in the last 25 years of the twentieth century, this chapter aimed at outlining the background of the case studies I present respectively in chapters Three, Four, and Five. As will become evident as this thesis develops, the effects of the debates that surrounded the emergence of a more sustained scholarly interest in the notion of canon reverberate on each of the case studies in different ways. In particular, it affected the way in which the work by Bloom, Guillory and Gates was initially

received and interpreted. Another important aspect of this first chapter is that it provides an initial systematisation of the substantial body of work on the subject of the canon produced between 1970 and 2000. Although for reasons of space not all the material available has been included in this preliminary analysis of the field of secular canonical studies, the scholarship presented in this chapter bears witness to the fascinating trajectory followed by the notion of canon from the margin to the centre of critical studies. Finally, this chapter has touched upon the dualism surrounding the notion of canon and linked it to the ideological struggle for the definition of the nation's core values and how these translated in the humanities into a controversy about the curriculum and its role in the transmission of said values. While towards the end of the 1970s individual scholars started to reflect on the notion of literary canon, the 1980s witnessed the transformation of these initial reflections into a choral debate that turned the canon into the object of contention between multiculturalist and foundationalist scholars. The initial desire to illuminate the role occupied by the canon in the field of literary studies was substituted by a series of exchanges in which the canon was interpreted symbolically as a means to represent diverging tensions in the changing cultural and demographic landscape of the United States.

In order to continue to explore the notion of canon and its function as a cultural institution, the next chapter will engage with the history of the word 'canon' and of its use at different historical junctures to show how the symbolic force attributed to the notion of canon sits squarely in its past and in the history of its interpretation.



## Chapter Two

### The Concept of Canon as Standard and as List

#### Introduction

Neither a solely aesthetic phenomenon, nor a simply social and cultural construct, the literary canon occupies a grey area of literary studies, which is symptomatic of both the breadth and complexity of the subject. Secular canonical critics have always been aware, both implicitly and explicitly, of the difficulties that arise in the attempt to interpret the idea of canon. A symptom of this uncertainty is, for instance, the overarching use of analogy as a means of explaining the concept of canon; by means of the fluidity of its meaning, *canon* always becomes something else, as if the concept of canon would not correspond to something tangible but remained, as Charles Altieri says, “an idea and an ideal”(37).

This chapter attempts to retrace the history of the idea of canon while engaging with key critical texts and putting them in relation to one another. In order to do this, after a brief observation of the etymology of the term, I shall engage with Jan Gorak’s 1991 study, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea*, where the process of the development of the idea of canon is scrutinized and placed in direct connection with the conflicting critical approaches of the 1980s and early 1990s. The originality of Gorak’s argument lies in its inquisitive nature and innovative scope; far from bringing forward an ideological reading of the canon, *The Making of the Modern Canon* constitutes a solid gateway to the understanding of the concept of canon as it relies on the intuition that – notwithstanding the central position it occupied in contemporary critical discourse –

very little attention had been given to the diversification that its meaning has undergone throughout the centuries. Gorak's study informs the perspective I take in this chapter when it assumes that, during the so called Canon Wars, most critical approaches to the idea of canon relied on the symbolic meaning it was charged with and not on a clear understanding of its meaning *proper*.

In the opening section of his study, Gorak focuses on two different approaches towards the idea of canon: a flexible canon, whose origins he finds in the work of Aristotle, and a closed canon, which is explained by referencing St. Augustine's reflections on the nature and function of the Scriptures. Gorak maintains that these two approaches correspond with two different schools of twentieth century critics who dealt with the problem of literary canons and canon formation. Drawing from Gorak's argument, I observe the extent to which Aristotelian and Augustinian interpretations of the idea of canon are relevant to our current understanding of the concept; where Gorak hints in passing at Aristotle's and Augustine's contemporary legacy, my observations aim at showing the extent to which Gorak's classification of two different traditions in the interpretation of the idea of canon prove to be both valid and worthy of greater attention. Thus, I observe how Aristotle's influence is manifest in Charles Altieri's seminal article "An Idea and an Ideal of Literary Canon" and how the two are connected by an underlying trust in the capacity of the individual to rely on the interplay between common judgment and free will to perform choices in order to achieve a greater good, which in Altieri's vision translates in cultural emancipation while in Aristotle is identified with happiness, or *eudemonia*. I then move on to observe Augustine's legacy in canonical studies; whereas Gorak focuses solely on the legislative effects of the canon of Scriptures on

the communities it effects, I argue that both *City of God* and *On Christian Doctrine* show Augustine's fundamental role in outlining a dialectic for the study of canons, one which greatly influenced the debates taken into examination in this dissertation. Following René Wellek's argument in *The Rise of Literary History* (1966), I present his observations on the rise of individuality in the eighteenth century in relation to canon-debates in order to outline the backdrop on which the struggle for the possession of and the access to the canon developed. Finally, I return to the observation of the way in which the critical dialogues examined in this thesis have interpreted the notion of canon and use Derrida's lecture "Archive Fever" (1994) to establish a conceptual relationship between the notion of canon and that of archive in order to explain the canon's role as institutional instrument of conservation of memory.

## 1 The 'Etymological Section'

Several critical studies on the notion of canon open with a reflection on the origins of the word 'canon'. Examples of such approaches can be found in Douglas Lane Patey's "The 18<sup>th</sup> Century Invents the Canon" (1988), Wendell Harris's "Canonicity" (1991), Anderson and Zanetti's "Comparative Semantic Approaches to the Idea of a Literary Canon" (2000), as well as in more extensive monographs such as Trevor Ross's *The Making of The English Canon: From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* (1998), John Guillory's *Cultural Capital*, and E. Dean Kolbas's *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (2001). Although all these studies

present acute differences in style, scope and methodology,<sup>25</sup> it is interesting to observe that they all open with an etymological section.

Often the etymological sections are functional to the setting of the framework in which the inquiry takes place, as shown in the following paragraph from Kolbas:

Before assessing the contemporary debate over the Western literary canon, it is necessary to understand the precise meanings of the word *canon*. Although new studies of specific incidents of literary canonization have been appearing with increasing frequency, most of them concentrate on the fortunes and fate of individual authors, texts, movements, or genres; to date, few have attempted to trace the origins of the term itself and its subsequent transformations. (11)

In other cases, such as in Trevor Ross's, etymology is used as a means to introduce the specific point of view that the author will take on in his enquiry:

An ancient Greek word, 'canon' originally meant either of two things, a measuring rod or, later, a list. From the first is derived the idea of a standard that can be applied as a law or principle. From the second comes the concept of canonization, the Catholic practice of admitting someone to the list of saints. Modern critics often assume that only the oldest definition, a canon as rule, is relevant to considerations of literary canonicity. This may be the result of analogizing the literary canon to the hegemonic rigidity of the biblical canon, since the usage of 'canon' as a term for a body of writings first developed in relation to the Bible, in the fourth century C.E., as an attempt by Church authorities to distinguish 'authentic' Scripture from competing canons that mixed scriptural writings with apocrypha...It may therefore be useful to consider literary canons as lists as much as standards of excellence. (*The Making of the English Literary Canon* 23)

This passage from Ross helps to introduce the ambiguous meaning of the word

*canon*: a canon can be both a standard and list of writings according to the meaning

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<sup>25</sup> While Patey and Ross develop very specific, historically and geographically located arguments aimed at dating the birth of the English canon, Wendell Harris reflects in general terms on the idea of canonicity, while revising Fowler's classification (see Chapter One, 29). Anderson and Zanetti, on the other hand, advocate a radical reconsideration of the idea of canon as a universal, while John Guillory's work focuses on the key role of canons in the maintenance of the United States' elitist pedagogical system and Kolbas examines the theoretical premises from which contemporary canonical debates stemmed, with a particular focus on the Frankfurt School.

that one chooses to refer to. Similarly, Anderson and Zanetti put the ambivalence highlighted by Ross in relation to etymology:

Etymological analysis of the word ‘canon’ in its cultural contexts is an interesting topic in its own right, and it is useful ... because it points out the multiple ways in which the word ‘canon’ is ambiguous...A ‘canon’ may be, ambiguously, open or closed; it may be a rule (or a set of rules) or a model or a selection of books or paintings or sculptures or other cultural artifacts. (346)

Jan Gorak’s argument in *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea* (1991) also uses etymology as its starting point, and then develops into an account of the history of the diffusion and interpretation of the notion of canon in Western thought. Gorak’s text opens with an extensive observation of early acceptations of the term *canon*, whose etymology goes back to the semitic root *qan*,<sup>26</sup> which means an especially straight-growing and useful kind of reed. Its Greek derivation, *kanōn* (*kanōn*), dropped its original meaning of *reed* and, when used to refer to something concrete, it designated

a straight thing...; for instance: a curtain rod, the beam in a loom, the shaft of a lance, rods arranged diagonally in a shield in order to support the rim, all kinds of rods in machinery, and, most important of all, a foot rule used in architecture; that is, an instrument which could be used for rough measurements as well as for making things even or straight, or, in other words, which could be used both as a yardstick and as a rule. (Von Fritz 112)

Probably by means of an association of ideas linked to its understanding as an instrument of measurement (*metron*), *kanōn* started to be widely adopted in different disciplines, mostly but not exclusively artistic, as a synonym for *rule*. Von Fritz points out that “starting from the use of *kanōn* as an instrument of measuring in architecture it acquires the meaning of ‘the right measure’ and, subsequently, of ‘the

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<sup>26</sup> For a detailed philological study of the word, see Hoppel’s philological study *Kanōn. Zur Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes und seiner lateinischen Entsprechungen (regula-norma)* (1937) and its review by K.von Fritz in *The American Journal of Philology*. 60: 1 (1939): 112-115.

right proportion' in different arts" (113). One very famous example of this can be found in both the theoretical and creative work of Polycletus: while his lost treatise, "Canon" (454 BC circa), set out the rules for the representation of the human body in visual and plastic arts, his "Doryphorus" (also known as "The Canon of Polycletus") set the standard for excellence and proportionality in sculpture.

This assimilation of meaning inaugurated the metaphorical use of the word *kanōn* that lies at the basis of the study of the process of canon formation.

In explaining this transition from sign to metaphor, Jan Gorak shows how canons became pivotal to the organization of human activities:

In the classical period, canons underpin the first chapters of 'how to' textbooks and explain the achievement of sculptural masterpieces. Canons govern practical activities such as building a temple, and artistic pursuits such as decorating it; contemplative pursuits such as moral philosophy, and early scientific accounts of the laws of nature. Canons play an important part in the composition of music and speeches, the construction of buildings and sculpture, the selection of authorities for writing history, philosophy and rhetoric, the organisation of time into significant units of measurement, and the framing of patterns to regulate the behaviour of human beings and heavenly bodies. (9)

Since antiquity, the adoption of canons as organizing instruments has been characterized by ambivalent responses and approaches. Gorak orients his study towards the observation of the significance that the idea of canon took on in the field of moral philosophy and observes that "in the shift from sculpture to ethics the canon becomes, even more markedly than with Polycletus, a tacit framework by which to guide human behaviour rather than an explicit set of rules" (13).

## 2 Aristotle's Canon

Gorak focuses at length on Aristotle's interpretation of the idea of *canon* as an instrument of measurement of the quality of human actions. "Aristotle", Gorak explains, "sees good human beings as able to adjust their field of vision, so that they can see 'the truth in each kind' while also acting as human canons, 'the standard and measure of the noble'" (17), thus being capable to choose to perform ethically in different circumstances. From this perspective, the normative force guiding such choices comes from within the men who perform them and not from a source of authority placed outside them. Indeed, as Gorak points out, Aristotle's understanding of *canon* as a way of measuring social behaviour "tacitly" (17) contrasts with the "rigidity of *nomos*" (17) due to its "flexible, unwritten, and adaptable properties" (17). Gorak shows how, under its Aristotelian interpretation

...instead of a picture of human beings as measuring according to a *canon* conceived of as an unchanging ideal blueprint, ...*canon* [is turned] into an instrument which is itself shaped by the materials on which it works. (17)

In this way, "[his] *canon* can support process and action as well as serving as a norm. It is the working flexibility of *canon* that Aristotle admires, a flexibility which he moves to a new centrality in human ethics" (17).

Aristotle's characterization of the "'the good man' as 'the standard and measure' [*kanōn kai metron*] of the noble and the pleasant'" (qtd. in Gorak 17) conveys the attempt to reconcile the idea of canon as entailing both a form of measurement (*metron*) and a stable standard (*kanōn*) as opposed to other contemporary interpretations that focused on the difference between the two terms; where *metron* stood for "a mere transitory measuring rod" (Gorak 18) and *kanōn* referred to "the basis for lasting standards" (Gorak 18). By combining the two words,

Aristotle anticipated reflections on the necessary flexibility that the *kanōn* – the standard – of ethics should display, so that through a constant renegotiation of its criteria it could concretely become a humanistic institution with the aim of helping man to ethically perform his best according to circumstances.

Thus, Gorak concludes his observations by pointing out how

in encouraging the adoption of a negotiable canon constantly readjusted to the demands of the people who use it, Aristotle stands as the head of a line of critics who want to mitigate the effect of the ‘hegemonic’ canon invoked...in the contemporary canon debate. From Aristotle to Gombrich, these critics constantly return to two simple points: the practical usefulness of canons in so many spheres; and the need to shape those canons to the needs of the people who employ them. (18)

## 2.1 Canonical Models of Emancipation: Charles Altieri

In the case of the utility of canons and the necessary flexibility, a third point of convergence between Aristotle’s ethics and modern canonical debates can be found in Charles Altieri’s article “An Idea and an Ideal of a Literary Canon” (1983). Here Altieri reflects on the problematic relation between authority and choice of readings by bringing forward a *quasi*-Aristotelian intederpretation of self-interest.

At the centre of Altieri’s preoccupation lies critical historicism’s<sup>27</sup> “hermeneutics of suspicion” (38), which relies on the interpretation of the past as a “record of ideological struggle” (39), the present as “a domain we liberate from that past by inaugurating disbelief and analyzing ideological overdeterminations” (39),

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<sup>27</sup> Altieri defines critical historicism as a term that “applies to all schools of criticism – Marxist, feminist, or modified deconstructionist – which insist with Terry Eagleton, that ‘criticism is not a passage from text to reader: its task is not to redouble the text’s self-understanding, to collude with its object in a conspiracy of eloquence. Its task is to show the text as it cannot know itself, to manifest those conditions of its making...about which it is necessary silent’” (59). Critical historicism, in Altieri’s article, comes to resemble very closely Harold Bloom’s ‘School of Resentment’, especially when it focuses on the “demystification” (38) and the “disbelief” (38) that characterise it.



and the future as “a conflict among the competing self-interests that determine critical stances” (39).

As opposed to this position, Altieri argues that

...the past that canons preserve is best understood as a permanent theatre helping us shape and judge personal and social values, that our self-interest in the present consists primarily in establishing ways of employing that theatre to gain distance from our ideological commitments, and that the most plausible hope for the influence of literary study in the future lies in our ability to transmit the past as a set of challenges and models. As ethical agents and as writers, we need examples of the powers that accrue when we turn critically on immediate interests and enter the dialectical process of differing from ourselves, in order to achieve new possibilities for representing and directing our actions.<sup>28</sup> (40)

Altieri considers the idea of interests and that of canon as intrinsically connected. Since “...the problem of judging others’ value statements by our own values” (Altieri 40) underlies the discourse on canons, attempts at establishing a general rule to be applied for the formation of canons are destined to fail. According to Altieri, this is why critical historicism can claim that “no argument is possible” (40): since “what [one] claims to be canonical (or to be a criterion for determining canons) does depend on norms that [one] establish[es] or, at least, on institutional norms that [one] certif[ies] ” (40), critical historicism can afford to “expos[e] the play of interests that create and sustain the circle” (40) without directly making any specific claim and concentrating exclusively on the conflict of interests at play. While acknowledging the immanence of such circularity in “all arguments about canons”(41), Altieri invokes the “possibility of finding common principles of judgment within circular conditions” (41) as a way to break away from the idleness

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<sup>28</sup> Altieri here echoes John Dewey in *Art as Experience* (1934): “Literature conveys the meaning of the past that is significant in present experience and is prophetic of the larger movement of the future. Only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual” (345).

of the circle. In other words, although it would always be possible to demystify a canon's authority by stressing its arbitrariness, the process of idealization that underpins canon formation should not be dismissed as easily because "works we canonize tend to project ideals, and the roles we can imagine for the canon require us to consider seriously the place of idealization<sup>29</sup> in social life" (Altieri 42). In fact, his definition of the canon as an "institutional form for exposing people to a range of idealized attitudes" (42) ensues from exactly this point. In order to clarify Altieri's definition of self-interest and its relation with Aristotelian ethics, we need to observe how, in "An Idea and Ideal", notions of public and private value and public and private interest are interweaved.

Altieri's critique of the historicist approach to the idea of canon focuses on the latter's interpretation of self-interest as dependent on the desire to exert "power over others"(43) and as an active instrument for the "pursuit of self-representations that satisfy narcissistic demands" (43):

Out of these aspects, ideologies are generated and sustained. But this is hardly an exhaustive account of needs, motives, and powers. I propose that at least two other claims seem plausible, each with important consequences for our understanding of the canon—that some people can understand their empirical interests to a degree sufficient to allow them considerable control over their actions and that a basic motive for such control is to subsume one's actions under a meaning the self can take responsibility for. (43)

Altieri's theory outlines a psychology of reading that relies on idealization as its driving force as he argues "many readers see their interest in reading as an opportunity to *escape* the empirical self, to undergo in imagination protean changes of identity and sympathy" (43, emphasis original). When read in these terms, the act

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<sup>29</sup> Altieri is very clear in his interpretation of the term 'idealization', which he defines as "writers' efforts to make the authorial act of mind or certain qualities in their fictional characters seem valuable attitudes with which an audience is moved to identify"(42) rather than a mere "projection of propaganda"(42).

of reading becomes part of a deeper psychological movement through which readers take on idealized roles and models that cannot be accessed in their sensuous experience because of its natural constraints (Altieri 44). Thus, the canon “institutionaliz[es] idealization” (Altieri 48): “positive models and powers”(Altieri 45) together with “examples of what ideals can be, of how people have used them as stimuli and contexts for their own self-creation...” (Altieri 48) are located and rendered accessible for the reader to undertake a process of conscious emancipation.

The choices such a reader makes are necessarily belated and self-consciously reliant on previous selections performed by trustworthy intellectual agencies whose existence and function in the reader’s cultural environment is validated precisely because of the institutionalization of ideal models they produce. By reading the canon in these terms, Altieri bypasses the historicist preoccupation with power-struggles and proposes a new angle from which the concept of canon, together with the wider problem of literary evaluation can be discussed; it is in this newly found rhetorical dimension that his debt to Aristotle’s ethics can be observed.

Without engaging in a thorough reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is important to remember that, for Aristotle, ethics is one of the pivotal points around which rotates the good man’s quest for *eudaemonia*. Whereas there is little chance for a man to be *eudaemon* in life (Aristotle 1100a 10-15, 105), good men do not cease to aspire to *eudaemonia* by means of their actions, deliberations and – more widely – of the type of life they choose for themselves.<sup>30</sup> In book 1.8 of *Ethics*, Aristotle explains that in order to understand *eudaemonia*, a common understanding

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<sup>30</sup> According to Aristotle, three ‘types’ of life can make a man ‘eudaemon’: the life of sensual pleasure, typical of animals and devoid of reason, the political life and the contemplative life, which apply respectively practical and theoretical reason. (1095b15 97-98).

of what is meant by good conduct should be granted authority (yet should not be interpreted as immutable but always remain open to re-definition and interpretation – as previously seen in Gorak’s treatment of the flexible canon). At a later stage in *Ethics*, Aristotle stresses once again the fundamental role played by communal consent in reflections on ethics, as he maintains: “what seems to all to be the case, that we assert to be the case” (1173a 1, 242). *Eudaimonia* is therefore an ideal state, whose understanding and pursuit implies, at points, a degree of reliance on the wisdom of common judgment; this last point is what makes it possible to both draw a connection between Altieri and Aristotle and to implement Gorak’s observations on the indebtedness of one part of canonical criticism to Aristotle’s ethical interpretation of the idea of canon. From a historicist perspective, this ideal state of trust and reliance on a benevolent authority is obviously unattainable; yet, for Altieri, authority does not necessarily imply alienation of the subject, as he once again calls upon ideals:

If ideals are to play a significant role for a culture, there must be a model of authority that empiricism cannot provide. When we offer an idealization from or about the canon, we must face the question of who will judge those features of the past worthy to become normative models—or, who will judge the kind of reasons we offer in our idealizations of those idealizations. (48)

While acknowledging the inherent circularity of this argument, Altieri is also willing to go further and exploit “some of the immanent capacities of the circle”(48) so as to offer a way out from the logical impasse he himself creates. He does so by noticing that, in the process of definition and transmission of ideals by means of the canon, it is possible to build “a normative circle, analogous to the principle of competent judgment John Stuart Mill proposes as his way of testing among competing models of happiness” (48). Just like Aristotle’s ‘wise’, “our judges for ideals must be those

whom we admire as ideal figures or those whom these ideal figures admired” (Altieri 48); in a nutshell, it is the canon itself that shapes its judges and makes them capable of idealization. The conclusion of Altieri’s argument places the canon in dialogue with the reader’s life, expectations and desires:

The ideals are explicit and their authority implicit in our literary activity. In asserting this, I do not mean that canonical ideals can or should dictate our actions...I claim ...that canons afford directions or considerations about ends, which we can reflect upon in relation to practical exigencies. (51)

Altieri’s description of the role played by canons in presenting images and models capable of inspiring processes of self-emancipation in readers departs from the strongly ideological backdrop defined by historicism, which – as I will show in the next section of this chapter – originated from a rather different approach to the idea of canon itself.

### 3 The Mystification of the Canon

Jan Gorak juxtaposes the strict legislative connotations that the term *canon* took on as a result of its use to define Christian and Judaic divinely inspired Scriptures<sup>31</sup> with the flexibility characterizing the use of *canon* in Classical Greece. The new levels of significance with which the word *canon* is enriched at this stage are several and pivotal to the general understanding of the idea of canon by American literary criticism in the 1980s and 1990s.

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<sup>31</sup> Gorak dates the first instance of Jewish canon back to AD 90, in correspondence with the Council of Jamnia, where different books – the *Law*, the *Prophets* and the *Writings* – were given the authority to “constitute the limited set of sacred books henceforth accepted as binding on the Jewish people” (19). The first Christian canon was finally completed by AD 400 by Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconius, who by then “could end his catalogue of the Old and New Testament books by calling them ‘perhaps the most reliable canon of the divinely inspired Scriptures’”(Gorak 19).

Gorak breaks down the process of the transformation of the meaning of canon under its Christian and Jewish appropriation into four distinct points. The first notable change he observes is that “the ultimate authority for the canon becomes divine rather than human, natural or instrumental” (Gorak 19): this change in authority marks a decisive step for the future understanding of the meaning of canon; whereas in classical Greece ethical, moral, and artistic canons “reflect the needs of the *polis*” (Gorak 20), the Christian and Jewish adoption of the term marks the “difference between human contingency and divinely sanctioned order permanently inscribed in the accepted canonical books” (Gorak 20). No longer a term to be used in its plural form, *canon* takes on the definite article *the* and becomes a collective noun indicating a closed group of Scriptures in which the word of God is spelled out for the believers and whose boundaries dramatically define the gap between God’s truth and human experience. Secondly, Gorak underlines how “...*canon* becomes far more than a rule or formula: it becomes a total narrative contained in a sacred book” (19): the religious doctrine transmitted by the books it is constituted of is turned into the main source of inspiration and regulation of the life – practical and spiritual – of the people who acknowledge its authority. The history, “required readings”, “...codes of behaviour”, and “...shared assumptions and manifest beliefs” (Gorak 20) of the communities it addresses are all encompassed in the narrative to which the Canon’s normative power consigns them. Thirdly, as the Canon becomes a book of books, it “becomes a closed narrative containing a retrospectively binding providential plot” (Gorak 19): human past, present and future are subjected to the timeless “divinely sanctioned order” (Gorak 20), which the Canon preserves and keeps alive by handing down the word of God to future generations of believers.

Last, this providential plot “governs every aspect of work, thought, public and private life in the religious community; it becomes, in effect, the basis for the canonization of everyday life” (Gorak 20), thus becoming an institutionalized instrument for the renewal of the pact existing between “the individual, the Christian community, or state, and God” (Gorak 20).

By means of the Christian and Judaic appropriation of the idea of canon, two elements that markedly differentiate the differences in interpretation from that observed in classical Greece can be identified. First, the original idea of canon as standard is translated into the tangible form of a collection of writings. This translation inaugurates the association between the idea of canon and that of list that sits at the very core of all discourses about literary canons from the eighteenth century to this day and that will be observed at greater length in the final part of this chapter. Second, this collection is constituted by a specific set of Scriptures, whose canonicity depends on their recognition as divinely inspired writings. As will become apparent through the next paragraphs, this reconfiguration of meaning cemented the dialectic, structure and motives that characterize contemporary canon debates.

### 3.1 Saint Augustine: First Canonical Critic?

Gorak refers to St. Augustine’s work as an example of early reflections on the newly established Christian Canon:

In Augustine’s *The City of God*... the idea of the canon as an authoritative list of sacred books, to be consulted before and beyond all others, is presented as part of an indispensable social need to regulate, limit and co-ordinate what a given community understands by ‘the Word of God’. (32)

In his study, Gorak focuses on Augustine's preoccupation with the establishment of the scriptural Canon as the core of religious communities. A further important aspect of Augustine's writings on the canonical Scriptures anticipates recurrent questions that are typical of the critique of secular canons: the canonicity of the books, the privileged nature of their writers and the difference between common and privileged readership. If, hypothetically, one was to re-write Gorak's quote and substitute 'sacred books' with 'privileged readings', 'the Word of God' with 'literature', it would be possible to notice the extent to which this observation of Augustine's reflections on the idea and function of the Canon of the Church could be translated into the language adopted by secular canonical studies to bring forth similar speculations. The extent to which St. Augustine's references to the Canon and the canonicity of the Scriptures anticipates a well-established model of enquiry in canonical studies can be observed in both *On Christian Doctrine* (AD 397) and *The City of God* (AD 413-26).

In Book 2, Chapter VIII of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine describes the type of approach necessary to critically engage with the Scriptures:

The most expert investigator of the divine scriptures will be the person who, first, has read them all and has a good knowledge—a reading knowledge, at least, if not yet a complete understanding—of those pronounced canonical. He will read the others more confidently when equipped with a belief in the truth; they will then be unable to take possession of his unprotected mind and prejudice him in any way against sound interpretations or delude him by their dangerous falsehoods and fantasies. (35)

Augustine outlines a specific reading hierarchy: readers of the Scriptures need to give priority to the canonical ones in order for them to form a sound basis against whose backdrop the rest of their knowledge ought to be shaped. The divinely inspired Scriptures are 'canonical' in two senses: on the one hand they are



constituents of the Canon as they are gathered together as literary instances of the Word of God; on the other, they come to constitute the highest standard possible for the evaluation of the whole of Christian writing. The reader is informed that the task is a difficult one, as a complete understanding of such privileged readings is not granted.<sup>32</sup>

Augustine continues by addressing the problem of the canonicity of the Scriptures. For Augustine, what makes a Scripture canonical is, first and foremost, the degree to which it is diffused and acknowledged as canonical amongst different churches, which have the authority to choose for the believers:

In the matter of canonical scriptures [the reader] should follow the authority of the great majority of catholic churches...He will apply this principle to the canonical scriptures: to prefer those accepted by all catholic churches to those which some do not accept. As for those not universally accepted, he should prefer those accepted by a majority of churches, and by the more authoritative ones, to those supported by fewer churches, or by churches of lesser authority. (*On Christian Doctrine* 35-36)

The potential controversies that could arise from diverging judgments are resolved by Augustine's appeal to a consensus amongst the churches, whose authority in canonizing matters does not lie open to questioning and whose deliberations are therefore final. One must be willing to submit himself to such deliberations if his reading of the Scriptures are to fulfil the task of bringing him knowledge of God's laws and, ultimately, salvation. Thus, Augustine continues, "the complete canon of scripture" (*On Christian Doctrine* 36) consists of "...books in which those who fear God and are made docile by their holiness seek God's will" (*On Christian Doctrine* 37).

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<sup>32</sup> This approach to the reading of canonical writings can be identified in contemporary criticism, particularly in the work of Harold Bloom, who recurrently exhorts readers to turn their attention to canonical works and to "forsake easier pleasures in favor of more difficult ones" ("The Point of View for my Work as a Critic: a Dithyramb" 30).

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine dedicates extensive attention to sacred writers. In Book Four, as he unfolds the principles of Christian rhetoric, Augustine reflects on the difference between eloquence and wisdom and points out how the two should be balanced so as to favour the transmission of God's word. Chapter VI in particular focuses on the characteristic style of sacred writers and maps the features that made their writing worth canonizing by focusing on abstracts from Paul and Amos. The first criterion that guides the distinction between sacred and secular writers is the nature of the formers' writing: neither entirely eloquent, nor overbearing with obscure wisdom, canonical authors seem to be able to achieve the stylistic balance that Augustine is looking for in the Scriptures:

...someone may be asking whether the Christian authors whose divinely inspired writings have created for us the canon of scripture ... should be pronounced just wise, or eloquent as well. In my experience...when I understand these authors, not only can I conceive of nothing wiser; I can conceive of nothing more eloquent. Indeed, I venture to say that all who correctly understand what these writers are saying realize at the same time that it would not have been right for them to express it in any other way... [as]...there is a kind of eloquence appropriate to writers who enjoy the highest authority and a full measure of divine inspiration. They spoke in their own particular style, and it would be inappropriate for them to have used any other style, or for others to have used theirs.... (*On Christian Doctrine* 105-106)

The uniqueness of canonical writers' style is symptomatic of the authority of their source, an idea that he addresses later in *The City of God*, whose Book XI opens with the description of how the Scriptures excel "all the writings of all the nations in their divine authority" (St. Augustine 449) and "have brought under their sway every kind of human genius, not by a chance motion of the soul, but clearly by the supreme disposition of providence" (St. Augustine 449). Not only do the Scriptures bear witness to the City of God, but – with their testimony – they also influenced and moulded human genius.

Augustine completes his reflections on sacred writers in *On Christian Doctrine* by observing that sometimes, notwithstanding their innate capacity of mixing eloquence and wisdom, sacred writings cannot be completely understood. This does not depend on the writers' weak eloquence as much as it depends on the magnitude of God's plan itself, in which

the fusion of obscurity with such eloquence in the salutary words of God was necessary in order that our minds could develop not just by making discoveries but also by undergoing exertion. (St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 106)

The path that leads a reader to the knowledge of God's truth through the reading of the Scriptures is long and relies on both the commitment of the reader and the privileged inspiration guiding the writer. The themes of exertion, dedication, and faith in relation to the pursuit of knowledge presented in *On Christian Doctrine* also appear in *The City of God*. Chapter Three of the already mentioned Book XI of *The City of God*, entitled "Of the authority of the canonical Scriptures composed by the Divine Spirit" (St. Augustine 451), explains the supplementary status of canonical Scriptures, which have "the most eminent authority, and we trust them in all matters of which it is not expedient for us to be ignorant but which we are not capable of knowing for ourselves" (St. Augustine 451). Since the incapacity of "knowing certain matters for ourselves" (St. Augustine, *The City of God* 415) is imposed on human experience by its dependence on sensuous knowledge, Augustine explains Christian reliance on canonical writings as a way of achieving an otherwise unattainable knowledge:

As to objects remote from our senses...we require the testimony of others in respect of them, and we rely upon those from whose senses we do not believe the objects in question to be, or to have been, remote. (*The City of God* 451)

Augustine also points out the fact that there is another class of things “which are perceived by the mind and the reason” (*The City of God* 452); he interprets the ability of perceiving through the mind and the reason as yet another sense – this time interior – as he explains that such operation “involves judgment [*sententia*], a word which is derives from *sensus*” (*The City of God* 452). Thus, he concludes,

...in the case of invisible things which are remote from our own interior sense, it is fitting for us to believe those who have seen them arrayed in incorporeal light, or who abide in contemplation of them. (*The City of God* 452)

In this respect, reliance on those who have seen, judged, and eventually abide becomes the key to accessing deeper and greater knowledge and to divine enlightenment. Although it is important to underline the fact that, for Augustine, the real mediator between men and God’s truth is Christ, by exhorting the faithful to confide in the mediatory function of those who have seen, Augustine assigns to the churches the authority of institutionalization of the true Word by means of its inclusion in the canon of Scriptures.

Traces of this approach can be identified in F.R. Leavis’s praise of a cultivated minority in both *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930) and *For Continuity* (1933) and, even earlier, in Hume’s description of the ‘true judges’ in “On the Standard of Taste” (1757). The Humean resonances carried by this approach, which I will address at greater length later in this chapter, serve to introduce the eighteenth century as a turning point in the history of the idea of canon. While the Christian appropriation of the term *canon* and its subsequent translation into the that of a list lies at the very core of the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion typical of 1980s and 1990s canon critique, it is during the eighteenth century that we witness a

return to the definition of standards to be applied in the evaluation of poetry, an act that calls upon the original acceptance of the term canon as a rule.

In the next section, I propose to observe how the creation of secular canons of poetry in the eighteenth century contributed in outlining the critical ground on which subsequent attempts at ‘making’ canons are shaped.

#### 4 Thinking Taxonomically: the Eighteenth Century and the ‘Invention of the Canon’

The eighteenth century stands at a pivotal crossroads for secular canonical studies as “authors begin to push the idea of canon in its modern direction when they develop a new self-consciousness about the value of national authors...” (Gorak 47). The centrality of this period is also confirmed by the attention it has received by a number of scholars<sup>33</sup> interested in the early stages of formation of the English canon, which began around the first few decades of the eighteenth century as the outcome of the several cultural, social, political, and economic changes, to which I will return in Chapter Four. From this point of view, the vernacular canon was a means through which modern literary productions could be either rejected or absorbed in the tradition. On the one hand, the rise of aesthetics oriented the philosophy of art towards a quest for the definition of standards to be applied in artistic appreciation; on the other, the model adopted for the creation of the canon of Scriptures as a closed

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<sup>33</sup> See Douglas Lane Patey, “The Eighteenth Century Invents the Canon”. *Modern Language Studies*. 18.1 (1988), 17-37; Patey, together with Kramnick, Lipking and Wellek – whose arguments are observed at greater length in this chapter – dates the birth of the canon in the second half of the eighteenth century; Trevor Ross’s *The Making of The English Literary Canon: from the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century*. Montreal and London: McGill-Queen’s University Press. 1998 dates the birth of the canon around the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century; of the same author, see also “The Emergence of ‘Literature’: Making and Reading the English Canon in the Eighteenth Century”. *EHL* 63.2 (1996): 397- 422.

taxonomy is perpetuated in the growing diffusion of anthologies and histories of poetry aimed at outlining a rising national poetic tradition. The making of the English canon by eighteenth-century critics developed in two directions: the first included ‘canons’<sup>34</sup> of poetry resulting from a process of selection and election of older authors are created; the second related to standardized rules being adopted in the evaluation of poetry<sup>35</sup> and outlined theoretically by isolating specific examples of poetic excellence in the existing tradition and elevating them to the status of standards.

Jonathan Kramnick dates the birth of the British canon towards the mid-decades of the 1700s, in the aftermath of the cultural debates brought about by the earlier battle of the Ancient and the Moderns.<sup>36</sup> Kramnick explains how professional criticism brought the discourse on literary tradition to a deeper level of analysis by increasingly turning its attention to the relation between older and modern works (1). This retrospective gesture resulted in what Kramnick eloquently describes as “the paradoxical establishment of tradition out of a sense of modernity” (1): in the ever-so-uncertain social and cultural context of the early eighteenth century, “works

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<sup>34</sup> I here follow Lawrence Lipking’s distinction between ‘canons’ and ‘surveys’ (13) in *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England*. Lipking importantly distinguishes canons from surveys; surveys “insist on the primacy of source materials and research” (13) and are to be considered as the outcome of the work of “scholars, men of leisure who work without patrons or deadlines” where criticism is “subordinate to a collection of antiquarian documents, and does not pretend that the field it surveys possesses an underlying unity” (13). The work that better exemplifies this category is, for Lipking, Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1773-75). A canon, on the other hand, “displays a strong critical bias. The product of acknowledged professional authorities, it undertakes to enhance the dignity of the several arts by condemning mediocrity and praising excellence; it envisages an imaginary order of merit in which artists of every period compete for a place” (13). The definitive example of this kind of collection is, for Lipking, Johnson’s *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1781).

<sup>35</sup> This double effort is similarly described in Ross: “[eighteenth century’s] canon-makers believed that judgement could be made objective by codifying the norms of canonicity within a discourse of scientific taxonomy and quantification”(253).

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Levine in *The Battle of The Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, (1991) offers in-depth analysis of the controversy.

written before the onset of cultural modernity exhibited a contrasting splendour” (1). It is with this mindset that in the eighteenth century the celebration of England’s literary past is inaugurated and new forms of public cultural validation are established. Changes in the profession did not happen in isolation, but concurrently with wider changes in the way in which both the practices of reading and writing literature were being outlined, with these in turn were also being defined due to two important developments: the rise of aesthetics and the sudden development of the print market.

To the professionalization of the figure of the critic followed the development of new media through which intellectuals could engage in constructive and structured debates on literature and its evaluation. At the same time, the fast diffusion of biographical works, abridgements, miscellanies<sup>37</sup> and anthologies contributed to the establishment of a national literary tradition. From a conceptual point of view, the early eighteenth century prepared the ground from which early forms of canonical classifications were to appear in the last decades of the century due to the development of what René Wellek calls a “historical sense” (48), that is, “a recognition of individuality in its historical setting and an appreciation of the historical process into which individualities fit” (48). Wellek’s argument in *The Rise of Literary History* (1966) observes how this shift towards individuality participated in reconfiguring both writing and reading practices.

Wellek explains how philosophical interest started to shift, because of the advent of Cartesianism, from the “cosmological problem” to the “problem of

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<sup>37</sup> See Michael F. Suarez’s “The Production and Consumption of the Eighteenth-Century Poetic Miscellany” in the collection of essays *Books and Their Readers in Eighteenth -Century England: New Essays*. London and New York: Continuum, 2001. 217- 252 and William St. Clair’s *The Reading Nation and The Romantic Period*, particularly Chapter 4 (66-83).

consciousness and its growth” (48), thus determining an increasing focus on the understanding of the problem of knowledge destined to become central “from Locke onwards” (48). Locke’s “psychological rather than strictly epistemological” (48) approach contributed in turning psychology into “a new and fundamental science” (49), thus rendering personal experience pivotal to several discourses on human knowledge. Wellek observes how a similar movement, “away from the abstract and towards the individual” (49) can be observed in literary and aesthetic concepts, where increasing attention is reserved to “the unique which has been once and will never be again” (49). It is at this point in history, Wellek maintains, that “the poet becomes an ‘original’, ‘creative’ genius” (49). The figure of the poet is invested with unprecedented authority and recognition; not only a solitary creative agency, he is also given the responsibility of representing the voice of the nation’s poetic identity, past and present. The intuition that poetic genius might be the creative force driving the composition of the most remarkable poetic compositions mirrors Augustine’s claims for canonical writers to be human by nature and divine by inspiration. A parallelism between poet and sacred writer could therefore be articulated by noticing that where the writers of the sacred Scriptures had been chosen to disseminate the word of God on Earth so as to testify the greatness of the City of God, from the eighteenth century onwards, and through the exemplary nature of their artistic achievements, secular poetic geniuses testify and bear standards for the nation’s artistic identity. The history, feelings and beliefs of the figure behind the words become as important as the author’s capacity to apply his technical skills when composing a poem. Poets became the centre of their own poetic production, thus giving way to the expression of their inner universe. The birth of the figure of the



canonized author, the genius, comes exactly from the new light thrown on the poet by the evidence found in philosophy of the possibility for each individual to perceive and interpret reality in his own terms.

In this respect, biographical collections such as Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774-1881) became central in the process of cultural assimilation of the prominence of the authorial figure in that they placed the reader in dialogue with the poet not only by providing "...a history of external facts" (Wellek 49) but also because they drew "a picture of the poet's mental peculiarities and their rise in the individual history of his mind" (Wellek 49). Such collections also played a decisive role in perpetuating the parallelism between biblical and secular canons by means of their mapping function.

Hoping to "develop the dawning of genius, and to pursue the progress of our national poetry, from a rude origin and obscure beginnings, to its perfection in a polished age..." (ii), Warton's *History* chronologically orders poetry and assumes the eighteenth century as a landmark in the progression of poetry as well as of that of language. At the heart of Warton's project lies the desire to preserve and transmit the national literary heritage; in this undertaking, poetic historiography becomes "an art, whose object is human society" (ii) as

...it has the peculiar merit... of faithfully recording the features of the times, and of preserving the most picturesque and expressive representations of manners: and, because the first monuments of composition in every nation are those of the poet, as it possesses the additional advantage of transmitting to posterity genuine delineations of life in its simplest stages. The more early specimens of poetry must ever amuse, in proportion to the pleasure which we receive from its finished production. (ii)

Warton's introduction to the *History* conveys the belief in the necessity of organizing the past in order to maintain the memory of "life in its simplest stages" and interprets

poetry as a practice that evolves alongside the history of the nation. Thus the *History* unfolds not as a canon, but as a survey, in keeping with the distinction formulated by Lipking.<sup>38</sup> It does not propose a selection of the best poetic productions, but engages in tracing the steps that allowed for the genius of his time to develop.

Another example of the increasing attention given to the figure of the author lies in Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* (1779-1781), which shifts away from Warton's strictly taxonomical efforts and proposes a more exclusive instance of biographical classification.<sup>39</sup> Johnson's efforts to establish a hierarchy of excellence in the English poetic tradition can also be observed in previous works; in particular, the "Preface to Shakespeare" (1765) constitutes another example of canon and to a degree reaches a greater level of specificity regarding the process of evaluation and canonisation. Alongside the praise for Shakespeare and Homer, Johnson is particularly concerned with the survival in time of certain works; time and truth are the judges that determine the survival of a work for future benefit. The property of a work to "please many, and please long" (Johnson, "Preface" 330), and its truthfulness and justness mark the entry of a work in the tradition. This is not given by a "credulous confidence in the superior wisdom of past ages, or gloomy persuasion of the degeneracy of mankind" (Johnson, "Preface" 329). On the contrary, it is "the consequence of acknowledged and indubitable positions, that what has been long known has been most considered, and what is most considered is best

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<sup>38</sup> See this thesis, 68n33.

<sup>39</sup> Although the selection of authors proposed in Johnson's *Lives* was not personally carried out by Johnson (the original list was imposed on him by the publisher, with the sole exception of a few authors, notably Blackmore, Watts, Pomfret, Yalden, and Thomson for whose inclusion he negotiated), it has been argued for a hierarchy inherent the selection, which Johnson applied by dedicating more space to certain authors, or by placing them in privileged positions in the volumes. See Mark W. Booth's "Proportion and Value in Johnson's 'Lives of the Poets'". *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 43.1 (1978): 49-57. This point questions current interpretations of the *Lives* as an example of an example of early 'structured' canon (cf. Lipking).

understood” (Johnson, “Preface” 329). By providing more than anybody else a “just representation of general nature”(“Preface” 330) Shakespeare is the centre of Johnson’s canon, the standard to be used in the evaluation of any other author:

...his drama is the mirror of life; that he who has ‘mazed his imagination, in following the phantoms which other writers raise up before him, may here be cured of his delirious ecstasies, by reading human sentiments in human language, by scenes from which a hermit may estimate the transaction of the world, and a confessor predict the progress of passion. (“Preface” 331)

Johnson’s evaluation of Shakespeare’s work as creative standard, determines a reconnection between the process of canon formation and the original acceptance of the term *canon* as a general rule. As will be observed at greater length in Chapter Three, this is also the approach that defines Harold Bloom’s mapping of his ‘Western Canon’ around Shakespeare, who “...is the Canon [because] he sets the standard and the limits of literature” (*Western Canon* 50).

Individuality gained a central position also in the way readers would respond to poetry. Wellek uses the example of the diffusion of new critical terms like ‘taste’ to describe the effects of the turn towards individuality on readership.

The concept of ‘taste’ was ... at first most valuable in deflecting attention from speculations on beauty, ideal genres, and the like, to a more careful analysis of the individual or national response to a work of art. It was thus one aspect of the whole movement towards the individual and particular. Its dangerous anarchism, being soon perceived, was combated by the concept of a ‘standard of taste’. (50-51)

Arguments such as the one outlined by David Hume in “Of The Standard of Taste” (1757), while producing a theory of taste based on subjectivity, also reflect on the function of evaluative consensus: “it is natural for us to seek a standard of taste; a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.” (315). In every society, Hume maintains, only a few individuals can function as an example for

others to follow by setting a standard of taste. Hume defines these individuals as “true judges”. In order for their judgement to function as a standard for others, true judges must possess “strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice” (320).

Works such as Hume’s essay on taste stand as part of that wave of ideas that contributed to our understanding of particular problems in the process of literary evaluation. They rephrase the Augustinian description of the acquisition of knowledge as mediated by and reliant on the experience of ‘those who have seen’ as Hume describes how certain people are better judges than others.

## 5 The Canon, the Archive, and Memory

A hierarchy of reception where standards are established from a minority and are then handed down to a majority lies at the basis of the anxieties about the literary canon’s power to conserve and transmit a common cultural heritage that I have observed in the first chapter of this thesis. As the term *canon* started to be applied in relation to pedagogical practices, particularly those of higher education, particularly as a substitute for the term *syllabus*, its role as an instrument of cultural preservation became more and more evident, and the political pressures it received more and more impelling.

To explain this point a little more clearly, I suggest to turn to Jacques Derrida’s 1994 lecture “Archive Fever: A Freudian Reading”, which talks about the idea of the archive by explaining its connection with the, the original rule. “Arkhe” he says,

...names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence*—physical, historical, or ontological

principle—but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given—nomological principle. ...the meaning of ‘archive’, its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded...On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that *place* which is their house...that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents’ guardians...(9-10, emphasis original)

Derrida calls the power of conservation of memory, of archive construction, ‘archontic’, and in many ways it resembles the power characterizing the act of canon formation performed by Christian churches and, later, by different secular intellectual agencies. This parallelism is further reinforced as Derrida points out that the archontic power (of unification, of classification) “must be paired with what we call power of *consignation*” (10, emphasis original), that is, an act of gathering signs together so as to administrate one single body “in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal of configuration...”. Thus “the archontic principle of the archive is also a principle of consignation...of gathering together” (10), a principle that further reinforces the analogy between archive construction and canon formation as we recall Gorak’s argument, where the canon – be it Scriptural or secular – becomes an instrument of the unification of communities that at the same time abide to the canonizing authority and identify with the results of the choices made by these authorities on behalf of the community. However, in the case of the formation of secular canons, the dogmatism of the scriptural canon goes amiss and other forms of secular authority substitute the seemingly unquestionable authority of God and the church. As the recent history of critical debates on the canon – which I observe in Chapter One – has shown, the forms of authority regulating the process of canon formation have been mostly identified with

pedagogical institution. The power struggle for the control of the canon and of its content further strengthens the canon/archive analogy. As Derrida explains,

there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation. (11n1)

Such is the reading, for instance, that allowed revisionist critics to read the canon as an instrument of reinforcement of cultural disparities, a practice that became particularly predominant during the Culture Wars in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. From this point of view, the problem of inclusion in, or exclusion from, the canon can be observed as the symptom of a greater preoccupation about the role that literature, and the arts in general, plays in the dramatic struggle for social and political power. In the United States, this has first and foremost resulted in the identification of the literary canon with the undergraduate curriculum. Moreover, there have been several attempts to open up the literary canon by virtually completing it with the works of authors representative of cultural minorities as well as the formation of parallel canons aimed at the preservation of specific cultural and ethnic literary identities. This democratizing effort certainly contributed to re-assess the role of literature in a multicultural environment and nurtured a series of important reflections on American literary identity itself. Yet it also inaugurated the increasing radicalization of canonical studies that I observe in this dissertation and through which the canon became a symbol of both oppression and liberation: while the boundaries marking the meaning of the word and its symbolic significance were being increasingly expanded and blurred, the idea that a selected set of writings could indeed function as an instrument of subversion of the cultural establishment

and of social emancipation of cultural minorities clashed with the conservative tendency towards a closed canon.

That the gap existing between these two perspectives is not as wide as it appears has been argued on several occasions. Both Gorak, in the introduction to *The Making of the Modern Canon*, and John Guillory's *Cultural Capital* stress the paradoxical closeness of the two parties: the former by pointing out the "irony by which the most significant critics of the canon also function as its defenders" (7), the latter to an even stronger extent as his argument tends towards the dismissal of canonical debates by force of the misleading nature of the assumptions – shared by both canon supporters and detractors – that underpin them. The ironic, paradoxical traits defining this grey area of seemingly unavoidable communion lends itself to further examination, where the parallelism between archive and canon allows for the identification of yet another common trait unifying divergent responses to literary canons in the United States, that is, an underlying malaise and concern about the role of literature in relation to a multicultural society.

## Conclusion

Against the backdrop of this last section, it seems fair to say that the debates observed in this thesis have contributed to shift the notion of canon even further away from its original meaning of standard and to consolidate its interpretation as a list. The final analysis of Derrida's definition of the archive and of its affinities with the interpretation of canon according to Christian tradition strengthens the identification of the literary canon with its normative function. Most importantly, both archive and the Scriptural canon directly derive from and re-create a connection

with the sources from which they depend. The distance separating the faithful – or the citizen – from this original source is, in this perspective, shortened through the Word – or the Law.

As we have observed in Augustine, the reading of the Scriptures provides knowledge of God; it constitutes one fundamental step towards The City of God, a *locus* where divine and human are reconciled. The same dynamic is doubled when Derrida stresses the domiciliary function of the archive, which stands as a reminder of the arkhe itself (*there* where things *commence* and *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *the place* from which *order* is given...).

In tracing a tentative trajectory that goes from the ancient use of the word *canon* to its modern interpretation, this chapter has sought to account for the different ways in which the critical dialogues that frame this thesis, have related to the notion of canon. In this respect, the next chapter shows a particularly poignant example of an interpretation of the notion of canon that combines its meaning as standard and its modern function as a list of works by discussing Harold Bloom's 1994 canonizing enterprise in *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages*.



## Chapter Three

### Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*

#### Introduction

Published in 1994, Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* stood out as one of the most powerful defences of the canon produced between 1970 and 2000. A strong advocate of a criticism based on aesthetic evaluation, Bloom presented a work that at once mourned the loss of the canon and celebrated its resurrection. On the one hand, *The Western Canon* reads as Bloom's manifesto against what he famously named the 'School of Resentment':

an extraordinary melange of the latest-model feminism, Lacanians, that whole semiotic cackle, latest-model pseudo Marxists, so called New Historicists...a third generation of deconstructors who...have no relationship whatever to literary value. ("The Art of Criticism" 202)

A somewhat unique figure in the American academic landscape, Harold Bloom has traditionally portrayed himself as a "solitary voice, ignored by an academic audience who should – but never will – listen" (Allen and Sellars xiii). In his 1986 interview with Imre Saluzinsky, Bloom says of himself as being known as "*the* truly outrageous literary critic" (48, emphasis added), "someone...consistently, abominably, weakly misread, ... viciously reviewed and written about" (49), a point which he reiterated a few years later in another interview, this time with Antonio Weiss for *The Paris Review*, where he pointed out how "members of the School of Resentment describe [him] as someone who partakes of a cult of personality or self-obsession ..."(198). Bloom's victimized self-perception and sense of detachment from his fellow critics was certainly reiterated as *The Western Canon* came about

proposing an approach to canon formation that was antithetical to those informing the revisionist stances of the “gender and power boys and girls” (“The Art of Criticism” 202). It is in this respect that *The Western Canon* could be read as a final, dramatic gesture aimed at tracing a clear separation between himself and the ‘School of Resentment’, culpable of attempting to kill the canon off.

However, *The Western Canon* has also been read as the opening chapter of a new productive cycle of Bloom’s criticism in which canonical texts became the object of incessant attention. In the “Preface” to the *Salt Companion to Harold Bloom* (2007), Roy Sellars and Graham Allen observe a “change in Bloom’s own critical focus” (xiv) from the mid-1980s onwards: from this point, they maintain, Bloom “dramatically altered his orientation..., ceasing to describe and in some way embody those who are belated and instead, focusing on that small circle of authors who...have made us all possible”(xiv). Sellars and Allen are here referring to Bloom’s theory of poetry as he developed it in his early works, from the tetralogy on influence – *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975) and *Poetry and Repression* (1976) – to its 1980s spin-offs *Agon* (1982) and *Ruin the Sacred Truths* (1989), in which he reflects on the sorrows of belated authors struggling to set themselves free from the tropological enslavement imposed by the influence of their precursors. The change observed by Sellars and Allen is a change in perspective: no longer concentrated on newcomers, Bloom turned to those great authors who have directly influenced our perception of ourselves by means of their originality, poetic strength and aesthetic value. However, such a shift in focus ought not be read as Bloom’s abandonment of his early theory. On the contrary, as Graham Allen observes,

*The Western Canon*...is a grand confirmation of Bloom's own theories about literature developed since the late 1960s and dominated by the theory of anxiety of influence. Bloom's theory—that authentic literature is produced within the confines of an agonistic, monumental history of 'inter-personal' relations (or what he calls influence)—is rhetorically presented as marking the limits of the canonical. ("Anxiety of Choice" 56)

This chapter observes how the continuity observed by Allen in Bloom's critical work has been overshadowed by the rhetorical turns taken by Bloom himself in his later work due to his controversy with the 'School of Resentment'. First, I will observe how Bloom's demands for a return to the aesthetic evaluation of literature have often been read as a gesture aimed at supporting his overt hostility towards the 'School of Resentment's demand for canon-revision. Second, I will argue that the this aspect of Bloom's work has overshadowed other important aspects of *The Western Canon* and of the position it occupies within Bloom's critical project. By doing so, I will observe how the continuity that characterises Bloom's work is worth further and closer analysis; finally I will observe how Bloom's scholarship has contributed to further our current understanding of the notion of literary canon and of its inner dynamics.

## 1 *The Western Canon* in Context: Early Reception

The publication of *The Western Canon* in 1994 marked a particular moment in the history of secular canonical studies, particularly because it provided the ongoing controversy with an instance of canon that rejected the influence of politics and ideology on the study and the appreciation of literature. Against the backdrop of the historical and cultural context explained in Chapter One, it is far from surprising that Bloom's attempt at mapping the canon was in some cases received as a revival

of previous attempts at reclaiming the Western legacy of American academia. In this respect, Norman Fruman's review for *The New York Times Book Review* (1994) emphatically welcomed *The Western Canon* as Bloom's heroic attempt at both defying the forces responsible for the corruption of the humanities and at rescuing 'good' literature from oblivion. Fruman opens his article with the evocative title "Bloom at Thermopylae" and proceeds to describe the work as a "heroically brave, formidably learned and often unbearably sad response to the present state of the humanities". He ends his text by wrapping it up with another, equally affectionate, praise:

*The Western Canon* is a passionate demonstration of why some writers have triumphantly escaped the oblivion in which time buries almost all human effort. It inspires hope, despite Harold Bloom's despair, that what humanity has long cherished, posterity will also. ("Bloom at Thermopylae")

Writing for *The New Republic*, Robert Alter was amongst those who, like Fruman, welcomed Bloom's work as a response to the pressure exerted by the politicisation of academia:

Harold Bloom's new book...is a vigorous criticism, devastating and salutary, of current academic pieties about the canon. Bloom performs an immense service in his unabashed and shrewd, counter-attack on the contemporary pieties that would substitute the political for the aesthetic, and level literature with rap lyrics and the soaps...We surely need a spirited and deeply literate oppositionalism to rescue literature from the new political puritans. (36)

Alter's enthusiasm for Bloom's work, however, focuses on its most polemical stances. Its praises for *The Western Canon* mostly focus on the service it pays in the current controversy while it extensively takes issue with its content and critical project. Bloom's readings of specific authors sometimes boil down to "reductive and truistic observations" (Alter 36), his sense of the aesthetic "omits, or at least elides, some essential aspects of the category that he wants to promote" (Alter 38), and

although “Bloom’s understanding of the power of literature is invigorating, in our moment of ideological self-righteousness...”(Alter 39), *The Western Canon* displays a “rather inadequate sense of literary tradition” (Alter 39) because, the “...constant stress on literature as an agon of the self tilts his definition of canonicity heavily toward intra-psychic or cognitive truth and away from beauty”(Alter 41).

Commentators who did not agree with Bloom’s polemical stance received *The Western Canon* as yet another attack on liberal politics and responded accordingly. For instance, Darlene J.Sadlier’s review calls Bloom a “staunch conservative who thinks of the literary past in fixed terms” (146), presenting “astonishingly weak” (146) scholarship and whose “glib critical assertions are another depressing sign of the ‘dumbing down’ of American critical discourse” (146). Another example can be seen in John Guillory’s review, “The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture”(1995), which positions *The Western Canon* alongside other works representative of the “American animus against official high brow culture” (88), such as Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1988) and Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* (1988). In Guillory’s essay, *The Western Canon* is treated as a “document in the Culture Wars” (84), and it is read as another sign of the desire for cultural unification fostered by the crisis in the system of values of the United States. Guillory expands on this point and describes *The Western Canon* as the product of America’s self-consciousness about its lack of a real high-brow culture (Guillory, “The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture” 85), a project at once elitist and populist aimed at responding to the frustrations of a middle class struggling for the possession of highbrow cultural capital.

Even in more generous reviews, such as John J. Burke Jr.’s and Charles T.

Wood's, the point that seems to be reiterated over and over again concerns the overall arbitrariness of *The Western Canon*. Thus, while Burke praises Bloom's project and its "sheer boldness" (131), he points out a certain lack of transparency regarding the process of composition of a Western canon as such:

Bloom's operating notion of the Western canon is by and large synchronic. It's what exists now. Bloom doesn't seem to feel much an obligation to provide us with lengthy explanations of how things come to be the way they are. (132)

Along the same line, Wood observes that "Professor Bloom may insist that his canon really does exist, but insofar as its specifics depend on his own taste, his own aesthetic judgements", it is destined to rely on weak "dogmatic certainties" (687).

From this sample of commentaries, a few observations can be put forward on both the relationship of *The Western Canon* with its original context and on the key-questions raised by its early reception. Perhaps the most evident problem lies in the ambiguity of Bloom's purpose. On the one hand, the polemical tones of the opening and closing sections of *The Western Canon* justify its reading as a document pertaining to contemporary conflicts between academics; the hostility expressed by Bloom towards the 'School of Resentment' certainly plays a substantial part in turning *The Western Canon* into an ideological manifesto. On the other hand, Bloom embarks on a journey of gargantuan proportions as he tries to map the Western canon by using his own critical apparatus as a compass. No doubt, this makes *The Western Canon* an astonishingly complex work in which the terminology adopted by Bloom does not easily lend itself to exegesis and whose understanding depends on the reader's prior knowledge of Bloom's work as a whole. Just how important this precondition to *The Western Canon*'s interpretation is can be noticed in the misuse by some reviewers of terms that in Bloom's theory take on very specific meanings,

and in the focus on *The Western Canon*'s vagueness and arbitrariness registered by most.

For instance, when Guillory speaks of the elitism of *The Western Canon*, he does not take into account that 'elitism' takes on a specific meaning in Bloom's theory and that it stands in an equally specific relation to the idea of literary tradition. As Bloom explains in *A Map of Misreading* (1975), literary tradition is "necessarily élitist...if only because the Scene of Instruction always depends upon a primal choosing and a being chosen, which is what 'élite' means" (39). While I will provide a greater explanation of what Bloom means by 'scene of instruction' at a later stage in this chapter, the observation of how Guillory neglects this aspect in reviewing *The Western Canon* offers an example of the complex ground one enters in attempting to deal with Bloom's project.

Despite Bloom's attempt at embracing the polemic and defending – against the grain – aesthetic criticism, once *The Western Canon* is studied alongside Bloom's production and the complex set of ideas that underpin it, it loses its polemical force and its position as yet another step in Bloom's theory's path towards completeness appears clearer. As critical responses to *The Western Canon* testify to the central ambiguity of this complex work, the next sections will investigate these ambiguities by situating *The Western Canon* within the larger context of Bloom's intellectual trajectory.

## 2 Early Canonical Bloom

Since its earliest stages, Harold Bloom's critical work has dealt with the ideas of tradition and canon formation. His 1960s studies on the Romantics, *Shelley's*

*Mythmaking* (1961), *The Visionary Company* (1963), and *Blake's Apocalypse* (1963) brought forward a strong demand for the revision of the then-dominant tradition outlined by the New Criticism, while the 1970s' tetralogy – *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975) and *Poetry of Repression* (1976) – proposed a new set of reflections on tradition that would come to constitute the theoretical core of Bloom's later canonical criticism.

In Bloom's early criticism, canon formation is explicitly reflected upon in relation to his theory of poetic influence. Unlike Northrop Frye, with whom he maintained a life-long friendship but who he openly antagonised,<sup>40</sup> Bloom unreservedly stresses the importance of aesthetic judgement and selection in the practice of criticism.

'Aesthetic value' in Bloom is not recognised intuitively, but it assigns to 'good' or, in Bloom's own terminology, 'strong' poetry a set of self-evident characteristics. For Bloom, strong authors are those who successfully assert themselves after engaging in an agonistic struggle with their predecessor. As he explains in *A Map of Misreading*,<sup>41</sup> "Poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead, and from an even more triumphant solipsism" (10). The work in which Bloom first elaborated his theory of poetic struggle is *The Anxiety of Influence*.<sup>42</sup> Written in 1973, *Anxiety* brings forward a theory of poetry that postulates a strong interdependence between literary history and intertextual influence. "Poetic history" Bloom observes "...is...indistinguishable from poetic

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<sup>40</sup> For an in depth analysis of the theoretical divergences between Frye and Bloom see Steve Polansky's "A Family Romance – Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom: A Study of Critical Influence". *Boundary 2*, 9.2 (1981): 227-246.

<sup>41</sup> Henceforth, *Map*.

<sup>42</sup> Henceforth *Anxiety*.



influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” (*Anxiety* 5). Bloom’s theory of influence sees literary tradition as the outcome of the struggle of a new author with his precursor. In order to assert himself, both artistically and historically, the “young citizen of poetry, or ephebe...” (Bloom, *Anxiety* 10) deviates from his precursor and embarks on a process of self-affirmation marked by specific “revisionary movements” (10) or ratios: *Clinamen*, *Tessera*, *Kenosis*, *Daemonisation*, *Askesis*, *Apophrades*. In *Anxiety*, Bloom clearly states that his concern lies “only with strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors...” (5), thus contradicting Sellar and Allen’s observation of a shift in interest from weaker to stronger poetic figures in Bloom’s later criticism to which I referred to in my introduction. “Weaker talents”, he continues, “idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves” (*Anxiety* 5). Moreover, one might add, figures of capable imagination re-write their history for their respective selves. While in *Anxiety* Bloom outlined his theoretical precepts, it is in the works that followed, *A Map of Misreading* and *Agon*, where he starts to place the theory of anxiety of influence in practical relation to tradition and the canon.

In *Map*, Bloom describes the function of tradition as “pragmatic” (29) as opposed to “idealized” (29): the most valuable aspect of tradition is that it functions as a filter for poetic production: it “stifles the weak” (29) and “represses even the strong”(29). In order to understand the pragmatic aspects of tradition, an operation of de-mystification must take place where tradition is understood as the result of an incessant flow of poetic influences. In Bloom’s interpretation, tradition, “deeply derives from the Hebrew *Mishnah*”, and it is “an oral handing-over, or transmission

of oral precedents, of what has been found to work, of what had been instructed successfully” (*Map* 32). Thus, he continues to maintain how tradition corresponds to “good teaching” (*Map* 32), ‘good’ in this case meaning “pragmatic, instrumental, fecund” (*Map* 32). This paragraph in *Map* closes with a passage famous for being one of the rhetorical tenets of Bloom’s criticism of Derrida’s essay “Freud and the Scene of Writing” (1972): here, Bloom establishes the primacy of a primal “Scene of Teaching” (*Map* 32) over the primal “Scene of Writing”,<sup>43</sup> thus defining poetry as “crucially pedagogical in its origins and function” (*Map* 32). The element of struggle that characterises Bloom’s vision of tradition as an agonistic narrative between ephebes and precursors arises from a “nostalgia for origins” (*Map* 47), from a desire to re-write one’s own history of poetic dominance. Given the impossibility of reviving an original “Primal scene”, each primal scene becomes a trope of the former, in a never ending chain of repetition which Bloom identifies with the rhetorical figure of a transumption.<sup>44</sup> From this idea, which is further elaborated in *Agon*, Bloom derives one of his most important points concerning the “canonical use of strong poetry” (*Agon* 286). On the one hand, as it was already clear from *Map*, strong poetry “goes on electing its successors” (286); on the other, different “Scenes of Instruction become identical with the continuity of poetic tradition” (*Agon* 286).

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<sup>43</sup>For an in-depth discussion of the differences between Bloom’s ‘scene of instruction’ and Derrida’s ‘scene of writing’, as well as Bloom’s commentary of Derrida, see Martin McQuillan’s “Is Deconstruction Really a Jewish Science” in *The Salt Companion to Harold Bloom*, 235-254. See also Spargo 85-87 and 86n17. For a more general commentary on Bloom’s work in relation to deconstruction, see Fite, 3-4 and Peter de Bolla’s *Harold Bloom. Towards Historical Rhetorics*. London & New York: Routledge, 1988.

<sup>44</sup>In classical rhetoric, transumption is a synonym for metalepsys, a trope which is central in Bloom’s early writings, particularly in *A Map of Misreading*. It is, in Bloom’s words, “a scheme, frequently allusive, that refers the reader back to any previous figurative scheme” (74), or “a metonymy of a metonymy” (102). “Transumption”, explains Bloom, “is a diachronic rhetoric, figuration operating across a time-frame, which is of course a conceptual temporality, or trope of time, not time itself, whatever we take that to be” (*Agon* 286).

The Scene of Instruction, that fleeting, ever-shifting moment for whose possession all poets struggle, corresponds to the continuity of tradition because it is in the quest for that almost mythological place of primal creativity that the psychological energy of authors is invested continuously and devotedly. Thus, literary history – and the canon as a construct that is made of history – is nothing but a series of moments very similar to what Walter Pater called ‘privileged moments’ in which Scenes of Instruction are temporarily misread by a new author, and so on and so forth, perpetually. It is along these lines that Bloom elaborates a more explicit theory of canonization which particularly stresses the bearings of reading and misreading on both the creation and the transmission of tradition:

A strong poem...can be defined as a text that must engender strong misreadings, both as other poems and as literary criticism. Texts that have single, reductive, simplistic meanings are themselves already necessarily weak misreadings of anterior texts. When a strong misreading has demonstrated its fecundity by producing other strong misreadings across several generations, then we can and we must accept its canonical status. (*Agon* 285)

This passage echoes the description of the stifling function of tradition of which Bloom had already elaborated in *Map*. Once again, Bloom defines poetic weakness and strength and shows how they function across time. A poem achieves canonical status by being constantly misread, either weakly or strongly, through time. As he comes to reiterate in *The Western Canon*, “the only pragmatic test for the canonical” is whether the text “is worthy rereading” (518). The act of reading that precedes the misreading is described as the moment inaugurating the fight between the reader and the poet; and in fact, Bloom goes on to outline a “true law of canonization” (*Agon* 286) that rotates around the clash of power of reading with the power of creating strong tropes:

*in a strong reader's struggle to master a poet's trope, strong poetry will impose itself, because that imposition, that usurpation of mental space, is the proof of trope, the testing of power by power". (Agon 286, emphasis original)*

Reading, re-reading and misreading are, therefore, considered as the privileged practices upon which Bloom's canonical project relies. In the next part of this chapter, I will show how all these elements converge in *The Western Canon*.

### 3 *The Western Canon*

While tradition springs from a chain of influences that keep moving from precursors to new authors, reading – and the resultant misreading – is the cardinal gesture that initiates and keeps such influences alive through time. It is from this fundamental point that Bloom's early theory underpins the formation of his Western canon.

"Who reads must choose, since there is literally not enough time to read everything, even if one does nothing but read" (15), Bloom writes in the "Elegy" that opens *The Western Canon*. If reading is observed in relation to time, or lack thereof, choice becomes a condition *sine qua non*, a necessary point of departure for the reading enterprise. It is for this reason that Bloom approaches the mapping of his canon as a way of putting his critical expertise at the service of the common reader, to whom *The Western Canon* is addressed. As he clarifies in "The Point of View for my Work as a Critic: a Dithyramb" (2009), the selection of authors presented in *The Western Canon* should thus be read as a "spotter" (46) aimed at helping readers to orient themselves in a landscape "flooded" (46) with possibilities.

The twenty-six writers included in Bloom's Western canon – namely Shakespeare, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Montaigne, Molière, Milton, Samuel

Johnson, Goethe, Wordsworth, Austen, Whitman, Dickinson, Dickens, George Eliot, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Freud, Proust, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, Borges, Neruda, Pessoa, and Beckett – are divided into three clusters, each corresponding to a literary age, a scheme which Bloom derives from Giambattista Vico's theory of historical ages as parts of a repetitive circle of continuity and unity.<sup>45</sup> This structure helps to convey Bloom's perception of literary tradition as an interconnected system of relations between authors and/or texts. An 'Aristocratic Age' that goes roughly from Shakespeare to Goethe is followed by a 'Democratic Age' which spans from Wordsworth to Ibsen; the cycle concludes with the 'Chaotic Age', corresponding to the twentieth century, which opens with Freud and closes with Shakespeare via Beckett, Joyce and Proust. Even though the rationale behind these groupings is not always straightforward, the division makes for an excellent way of organizing the more extensive prophetic appendices at the end of the book which, according to Bloom's list of authors and works, amount to circa 400.

In order to begin to map out *The Western Canon's* central argument, we need to identify the role Bloom assigns to aesthetic value. He opens the "Preface and Prelude" to *The Western Canon* by stating the substantiality of aesthetic value: "Aesthetic value' is sometimes regarded as a suggestion of Immanuel Kant's rather than an actuality, but that has not been my experience during a lifetime of reading." (1). Thus, in the "Elegy for the Canon" that opens the volume, he further describes the tenets of his take on aesthetics. The first is the fundamentally individual character of the aesthetic experience (Bloom, *The Western Canon* 15). In excluding the social

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<sup>45</sup> See Giambattista Vico's *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*. Trans. David Marsh. London: Penguin Classics, 1999. For further analysis of Vico's influence on Bloom, see R. Clifton Spargo's "Towards and Ethic of Literary Revisionism". *The Salt Companion to Harold Bloom*: 74-75.

aspect of the aesthetic experience, Bloom reiterates the divergence between himself and the ‘School of Resentment’. “Aesthetic criticism”, he says, “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 ...” (*The Western Canon* 10-11).

Second, Bloom focuses on the exclusivity of the aesthetic experience: aesthetic value can be “recognized or experienced, but it cannot be conveyed to those who are incapable of grasping its sensations and perceptions” (*The Western Canon* 17). His polemic against the ‘Resenters’ becomes even more explicit when he lingers to contemplate “the flight from the aesthetic among so many in [his] profession, some of whom at least began with the ability to experience aesthetic value” (*The Western Canon* 17). To account for the apostasy of aesthetic value amongst so many contemporary literary critics, he invokes Freud’s theory of repression, where:

... flight is the metaphor for repression, for unconscious yet purposeful forgetting. The purpose is clear enough in my profession’s flight: to assuage displaced guilt. (*The Western Canon* 17)

This guilt originates from the belief that the study of literature ought to be conducted by taking into account the relations it entertains with societal concerns; from this perspective, the pleasure generated from the act of reading becomes secondary to a concern for social and cultural issues. To forcefully forget about the heights that the aesthetic experience gives access to “reduces aesthetics to ideology, or at best to metaphysics” (Bloom, *The Western Canon* 18), especially when poems cease to be read *just* as poems, but they are turned into “social document [s]” (Bloom, *The Western Canon* 18). Bloom’s concern with the social function attributed to literature by the ‘School of Resentment’ is very clearly summarized in the following passage from the Saluzinsky interview:

What I understand least about the current academy, and the current literary scene of criticism is this lust for social enlightenment; ...this extraordinary and, I believe, mindless movement towards proclaiming our way out of all introspections, our way out of guilt and sorrow, by proclaiming that the poet is a slum-lord – whether he wants to be or not – and that there is no distinction between Yale University ... and the New York stock exchange. This is a clap-trap. The poet is not a slum-lord; the critic is not a hireling of the stock exchange. ... If they wish to alleviate the sufferings of the exploited classes, let them live up to their pretensions, let them abandon the academy and go out there and work politically and economically and in humanitarian spirit. (83)

Anticipating *The Western Canon* by almost a decade, this interview shows just how Bloom's contempt for the 'School of Resentment' runs, like a red thread, throughout his career. This sense of continuity has also been pointed out by Sellars and Allen, who observe how, from *Anxiety* onwards, Bloom challenged the idea that literature ought to be an instrument of social reform: whereas in *Anxiety* the message was delivered "mainly to academic literary critics" (Sellars and Allen xx), in *The Western Canon* "it is a message delivered *in spite* of them" (Sellars and Allen xx, emphasis added). For reasons of space, I have to limit my observations of the intricacies of Bloom's struggle with the "School of Resentment";<sup>46</sup> however, Bloom's incessant challenge to contemporary critical trends, and his polemicizing against the 'Resenters' substantially affected *The Western Canon*, as its early reception shows. In order to reclaim Bloom's aesthetics from the confusing rhetorical debates of the Culture Wars, I propose to temporarily ignore Bloom's antagonism with the School of Resentment and to scrutinize it in relation to Bloom's critical paradigm. If "aesthetic choice has always guided every secular aspect of canon formation", then it

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<sup>46</sup> For an in depth analysis of the issue, see Barnard Turner's "Bloom and The School of Resentment: An interrogation of the 'Prelude' and 'Preface' to *The Western Canon*" in the *Salt Companion to Harold Bloom*: 133-148.

is by exploring the meaning of aesthetic value in Bloom that his mapping of the canon can be further understood.

In *The Western Canon*, Bloom provides a clear definition of canonicity in relation to aesthetic value: “One breaks into the canon only by aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily of an amalgam: *mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction*” (29, emphasis added). Amongst these criteria, originality is the one that more than others functions as a conceptual divide between Bloom’s canon and his earlier work. In Bloom’s theory of anxiety of influence, poetic originality stands as the condition that a new poet aspires to achieve via the undertaking of an agonistic struggle with his precursor. As he reiterates in *The Western Canon*:

There can be no strong, canonical writing without the process of literary influence, a process vexing to undergo and difficult to understand...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. An authentic canonical writer may or may not internalize her or his work’s anxiety, but that scarcely matters: the strongly achieved work *is* the anxiety. (8, emphasis original)

The relationship between new poets and their precursors has been often misread as an Oedipal conflict, in which the latter represent a father-figure for the former. As Graham Allen points out, such interpretation presupposes the understanding of the poetic precursor as the “poetic equivalent of the [new poet’s] superego” (*A Poetics of Conflict* 23), whereas in Bloom’s theory the figure of the poetic precursor “comes to be absorbed as part of the poetic equivalent of the id-component” (*A Poetics of Conflict* 23). This simple, but effective distinction serves to introduce the idea that the poet-precursor does not function as “the Other who commands us” (Bloom, *Anxiety* 71), but exerts its power on the poetic consciousness of the new poet from



within, through the anxiety experienced by the new poet at the realization of his own belatedness. This is manifest, for instance, in language; Graham Allen summarises this difficult concept as follows:

A poet's will-to-power or desire for poetic originality is from the very start the product of the influence of a precursor. On the level of rhetoric, this is equivalent to the recognition that the only *language* a poet has by which to prove his or her own originality and 'strength' is a *language* already possessed by past poets. The poetic 'will' is, essentially, that already possessed *language*.... (*A Poetics of Conflict* 24, emphasis original)

The ephebe's psyche thus become the theatre in which the dramatic struggle takes place; the 'poetic- father', or precursor, is a "voice" that "cannot die because already it has survived death – *the dead poet lives in one*" (Bloom, *Map* 19, emphasis original). If the poet wants to affirm his own originality he needs to "become defensive about the very drives which constitute him or her as a poet" (Allen, *A Poetics of Conflict* 25); he needs to embark in a struggle against the echo of past poetry that lives on in himself. According to Bloom, anxiety of influence is a form of defence, which, as psychological defence-mechanisms often do, relies on repressive dynamics, which Bloom described by the six revisionary ratios I have listed earlier in this chapter. If the new poet manages to go through this cycle of poetic life and be strong enough to survive, then chances are that he will find himself part of that tradition within which he has been fighting for survival or, better still, for rebirth. "Poetic strength", Bloom explains in *Map*, "comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead, and from an even more triumphant solipsism" (9). Once this struggle is looked at as a phenomenon that takes place in a historical framework, the meaning and function that Bloom assigns to the idea of tradition become altogether clearer.

These preliminary observations on the role of originality in the new poet's quest for liberation from the voice of the precursor are fundamental for the understanding of the concept of 'primal scene of instruction', or "psychopoetic paradigm for literary origins" (Allen, *A Poetics of Conflict* 69) which, as I have pointed out earlier, is central to Bloom's theory. As Allen explains, the paradigm both "plays a crucial role in the development of his agonistic version of literary history" (*A Poetic of Conflicts* 69) and is vital for the understanding of Bloom's early reflections on the problem of canon formation.

### 3.1 Originality as Strangeness

However, in *The Western Canon*, originality takes on a new nuance, which Bloom calls 'strangeness' and that he regards as a key indicator for canonicity:

With most of these twenty-six writers, I have tried to confront greatness directly: to ask what makes the author and the works canonical. The answer, more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange... When you read a canonical work for a first time you encounter a stranger, an uncanny startlement rather than a fulfilment of expectations. (*The Western Canon* 3)

Strangeness identifies canonical works because it marks their otherness, their being 'strangers' to the reader. For Bloom, strangeness is either "never altogether assimilate[d]" or it "becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies" (*The Western Canon* 4). The effect of strangeness as an index of an author's canonicity is registered in the different ways in which Dante and Shakespeare occupy a central position in Bloom's Western canon. On the one hand, "Dante is the largest instance of the first possibility", while Shakespeare is "the overwhelming example of the second" (*The Western Canon* 4). A better understanding of what Bloom means

by strangeness can be gathered from his most recent work, *The Anatomy of*

*Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (2011). Here, Bloom explains:

‘Strangeness’... is *the* canonical quality, the mark of sublime literature. Your dictionary will give you assurance that the word *extraneous*, still in common use, is also the latin origin of *strange*: ‘foreign’, ‘outside’, ‘out of doors’. Strangeness is uncanniness: the estrangement of the homelike or commonplace. This estrangement is likely to manifest itself differently in writers and readers. But in both cases strangeness renders the deep relation between sublimity and influence palpable. ...For a strong writer, strangeness is the anxiety of influence...Implicit in Longinus’s famous celebration of the sublime – ‘Filled with delight and pride we believe we have created what we have heard’—is influence anxiety. What is my creation and what is merely heard? This anxiety is a matter of both personal and literary identity. What is the me and the not-me? Where do other voices end and my own begins? The sublime conveys imaginative power and weakness at once. It transports us beyond ourselves, provoking the uncanny recognition that one is never fully the author of one’s work one’s self. (19-20, author’s emphasis)

‘Strangeness’ is a mode of originality and an index for canonicity because it is the effect produced in the process by which an author affirms his poetic strength. By refiguring tropes and images to the point where they are no longer identified with the tradition from which they arose, strong authors turn the familiar to the unfamiliar. Strangeness is uncanniness,<sup>47</sup> and the discomfiting pleasure created by our encounter with it produces the sublimity of textual greatness.

In *The Western Canon*, Bloom establishes a direct relation between his interpretation of the idea of strangeness and Walter Pater’s definition of “the addition of strangeness to beauty” as constitutive of “the Romantic character in art” (143) in

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<sup>47</sup> The dualism familiar/unfamiliar is evocative of the influence of Freud’s 1919 article, “The Uncanny” on Bloom’s definition of strangeness. Bloom’s appreciation of Freud is in his work and, particularly in *Agon*, we see an attempt of bringing together Freud speculations on the uncanny and Bloom’s theory of aesthetic appreciation, to the point where Bloom describes “The Uncanny” as “the only major contribution that the twentieth century has made to the aesthetics of the Sublime” (101). In her essay “Sublime Theorist” (2007), Heidi Sylvester observes that Freud occupies a central part in Bloom’s interpretation of the sublime; indeed, via Freud Bloom maintains that the effects induced by the sublime on the reader can be so aggravating as to require repression (124). Also, Sylvester explains, “Bloom incorporates Freud into the tradition of the sublime” (124) because Freud provides him with a vocabulary that helps Bloom to articulate his agonistic vision of literary tradition.

the “Postscript” to *Appreciations* (1889). Here, Pater describes Romanticism as characterised by a desire “...for a beauty born of unlikely elements, by a profound alchemy, by a difficult initiation, by the charm which wrings it even out of terrible things...” (144). This uncommon beauty might produce “a trace of distortion, of the grotesque...as an additional element of expression, about its ultimate grace. Its eager, excited spirit will have strength, the grotesque, first of all – the trees shrieking as you tear off the leaves...” (144). As Iser observes, for Pater “...life is only seen as beautiful when it is defamiliarised. Thus, it is not the trees that are beautiful, but their grotesque distortion as they shriek” (64). According to Pater, the “perpetual and unresting break with the familiar” (Iser 67) elects the grotesque as a privileged form of representation of nature, thus challenging the idea of beauty as harmonic and marking the separation between the Platonic tradition and his own aesthetics: while in the former “beauty was the sensuous appearance of the Idea” (Iser 63), in the latter it is “the unusual appearance, most visible in the grotesque” (Iser 63). The distortion of the familiar inherent to this interpretation of beauty is expanded so as to become an index of originality – of authorial distinctness. This is exemplified in the “Postscript” when Pater comments on Rousseau’s *Confessions*:

His strangeness or distortion, his profound subjectivity, his passionateness – the *cor laceratum* – Rousseau makes all men in love with these. Je suis fait comme aucun de ceux que j’ai sus. Mais si je ne vaud pas mieux, au moins je suis autre. ‘I am not made like anyone else I have ever known: yet, if I am not better, at least I am different’. These words, from the first page of the *Confessions*, anticipate all the Werthers, Renes[sic], Obermanns, of the last hundred years. For Rousseau did but anticipate a trouble in the spirit of the whole world; and thirty years afterwards, what in him was a peculiarity, became part of the general consciousness. (146-147)

In *The Western Canon*, Bloom describes two modalities in which strangeness can be expressed. He uses the example of Dante to illustrate a type of strangeness that can

never quite be assimilated. This is the type of strangeness that is closest to the grotesque element of Pater's shrieking trees, and to a more conscious experience of the sublime. To explain the second type of strangeness, the one of whose idiosyncrasies we no longer recognise by force of their power of redefining cognition, he uses Shakespeare. This strangeness is the strangeness of Rousseau, who anticipates future consciousness by giving expression to his solipsistic distortion, his uncompromising yet suffering individuality.

In Bloom's reading, 'strangeness' also comes to correspond to the poetic capacity of reinventing nature to the point where no trace is left of such a process of reinvention. On the one hand, Bloom's theory of antithetical poetry, which describes the nature of Romantic imagination and explains how it develops in opposition to the 'normality' of experiential writing, underpins the idea of 'strangeness' as a mode of originality insofar as it highlights the struggle of the author to cast the images produced by his imagination in opposition to what is natural, that is, to what pertains to the normalised figurative paradigm of any literary tradition. On the other, Bloom's strangeness evokes a type of sensibility where the integration of elements of strangeness with beauty results in that particular effect on the reader, which Bloom defines as "uncanny startlement", the sublime.

### 3 Shakespeare as the Canon

Bloom makes a particular case for Shakespeare, whom he considers to be a universal narrator of human experience by force of his capacity to make readers feel 'at home' wherever they might be. Shakespeare is 'strange' because his creative strength allowed him to overwhelm tradition and to become a point of origin himself.

As Bloom explains in the “Preface” to the first edition of *Anxiety*, Shakespeare stands as an unrepeatable instance of the unique phenomenon, which Bloom calls “the absolute absorption of the precursor” (*Anxiety* 11). His originality/strangeness lies in his capacity to invent new modes of representation of human existence, all of which have been extensively absorbed through time by the consciousness of readers and writers so as to become a reference for the representation of all things human. By having established an absolute “new norm for representation” (“Preface” to *Anxiety II* xxix), Shakespeare becomes the authentic universal author who, through his characters, shaped our idea of ‘the human’.<sup>48</sup> In both *Ruin the Sacred Truth* and *The Book of J* Bloom extensively reflects on Shakespeare’s role in relation to the development of a Western literary tradition. However, it is in *The Western Canon* that he finally articulates his vision in greater detail, thus clearing the path for the wave of ‘Bardocentric’ publications that followed in the second half of the 1990s and in the early 2000s: *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998); *How to Read and Why* (2000); *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (2002); and *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?* (2004).

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<sup>48</sup> In referring to Shakespeare as a creator of the human character, Bloom confers on him a creative authority that is very similar to that Bloom confers to the ‘J writer’ in *The Book of J* (1990). Here, Bloom confronts the invention of God as a fictional character as the most authentic creative gesture — that is — the invention of an ‘absolute’ origin. J’s, and Shakespeare’s universality are explained by means of their capacity of transforming their “figurations” (Allen 144) into “articles of belief” (Allen 144). In *The Book of J* Bloom explains universality as the manifest capacity of certain authors to have an imbuing power, the power of J’s Yaweh: dynamic, unbinding even as it binds, unbounding even as it sets boundaries, redeeming time rather than space, inspiring the auditory more than the visual freedom of the reader. The Bible is true, in one way of another, to most who read it regularly; it confirms or even defines extraliterary belief. J, like Shakespeare, works between truth and meaning, just as belief does, but neither J nor Shakespeare seems to me a believer as most people believe. J and Shakespeare, being poets upon the heights of the Sublime, do not waste their energies by choosing forms of worship from poetic tales. They work rather to represent reality, but in the urgent mode of compelling a perpetually fresh reality to appear...Reality appears, rather than remains latent, because Shakespeare summons it; he does not imitate a reality already manifest. (269-270)

Shakespeare's function in *The Western Canon* is therefore worthy of extensive attention. From the outset, one is faced with the puzzling ambivalence of Shakespeare's position in Bloom's canon: while he is described as the "central figure of the Western Canon" (2), Bloom also declares Shakespeare to be "the Canon" (50) itself. What might appear as a minor distinction carries an enormous value for the wider scopes of the present project as, through Bloom's double use of the term canon to refer to both a list and to a single author who comes to function as standard, it is possible to see the two interpretations of the idea of canon, which I discussed at length in Chapter Two, at work at the same time.

On the one hand, Bloom engages in the composition of a closed set of authors, a list, which he calls 'Western canon'. As I have discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, this interpretation of the notion of the canon is evocative of the rigidity and normativity deriving from the immediate analogy with the canon of the Scriptures. While acknowledging this analogy in the "Elegy for the Canon" that opens *The Western Canon*, Bloom also recognises the implicit challenge amongst authors or texts that this model of interpretation nurtures: "The Canon", he writes,

a word religious in its origins, has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival, whether you interpret the choice as being made by dominant social groups, institutions of education, traditions of criticism, or, as I do, by late-coming authors who feel themselves chosen by particular ancestral figures. (20)

In this passage, Bloom draws a picture of the general tensions at play in the process of canon formation while also making space for his theory to blend with the discourse on literary selection and tradition. The notable difference between his approach to canon formation and that of the other canonizing agencies that he lists lies in the role which he assigns to himself: not an active participant in the process,

but a witness of the fight for survival between texts and authors who then narrates the story of the formation of a self-selective canon. *The Western Canon* could, thus, be read as Bloom's major critical narrative of this long-lasting process within the Western literary tradition, an epic narration of the history of strong literature, an idea that fits well within Bloom's vision of criticism as a form of "prose poetry" (*Anxiety* 95). Testimony of the relevance granted by Bloom to the Scriptural roots of his interpretation of canon can also be found in *Agon*, where he describes the practice of canon formation as the combination of Jewish – and Christian – tradition of "forming Scripture" (284), the "Alexandrian Hellenistic tradition of literary scholarship" (284) and, most importantly, the "self-canonizing" (284) or "self-electing" (284) tradition of Greek poets. The passage from *Agon* aims at showing that "there is no innocence, and only a small part of degree of chance, in the canonical process" (284): in order to be canonized, an author needs to be aware that "any hope of permanence" (284) will result in the building of "canonical ambition, process and agon" (284). The critical act of "measuring the canon" (*Agon* 284), as opposed to the act of forming it, will therefore be similar to a "cataloguing" (*Agon* 284), a belated attempt to reconstruct the story of self-selection inherent to literary tradition or, as Bloom puts it, "a gauge of vitality, a measurement that attempts to map the incommensurable" (*The Western Canon* 39). The most problematic point in Bloom's postulation of a self-selective canon is that this theory relies entirely on the critic's capacity of individuating and understanding the tropological struggle between authors and texts, which for Bloom is self-evident as part of his theoretical apparatus, but which also marks a neat separation of his theory and methodology from other critical discourses.



Against the backdrop of this premise, and by force of the power-struggle for the possession of the canon as an instrument of cultural legitimation during the American Culture Wars, the allegations against Bloom's canon's excessive arbitrariness are not surprising. Even when observing the extensive prophetic appendix that closes *The Western Canon*, arguably Bloom's attempt to circumvent accusations of excessive rigidity, Bloom's list remains vulnerable to the polemic of inclusion and exclusion which, as I have explained, comes with the identification of the notion of canon with the archive. As he explains in *The Western Canon*, the canon works as an instrument of conservation of memory whose "pragmatic function"(39) is that of "remembering and ordering a lifetime's reading" (39): a slightly more nuanced way of describing the 'stifling of the weak' that he had previously employed to define the function of tradition. In this ordered archive, a repository of a reader's achievements, "the greatest authors take over the role of 'places' in the Canon's theatre of memory, and their masterworks occupy the position filled by 'images' in the art of memory" (*The Western Canon* 39).

If authors become places, the role that Bloom takes on in respect to the canon is, as Barnard Turner explains, that of a cartographer (136). Turner goes to great lengths to explain how "spatial and temporal relationships" (134) inform Bloom's depiction of the canonical; in particular, he offers an interesting insight into the spatial organisation of Bloom's canon by focusing on the notions of map and mapping in relation to canon formation. Turner offers a definition of Bloom's canon as a "genealogy of diachronic intertextual relations" which becomes "a 'map' which "moves out from the present, ..." (134): the critic's gaze maps the canon in the present and consigns it to the future while diachronically establishing the relations on

which it is founded, geographically ordering it by thinking of it as a concentric image where Shakespeare becomes its centre, or “cardinal point” (134). In this respect, Turner concludes, Bloom “conflate[s] historiography and cartography, or linear and concentric images of the transmission process of cultural canonicity” (136).

Shakespeare is the centre of Bloom’s canon, where he becomes canon itself: the cardinal point, but also Aristotelian *kanōn kai metron*,<sup>49</sup> ‘standard and measure’, and the final answer to what Bloom calls the “triple question of the agon” (*The Western Canon* 24): “more than, less than, equal to?” (*The Western Canon* 24). From the centre of the Western canon, Shakespeare absorbs the tradition and perpetuates it at every attempt at testing the poetic strength of a new candidate to canonical status. Not only, as I have briefly pointed out earlier, and as Bloom repeatedly argues in both *The Western Canon* and in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, is Shakespeare’s influence pervasive, but it also defines our idea of what ‘being human’ means by the creation of truly original characters. As he explains in *Genius*,

the true Shakespearean difference, the uniqueness of his genius is...in his universality, in the persuasive illusion...that he has peopled a world, remarkably like what we take to be our own, with men, women and children preternaturally natural. (18)

The election of Shakespeare as ‘canon within the canon’ makes us return to the point of departure of this chapter: Graham Allen’s reading of Canon as a “grand confirmation” of Bloom’s theory of influence. Without rejecting Allen’s point, I would like to suggest how another way of looking at *The Western Canon* could be that of reading it as a rehearsal, in preparation to the confirmation that came about

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<sup>49</sup> See Chapter Two, 54.

only three years later with the publication of the second edition of *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997).<sup>50</sup>

*Anxiety*'s second edition<sup>51</sup> opens with a lengthy "Preface" in which Bloom accounts for Shakespeare's greatness by explaining his poetic struggle with – and eventual absorption of – his direct precursor; whom Bloom identifies with Christopher Marlowe. The "Preface" filled a space that Bloom had deliberately left void when he first postulated his theory of poetic influence in 1973. In the introduction to the first edition of *Anxiety*, he gives three explanations for his exclusion of Shakespeare from his argument. The first reason is "necessarily historical" (*Anxiety* 11): Shakespeare "belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness" (*Anxiety* 11), which came to correspond to the 'Aristocratic Age' he refers to in *The Western Canon*. Secondly, Bloom observes, the increasingly subjective nature of the lyrical form as opposed to drama placed "the shadow cast by precursors" (*Anxiety* 11) in a more dominant position. Finally, and most importantly, the fact that Shakespeare completely overwhelmed Marlowe (*Anxiety* 11) determined his initial exclusion from the paradigm of authors on whose revisionary struggle Bloom focused the first edition of *Anxiety*.

However, the 1997 "Preface" enters into dialogue with this stance and revises it by stating that Shakespeare's exclusion from the 1973 edition depended more on

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<sup>50</sup> For an alternative treatment of the Preface, see J.T. Cribb's "Anxieties of Influence in the Theatre of Memory: Harold Bloom, Marlowe and Henry V". Cribb's argument challenges Bloom's revision of his theory of influence so to include Shakespeare on historicist ground: according to Cribb, Bloom "had no need to renege on his original intuition that Shakespeare was immune from the anxiety of influence as it may have developed with the Romantics, and that Shakespeare's relation with Marlowe is more like that of an apprentice who becomes his own man by mastering and criticising the tools of his trade." (181)

<sup>51</sup> Henceforth, *Anxiety II*.

Bloom's personal state during the drafting of *Anxiety*: as he says, he was simply "not ready to meditate upon Shakespeare and originality" ("Preface" to *Anxiety II* xiii). He starts his revision by conceding that "one cannot think through the question of influence without considering the most influential of all authors during the last four centuries" ("Preface" to *Anxiety II* xiii); he then moves on to reiterate the important point in *The Western Canon* which defines "the invention of the human, as we know it" as a "mode of influence far surpassing anything literary" (xiii-xiv). From this point on, Bloom develops his argument in the "Preface" as the echo of the arguments that run consistently through his work of the late 1980s and early 1990s, from *Ruin the Sacred Truths*, through *The Book of J* and finally in *The Western Canon*: "Shakespeare's uniqueness" (xv) and his universality find confirmation in the attitude of "real multiculturalists" (xv) who "accept Shakespeare as the one indispensable author, different from all others in degree, and by so much that he becomes different in kind" (xv). This acceptance, this yielding to his authority, (as opposed to the resistance of the 'School of Resentment') indicates the degree to which the intuition underpinning *The Western Canon*, where Shakespeare impersonates the canon of Western literature, can be stretched across time and space so as to extend Shakespeare's influence as a literary standard to the whole world. By means of this emphatic gesture, Bloom turns Shakespeare into "world canon" (xv). It is in the "Preface" that one finally gets the sense of the uncontainable poetic strength of Bloom's Shakespeare as the three positions from which he exerts his power come together. Not only Shakespeare overwhelms his precursor: he also boundlessly overwhelms tradition, the canon, and, most ironically, Bloom's criticism by

enforcing a revision of Bloom's most influential work by means of his newly found centrality in his critical paradigm.

## Conclusion

In analysing Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*, this chapter argued for the need to separate the more polemic aspects of Bloom's criticism from the actual critical project carried out in *The Western Canon* in order to fully appreciate the sophistication of its argument and the role it fulfils within Bloom's critical paradigm, which, as this chapter argues, is one of transition between his early and later criticism. For this reason, while observing *The Western Canon*'s early reception and accounting for the position it occupied within the canon debates, this chapter also wanted to assess Bloom's theoretical contribution to the study of the notion of canon. In observing *The Western Canon* against the backdrop of Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, this chapter has addressed Bloom's interpretation of the concept of canon as a product of complex inter-textual tensions within the tradition. Bloom's interpretation of the notion of canon, from this perspective, could be described as a synthesis of the two interpretations of the notion of canon presented in Chapter Two. While the image of the canon as the creative power and the work of Shakespeare is strictly connected to the interpretation of the canon as 'standard', the form of the list that contains Bloom's canon makes it vulnerable to the polemics on inclusion and exclusion so central to debates amidst which *The Western Canon* was published, and which constitute one of the central preoccupations of the criticism of John Guillory, which I explore in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

### John Guillory and the Canon as Cultural Capital

#### Introduction

Of the many voices that participated in 1980s and 1990s canon debates, John Guillory's resonates among those who most actively sought to observe the intricate system of social and institutional relations involved in the process of canon formation. In the following chapter I will focus on his book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993).

In order to provide an exhaustive explanation of Guillory's contribution to the study of the literary canon, my reading of *Cultural Capital* will be twofold. On the one hand, while presenting the general facets of Guillory's argument, I will focus on its theoretical sources, on the ways in which ideology surfaces in Guillory's interpretations of the concept of canonicity, of the process of canon formation, and of how it influences Guillory's own approach to the concept of canon. On the other hand, I will engage with some specific aspects of Guillory's reading of the school as the exclusive place where literary works are canonised in order to assess both the strengths and weaknesses of such assumptions.

## 1 *Cultural Capital*: Enter the ‘School Canon’

Published in 1993, *Cultural Capital* gathers into a cohesive argument the reflections on canons and canon formation that Guillory presented in a series of articles published between 1983 and 1991. “The Ideology of Canon Formation: T.S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks” was first published in *Critical Inquiry*’s 1983 special issue “Canons”, on which I have dwelt at length in Chapter One. After partial revision, the essay on Eliot came to constitute a pivotal part of *Cultural Capital*’s third chapter. Two other articles, “Canonical and Non Canonical: a Critique of the Current Debate” and “Canon, Syllabus, List: a Note on the Pedagogic Imaginary” appeared respectively in *ELH* in 1987 and in *Transition* in 1991 and their content constitutes a relevant portion of *Cultural Capital*’s first chapter.<sup>52</sup> A fourth essay, “The English Common Place: Lineages of the Topographical Genre”, also published in 1991 in *Critical Quarterly*, constitutes a substantial section of chapter two. In 1990, Guillory also contributed to the collection *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, with an entry on the term ‘canon’.

It is important to point out Guillory’s consistent interest in the problem of canon formation throughout the 1980s and the 1990s as it underlies and strengthens *Cultural Capital*’s revisionist mission: having observed the dialogues about the canon unfold and gain relevance in the previous decade, in *Cultural Capital* Guillory presented the whole debate from an original angle, and argued for a thorough reconsideration of the terms in which the literary canon was being discussed. This gesture was most welcomed by reviewers such as Sharon O’Dair, who called it “a

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<sup>52</sup> “Canonical and Non Canonical: a Critique of the Current Debate”. *ELH* 54: 3 (1987) 482 – 527; “Canon, Syllabus, List: a Note on the Pedagogic Imaginary. *Transition* 53 (1991) 36-54.

striking intervention” (130) into the canon debates, J.G. Saunders, who defined it as a “brilliantly iconoclastic exploration of the current state of literary criticism” (129).

Jan Gorak observed how

...[*Cultural Capital*] maintains the seriousness, intellectual ambition, and public concern that marked the original volume. Impatient with the frustrating course of the current debate, the author wants to expand and, in expanding, change utterly the terms of that debate. (287)

This comment is particularly important for the perspective adopted in this thesis as it defines the significance of *Cultural Capital* in relation to the trajectory followed by the debates on the literary canon – from the initial phase of enquiry of the late 1970s and early 1980s into the full blown controversy of the late 1980s and 1990s – that I have outlined in Chapter One.

As the following quote from a 2009 lecture given by Prof. Paul Fry at Yale University explains, perhaps a little too enthusiastically, *Cultural Capital*’s impact was remarkable:

[Guillory’s] argument actually ended the very debate that he thinks is going to intensify and get worse. In other words, he thought that the big, hot-button topic in the academic world for the next twenty-five years or more would be the canon wars: canonical, non-canonical, cultural, and multicultural--he thought this would be the fundamental point of contention in the academic world. Well, it wasn't, and the reason it wasn't is that his argument was so brilliant everybody came to their senses and realized [laughs] that they were barking up the wrong tree, literally. His book, *Cultural Capital*, simply silenced not the public, because nothing ever silences the public, [laughter] but simply silenced the debate about the culture wars in the academy. (“The Institutional Construction of Literary Study”)

Although *Cultural Capital* did not terminate the debate (it was, after all, published a year before Bloom’s *The Western Canon*, which as I have explained in the previous chapter, engaged very clearly, and loudly, with the ongoing debate), it successfully proposed a “thorough displacement” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* vii) of the dualistic opposition between inclusion in and exclusion from the canon by focusing on the



school as the key institutional *locus* of canon formation. The following passage taken from the Preface to *Cultural Capital* summarises Guillory's agenda:

Where the debate speaks of the literary canon, its inclusions and exclusions, I will speak of the school, and the institutional forms of syllabus and curriculum. I will argue that evaluative judgements are the necessary but not sufficient condition for the process of canon formation, and that it is only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how works are preserved, reproduced and disseminated over successive generations and centuries. Similarly, where the debate speaks about the canon as representing or failing to represent particular social groups, I will speak of the school's historical function of distributing, or regulating access to, the forms of cultural capital. (Vii)

From this premise, Guillory develops *Cultural Capital* as a critique of the politics of access to the school system of the United States. As it will become apparent throughout this chapter, *Cultural Capital* is – at times – strongly polemical, particularly when Guillory's political agenda and strategic attitude in the construction of its argument and in the selection of its sources are taken into account.

The set of references Guillory uses to sustain his argument is far reaching; yet the overarching influence of Bourdieu and Gramsci determines the general atmosphere of Guillory's reflections on the nature, function and formation of literary canons in the institutional context of the school. While Bourdieu's theory on the nature of symbolic capital largely informs Guillory's argument, Gramsci's idea of a unitarian school is juxtaposed by Guillory to the American pedagogical system in order to stress the latter's fragmentary nature.

### 1.1. Pierre Bourdieu's Idea of Cultural Capital

In setting out to define a new rationale for the study of the canon, Guillory introduces the concept of cultural capital as “the basis for a new historical account of both the process of canon formation and the immediate social conditions giving rise to the debate about the canon” (*Cultural Capital* viii). In order to understand Guillory's approach, it might prove useful to devote a few words to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital.

The concept of capital as accumulation of labour is related to those practices aimed at producing economic profit; for this reason, in his essay “Forms of Capital” (1986) Pierre Bourdieu defines these practices as interested. Bourdieu also identifies disinterested practices, of which the arts are an instance. Bourdieu stresses that a bourgeois interpretation of the purposelessness of art tends to ignore the fact that the production of arts and, more generally, of intellectual commodities does not happen in a vacuum, but it is subject to the economic rules regulating the accumulation of capital: even “priceless things”, says Bourdieu, “have their price” (“Forms of Capital” 242). Nevertheless, Bourdieu maintains that disinterested practices “are not and cannot be socially recognised as economic” (“Forms of Capital” 243).

In order to understand this point, it is necessary to spend a few words on Bourdieu's interpretation of the concept of capital, which he breaks down into three different types: economic, cultural and social. According to the field in which capital is activated, it will be defined in one of these three forms. Different types of capital are not immutable; indeed, upon specific conditions, both cultural and social capital can be converted into economic capital (“Forms of Capital” 243): while cultural capital can be “institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications” (“Forms of

Capital” 243), social capital can be “institutionalised in the forms of a title of nobility” (“Forms of Capital” 243).

Cultural capital, Bourdieu explains, can be embodied, objectified or institutionalised. In order to accumulate cultural capital in its embodied form, a “process of embodiment” or “incorporation” (“Forms of Capital” 244) must take place where the social agent acquires capital by working on him or herself, that is, by engaging in a process of self-improvement:

The work of acquisition is work on oneself (self-improvement), an effort that presupposes a personal cost (*on paie de sa personne*, as we say in French), an investment, above all of time, but also of that socially constituted form of libido, *libido sciendi*, with all the privation, renunciation, and sacrifice that it may entail. (“Forms of Capital” 244)<sup>53</sup>

Institutional education plays a key role in this process, in that it officialises both the individual’s intellectual labour and the cultural capital that has been accumulated as a consequence of that labour. Cultural capital obtained by means of education will therefore be converted into economic capital when the agent will switch from the learning field to that of labour. The more sophisticated the

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<sup>53</sup> It is interesting to observe this aspect of Bourdieu and its effect on Guillory’s interpretation of the canon as cultural capital against the backdrop of the interpretation of self-interest offered by Charles Altieri in “An Idea and an Ideal”, which I analysed in Chapter Two. While Guillory, in keeping with Bourdieu, observes the role played by institutionalized canons in the maintenance of social inequalities, Altieri calls upon the positive responses that literary models officialised in the canon can elicit in the reader. Notwithstanding their different premises, both Altieri and Guillory register the social function of literary canons – and of literature in general – as instruments of emancipation for the individual and his social performance. However, while Guillory focuses on the social tensions that derive from the impossibility of an egalitarian possession of the cultural capital embodied in the literary canon, Altieri’s reader of the canon is one who freely asserts his interests and who strives with canonical models in order to achieve emancipation

Guillory himself reflects on Altieri’s essay, albeit as an instance of the “liberal position that...discovers in the intrinsically ‘liberating’ effect of [canonical texts] the reason of their canonicity” (*Cultural Capital* 21), a position that Guillory associates to the “liberalism of the old bourgeoisie” (*Cultural Capital* 21). By force of an apparent egalitarianism, such liberalism succeeded, Guillory argues, to divide “the population into those who were capable of being so liberated and those who were not” (*Cultural Capital* 21); for this reason, Guillory continues, this type of critique of the canon “will inevitably resurrect the charge of elitism” (21).

knowledge and competencies an agent will own, the higher the chances to increase his or her economic capital will be. It follows that the more pedagogic institutions will grant democratic access to the cultural capital they distribute, the higher the chances for social agents of moving upwards in the economic and social ladder will be.<sup>54</sup>

Guillory applies this principle when he observes that the school becomes the place where cultural capital in the form of ‘high’ literature is legitimised. As he explains in “Canon”:

The literary canon is itself a considerable part of the matter of history, and that historicity is not really transcended by the immortality of the canonical work. The literary canon is itself a historical event; it belongs to the history of the school. (245)

Guillory precisely wants to dismiss what he calls the “liberal and conservative imaginary scenes of judgement” (“Canon” 238): the notion of “absolute aesthetic value” (“Canon” 238), as well as the interpretation of the canon as representative of “social constituencies in the manner of a pseudo-democratic legislature” (“Canon”

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<sup>54</sup> See Bourdieu’s essay “Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception” (1968):

Only an institution like the school, the specific function of which is methodically to develop or create the dispositions which produce an educated person and which lays the foundations, quantitatively and consequently qualitatively, of a constant and intense pursuit of culture, could offset (at least partially) the initial disadvantage of those who do not receive from their family circle the encouragement to undertake cultural activities and the competence presupposed in any discourse on works, on the condition – and only on the condition – that it employs every available means to break down the endless series of cumulative processes to which any cultural education is condemned. For if the apprehension of a work of art depends, in its intensity, its modality, and in its very existence, on the beholders’ mastery of the generic and specific code of the work, ... which they owe partly to school training, the same thing applies to the pedagogic communication which is responsible...for transmitting the code of works of scholarly culture (and also the code according to which it effects the transmission)...Considering that the direct experience of works scholarly culture and the institutionally organized acquisition of culture which is a prerequisite for adequate experience of such works are subject to the same laws (...), it is obvious how difficult it is to break the sequence of effects which cause cultural capital to attract cultural capital. In fact, the school has only to give free play to the objective machinery of cultural diffusion without working systematically to give to all, in and through family inheritance... for it to redouble and consecrate by its approval the socially conditioned inequalities of cultural competence, by treating them as natural inequalities or, in other words, as inequalities of gifts or natural talents (233).

238), and to substitute them with a more thorough consideration of the social role of the practices of reading and writing (“Canon” 240). While at its lower levels the school is responsible for the dissemination of literacy, higher education provides access to increasingly sophisticated textual models that are identified with ‘high literature’. Through the construction of the undergraduate syllabus, the canon is not only institutionalised, but it is also transformed into a higher form of cultural capital. In Guillory’s account, the canon is a fundamentally pedagogical construct, particularly because it is only through its identification with the syllabus that it ceases to exist solely at an imaginary level (*Cultural Capital* 30). In fact, it is through the construction of curricula and syllabi that the canon and its symbolic role are not only legitimised, but also created.

The association of the notion of canon with that of cultural capital also allows Guillory to develop an alternative reading of the ongoing debate on the canon, where

the polarization of the debate into Western culturalism versus multiculturalism must be seen not as a simple conflict between regressive and progressive pedagogies but as the symptom of the transformation of cultural capital in response to social conditions not yet recognized as the real and ultimately determining context of the canon debate. Both the right-wing attempt to shore up the cultural capital of the ‘great works’ by advocating a return to a core curriculum, and the pluralist advocacy of multiculturalism respond to the same demographic circumstances, the heterogeneous constituency of the university. But neither version of culturalist politics responds to the heterogeneous constitution of cultural capital, and hence both movements are condemned to register this condition symptomatically, as a false perception of the mutual (cultural) exclusivity of canonical and noncanonical works. (*Cultural Capital* 47)

Guillory reads the demographic changes within the university population as the key factor determining the ongoing debates about curricular revision. At the same time, he argues that the school system, in order to adequately respond to the new conditions, should undergo changes at both curricular and systemic level.

## 1.2 Gramsci and the School

To do so, Guillory proposes a “Gramscian reconsideration of the curriculum debate” (*Cultural Capital* 50). His main source here is Gramsci’s essay “The Organisation of Education and Culture”,<sup>55</sup> where he observed how the division of the pedagogical system into “classical” and “trade ” (126) schools traditionally fostered the division between “instrumental classes” (126) and “ruling classes and intellectuals” (126). Because of the increasing industrialisation of both rural and urban centres, there emerged what Gramsci calls the “technical” (“Organisation” 126) school, which developed to respond to the need of the “growing need for a new type of urban intellectual” (“Organisation” 126). The “professional but not manual” (Gramsci, “Organisation” 126) knowledge disseminated by the technical school somehow challenged the “very principle of the concrete orientation of general culture based on the Greco-Roman tradition” (Gramsci, “Organisation” 126). Since Gramsci’s concern lay in the perpetuation of social differences fostered by such diversification of knowledge, in order to compensate for the increasingly fragmentary nature of the pedagogical system he formulated the idea of a

single, humanistic, formative, primary school of general culture which will correctly balance the development of ability for manual (technical, industrial) work with the development of ability for intellectual work. (“Organisation” 127)

The fundamental vision driving Gramsci’s project of a unitary school was, as Guillory justly points out, that of providing all members of society with the knowledge necessary to participate in the political life of the State (*Cultural Capital* 49) in order to counteract the effects of a hegemonic system.

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<sup>55</sup> Henceforth, “Organisation”.

Guillory uses this aspect of Gramsci's postulation of a unitary school as a lens through which to analyse the pedagogical system of the United States and its "very limited 'democratization'" (*Cultural Capital* 49). Whereas Gramsci envisioned a common, humanistic knowledge was to be taught "at primary or secondary level" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 49), in the case of the U.S. school system Guillory registers a "displacement upwards" (*Cultural Capital* 49):

Given the social pressure to enforce vocational tracking at the lower levels of the educational system, and to dispense more highly valued professional and technical knowledge at the university level, the slot into which the humanities curriculum is confined is very small—as we know, the first two years of college study. (*Cultural Capital* 49)

The core curriculum based on a "set list of 'great works'" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 49) and taught in the first two years of college is, from this perspective, "remedial" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 49), for it is designed to provide the humanistic knowledge that the lower levels of education do not disseminate and that is not included in the specialised programs of the university. In pointing out the remedial function of the college curriculum, Guillory can engage in a critique of current debates that opens by challenging the understanding of the curriculum and the university as means through which produce both a "*national* culture" and a "national multiculturalist ethos" (*Cultural Capital* 50, emphasis original).

Guillory's 'Gramscian reconsideration' of the debate mirrors his desire to shift the attention of the current debate from the problem of inclusion and exclusion of specific works in the undergraduate curriculum to the "social effects...produced by the knowledges disseminated in the university, and by the manner of their dissemination" (*Cultural Capital* 50). Thus, he continues, "a necessary objective of a Gramscian reconsideration of the curriculum debate would...be the rearticulation of

that debate in the context of the educational system *as a system*” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 50). Once this context is established, Guillory can present his own reading of the debate:

...the constraints upon the university curriculum at its present moment and in its present form account for the fact that the project of a core curriculum is so easily annexed to a socially regressive agenda. Time is one such constraint, since it intensifies the effect of deracination to the point of reducing the study of ‘great works’ to a shallow rehearsal of contextless ideas; such ‘ideas’ turn out unsurprisingly to be nothing more than the clichés of right-wing ideology. It has been all too easy as a consequence for the left/liberal professoriate to identify the only respectable adversarial stance with opposition to a core curriculum. The institutionalisation between canonical and noncanonical works thus emerges as the necessary response to any attempt to reinstitute an exclusively traditional curriculum. As an expression of the same culturalist politics which confuses school culture with culture in general, this adversarial position unfortunately also deprives the teaching of canonical works of an adequate progressive rationale. (*Cultural Capital* 50).

Guillory’s solution to the constraining factors limiting the processes of curricular reformation is to envision an “integrated curriculum” (*Cultural Capital* 51) based on the “recognition that a syllabus of study always enacts a negotiation between *historical* works and *modern* works” (*Cultural Capital* 51, emphasis original). The dualistic opposition between canonical and noncanonical works would be substituted by the understanding of changes in the curriculum as the natural consequence of the process of evolution of the body of works taught in the school.

The inevitable loss of older works in any humanities curriculum...is the result...of the *absolute* accumulation of cultural works. The reactionary defense of the traditional ‘canon’ thus betrays itself as ignorant of the cultural history sedimented in the very syllabus it desires to fix. On the other hand it should no longer be necessary to present certain other works, ‘noncanonical’ works, as intrinsically opposed to hegemonic principle of canonicity, as this is likewise to forget the history sedimented in any syllabus of study. (*Cultural Capital* 51, emphasis original)

Guillory maintains that to embrace this perspective would mean to “repudiate the practice of fetishizing the curriculum” (*Cultural Capital* 51) and to interpret it as a



“means of providing *access* to cultural works, both historical and modern” (*Cultural Capital* 51, emphasis original), instead of considering it as reproducing “a given culture, hegemonic or anti-hegemonic, through [its] *content*” (*Cultural Capital* 52, emphasis original). As he explains,

to contend otherwise is to commit to the notion that some works are intrinsically canonical, simply expressive of the dominant ideology, and other works are intrinsically noncanonical, utterly unassimilable to hegemonic culture. If that were true, what would the struggle to legitimize new works as objects of study be *for*? Hegemony, in Gramsci’s sense, is to be fought for; it is something that is continually won and lost by struggles which take place at the specific sites of social practice. (*Cultural Capital* 51-52, emphasis original)

Guillory’s objective is to challenge a pedagogical system that both validates and participates in the perpetuation of hegemony, also by means of the content of its curriculum. His postulation of an integrated curriculum composed of historical and modern works therefore is an attempt at circumventing the nomological constrictions inherent to a more classical conception of the curriculum as composed of canonical works. An integrated curriculum would be constituted of cultural works both “*important and significant*” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 52, emphasis original) because of their condition as historical documents that the school has to teach by force of “social obligation” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 52). The interpretation of canonical works as embodying “hegemonic values” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 53) would therefore be replaced by the acknowledgement of their significance as historical cultural works.

However, by inviting teachers to “disabuse” (*Cultural Capital* 52) themselves and their students from the idea that “canonical and noncanonical syllabi have natural constituencies, the members of dominant or subordinate cultures respectively” (*Cultural Capital* 52), Guillory’s reconsideration of curricular debates slightly

departs from its Gramscian inspiration and indirectly engages with some ambiguities present in Gramsci's writings on the school.

### 1.2.1. Gramsci's 'Conservatism'

Gramsci's project for the unitary school was outlined as a progressive, counter-hegemonic response to the tripartite educational system established in Italy by the Fascist government through the Gentile reformation of 1923. As Borg and Mayo explain, "the emphasis throughout Gramsci's writings is on ethical agency" (91) and his writings on the school reflect this concern inasmuch as they reflect on the "means whereby working-class children can gain access to the 'cultural baggage', which he felt they needed in order not to remain on the periphery of political life" (93). Gramsci sought to exploit specific qualities of the knowledge that had shaped the Italian ruling class and to use it as a means for the empowerment of the working class (Borg and Mayo 97). In particular, he observed how the old curriculum could both provide disinterested knowledge and instil in pupils a sense of rigor and discipline through the teaching of Greek and Latin. He wrote in "In Search of the Educational Principle":

In the old school the grammatical study of Latin and Greek, together with the study of their respective literatures and political histories, was an educational principle—for the humanistic ideal, symbolised by Athens and Rome, was diffused throughout society, and was an essential element of national life and culture. Even the mechanical character of the study of grammar was enlivened by this cultural perspective. Individual facts were not learnt for an immediate practical or professional end. The end seemed disinterested, because the real interest was the interior development of personality, the formation of character by means of the absorption and assimilation of the whole cultural past of modern European civilisation. Pupils did not learn Latin and Greek in order to speak them...They learnt them in order to know at first hand the civilisation of Greece and of Rome—a civilisation that was a

necessary precondition of our modern civilisation: in other words, they learnt them in order to be themselves and know themselves consciously. (37)

If, on the one hand, Gramsci proposes a systemic reform aimed at counteracting the sustenance of class-division implied in the Gentile reformation, on the other he seemed to praise the qualities of the old school,<sup>56</sup> which he maintained worked well to enforce in the pupils a sense of academic rigor and which provided the means for them to grow into themselves as modern, emancipated individuals, aware of their past and of their potential for future action. As Borg and Mayo observe, the piece on education has “excited” (96) a number of scholars by seemingly presenting a conservative approach to education. Some scholars have read Gramsci’s “obsession with discipline and rigor, and his insistence on working-class children’s exposure to disinterested knowledge ‘as was intended by the ancients and more recently by the men of the Renaissance’...” (Borg, Buttigieg and Mayo 12) as a slippage into conservatism.<sup>57</sup> Others, like Borg and Mayo, read this aspect of Gramsci’s writings as an attempt at “cracking the code” (98), thus reinforcing his interpretation of education as a form of empowerment” (96):

...the piece on education strikes us as constituting an attempt to explore what the ‘old school’...offered the ruling class ...in terms of producing its own intellectuals. Are there elements of this school that can prove beneficial for a class or group aspiring to power? Does a new group coming into power require a complete overhaul of the educational system? Should the dominant established culture be ignored—a complete break with bourgeois culture, as some would have it? (98)

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<sup>56</sup> With ‘old school’ I mean the elementary school as it was defined by the Casati act (1859), before the Gentile Reformation in 1923. See Borg and Mayo, 92 and Borg, Buttigieg and Mayo, 12.

<sup>57</sup> Harold Entwistle in *Antonio Gramsci: Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics* offers a detailed insight on the conservative traits of Gramsci’s writings on the school. London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1979. Further commentary on the subject can be found in G.B. Senese’s “Warnings on Resistance and the Language of Possibility: Gramsci and a Pedagogy from the Surreal” in *Education Theory* 41.1 (1991): 13-22.

Guillory's answer to these questions is, as we have seen earlier, to break with the existing system, to abandon the way in which the 'dominant established culture' conceives of the role of the core curriculum. In this respect, Guillory's project of reformation shows its more radical side, which is finally disclosed in the conclusion of *Cultural Capital*, where he envisions an ideal, fully reformed pedagogical system defined by universal access, a plan which he presents as a "thought experiment" (340) in the closing paragraphs of *Cultural Capital* and which points to the breadth of *Cultural Capital*'s reformatory ambitions.

### 1.3 Renegotiating the Terms

The substitution of terms suggested by Guillory specifically aimed at bringing forward an alternative way of looking at literary canons by removing the issue of canonicity from the dualistic framework of exclusion and inclusion in which it had been secluded. By stressing the importance of breaking away from representation as the driving force underpinning canonical selection, Guillory's argument digs into the possibility of looking at literary canons without charging them – as liberal pluralism advocated – with the responsibility of representing society and its structures. According to liberal pluralist doctrine, individuals are conceived as members of groups with conflicting interests. Since each group is characterised by its own social practices, beliefs and values, the State is invested with the role of mediating between groups so to grant social harmony and equal opportunities for each group. During the Culture Wars, this model of interpretation of society was brought from the political sphere to the cultural one; as a consequence, universities became the "new venue of representation" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 6) for competing social groups: an idea with which Guillory wrestles throughout the first part of *Cultural Capital*.

The liberal pluralistic appropriation of the syllabus as a “demographic oversight” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 7) entailed a new focus on the figure of the author, in particular on his or her social identity. Guillory defines this phenomenon as a return of the author “in the critique of the canon, not as the genius, but as the representative of a social identity” (*Cultural Capital* 10):

The sense in which a canonical author represents a dominant social group, or a noncanonical author a socially defined minority, is continuous with the sense in which the work is perceived to be immediately expressive of the author’s *experience* as a representative member of some social group. The primacy of the social identity of the author in the pluralist critique of the canon means that the revaluation of works in this basis will inevitably seek its ground in the author’s experience, conceived as the experience of a marginalized race, class or gender identity. (*Cultural Capital* 10, emphasis original)

After having been “called into question” by “the first wave of theory” (*Cultural Capital* 10), the notion of the author returned, in race and gender-specific syllabuses, teaching anthologies, and research programs that reclaimed a place in the canon for under-represented cultural minorities. However, Guillory observes that in order for an author to be fully representative of a social group one must look at his or her identity as completely defined by the experience of belonging to the social group he or she is supposed to represent. Such perfect adherence to a sociological specimen is quite – if not completely – unattainable, and Guillory maintains this is where liberal critique shows one of its major vulnerabilities (*Cultural Capital* 12-14):

By defining canonicity as determined by the social identity of the author, the current critique of the canon both discovers, and misrepresents, the obvious fact that the older the literature, the less likely it will be that texts by socially defined minorities exist in sufficient numbers to produce a ‘representative’ canon. Yet the historical reasons for this fact are insufficiently acknowledged for their theoretical and practical implications. The reasons more women authors, for example, are not represented in older literatures is not primarily that their works were routinely excluded by invidious or prejudicial standards of evaluation, ‘excluded’ as a consequence of their social identity as women. The historical reason is that, with few exceptions before the eighteenth

century, women were routinely excluded from *access to literacy*, or were proscribed from composition or publication in the genres considered to be serious rather than ephemeral. (*Cultural Capital* 15, emphasis original)

Further, “the existence of canonical women authors, even before the revisionary movement of the last decade, invalidates in strictly logical terms the category of gender as a *general* criterion of exclusion” (17, emphasis original). What academia has done to rediscover and bring to light the work of several female authors otherwise destined to remain unknown has been to integrate its programme with research projects specifically designed to fill a specific gap in the humanities. In this perspective, Guillory’s choice of quoting the first line of F.R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition* (1948) to illustrate his argument about the questionability of gender and race as conditions for canonicity is particularly effective. Leavis’s inclusion of two women in his far-from-inclusive novelistic canon proves that gender alone cannot be interpreted as a determining criterion of the canonicity of a work or of an author. To the categories of race and gender, Guillory juxtaposed that of class, and uses D.H. Lawrence as an example to illustrate the systematic repression of the category of class from the canon debate.

The name of ‘D.H. Lawrence’ ... may signify in the discourse of canonical critique a white author or a European author, but it does not usually signify a writer whose origins are working-class. Within the discourse of liberal pluralism...the category of class in the invocation of race/class/gender is likely to remain merely empty. (14)

The same rule applies to canon revisions: 1980s and 90s revisionary agenda is historically embedded with liberal pluralistic politics of inclusion as a reaction to the perceived exclusion of cultural minorities from the cultural sphere. In this sense, liberal pluralist critique of the canon seems to have taken off from a base as narrow as that of the conservatism it attempted to oppose. Guillory observed at length this

paradoxical closeness between canon opponents and supporters by underscoring an existing set of shared theoretical assumptions regarding the idea of value in relation to canonical texts and to the process of canon formation.

The first assumption Guillory focuses on is that “*canonical texts are the repositories of cultural values*” (*Cultural Capital* 22, emphasis original). Guillory maintains that canonical works do not transmit, nor perpetuate a given culture by means of their content or of their meaning. In other words, the value of a work does not depend on the values expressed in it. Second, Guillory stresses how both supporters and opponents of the canon endorsed the idea that “*the selection of texts is the selection of values*” (*Cultural Capital* 23, emphasis original). Guillory points out that the “equation of text-selection with value-selection” (*Cultural Capital* 25) determined a return to moralism in that the endorsement of moral values – or their subversion – in literary works has often constituted the criterion reinforcing their canonical status. From this perspective, “the critique of the canon moves quickly to reassert absolute notions of good and evil; the overturning of Kant’s autonomous aesthetic is brought up short before Nietzsche’s critique of morality” (*Cultural Capital* 25). The conflict between autonomous and moral judgment is restated as in the third assumption listed by Guillory: “*value must be either intrinsic or extrinsic to the work*” (*Cultural Capital* 26, emphasis original). The opposition between intrinsic and extrinsic value constituted a fertile ground for the controversy between canon supporters and opponents to thrive. While the intrinsic value of a work appeals to the work’s transcendental properties, whose determination is obtained only by yielding to the idea of universal reception, a given subject or a community of readers contingently determines its extrinsic value. The opposition between intrinsic and

extrinsic value lends itself to a parallelism with the politics of exclusion and inclusion brought forward by liberal pluralistic critique. Guillory's principal point here is that no act of judgement can be effective in any way if it is not activated in an institutional context. In this perspective, to approach the process of canon formation by focusing on either the intrinsic or extrinsic canonicity of a work becomes irrelevant if the circumstances of its institutionalisation are not taken into account. As he explains:

...there can be no general theory of canon formation that would predict or account for the canonization of any particular work, without specifying first the unique historical conditions of that work's production and reception. Neither the social identity of the author nor the work's proclaimed or tacit ideological messages definitively explain canonical status... If the literary canon has historically been capable of assimilating enormously heterogeneous productions, that is because the ideological integration of these works has always been the task of the school, not of works themselves. (*Cultural Capital* 85)

These premises become altogether clearer in the first case study Guillory presents in *Cultural Capital*, in which he focuses on the conditions that determined the canonicity of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard" (1751).

## 2 Canonical "Elegy"

"As soon as we understand canonicity as a form of cultural capital", maintains Guillory,

we recognize that whatever agreeable messages may have been derived from the poem by its initial readers (and these messages were by no means unambiguous), it also circulated as capital in at least two senses: ...as a *property*...and, second, as *linguistic capital*... There is much evidence to suggest that Gray's *Elegy* accrued enormous capital of the latter sort, since it rapidly established itself in the school system as a perfect poem for introducing schoolchildren to the study of English literature. Of what does this perfection consist? Not ... primarily or only its perceived ideology, for this ideology does not operate independently for other more 'formal' aspects



of the poem. It is rather in the relation between what the poem means and what it formally embodies that we may understand its canonical position. (*Cultural Capital* 86, emphasis original)

Guillory argues that Gray's "Elegy"'s canonical status depended on the specific social and institutional context of the poem's production and reception.

To explain the poem's canonical position, he identifies three different matrixes: *compositional*, *generic* and *linguistic*. The "*compositional matrix*" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 87, emphasis original) refers to the poem's intertextuality and to Gray's habit of making use of books of commonplaces as a source of inspiration. The immediacy of the poem's accessibility relied on a set of clichés strictly related to, and originated by, the cultural framework in which the poem was composed. The poem was thus received on a large scale because of the clichés it presented, which contributed to establish a connection with the readers, regardless of their socio-economical background. It is in this sense, then, that the commonplace book becomes the compositional matrix underpinning the "Elegy". Guillory reads the sententiousness of the poem, that is, ... as the key-factor that determined its early institutionalisation in the school. Once the function of commonplaces is understood as that of reiterating a set of truths about human experience accumulated by a certain culture, a text like the "Elegy", whose composition is based on the reiteration of these truths through the definition of locodescriptive poetic images, comes to constitute a suitable tool to support the school in the diffusion of its bourgeois pedagogical agenda.

The "*generic matrix*" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 89, emphasis original) of the poem, on the other hand, is related to the "larger historical conjuncture, which sees the emergence of 'landscape' as a value in cultural-aesthetic domain," (Guillory,

*Cultural Capital* 89). To explain this point, Guillory refers to Thomson's "Seasons" (1730), a composition in which the descriptions of the landscape contribute to present the reader with a wider image of harmonic social order. In Guillory's interpretation, the diffusion of the landscape topos is strictly connected with the doubling of the commonplace and its "agenda of persuasion" (*Cultural Capital* 90) and contributes to the development of the idea of national literature.

Thus, in Guillory's analysis, the canonicity of the "Elegy" depends on the appropriation of the poem by the school as a pedagogical tool that would instil in the pupil a sense of belonging to a geopolitical culture by exposing him or her to familiar images and shared impressions of human experience. This "evocation of the 'common'" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 90), of belonging to a reality shared by many also determines the *linguistic matrix* (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 90, emphasis original) of the "Elegy" and of its function within the pedagogical system. Guillory explains this by looking at Samuel Johnson's famous praise of the "Elegy" in his "Life of Gray":

In the character of his Elegy, I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning must finally be decided all claim to poetical honours. The Church-Yard abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. The four stanzas beginning 'Yet e'en these bones' are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here persuades himself that he has always felt them. Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame, and useless to praise him. (Johnson 184)

As Roger Lonsdale wrote in the "Introduction" to the 2006 edition of Johnson's *Lives*, in his appreciation of the "Elegy" Johnson praises "...[the fusion] of the 'natural' and the 'new' which great poetry always offers, and finally resign[s] his learning and authority in deference to both the poet and the reader" (164).

It is specifically with this aspect of Johnson's commentary that Guillory takes issue, as he points out Johnson's lack of consideration for the part of the population that could not read (*Cultural Capital* 91), thus turning his reference to "every mind" to the expression of an imaginary social uniformity:

The claim to a 'common sense' embraces everyone in the same way that everyone is embraced by a mortal fate. The instancing of a universal fate is the ground of a claim to a universal truth that does not even allow of an 'original' thought unless that thought can be experienced at the same time as 'always felt'. (*Cultural Capital* 91)

Thus, the 'always felt' notions praised by Johnson lose their validity as common truths and become "nothing but banalities" (*Cultural Capital* 91) whose force is "expressed in a specific linguistic form" (*Cultural Capital* 91), which Guillory defines as "*systematic linguistic normalization of quotation*" (*Cultural Capital* 92, emphasis original). This compositional method entails that previous works of literature are unified in the "Elegy" through the cohesive force of its language, which mediates the transmission of common truths in a common language, that is, mid-eighteenth century's Standard English:

The cento of quotable quotations which *is* the poem...generates a reception scenario characterised by the reader's pleased recognition that 'this is my truth', while at the same time concealing the fact that this pleasure is founded upon the subliminal recognition that 'this is my language'. (*Cultural Capital* 92, emphasis original)

Guillory further clarifies this point by noticing that, although these conditions of reception generate a narcissistic pleasure in the reader, this pleasure is not derived from the reader's recognition of his or her individuality but it arises in the reader's acknowledgement of the patrimony he or she shares with the writer – that is – their common language.

Guillory expands his analysis beyond the language of the poem and stresses how its themes can illuminate its relationship with the social and cultural dynamics of its creation. In particular, he focuses on the theme of fulfilment of potential, famously portrayed in the “Elegy” with the image of the “gem”. However, instead of focussing on the way in which the poem speaks about “the social inequality of the class structure” (*Cultural Capital* 93), Guillory’s reading wants to show “...what the class structure signifies in the poem” (*Cultural Capital* 93). Guillory observes how the poem symptomatically registers the bourgeois frustration towards the politics of repression of social mobility set in place, particularly through the restriction of the access to the school, by “...eighteenth-century guardians of class structure...” as expression of their worries about “...mobilizing and possibly destabilizing effects of education...” (*Cultural Capital* 95):

Only those in possession of some capital are in a position to acquire the knowledge that in turn signifies the at once attractive and dangerous possibility of upward mobility, even if this mobility is essentially enacted in the realm of the imaginary, as the imitation of upper-class behavior [sic] or educated manners, that is, as social *emulation*. (*Cultural Capital* 95-96, emphasis original)

For this reason, Guillory explains, there emerged a series of cultural institutions that “...traverse[d] the market, the class structure, and literary discourses” (*Cultural Capital* 96), such as “...for-profit grammar schools and vocational academies designed specifically for commercial classes” (*Cultural Capital* 96). Classical literature and languages in these schools were taught also because of their symbolic value, thus fostering their cultural capital through the imitation of the schools of the aristocracy, as a sign of “the bourgeois embrace of aristocratic culture” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 96). The reflections on language that Guillory addresses earlier in

*Cultural Capital* assume, within this context, a clearer meaning as he explains that emulation extended itself onto linguistic knowledge as a sign of cultural refinement. Guillory explains that emulation towards the type of education imparted by the school of the aristocracy reflected in the ambivalent mission that came to define the type of curriculum offered in the vocational academies, which disseminated commercial knowledge in response to the “utilitarian” (*Cultural Capital* 96) needs of the bourgeoisie. These innovations in the curriculum determined not only the reinforcement of the symbolic value of classical languages as a type of knowledge specific of the nobility, but also the instalment “in the ‘middling’ and commercial classes, as the upwardly mobile classes” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 97) of a “linguistic ambivalence which takes the form of suspicion toward the classical languages as useless knowledge, and envy of the social distinction they represent”(Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 97), which was then “resolved with the entry of vernacular literature into the new, middle-class schools” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 97). Thus, Guillory argues, it is in the vernacular that the bourgeoisie comes to identify itself as a cohesive community.

These complex social and cultural dynamics underpin Guillory’s reading of the “Elegy” as the result of the synergy of the linguistic, compositional and generic matrixes observed earlier. Together, they determine the “complex effect by which it is possible for readers to identify with either the state of privilege or the state of deprivation, to indulge in the pathos of sympathy or the ethos of resentment” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 102-103), by means of which Guillory indicates not “the reason for the poem’s ‘canonization’, but the fact that it cannot be other than it is, that

its conditions of production are such that it must occupy this place and no other in the history of literary production and reception” (*Cultural Capital* 103).

The case of “The Elegy”’s canonicity clearly reflects the revision of terms that Guillory elaborates in more general terms earlier in *Cultural Capital*. In particular, it is possible to observe the extent to which his approach removes itself from the debates on the canon and refers to canonicity and canon formation as the effects of specific historical conditions of literary production and reception to be registered within the school. This becomes particularly evident if we compare the perspective Guillory takes in regard to the eighteenth century as a crucial moment in the history of canon formation with that of other scholars, such as Trevor Ross and Jonathan Kramnick.

Like Guillory’s, both Ross’s and Kramnick’s approaches rely on Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital. Unlike Guillory’s, however, Ross’s and Kramnick’s studies observe eighteenth-century canon formation as the product of the activation of different agencies that, as we have seen a few paragraphs ago, Guillory defines as “...travers[ing] the market, the class structure, and literary discourse” (*Cultural Capital* 96). Instead of indicating, as Guillory does, the school as the sole agency responsible for the institutionalisation of literature, both Kramnick and Ross try to provide a comprehensive portrait of the complex net of social, cultural, economic and historical interactions at stake in the early stages of formation of the English canon. Central to both their works is, for instance, the liberalisation of the press from copyright laws in 1774. Ross and Kramnick respectively noticed how not only it boosted the diffusion of canonical works and the democratising effect on national readership, but it also contributed to reinforce the figure of the author as a ‘genius’

that showed so important in early outlining of the canonicity of particular works, as happens for instance with Shakespeare.

Both Ross and Kramnick list the numerous factors that determined the way in which canonical works were being interpreted in the eighteenth century: the quick and sudden development of the book trade is one of these changes, together with the increasing interest of critics in England's literary tradition and the birth of the periodical as a cultural source of reference and the gradual spread of literacy. The most evident effect of mass literary distribution and the lowering of prices of classical works of literature was that it allowed people of lower social classes to get hold of masterpieces otherwise destined to remain an exclusive privilege of the lucky minority who could previously afford them.

At the same time, critics increasingly turned their attention to the nation's literary heritage. As ancient authors became the standard through which modern authors were to be judged, the eighteenth century became a fruitful period in which the development of theoretical speculations on literary value and judgement ought to be traced. In *Making The English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past 1700-1770*, Kramnick explains how the discourse on literary tradition was brought to a deeper level of analysis by the increasingly professionalised figure of the critic:

Critics weighed the value of older works and pondered their relation to modern writing. They also contemplated the character of modern readers, and examined how the education, class, and gender of the reading audience had changed over time. The paradoxical establishment of tradition out of a sense of modernity happened when literary culture was seen to be under considerable duress, even in crisis. Whereas the new literary and social world was unpredictable, and readers and genres no longer conformed to a settled pattern, works written before the onset of cultural modernity exhibited a contrasting splendor. (1)

Kramnick points out how the quick changes in the social and cultural background encouraged a pursuit of antiquity that endeavoured to compensate for the uncertainty of modernity. The vernacular canon was, from this perspective, a rational and systematic lens through which modern literary productions could be either rejected or absorbed in the tradition. In this process, mass reproduction of literary classics played a decisive role.

The relation between print and the establishment of literary tradition is thoroughly analysed by Trevor Ross in *The Making of the English Literary Canon*. In keeping with Kramnick, Ross maintains that the English canon was generated by a shift between antiquity and modernity, but he dates the birth of the canon towards the end of the seventeenth century, in correspondence with the passage from Renaissance to Enlightenment. According to Ross, the birth of the canon was a consequence of the conversion of the Renaissance's rhetorical tradition into that of the Enlightenment, and of the subsequent rise of what he defines as "objectivist culture" (*The Making of The English Literary Canon* 7). Most importantly, it should be read as the moment in which interpreters took over the intellectual discourse about literature: by progressively engaging in the debate on artistic evaluation and therefore on the preservation of artistic tradition, critics started to become more and more important. The professionalization of the critic and the consequent development of new media through which intellectuals could engage in constructive and structured debates are key factors in the increasing interest in the evaluation of literature:

...the appearance of literary histories, interpretive commentaries, and evaluative hierarchies reflected a cultural situation in which the function of canon-formation, of evaluating and reproducing works, had been assumed by an increasingly professionalized critical discourse. This cultural situation, in turn, reflected a vast cognitive shift in society, wherein it could suddenly seem imperative to objectify value through such discourses of 'ordering',



categorisation, and historicization. (Ross, *The Making of The English Literary Canon* 248)

In “The Emergence of ‘Literature’: Making and Reading the English Canon in the Eighteenth Century” (1996) Ross observes the role that print assumed in the promulgation of Literature and how it came to bear on the process of canon formation. He indicates 22 February 1774 as the specific date of birth of ‘Literature’. On this day:

the House of Lords elected to defeat the notion of ‘perpetual copyright’ so long claimed by the London bookselling monopoly over works of the English canon. The Lords has been persuaded by the novel idea that the canon ought to be fully accessible in multiple editions to general readers, for their benefit and pleasure. The moment was highly symbolic, for it marked the official recognition of the needs and desires of the reader. (“The Emergence of Literature” 410)

The publishing trade implemented the diffusion of the works of those authors whose value had been ratified by critics, commentators and – of course – publishers.

The publication of works written *by* excellent authors was also combined with the mass-production of works written *on* excellent authors. In *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (2004) William St Clair explains at length these editorial dynamics:

By 1780, the publishers of Great Britain were free, both legally and in practice, to reprint any texts they chose from the hundreds of thousands which lay outside the copyright restrictions of the 1710 statute...But which texts should they choose? In particular, which literary texts should they choose? The tradition of identifying and classifying the best writers of the past was already under way in the mid seventeenth century, when Jonson, Shakespeare, and Fletcher were enshrined as the ‘Triumvirate of Wit’, the three masters of the English drama. By the end of the seventeenth century, we also see the beginnings of a more historical, more unified, more comprehensive, and more critical approach to the nations’ past written literature, beginning with brief biographies. By the high monopoly period there were many books which summarised the lives of authors, offered descriptions of their writings, and commented on their merits. But, for readers at that time, it was one thing to know the names in the long pedigree of English literature, quite another to be able to buy or to read the works. (122-123)

As I observed earlier in this thesis, the fast diffusion of biographical works, abridgements, miscellanies and anthologies in the eighteenth century participated in the definition of a literary tradition that was deeply linked to the idealisation of authors whose texts were still quite far from becoming familiar with the readers.<sup>58</sup>

From this point of view, it is possible to observe how, by contrast, the figure of the author is almost entirely absent from Guillory's articulation of the dynamics of canon formation as cultural capital. As I observed earlier in this chapter, Guillory's critique of the role assigned to the identity of authors aims at exposing the limitations implied in the idea of representativeness of socio-political communities as key to the process of canon formation. However, going through *Cultural Capital* one clearly perceives the relative neglect of the figure of the author as integral to the cultural field in which canon formation happens.<sup>59</sup>

Whether this aspect of *Cultural Capital* marks a departure from Guillory's earlier reflections of authorship and authority in *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* (1983) needs to be established. In *Poetic Authority*, Guillory extensively reflects on the process by which Spenser and Milton established their own poetic authority while reflecting, albeit in passing, on the role of authors in the process of canon formation.

The process by which authority is acquired, by which a figure is elevated to a canon, ultimately to a life beyond life, remains largely mysterious... Canonical authors are not markedly different in this respect from their contemporary workers in the medium of power; they have only chosen a strangely durable medium, the text, which has come to signify the very assurance of an afterlife. (vii)

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<sup>58</sup> See Chapter Two, 70.

<sup>59</sup> A similar point is made by Jan Gorak, in his 1996 review of *Cultural Capital*, when he notices that "the importance of artists, so central to much of Bourdieu's work, is something Guillory barely registers" (290).

*Poetic Authority* argues that Spenser's and Milton's "claim to authority" (Guillory viii) relied on their "resistance...to writing that is not, in effect, *scriptural*" (Guillory viii, emphasis original):

Authority...makes recourse to what is ancient; but the closure of the biblical canon, while it restricts both religious and poetic possibilities, simultaneously enjoins a more extreme defense of authority than any institution undertook through the instrument of tradition. This defense, which is in its own way absolutist as 'divine right', renews the life of an ancient figure: inspiration. (viii)

While Guillory dedicates the rest of *Poetic Authority* to elucidate the transition from inspiration to imagination, and Spenser's and Milton's defense of the former, it is interesting to notice how the passages quoted above relate to issues of authority and power in relation to the canon in a way that is distinctively more explicit than the *Cultural Capital*'s. Further, whereas *Poetic Authority* approaches the development of literary history as an "interior"(Guillory, *Poetic Authority* 131) phenomenon that can "be written tropologically" (Guillory, *Poetic Authority* 131), in a way that at points refers back to Bloom's "sophistication of literary history" (Guillory, *Poetic Authority* 131),<sup>60</sup> the account of literary history and canon formation presented in *Cultural Capital* is a far more grim business, greatly determined by the superstructural motives of the pedagogical system. These two aspects are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they coexist in Guillory's theoretical *corpus* as well as in the narrative of his career as a critic, of which the year 1983 seems to be a particularly important juncture. In this year, in fact, not only did Guillory publish *Poetic Authority*, but, as I have observed while introducing the present chapter, he also joined the burgeoning dialogues on the canon with the publication of "The Ideology of Canon Formation: T.S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks" in *Critical Inquiry*'s "Canons", which was eventually

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<sup>60</sup> See for example *Poetic Authority*, 131-136.

reproduced in *Cultural Capital* as a case study, and with which I will engage in the next paragraphs.

### 3 T.S.Eliot: Canon Formation and Ideology

While the case study on Gray's "Elegy" dealt with the canonicity of a single work, Guillory addresses the problem of literary canon formation by looking at T.S. Eliot's revaluation of minor poetry during the *inter-bellum* as an example of canon revision that directly impacted the teaching of literature at university level.

Bourdieu's reflections on the concepts of doxa, heterodoxy and orthodoxy provide the theoretical framework Guillory applies to read Eliot's as an example of ideologically driven canonical revision. Guillory constructs his argument so as to convey the embedment of pedagogical practices such as those adopted by the New Critics with the unequal distribution of cultural capital/knowledge.

Central to Guillory's analysis is the relation between Eliot's revaluation of the Metaphysical poets and its bearing on following critical movements, particularly the New Criticism in the United States and the teachings of Leavis and the Leavisites in Britain. Guillory opens his analysis by noticing that the ideological differences existing between these two critical movements – "Leavis's progressive but anti-Marxist critique of modernity, the New Critics' conservative advocacy of Christian, 'agrarian' values" (*Cultural Capital* 134) – found common ground in the influence of Eliot's revisionary project through the answers it provided to the "crisis in the state of literary culture" (*Cultural Capital* 135) registered by both. The following quote summarises this point:

Eliot's suggestion that traditional criticism had been seriously mistaken in its evaluative judgements displaced the perception of the crisis into the very *form* of the canon. ... it was not any particular judgement which possessed the force of ideology, but (to use Eliot's own words) the 'whole existing order' of the literary canon. It was the form of the canon in its totality which became the vehicle of 'ideology' in critical discourse, since that totality could be made to signify either a certain perceived disorder of culture or (after the appropriate 'revaluations') an alternative, more 'ideal' order. (*Cultural Capital* 135, emphasis original)

Guillory opens his analysis by stressing the indebtedness of Eliot's revisionary movement to Matthew Arnold's cultural dogmatism. Whereas the establishment of the vernacular canon in the eighteenth century was part of a bigger project oriented towards the diffusion of literacy amongst different classes in order to neutralize "the very political ideologies which set the classes in opposition to one another" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 136), in Arnold's critical agenda the capacity of literature to "produce ideological effects *through form*" (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 136, emphasis original) is articulated as the desire for literature to become a surrogate for religion. Guillory observes how the later Eliot expanded on Arnold's project of substituting religious faith with literary sensibility, thus turning literature into a cultural phenomenon unconsciously grounded in Christianity, to be understood and experienced by means of a sensibility itself determined by the dominant position assumed by religious ideology. Guillory maintains that Eliot's aim was to transform Christian faith into what Bourdieu defines as *doxa*, that is, a set of beliefs so strongly entrenched in a society that they come to correspond to the individual's way of experiencing the world, both socially and naturally (Bourdieu qtd. in *Cultural Capital*, 137).

According to Guillory, Eliot's canonical revision was the practical outcome of his fantasy about a "reinstitution of a 'Christian society'" (*Cultural Capital* 152), a

fantasy that takes the form of ideology, thus being destined to struggle to establish itself as a dominant belief, as shown by Bourdieu. From this perspective, Guillory can read Eliot's cultural and social criticism as an ideologically driven movement aimed at imposing upon culture (and its institutions) a clergy-like mediating and pedagogical function. The New Critics and the Leavisites keenly subscribed to such agenda, minus the religious overtones, by adapting their pedagogical practices to a methodology that was solidly reliant on the progressive elitism characterising the teaching and learning of literature.

The ideological nature of Eliot's canon revision loses its centrality in Guillory as he declares that "the appearance in Eliot's criticism of a shadowy, alternative 'tradition' of minor poets has a good deal to do with the legitimation of his poetic practice, with the emergence ... of a 'modernist' poetic" (*Cultural Capital* 147).

Guillory's suggestion is that Eliot engaged in the definition of the complex set of evaluative criteria underpinning his estimation of minor poetry in order to prepare the ground which would have enabled the work of the poet T.S. Eliot to be automatically included in the canon by means of its adherence to the critical principle he himself had set for the evaluation of poetry. In fact, Guillory continues,

The status of Eliot's 'canon' (if it can be called that) corresponds exactly to the status of a minority *within* literary culture, that minority of poets and writers who can be associated with the practices of Eliot and Pound, and who are at the time Eliot's essays are written still relatively marginal to literary culture, a coterie whose work will only later come to define modernism in poetry. (*Cultural Capital* 147-148, emphasis original)

Two things should be noticed about this passage. First, the observation in brackets about the doubtful canonical nature of Eliot's choice of minor poetry, to which I will return shortly; second, that at this stage of Guillory's analysis he seems to be looking at Eliot as a sort of intermediary working to have the poetry of his

“coterie” acknowledged by means of his already established cultural position. Thus, according to this interpretation, “in order to conceptualize his break with the poetic practice of his immediate predecessors, Eliot was forced to return to the moment of ‘dissociation of sensibility’...”(Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 148). “This”, concludes Guillory, “is the meaning of his replacement of one precedent for English literary ‘tradition’ (Victorian and Edwardian poetry) with another (the Jacobean dramatists, the Metaphysical poets, Dryden)” (*Cultural Capital* 148).

This reading of Eliot’s critical project is, in my opinion, neither particularly generous, nor does it befittingly account for the bearing of Eliot’s ideological commitments onto his criticism. This becomes even clearer if we compare Guillory’s argument with Kenneth Asher’s in *T.S. Eliot and Ideology* (1995), a study aimed at showing how politics and ideology actively influenced T.S. Eliot’s criticism and the perpetuation of his legacy.

Asher illustrates the impact that a number of reactionary French intellectuals had on the young Eliot during his stay in Paris between 1910 and 1911 by particularly focusing on the figure of Charles Maurras, leader of the *Action Française*, whose strong classicism, and deep anti-Romanticism,<sup>61</sup> considerably influenced Eliot<sup>62</sup> in both his pre- and post-conversion criticism. Asher’s argument

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<sup>61</sup> “Conceived in recoil from the French Revolution and its democratic impulse, [the classical] tradition championed the old hierarchies of throne, altar and pre-romantic literary decorum. Only the economy of discriminations involved in these hierarchies, it was maintained, could restrict the free play of desires spawned by Original Sin. What was at stake was, then, was nothing less than Order, a social organization in consonance with natural law. The threats to this dispensation were democracy, capitalism, Protestantism, and especially the Romantic spirit of untrammelled individualism that enabled the others” (Asher 161).

<sup>62</sup> As Peter Ackroyd points out in his biography of T.S. Eliot (1984), “the effect of Charles Maurras...was to last a lifetime. This is the Maurras, after all, who in 1913 was described as the embodiment of three traditions – ‘classique, catholique, monarchique’. This trinity was ascribed to him in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* of March 1913 at precisely the time when Eliot was reading that magazine. Fifteen years later Eliot was to describe himself in turn as a classicist, royalist and anglo-catholic. (41)

strictly depends on the acknowledgment of such influence. By embracing Maurras's anti-Romanticism and by identifying the return to political and cultural classicism as the only valuable cure for the post-revolutionary chaos that had been investing Europe since 1789, Eliot defined his criticism according to a strongly ideological vision that was all-encompassing and bore heavily on both his criticism and poetic composition. From this perspective, Eliot's literary judgements were inherently determined by a pre-existing ideology, thus making his revaluation of the Metaphysical poets the outcome of a complex interaction between ideology and critical practice. As Asher eloquently puts it, in revising the English tradition Eliot was

imposing an *ideology* on English literature: a systematic worldview focusing on religion, politics, and literature, along with the corollary explanations for historical evolution and economics – in short, an interpretation of culture in general. To say this is to claim far more than that Eliot was an unwitting 'carrier' of ideology, a critic whose formulations might be said to support a certain societal power structure merely because he didn't question it; rather, consciously and with increasing urgency, Eliot is pushing an all-encompassing interpretation of society that has as its goal the ultimate revamping of relations along the lines of a French reactionary model. (51, emphasis original)

In Asher's reading, Eliot's evaluative tropes mirror his political and religious beliefs so that, for example, "'dissociation of sensibility'...runs parallel to the dissolution of the old monarchy, with the final poetic and political ruptures occurring simultaneously" (46). The works of the Metaphysical poets are valuable because "instances of a prelapsarian<sup>63</sup> sensibility" (Asher 46), and English literary tradition "comes to be written after a French model in which 1688 corresponds to 1789 as the date of the ejection from the Eden of authoritarian institutions"(Asher 48).

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<sup>63</sup> For further reference to the theme of the Original Sin and the Fall of Man in the critical work of T.S. Eliot, see Asher 35-59 and Ronald Schuchard's *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersection of Life and Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. 52-69.



The differences between Asher's and Guillory's arguments allow to distinguish some important aspects of the way in which ideology and canon formation are related to one another in Eliot. Ideology is seen as the driving force underpinning Eliot's critical choices, a point which helps to illuminate the sophisticated intertwining of Eliot's political agenda with his artistic vision. In Asher's organic reading, the personae of Eliot 'the critic', Eliot 'the ideologue' and Eliot 'the poet' converge in his predilection for the Metaphysical poets. In illustrating how it is indeed possible to read ideology from a canon, this point complicates Guillory's argument. Indeed, Asher shows how Eliot's ideology is not to be derived, as Guillory argues, by reading canonical works as ideological in themselves, but from the observation of the criteria applied for their selection. In Asher's interpretation of Eliot's canon revision, works achieve canonical status thanks to their formal adherence to an ideal model of poetic integrity which is determined via the establishment of a complex evaluative system whose tenets are established via ideology itself. Thus, Eliot's revaluation of minor poets is not, as Guillory maintains "the most consistent principle underlying Eliot's revisionary stance" (*Cultural Capital* 140), but it could be seen as the outcome of the systematic application to poetry of ideologically determined selective criteria.

As this chapter has sought to show, this is precisely the type of critical posture towards the process of canon formation that Guillory challenges throughout *Cultural Capital*, as he repeatedly asserts the irrelevance of judgements of value produced outside their institutional context. In this respect, the section on Eliot successfully accounts for the absorption of his canonical revision in the university through the pedagogical practices of the New Criticism and F.R. Leavis. However,

one cannot help but notice that the most evident consequence of this interpretation of Eliot's revision of the canon ironically diminishes the revision's own ideological force. The individual character of Eliot's canon formation as the result of a personal engagement with problems of tradition and poetic composition loses its ideological strength when Guillory registers its significance as linked to its absorption in the pedagogical system. This is perhaps the most telling aspect of Guillory's own politics of inclusion and exclusion in *Cultural Capital*, where the displacement of the problem of canon formation onto its institutional context seems to systematically exclude the possibility of envisioning canon formation as a practice that belongs, as Fowler suggests, to the school as much as it does to the individual critic.

## Conclusion

*Cultural Capital* assessed the ongoing debates on the canon by exposing the limitations of both conservative and liberal pluralistic approaches and by pointing out their shared set of assumptions regarding the symbolic role assigned to canonical works: in particular, it challenges the ideas that cultural values can be preserved through canonical texts, that to select texts equals the selection of values and that the value of literary work can only be read either as intrinsic or extrinsic to the works. In order to redefine the set of questions at hand, Guillory argues for a reading of the literary canon as a particular cultural capital distributed by the pedagogical system, thus indicating the problems of inclusion and exclusion of works in the canon and as ultimately ancillary to the more urgent question of access to the school where the canon in the form of cultural capital is distributed. To these general observations, Guillory adds two particularly important points regarding the process of

canonisation, which are worth restating: first, it is impossible to account for the canonicity of particular works without accounting for the historical framework of their production and reception, and second, that “neither the social identity of the author nor the work’s proclaimed or tacit ideological messages definitively explain canonical status” (Guillory, *Cultural Capital* 85). Canonisation, therefore, should be read as a result of how a particular work came to be absorbed and distributed in the institutional arena of literary culture that is the school.

By means of an analysis of its theoretical sources from which Guillory drew inspiration for *Cultural Capital*, and by observing the readings of both Gray’s *Elegy*’s canonical status and T.S.Eliot’s canon revision, I wanted to outline the basis from which to develop a reflection on Guillory’s own ideological stances, and on their influence on his reading of the ongoing debates and of his interpretation of the concept of canon.

By comparing Guillory’s argument with that of other scholars who have engaged with the birth of the English canon as a historical phenomenon, I wanted to point out how in *Cultural Capital* the role of the book trade, of the media, of the critical profession when performed outside academia are all generally dismissed by means of their correspondence with bourgeois practices of culture distribution and consumption. In this respect, Guillory’s confinement of the process of canon formation solely within the pedagogical system reveals itself as functional to his utopian project of a universally accessible university.

It is with this thought in mind that the next chapter explores the relationship between the canon and the anthology as an example of the possibility of

understanding the diffusion and the construction of literary canons as the result of a cooperative effort between different cultural institutions.

## Chapter Five

### Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*

#### Introduction

This chapter explores the relationship existing between the idea of canon and that of anthology by focusing on Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s interpretation of canon formation as anthology making. The way in which Gates interpreted the editing of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) as a canon-making enterprise is analysed so as to encompass a wider reflection on the function of anthologies in the of canons. I problematise Gates's establishment of a conceptual correspondence between canons and anthologies by examining a number of anthologies of African American literature and by showing how they worked to disseminate a 'desire' for the canon, following Barbara Benedict's insights in *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (1996).

#### 1 The *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*

Edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Nellie MacKay, the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*<sup>64</sup> was published in 1997 as a collection principally destined to be used as a textbook in undergraduate programs. From the outset, the *NAAAL* was a very successful commercial enterprise, with 30,000 copies alone sold

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<sup>64</sup> Henceforth, *NAAAL*.

in the first two weeks. The volume was collectively acclaimed as an unprecedented effort to reproduce as comprehensively as possible the Afro-American literary tradition,<sup>65</sup> as it presented much more material (120 authors) than any other anthology of African American literature had done before.

Works are grouped chronologically into seven clusters: “The Vernacular Tradition”; “The Literature of Slavery and Freedom: 1746-1865”; “Literature of the Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance: 1865-1919”; “Harlem Renaissance: 1919-1940”; “Realism, Naturalism, Modernism: 1940-1960”; “The Black Arts Movement: 1960-1970”; “Literature Since 1970”. A particularly important trait of the *NAAAL* is the particular attention paid by its editors to the role of the vernacular tradition in defining the foundations of black expression in America. As Gates and MacKay wrote in the introduction to the first edition of the *NAAAL*, if the oral traditionally precedes the written, in the African American tradition it is “never far” (xxxviii) from it. Indeed, Gates and MacKay explain how, in relation to African American cultural expressivity, the vernacular tradition keeps the written alive by nurturing it, by commenting on it, and by establishing a dialogical relationship with it (xxxviii).<sup>66</sup> In the section entitled “The Vernacular Tradition”, O’Meally describes how African American vernacular

consists of forms sacred—songs prayers and sermons – as well as secular—work songs, secular rhymes and songs, blues, jazz, and stories of many kinds. It also consists of dances, wordless musical performances, stage shows, and visual art forms of many sorts. (3)

All these forms are unified by their subversive undertone and insouciance towards

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<sup>65</sup> See for example Mason 186; Manning 133; Meehan 42; Passaro 72.

<sup>66</sup> See Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), which observes “the relation of the black vernacular tradition to the Afro-American literary tradition”(xix) while attempting to define a theory of criticism deriving from, and “inscribed within” (xix), such tradition.

the “Thou-shalt-nots” (O’Meally 3) of conventional artistic representations.

Vernacular forms are also brought together by their common African descent, which is reflected in formal aspects such as “call/response patterns of many kinds; group creation; and a percussive, often dance-beat orientation not only in musical forms but in the rhythm of a tale or rhyme” (O’Meally 4) and the rhetorical practice of *signifying*, which is based on “verbal games involving insult, competition, innuendo, parody, and other forms of loaded expression” (O’ Meally 42n1), and that lies at the core of the tropological interpretation of tradition elaborated by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988).<sup>67</sup>

The section on the vernacular tradition unfolds independently from the remaining sections of the *NAAAL* and it frames different forms of expression in which the African American oral tradition developed (‘Spirituals’, ‘Gospel’, ‘The Blues’, ‘Secular Rhymes and Songs, Ballads, And Work Songs’, ‘Jazz’, ‘Rap’, ‘Sermons’, ‘Folktales’) within chronologically ordered sub-sections. Continuity within the section is maintained through the notes that open each sub-section, which observe how different forms collectively participated in strengthening the voice of

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<sup>67</sup> See *The Signifying Monkey*, particularly pages 44-88. Gates’ theory inserts the practice of signifying in a tropological system of “formal revision, or intertextuality, within the Afro-American literary tradition” (*The Signifying Monkey* xxi); in this context, signifying (or, as Gates spells it so as to stress the difference of the use of the term ‘signification’ in white and black contexts, Signifyin(g)) is read as a trope of tropes which “turns on the play and chain of signifiers...” (*The Signifying Monkey* 52). The correlation with the role given to metalepsys in Bloom’s theory of literary revision (see Chapter Three, 89n44) is unambiguous, and promptly acknowledged by Gates (*The Signifying Monkey* 52). Signifyin(g) is a “trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes” (*The Signifying Monkey* 52), “discourse modes of figuration” (*The Signifying Monkey* 52) that are learnt within the community as “adult ritual[s]” (*The Signifying Monkey* 75), whose origins are, quite obviously, oral. The study of the relations they entertain with the literary tradition is what moves Gates’ theory. Gates positions his theory alongside that of other Western critics (he cites Vico, Burke, Nietzsche, deMan and Bloom) while reiterating the dominance of a ‘black difference’ in African American letters via the practice of Signifyin(g), as “the language of blackness encodes and names its sense of independence through a rhetorical process” (*The Signifying Monkey* 66). Thanks to the grey area in which Gates explores the idea of tradition – not entirely ‘Western’, and not entirely Black because of the adoption of traditionally ‘Western’ critical methodologies – his theory successfully manages to mediate between the two languages.

African American people in their quest for freedom and equality while reinforcing the sense of formal tradition that the section wishes to define.

Comprehensiveness and the originality and relevance of O'Mealley's section on the vernacular, were amongst the aspects of the *NAAAL* that were more positively welcomed by early reviewers,<sup>68</sup> whose commentaries range from very specific enquiries on the selection presented in the anthology<sup>69</sup> to wider reflections on the importance of the publication of the *NAAAL* as a symbolic document for the pursuit of (multi) cultural equality in America.<sup>70</sup> While readers such as Fox and Manning praised the *NAAAL* as an anthology that could strongly assert the presence of African Americans in the cultural landscape of the United States, others, such as Meehan, Mason and Passaro, were more sceptical and interpreted the symbolic status of the *NAAAL* as a fortunate result of the union of Gates's editorial ambitions with the right publishing house, W.W. Norton & Company (Meehan 44), a point which I explore at greater length later in this chapter. In the vision of these reviewers, the *NAAAL* was "both text and event" (Mason 186), a volume "whose very title signals an idea of mainstream acceptance and canonization" (Mason 186); it is the title, insists Mason, that "confers authority" (186) to the volume. While granting vast dissemination, the 'Nortonization' of African American literature was also seen by these critics as a cause for the anthology's lack of political commitment. Vince Passaro argued that Gates's public persona contributed to reinforcing the mixed feelings about the *NAAAL*. In his review, he described him as a "promotional wizard" (70) who, as "chief spokesman for such heavily institutional movement as multicultural literary

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<sup>68</sup> See Manning 133; Meehan 42; Passaro 70.

<sup>69</sup> See Manning 133; Meehan 46; Passaro 70; Fox, "Shaping an African American Canon".

<sup>70</sup> See Fox, "Shaping an African American Canon"; Manning 132-133.



studies”, was constantly engaged in a “quick-footed dance with political orthodoxy” (71). While Gates’s “... unifying sensibility” (Passaro 72) and his aesthetic “helped lend the book its tone of distant and established authority, and guided its effort to conceive of African American literature as a coherent development over the last three centuries”(Passaro 72), the *NAAAL* “remains a painfully paradoxical volume, for the politics that drive it are profoundly insufficient to honor what lies in the book or the problems those politics were once invented to address” (Passaro 75).

In short, the *NAAAL* appeared from the outset as a very ambitious project whose success was determined by various factors such as its comprehensiveness, its publisher, and Gates’s ambitions as an editor. The next paragraphs account for these aspects by looking at one particular essay written by Gates ten years before the publication of the *NAAAL*, which serves as the starting point for the observation of his position as an aspiring canon-maker.

## 2 The Canon According to Gates

In 1987, at a conference called “The Study of Afro-American Literature: an Agenda for the 1990s” organized by the Centre for the Study of Black Literature and Culture at the University of Pennsylvania, Gates announced the forthcoming publication of the first *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* in his paper, “Canon Formation, Literary History and the Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to the Told”.<sup>71</sup> Here, Gates reflects on the process of canon formation in both African American criticism and literature.

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<sup>71</sup> Henceforth “Canon-Formation”.

In the first part of the essay, Gates deals with canon formation as the definition of a tradition of criticism specific to African American discourse. He opens the section by focusing on a speech delivered in 1898 by Alexander Crummel, “a pioneering nineteenth-century pan-Africanist, statesman, and missionary” (“Canon-Formation” 15) who in 1897 founded the African Negro Academy. Gates describes how Crummel understood the acquisition of the “master’s tongue” (“Canon-Formation” 17) as “the sole path to civilization and to intellectual freedom and social equality for the black person” (“Canon-Formation” 17). Crummel’s faith in the liberating power of the English language went so far as to lead him to define the original languages spoken by the African slaves as “the speech of rude barbarian” (qtd. in Gates, “Canon-Formation” 19), languages that “lack those ideas of virtue, moral truth, and those distinctions of right and wrong with which we [i.e. the descendents of the first slaves, who have since then acquired the use of English], all our life long, have been familiar” (qtd. in Gates, “Canon-Formation” 19). According to Crummel, both “indigenous African vernacular languages” and “the neo-African vernacular” ones (Gates, “Canon-Formation” 20), which were developed in the United States, ought to be abandoned in order for black people to see their humanity validated through their acquisition of English, which elevates and “places the native man above his ignorant fellow, and gives him some dignity of civilization” (Crummel qtd. in Gates, “Canon-Formation” 28).

Gates uses Crummel’s opinions about the relationship between black people and the master’s tongue as a metaphor to illustrate the central point of the next section of his paper, aimed at clarifying “the relation between the critic of black literature and the broader, larger institution of literature” (“Canon-Formation” 20).

For African American scholars, learning the master's tongue has traditionally meant learning the "critical language" (Gates, "Canon-Formation" 20) of different critical discourses arising "from a specific site of texts within the Western tradition" (Gates, "Canon-Formation" 20). Gates indicates the institutionalisation of African American literature within the university via the creation of specific pedagogical programmes and the publication of scholarly material on African American literature ("Canon-Formation" 20) as the most evident effect of the acquisition of this knowledge by African American academics. Despite the positive outcomes of the acquisition of Western critical language, Gates wonders whether the time had come for African American critics to start thinking about developing modes of discourse that would speak with the unique voice of the black tradition. This does not mean developing a critical tradition *as opposed* to the existing one: this, Gates explains, would condemn African American criticism to "merely...serve within the academy as black signs of opposition to a political order in which we are the subjugated" ("Canon-Formation" 24). On the contrary, it means, as Gates's explains while quoting Derrida, "to speak the other's language without renouncing our own" (qtd. in "Canon-Formation" 25), to "use theories and methods insofar as they are useful to the study of our literature" ("Canon-Formation" 26) or, in Wole Soyinka's words, to co-opt the "entire properties of that language as correspondences to properties in our matrix of thought and expression" (qtd. in Gates, "Canon-Formation" 24). This aspect is as important to African American criticism as it is to African American literature, and Gates identifies it as "the challenge of black canon-formation at the present time" ("Canon-Formation" 24). While a canon of African American criticism will be defined by turning to "the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our

literatures” (Gates, “Canon-Formation” 25), the possibility of ever defining the contours of the canon of African American literature depends on the ways in which this particular tradition will be granted the “right to define itself” (Gates, “Canon-Formation” 30).

This point opens the second part of the essay, where Gates discusses “... canon-formation in the African American tradition by discussing the idea of anthology as canon-formation” (“Canon-Formation” 14). While the relationship between canon and anthology is initially presented in the form of an analogy – anthology *as* canon-formation – as the essay progresses the boundaries of this analogy weaken and the terms ‘anthology’ and ‘canon’ are used interchangeably, as synonyms. This is seen, in particular, when Gates starts to address specific anthologies: Armande Lanusse’s *Les Cenelles* (1845) is “the first attempt to define a black canon” (32); James Weldon Johnson’s *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* (1925), and V.F. Calverton’s *An Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1929) are “seminal attempts at canon-formation in the twenties”(33); Brown, Davis and Lee’s *Negro Caravan* (1941) is “a canon that was unified thematically by self-defence against racist literary conventions...” (36), while Baraka and Neal’s *Black Fire* (1968) is “...the blackest of all canons” (37). Finally, Gates introduces the upcoming *NAAAL* as “still another attempt at canon-formation” (“Canon Formation” 37).

I will shortly return to observe the implications of Gates’s analogy between the idea of canon and that of anthology. For the time being, it suffices to notice that its most immediate effect is that of framing Gates’s own editorial project with previous ‘attempts at canon-formation’, which form a narrative that is the narrative

of how African American literary tradition was defined through the anthologies that first diffused it, and which would ultimately be resolved with the publication of the *NAAAL*. In the final section of “Canon-Formation”, Gates explains:

W.W. Norton will be publishing the Norton Anthology of Afro American Literature .... Once our anthology is published, no one will ever again be able to use the unavailability of black texts as an excuse not to teach our literature. A well-marketed anthology—particularly a Norton anthology—functions in the academy to *create* a tradition, as well as to define and preserve it. A Norton anthology opens up a literary tradition as simply as opening the cover of a carefully edited and ample book. (Gates, “Canon-Formation” 37)

A point worth mentioning is the contextual transition of W.W. Norton & Company from publishing house to agency with the power of certifying and legitimating the existence of a literary tradition. The Norton anthologies’ key role in the teaching of literature(s) in English-speaking contexts has been widely acknowledged,<sup>72</sup> and Beth McCoy has observed how the ‘Nortonization’ of African American literature normalised “the physical presence of African America literature” (113) for it has given it a body that is “visually comparable with ‘classic Norton anthologies already established rather heavily in students backpacks” (111).<sup>73</sup> As Gates reiterated in the “Preface to the Second Edition”<sup>74</sup> of the *NAAAL*, the institutional power of Norton anthologies and their wide presence in the University created the conditions for his and MacKay’s anthology to gain canonical status:

...while the scores of anthologies of African American literature published since 1845 had each, in a way, made claims to canon formation, few, if any, had been widely embraced in the college curriculum. And that process of adoption for use in college courses is a necessary aspect of canon formation. (“Preface” xxx)

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<sup>72</sup> Interesting insights on the role of Norton anthologies by five of the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* have been collected in the symposium “Editing a Norton Anthology”. *College English* 66.2 (2003): 172-206.

<sup>73</sup> McCoy also observes how this process might have resulted in the loss, or in the dilution, of the political and aesthetic force of the works included in the Norton (113).

<sup>74</sup> Henceforth, “Preface”.

Another aspect marking the difference between the *NAAAL* and previous anthologies, Gates explained, was the application of qualitative, more than quantitative, criteria in the selection of texts:

In part to be as eclectic and as democratically ‘representative’ as possible, most other editors of black anthologies have tried to include as many authors and selections ... as possible, in order to preserve and ‘resurrect’ the tradition.... While we must be deeply appreciative of that approach and its results, our task will be a different one. Our task will be to bring together the ‘essential’ texts of the canon, the ‘crucially central’ authors, those whom we feel indispensable to an understanding of the shape, and shaping, of the tradition. A canon is the essence of the tradition: the connection between the texts of the canon reveals the tradition’s inherent, or veiled, logic, its internal rationale. (“Canon-Formation” 37-38)

Gates and his collaborators’ ambition was not limited to the definition of the boundaries of the tradition of African American literature, but to reach its core, its ‘essence’, the fundamental works that function as standard-bearers for the entire tradition. “Canon Formation” therefore functioned as a first announcement of this impending editorial commitment, of its breadth and ambitions.

In this respect, the establishment of a synonymic correspondence between canon and anthology is an important feature of this essay, one worth looking at more closely.

### 3 Barbara Benedict: Anthologies and the Canon

Leah Price has observed that the anthology can be understood as the canon’s “most concrete manifestation” (5). According to this definition, the anthology embodies the canon and renders it tangible; it defines its boundaries in a way that is similar to that of the school curriculum by giving it a beginning and an end and by rendering its content explicit. However, as Price explains, once anthologies are read as manifestations of the canon and the understanding of their function is “reduced to

their evaluative function” (5), criticism will be bound to occupy itself with the familiar – yet unproductive – questions about the inclusion and exclusion of authors and texts. A more productive way of thinking about the relationship between anthologies and the canon could be to think about the ways in which these two concepts interact, and the extent to which they are functional to one another.

In both Chapter Two and Chapter Four, I have pointed out how a number of studies on the origins of the English canon have engaged with anthologies and miscellanies as a means of cultural dissemination of the canon.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, Barbara Benedict’s *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (1996), explores the influence of the diffusion of anthologies and miscellanies in early modern<sup>76</sup> England on the shaping of new models of readership. More poignantly for the present research, the text also offers some original insights on the nature of the relationship between canons and anthologies.

Benedict’s argument observes the specificities that underpin and strengthen anthologies’ mediatory function in the process of canon formation. The first of such characteristics is their format: anthologies, Benedict observes, “organize literature into categories for comparison” (4), thus establishing, and relying on, the application of a hierarchic system (4). She observes how early modern anthologies imitated

...the bundles of multiple examples of genre that booksellers gathered together on the basis of their similarities, ...[thus]embody[ing] the principle of clustering together different but similar items. They thus presuppose that all their contents are alike enough to be compared, yet unlike enough to spur readerly evaluation. By beginning with a text that defines the genre and then arranging entries to emphasize contrast, these books stimulate readers to compare, judge, and thus rank the separate items. (4)

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<sup>75</sup> See Chapter Two, 70 and 70n37; and Chapter Four, 135-136.

<sup>76</sup> Benedict understands this period as going “from the Restoration to the beginning of the nineteenth century” (3).

According to Benedict, such ranking stimulated canon formation by fostering a “cultural desire” (4) for a canon. Seeing as anthologies “categorize literature by kind and quality” (Benedict 4), the notion of canon is, thus, enriched by a new level of meaning and becomes a “*consensual hierarchy of contrast and comparison, an order that extends beyond individual taste, a systematic classification of excellence established by professionals*” (Benedict 4, emphasis added).

The canon thus conceived is dialogic, a clustering of works that talk to one another, by force of their differences. A dialogue is established within the tradition by the professional figures in charge of defining the language spoken in a frame of reference where formal differences give way to the affirmation of excellence as the consensually determined common denominator between heterogeneous texts. In this respect, Benedict observes that anthologies play a pivotal role in the definition of both “the literary values that lead to a canon” (6) and the reader’s “imaginative interaction with the text” (6). With particular reference to anthologies composed towards the end of the eighteenth century, Benedict argues that a reader’s subjectivity and literary values leading to the canon are “reciprocally related” (6). In Benedict’s picture, anthologized literature exists in a vacuum; a space deprived of all contextual information in which readers are charged with the “heavy burden” of “reconstruct[ing] meanings from their own contexts” (Benedict 7). In this contextual void, “texts become dehistoricized, depoliticized, and hence ‘timeless’, immortal, or, in other words, eternally contemporary” (Benedict 7). As a consequence, anthologies “publicize and proliferate critical values” (Benedict 7) and come to play a pivotal role in the establishment, diffusion and maintenance of “cultural consensus on literary merit” (Benedict 7).



On another level, anthologies contribute to the diffusion of language by “setting up new resonances between categories” (Benedict 10): “fresh relationships” are established among “words, languages, and genres” (Benedict 10). These relationships constitute the texture of the anthology and function as the implicit background noise to the clearer, louder voices of the texts. It is in this constant talk within and amongst anthologies that “the wealth of the culture from which they draw” (Benedict 10) is celebrated.<sup>77</sup>

Another aspect on which Benedict focuses is the role taken on by prefaces in certifying the anthologies’ cultural and social value:

Later-eighteenth-century prefaces in contrast to those of the earlier period typically represent collections not as opportunistic publications but as works of social art. Addressed to critical readers, they advertise the quality of their contents and their editor; they explain these contents as examples of the finest culture, selected and censored according to refined principles at once aesthetic and moral... This editorial work redefines the contents as a more or less coherent body of work selected on consistent principles that illustrate social values. (12)

Benedict observes how anthologies were promoted by their editors as a means of the reformation of culture (12), so that they became part of a discourse which “not only advertise[d] novelty but also represent[ed] literary culture as the locus of progressive thought, the site of social change: literary values bec[a]me social values” (12).

Within this type of rhetoric, which is centred on critical authority and normativity, Benedict suggests how the ground for the formation of a canon of English literature was rendered fertile (13). At the same time, the particular relation between anthologies and their context also determined their central role in eighteenth century’s “dialectical movement of canon construction...” (Benedict 17). Together

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<sup>77</sup> Benedict observes the recurrence of the metaphorical reference to the ideas of feast, diversity and plenitude in eighteenth-century anthologies to evoke in the reader a sense of ‘cultural abundance’ and to implicitly invite her to partake of such richness.

with the de-contextualisation of texts that underpin their composition, anthologies participate in the establishment of the canon by the constant re-contextualisation of works that results from anthologies “stealing from each other” (Benedict 17), thus disseminating a core collection of literature to different audiences that, in turn, are unified by this common knowledge:

By reappearing in contexts other than their original pamphlets, these works often appear in enough contexts to lose their historical specificity of meaning and to become popularly understood as ‘universal’—a central criterion on eighteenth-century literary theory. Anthologies thus form a vital link in the transformation of particular poems from the novelties of the day to staple features in the English canon. New contexts renew the contents. (Benedict 17)

To summarize, Benedict observes how early modern anthologies contributed to the formation of the English canon through a) their format; b) by contributing to the diffusion of critical values; c) the establishment of linguistic relationships; d) by becoming instruments of social change (especially in the eighteenth century) and e) by presenting the same texts in different contexts. By defining these points of convergence between anthology making and canon formation, Benedict’s study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between these two phenomena and defines a methodological framework that could be tentatively extended to other periods in order to observe how and if the same relations can be outlined.

Gates’s treatment of anthologies of African American literature as attempts at canon formation departs from this perspective when it presents each anthology/canon as part of a closed narrative whose final act is the publication of the *NAAAL*. The establishment of a synonymic relationship between canon and anthology entails the understanding of the notion of canon as susceptible to an undetermined number of reformulations. This logic neutralises the possibility of ever achieving the formation

of what Fowler calls an “official” or “institutionalised”(98) canon.<sup>78</sup> If each anthology aims at presenting the ‘official’ canon of African American literature, the possibility of ever reaching an agreement on the core set of texts that constitute the ‘essence’, as Gates calls it, of the tradition is destined to remain only a promise. As I have shown earlier, Gates overcomes this impasse by relying on the power of the publisher to grant the diffusion and the adoption of his canon by academia. In this respect, it is fair to align Gates with other critics such as Frank Kermode and John Guillory, whose positions about the pivotal role played by the university in the institutionalisation of canons I have observed respectively in Chapters One and Four. This parallelism is further reinforced in the essay “The Master’s Pieces: On Canon Formation and the African-American Tradition”,<sup>79</sup> a revised version of “Canon-Formation” which appeared first in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* in 1990 and was published again in 1992 as part of *The Politics of Liberal Education*.<sup>80</sup> Here Gates states that:

the history of the idea of the ‘canon’ ... involves, the history of literary pedagogy and of the institution of the school. Once we understand how they arose, we no longer see literary canons as *objets trouvés* washed up on the beach of history. And we can begin to appreciate their ever-changing configuration in relation to a distinctive institutional history. (“Master’s Pieces” 109-110)

A comparison between Benedict’s and Gates’s interpretations of the role of the anthology in the process of canon formation shows that while Benedict understands the anthology as an instrument of cultural mediation, Gates sees it as a culturally mediated object. Benedict’s idea that anthologies foster a “cultural desire”

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<sup>78</sup> For Fowler’s categorisation of the notion of canon into different typologies, see Chapter One, 29.

<sup>79</sup> The same essay also appears in Gate’s collection of essays on the Culture Wars entitled *Loose Canons* (1992).

<sup>80</sup> See Chapter One, 26-27.

(4) for the canon is lost in Gates's account, where each of the anthologies/ canons he enlists becomes a self-contained canon. Benedict's interpretation of canon formation as a dialogical, dynamic process of cultural dissemination contrasts with Gates's, in which all dialogue is ultimately resolved, and silenced; in the particular case of the *NAAAL*, by the power of institutionalisation of its publishing house and of the university.

#### 4 Anthologies as Disseminators of Canonical Desire

To expose the limitations that the analogy between the notion of anthology and that of canon imposes on the understanding of the process of canon formation, in the next paragraphs I would like to revisit the tradition of anthologising African American literature outlined by Gates in "Canon-Formation" and offer a slightly different appraisal of the function of these collections for the formation of a canon of African American literature. Using the insights offered by Benedict to propose an account of the pivotal function of anthologies in defining a "cultural desire" (Benedict 4) for an African American literary canon, I consider the way in which some of these anthologies talked about the tradition they wanted to define, the critical and political stands taken by their editors and the type of texts they aimed at presenting. In doing so, I am hoping to highlight the discursive dimension that anthologies contribute to establish within literary traditions and that underpins canon formation.

The earliest anthology by African Americans, also mentioned by Gates in "Canon-Formation", was published in 1845 and constituted of 85 poems written in French by 17 creole authors (Kinnamon 461). The works gathered in this anthology,

entitled *Les Cenelles, Choix de Poesies Indigènes*,<sup>81</sup> are written in French and echo French Romanticism in both content and form. As Kinnamon explains, the authors presented in *Les Cenelles* were “totally disengaged from issues of slavery and emancipation” (461) and wrote of “love, friendship, and hedonistic pleasure...” (461) instead.<sup>82</sup> A similar collection, which on the contrary fully embraced the anti-slavery cause, was published a few years later, in 1853, with the title *Autographs for Freedom*. Published by the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, *Autographs* collected original works by African American authors alongside non-fiction pieces by some of the strongest intellectual voices of the Anti-Slavery movement, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Theodore Parker and Harriet Beecher Stowe. *Autographs* belonged to a type of publication, the gift-book, which was a favourite medium of the anti-slavery movement in the United States; probably the most famous example of this type is *The Liberty Bell*, which was published consistently between 1833 and 1858. The remarkable difference between *Autographs* and other anti-slavery gift books is, however, that it proposed to the public original literature written by black authors.<sup>83</sup> As John S. Lash pointed out in his 1947 essay “The Anthologist and the Negro Author”, the beginning of a new century was inaugurated by scholars of American literature with the publication of several collections bringing together the literary tradition of the nation (69), which was characterised by the systematic

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<sup>81</sup> Armand Lanusse, ed., *Les Cenelles: Choix de Poesies Indigenes*. (New Orleans, 1845). Further reprints and editions are noted in M. Roy Harris, "Les Cenelles: Meaning of a French Afro-American Title from New Orleans," *Revue de Louisiane/Louisiana Review*, XI (1982), 179-196. See also Johnson, Jerah. "Les Cenelles: What's in a Name?" *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, 31.4 (1990), 407-410. Johnson explains how the title of the collection has in the past served, in its mistranslations, as an index of racial self-consciousness on the authors' part.

<sup>82</sup> Gates points out that, although the content of the poems collected in *Les Cenelles* was not strictly political, the intentions of its editor were. Indeed, Armand Lanusse's "Introduction" is "a defense of poetry as an enterprise for black people" ("Canon-Formation" 32).

<sup>83</sup> See Ralph Thompson's "The Liberty Bell and Other Anti-Slavery Gift-Books". *The New England Quarterly*. 7.1 (1934): 154-168.

neglect of African American literature. Such exclusions, Lash explains, were justified by anthologists by either arguing for the unworthiness of the contribution of African American authors to National literature (70), or by appealing to what he calls the “very practical, though oftentimes convenient demands upon the anthologist” (70), who

must draw a line somewhere since his book is intended for more or less definite reading times; he must give sufficient attention to the ‘standard’ authors and their works; he must include those materials which will appeal to the greatest number of his prospective school clientele: he cannot permit questions of social justice to take precedence over literary considerations. Moreover, there is undoubtedly some objection to the rugged tones of protest which are to be found in the offerings of the Negro author and to the ‘race consciousness’ which pervades much of the Negro’s literature. (70)

When considered in the context of the present research, Lash’s remarks sound peculiarly familiar. Indeed, they seem to illustrate – point by point – the rhetorical arguments used by cultural conservatives to explain their attachment to, and control of, the canon, which I described at greater length in Chapters One and Two. Lash’s article illuminates an interesting parallelism between the talk surrounding a particularly intense period of anthology-production, the early years of the 1900s, and the discussions of the canon during the American Culture Wars, which emerged from an equally intense period of legacy-reclaiming and rediscovery of the nation’s literary roots. In this respect, subsequent efforts at establishing an independent canon of African American literature are strongly grounded into the roots of the anthologising tradition that allowed for the early diffusion of works by Black authors.

At least four anthologies of African American literature were published

between 1910 and 1921,<sup>84</sup> when James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, which Lash acclaimed as "a milestone in the progress of the Negro author" (71), was published. The unique circumstances of Johnson's anthology's publication together with the originality of its content and internal organisation explain the importance assigned to this work. Not only was *The Book of American Negro Poetry* the first anthology of African American literature to be nationally distributed; it also unabashedly made some strong points about African American literature, not as a branch of American literature, but as an independent form of expression which demanded particular forms of reception. James Weldon Johnson's anthologising enterprise reflects the beliefs of the burgeoning tradition of African American authors and thinkers who participated in the creation of the collective discourse on the relationship between culture and the advancement of Black people in American society that characterises the Harlem Renaissance (1920-1932 c.ca). At this time, intellectual activity, creative writing and political activism enlarge their boundaries as they all participate in the shaping of an African American cultural élite; the New Negro. Johnson concretely epitomized such a figure: as a creative writer he had published his first novel – *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* – in 1912; his political activism with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) reached its peak in 1920, when he was nominated secretary for the association; as an anthologist, he applied both his artistic and

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<sup>84</sup> Lash mentions Benjamin Brawley's 1910 booklet *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States*, "a popular commentary" (71) which went through several revisions before becoming a book. Despite not being an anthology *per se*, Lash explains its importance in providing "a kind of stimulation for anthological presentations of literature by Negroes" (70). It was followed in 1914 by Alice Dunbar Nelson's *Masterpieces of Negro Eloquence*, "the first genuine anthology of expression by Negroes (Lash 71) and, in 1919, by Robert Kerlin's *Voice of the Negro*, "a commentary which included excerpts from the writings of the better known Negro authors" (Lash 71).

political sensibilities to the construction of a collection that still “frames” (Gates “Canon-Formation” 27) the Harlem Renaissance as a central moment in the development of the African American tradition.

As Gates explains, “attempts at canon formation in the 1920s...defined as its goal the demonstration of the existence of the black tradition as a political defence of the racial self against racism” (“Canon-Formation” 26). Against the backdrop of the intense intellectual and political labour that characterizes this period, the anthologies published during the Harlem Renaissance celebrate the rise of a new generation of authors and of a strong African American literary voice. The collection *The New Negro* (1925) is one example worth looking at more closely.

#### 4.1 *The New Negro*

Edited by Alain Locke, a key figure in the promotion of African American culture and art, *The New Negro* is often remembered as the manifesto of the New Negro Movement. Locke’s anthology does not attempt to reconstruct the history of African American literature so much as attempt to celebrate the new generation of authors whose work he sees as emblematic of the energy and optimism characterizing the ongoing Harlem Renaissance. Strongly focused on the progress and renewal of African American art, *The New Negro* is a collective effort to represent the spirit of the age and the willingness of the younger generations of African American intellectuals to embrace art as a means towards racial advancement. Locke’s strategy for this collective voice to come across was to shape a heterogeneous anthology in which different forms and genres participated in conveying the same message.



Formally, the collection is divided into two parts, “The Negro Renaissance” and “The New Negro in a New World”. While the latter presents a series of essays that, collectively, seek to reflect on the social and cultural status of the African American population and of its culture, the former frames the literary core section of the collection, “Negro Youth Speaks”. This part of the anthology presents works of fiction, poetry, drama and music, which Locke selected as both aesthetic and philosophic testimonials of the New Negro movement (Locke 49). Locke explains the motives that lie behind the selection of authors<sup>85</sup> included in the anthology; alongside their popularity at the time of publication (49) they all, in different ways, successfully contributed to the advancement of African American literature “sharply into stepping alignment with contemporary artistic thought, mood and style” (50). By praising their “thorough” (50) modernity, Locke is praising the African American voice that is not wearing “the uniform of the age” (50). Locke’s interpretation of these authors’ modernity is built on a radicalism that sees race as an element playing a key part in redefining African American literature. Having overcome the forefathers of African American literature, according to Locke these authors:

take their material objectively with detached artistic vision; they have no thought of their racy folk types as typical of anything but themselves or of their being taken or mistaken as racially representative. (50)

“The newer motive”, Locke concludes, is that “...being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art” (51).

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<sup>85</sup> Locke’s complete list of authors divided into genres. Fiction: Rudolph Fisher, John Matheus, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Bruce Nugent, Eric Walrond; Poetry: Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Georgia Johnson, Anne Spencer, Angelina Grimke, Lewis Alexander; Drama: Montgomery Gregory, Jessie Fauset, Willis Richardson; for Music: Claude McKay, J.A. Rogers, Gwendolyn B. Bennet, Langston Hughes.

Perhaps the most complex aspect of Locke's anthology lies in the way in which it relates to the past of African American literature, a point that Gates observes in the 1988 article, "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black".<sup>86</sup> Gates's argument looks at the idea of the New Negro and expands its significance to African American discourse beyond the historical framework of the 1920s' Renaissance. By retracing the history of the concept and determining its constant presence in the writings of and about African Americans from the late years of the nineteenth century, he exposes its nature as a "*trope of Reconstruction*" ("Trope" 131, emphasis original). Gates observes that, from its early formulations, the concept of New Negro entails the negation of the notion of the Old Negro; a notion associated with stereotypical representations of the African American community as inferior and enslaved ("Trope" 131). The following lengthy quote presents the core of Gates argument:

The 'New Negro'... was only a metaphor. The paradox of this claim is inherent in the trope itself, combining as it does a concern with time, antecedents, and heritage, on the one hand, with a concern for a cleared space, the public face of the race, on the other. The figure, moreover, combines implicitly both an eighteenth-century vision of utopia with a nineteenth-century idea of progress to form a black end-of-the-century dream of an unbroken, unhabituated, neological self—signified by the upper case in 'Negro' and the belated adjective 'New.'

A paradox of this sort of self-willed beginning is that its 'success' depends fundamentally upon self-negation, a turning away from the 'Old Negro' and the labyrinthine memory of black enslavement and toward the register of a 'New Negro', an irresistible, spontaneously generated black and sufficient self. Perhaps a more profound paradox of this form of neological utopia is that this willed, ideal state of being, of renewal, can exist only in what Michel Foucault calls 'the non-place of language,' precisely because it is only a rhetorical figure. And, just as *utopia* signifies 'no-place,' so does 'New Negro' signify a 'black person who lives at no place,' and at no time. It is a bold and audacious act of language, signifying the will to power, to dare to recreate a race by renaming it, despite the dubiousness of the venture. ("Trope" 132, emphasis original)

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<sup>86</sup> Henceforth, "Trope".

That the manifesto for the “New Negro” ought to be an anthology together with the belief that this anthology ought to be named after “‘a black person who lives at no place’ at no time” is compelling and ironic at once. Within the contextual vacuum of the anthology, a new context is formed in which the texts of New Negro intellectuals talk to each other in the new artistic dialectic they have defined for themselves. Gates’s depiction of the condition of the New Negro as devoid of spatiotemporal coordinates is mirrored in Locke’s anthologising enterprise as he tries to define a new way in which racial and literary selves are placed in relation to one another.

Gates’s observations on the New Negro’s struggle for self-beginning and self-sufficiency are evocative of the struggle for self-affirmation in the tradition undertaken by Bloom’s ephebe, which I discussed at length in Chapter Three. By means of a paradoxical reversal of values, self-negation, as well as Gates’s reference to the negation of one’s past, mirrors the process of idealization of the past which is so central in Bloom’s canonical theories. The ‘non place of language’ is thus comparable to Bloom’s Primal Scene: a suspended state of creation where one becomes original or indeed ‘New’. If, for Bloom, the past is never altogether eliminated but only overwhelmed by a new author, Gates seems to be indicating that, for Locke and the New Negroes, the only way to relate to their past is to deny it ever existed. Gates explains:

Locke’s New Negro was a poet, and it would be in the sublimity of the fine arts, and *not* in the political sphere of action or protest poetry, that white America (they thought) would at last embrace the Negro of 1925, a Negro ahistorical, a Negro who was ‘just like’ every other American, a Negro more deserving than the Old Negro because he had been reconstructed as an entity somehow ‘new’. (“Trope” 147, emphasis original)

While Bloom's poet's struggle with the past takes place in the apolitical, purely tropological tradition that Bloom describes in his theory of the anxiety of influence, Gates observes that attempts such as Locke's, to establish a similar dimension for the African American poet are problematised by the inescapable political significance of Black cultural advancement and affirmation:

In response to a seemingly rigid and fixed set of racist representations of the black as the ultimate negated 'Other'—as all that white culture feared about its 'nether' side—black writers attempted to rewrite the received text of themselves... Locke and his followers, by appropriating the trope of the New Negro from the radical black socialists then supplanting that content with their own, not only sought to *rewrite* the black term, they also sought to *rewrite* the (white) texts of themselves. If the New Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance sought to erase their received racist image in the Western imagination, they also erased their racial selves, imitating those they least resembled in demonstrating the full intellectual potential of the black mind. ("Trope" 148, emphasis original)

This gesture of racial erasure and imitation constitutes a crucial point not only in the development of African American literary tradition but also of its criticism.

Writing in 1926, when the New Negro movement was in full swing, 'Harlem's poet laureate' Langston Hughes expressed concerns similar to Gates's in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". While exposing the psychology of self-negation at play amongst the "young Negro poets" (27), Hughes' essay translates the desire of a young poet to be just "a poet—not a Negro poet" into the desire of wanting to "write like a white poet" (27) This could be read as the subconscious wish of being "...a white poet" (L. Hughes 27) which indicates that the black poet would ultimately "...like to be white" (L. Hughes 27). The racial insecurity of the young poet worried Hughes, for whom self-assurance constituted a key to poetic success as he maintained that "...no great poet has ever been afraid of being oneself" (27). The move towards whiteness, "the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of

American standardization, and the as little Negro as much American as possible” (27) is, for Hughes, “the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America” (27). While observing that the “... vogue in things Negro” (L.Hughes 29) of the 1920s contributed to strengthening the validating effect of the white gaze upon African American artistic production, he also concedes one of the positive effects to be the wider diffusion of such products amongst the Black public. In this respect, the social commitment of the new generations is that of promoting Black beauty and to make its power readable, tangible and audible in literature, visual arts and jazz music and to create a virtuous circle of recognition that would heal the plague of self-negation.

#### 4.2 *The Negro Caravan*

As the 1929 Depression marked the end of the Harlem Renaissance, it also marked a period of stasis in anthology making. The next remarkable achievement was indeed to come in 1941, with the publication of *The Negro Caravan*, possibly the most important and widely diffused anthology of African American literature *ante* Gates and MacKay’s *Norton Anthology*.

Edited by Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee, *The Negro Caravan* was published by Dryden Press, which did not hold back in promoting the volume to as wide an audience as possible.<sup>87</sup> Although its diffusion was somehow

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<sup>87</sup> Jennifer Jordan provides an exhaustive description of the marketing campaign of *The Negro Caravan*:

[Publisher] Stanley Burnshaw of The Dryden Press had high hopes for [The Negro Caravan’s] commercial success and had devised an energetic marketing campaign to sell it. Dryden Press solicited quotes for the book jacket from Louis Untermeyer, Alain Locke, Van Wyck Brooks, and Archibald MacLeish (carbon copy of letter from publishers to Brown, 1/2/42)... Burnshaw vigorously marketed the book to a Black middle-class audience, including Black fraternal organizations (Burnshaw to Davis 2/14/42). Ten thousand letters offering a 20% discount were

slowed down by the outbreak of World War II (Lester 1),<sup>88</sup> it managed, through time, to become a familiar volume in the African American community, a “legend” and a “miracle”(1), as Julius Lester emphatically defines it in his introduction to the anthology’s re-issue in 1969. Perhaps not miraculous, but certainly highly influential for future generations of African American anthologists, *The Negro Caravan* is the result of its editors’ concerted efforts to outline the African American literary tradition as extensively as possible, to counteract the stereotypical representation of African American by white authors and to establish African American literature as a “segment” (Brown, Davis and Lee, 7) of American literature. While previous anthologies had focused on specific periods and genres, Brown, Davis and Lee’s was supposed to present the journey of African American people in its entirety. Thus, the works included in *The Negro Caravan* are chronologically ordered within generic sections. For the same reason, the anthology often overlooks questions of literary merit and instead stresses the varied nature and the continuous presence of African

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sent to 5000 high school teachers, 2500 ministers, and 2500 college professors at historically Black colleges and universities (Burnshaw to Davis 11/7/42). One hundred books were shipped for review and the 150 Black newspapers in the Directory of the American Association of Papers received news releases. Fifty of those newspapers also got a favorable review by Claude Barnett of the Associated Negro Press and pictures of all three editors. Letters and free exam copies were sent to teachers of African-American literature at Black colleges (Burnshaw to Brown 1/19/42). (454-455)

It is interesting to observe how this dynamic approach to the promotion of the anthology involves several cultural institutions, all of which – as it has been pointed out in different occasions throughout this thesis – play a considerable role in the definition of literary canons. The simultaneous activation of different cultural agencies for the promotion of *The Negro Caravan*, and its subsequent consecration as an unmatched “influence in establishing the canon of African American Literature” (Kinnamon 462) lends itself to further consideration, especially against the backdrop of Guillory’s observations on the privileged function of the school in the formation of literary canons and on Bloom’s focus on both the common reader and the critic in the canonizing enterprise which I observe respectively in Chapter Four and Three. The case of *The Negro Caravan* and of its early diffusion illustrates the interaction between different cultural agencies in the establishment of new canons. *In primis*, as the premise to this chapter seeks to show, by force of its anthological nature, *The Negro Caravan* is – at the very moment of its creation – a means of representation of the African American canon; second, as an editorial product, its diffusion happens at different levels of the cultural milieu, which are targeted because of the specific function they fulfil in the validation of cultural products.

<sup>88</sup> Lester’s point is directly challenged by Jennifer Jordan (455), who points out how, regardless of the difficulties imposed by the outbreak of the war, *The Negro Caravan* managed to be widely distributed during the late 1940s and 1950s.

American writings in the wider landscape of American literature. As the editors state in the “Introduction”,

Literature by Negro authors about Negro experience is a literature in process and like all such literature (including American literature) must be considered as significant, not only because of a body of established masterpieces, but also because of the illumination it sheds upon social reality. (7)

The absence of a specific set of selective criteria for the entries in *The Negro Caravan* problematises the status of canon that Gates assigns to it. The historical work of discovery and conservation of a literary heritage replaces the need for the definition of a set of masterpieces. It is important to observe this phenomenon in order to understand the conceptual problems that arise when collections such as *The Negro Caravan* are described as canons. Indeed, since the need to define a particular literary tradition as exhaustively as possible is given priority over the selection of specific texts, *The Negro Caravan* hardly conforms to the idea of the canon as the result of an elective process of literary works. However, because it contributed in rendering part of the African American literary tradition available to a vast number of readers, *The Negro Caravan* stands as an excellent example of an anthology participating in the construction of the collective longing for the canon that Benedict describes in her study. An anthology such as *The Negro Caravan*, which distinguishes itself from previous examples in terms of exhaustiveness and critical approach, serves to inscribe African American literary past within American tradition by highlighting the influences of American and English authors on those included in the collection. Despite the “unifying bond[s]” (6) between the works presented, in particular the attempt at subverting stereotypical representations of Black people by white authors and the recurrence of racial struggle as a pivotal theme, Brown, Davis and Lee point out the absence of a “unique cultural pattern” (6) amongst African

American authors. “Negro writers”, they maintain, “have adopted the literary traditions that seemed useful for their purposes” (Brown, Davis and Lee 6):

Phillis Wheatley wrote the same high moralizing verse in the same poetic pattern as her contemporary poets in New England. While Frederick Douglass brought more personal knowledge and bitterness into his antislavery agitation than William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Parker, he is much closer to them in spirit and form than to Phillis Wheatley, his predecessor, and Booker T. Washington, his successor. Francis E.W. Harper wrote antislavery poetry in the spirit and pattern of Longfellow and Felicia Hemans; her contemporary, Whitfield, wrote of freedom in the pattern of Byron. And so it goes. Without too great imitateness, many contemporary Negro writers are closer to O. Henry, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Waldo Frank, Ernest Hemingway, and John Steinbeck than to each other. (Brown, Davis and Lee 6)

“The bonds of literary tradition”, they conclude, “seem to be stronger than race”(Brown, Davis and Lee 7). The “poetics of integrationism” (Baker 180) of the editors of *The Negro Caravan* are reflected in their isolation of a dialogical trajectory in the development of African American tradition. The hopes for America to become a pluralistic society characterized by a free-flowing stream of literary and artistic influence bears heavily on Brown, Davis and Lee’s perspective. Since “The Negro writes in the forms evolved in English and American literature” (Brown, Davis and Lee 7), “Negro literature” does not signify a literary genre with definite structural specificities, the term is billed as inaccurate; thus, “Negro writers [are] American writers, and literature by American Negroes [is] a segment of American literature” (Brown, Davis and Lee 7). Such clarifications are fundamental to prevent prejudice to intervene in future classifications of African American literature, as Brown, Davis and Lee move towards a single standard of criticism that would evaluate all literature in America:

The chief cause for objection to the term is that ‘Negro Literature’ is too easily placed by certain critics, white and Negro, in an alcove apart. The next step is a double standard of judgement, which is dangerous for the future of



Negro writers. 'A Negro novel', thought of as a separate form, is too often condoned as 'good enough for a Negro'. That Negroes in America have had a hard time, and that inside stories of Negro life often present unusual and attractive reading matter are incontrovertible facts; but when they enter literary criticism these facts do damage to both the critics and the artists.

...Negro writers...must ask that their books be judged as books, without sentimental allowances. In their own defence they must demand a single standard of criticism. (7)

As Houston Baker has observed, the tenability of this position relied mostly on those "poetics of integrationism" that strongly depended on the particular steps that were being taken at the time towards a more democratic inclusion of Black population in the public life of the country (181). As these seemingly optimistic times changed into the realization that the suppressive white response to the initiatives of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s left little hope of there being any future integration, the integrationist agenda exemplified in *The Negro Caravan* was to be replaced by the nationalistic agenda of the Black Power movement and of its cultural sibling – the Black Arts Movement.<sup>89</sup>

1968 was a particularly prolific year for African American anthologies: Abraham Chapman's *Black Voices*; Lindsay Patterson's *An Introduction to Black Literature in America from 1746 to the Present*; R. Baird Shuman's *Nine Black Poets*; *I Am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by Negro Americans* and the collection of essays *Black on Black*, both edited by by Arnold Adoff; William Couch's *New Black Playwrights*; and Margaret B. Wilkerson's *9 Plays by Black Women*, were all published in this year. Kenneth Kinnamon accounts for this overabundance of anthologies as the outcome of the sudden interest in

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<sup>89</sup> My understanding of the two movements, their reciprocal implications and their early timeline (1954- 1970) is informed by James Edward Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement. Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. Chapel Hill and London: The Univeristy of North Carolina Press, 2005.

African American studies triggered by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the demonstrations that followed it (462).

#### 4.3 *Black Fire* and *Dark Symphony*

Two anthologies published in this year worth examining more closely are *Black Fire*, edited by LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal, and *Dark Symphony*, edited by James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross. *Black Fire* is a militant collection in which, as Gates points out in “Canon-Formation”, “art and act were one” (37). *Black Fire* is indeed an anthology that aimed at exalting literary production as a means of the expression of contemporary activism and separatist politics. The foreword by Baraka introduces the authors included in the anthology as

...the founding Fathers and Mothers, of our nation... These are the wizards, the bards... the standards black men make reference to for the next thousand years. These are the sources, and the conscious striving (*jihad*) of a nation coming back to focus. (xvii)

Not only do the authors collected in *Black Fire* represent the standard, the canon, of a certain type of literary production, but they are also human, moral standards and examples to follow in the Black nation’s quest for political and social affirmation. Jones describes his and Neal’s anthology as the “source... The black man’s comfort and guide” (xvii), and invites his (Black) reader to use *Black Fire* as an instrument of personal and spiritual discovery: “Look in. Find yr self (*sic.*). Find the being, the speaker. The voice... Is you. Is the creator. Is nothing. Plus or Minus, you vehicle! We are presenting. Your various selves”(xviii).

Jones’ passionate foreword concludes by reinforcing this idea of sameness of readers and texts by describing the role of the editors as one of mediation between

readers and God: “We are presenting, from God, a tone, your own. Go on. Now.” (xviii). Jones and Neal interpret their task as anthologists as that of disseminating the works included in *Black Fire* as the testimony of the correspondence between the ‘tone of God’ and the voice of African American men and women, so that it may trigger a new awareness of one’s own Blackness as a godly condition.

*Dark Symphony*, on the other hand, presented quite a different vision. Emanuel and Gross specify in the preface that “intrinsic artistic merit” (xi) constitutes the “single criterion for inclusion” (xi) in their anthology. While acknowledging the efforts of previous editors to rescue written material by African American authors from oblivion, they also point out that “aesthetic distinctions” (x) were not a primary concern (a point that, as I have shown a few paragraphs above, had been raised by Brown, Davis and Lee in their introduction to *The Negro Caravan* and that was also reprised by Gates et al. in the *NAAAL*). The editors of *Dark Symphony* felt that the times were right to start making such distinctions (x) and to promote the need for qualitative selection within the expanding corpus of African American literature. Thus the section entitled “Major Authors,” contains the works of only four authors: Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Each author is introduced by a biographical section in which the editors justify each author’s inclusion, and account for their distinguished status. The following passage is taken from the introduction to the section dedicated to Langston Hughes:

In his ten volumes of poetry and countless separate pieces, Hughes is distinguished by his innovative genius.... His best poems...are vivid transcriptions of Negro urban folk life; they remain historically alive through their authentic use of the changing talk, moods, and habits in Negro communities. Racially sound in his stylistic responses to blues, jazz, bebop and boogie-woogie, and alert to national and international trends in his use of newspaper headlines, nightclub names, and varieties of ultramodern techniques, Hughes repays study as a truly American poet who genuinely

reflects racial inspiration. His universality as a lyric poet, on the other hand, is demonstrable in every decade of his career. (Emanuel and Gross 200)

Despite the different political and critical positions underpinning *Black Fire* and *Dark Symphony*, both anthologies manifest similar ambitions as they both aim at presenting the best that the tradition of African American literature had to offer at that point. While the main criterion for *Black Fire*'s standard of excellence is the political commitment, the Blackness, of the texts it presents, *Dark Symphony* bases its evaluation on the way in which writers combine their identity as African American writers with their 'universality'.

## Conclusion

This overview of the history of African American anthologies returns us to our point of departure with a little bit more information that might help to clarify the relationship between canons and anthologies. A closer look at some of the anthologies that Gates mentions in "Canon-Formation" alongside other relevant collections of African American literature, helped to show that, in keeping with Barbara Benedict's suggestion, anthologies facilitate the dissemination of the canon through format, the diffusion of critical values, the promotion of social change and by presenting the same texts in different contexts.

All these anthologies were driven by different ambitions: *The Book of American Negro Poetry* presented the tradition in a way that sought to define African American literature as an independent form of expression, *The New Negro* wanted to gather contemporary works that represented the spirit of novelty and enthusiasm of the New Negro movement; the popular *The Negro Caravan* did not aim at presenting

a qualitative selection of African American literature as much as it wanted to represent the tradition as extensively as possible, as a segment of the totality of American Literature; finally, *Black Fire* and *Dark Symphony* offered selections based on political and aesthetic value, and are the two anthologies amongst those observed here that more closely evoke the sense of a canon as a closed set of specifically selected works.

The context of Gates's attempt at defining a literary canon deserves some more consideration; in particular, the choice of revisiting the history of anthologising African American literature as a chronology of attempts at canon formation seems to register the heavy circulation of the term canon within the field of literary studies that I have highlighted throughout this thesis. In this respect, one wonders whether Gates's use of the term canon to define his anthologising enterprise, and the re-reading of an important part of the history of the dissemination of African American literature as attempts at canon formation could be read as a promotional statement aimed at enhancing the symbolic value of the *NAAAL* by placing it in direct dialogue with the ongoing preoccupations of part of the professoriate and the public. This speculative, and not particularly generous, thought would be in keeping with some of the critique of the *NAAAL* that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in particular with those reviews that pointed to Gates's skills as a public communicator.

Through the observation of some of the 'attempts at canon-formation' pointed out by Gates and following Benedict's insights on the functional relationship between anthologies and the canon, I wanted to call into question the understanding of anthologies as embodiments of the literary canon. When anthologies are understood as agencies of cultural mediation participating in the process of canon

formation within a specific literary tradition,<sup>90</sup> the canon is automatically projected in the future, as an idea never quite realised into an objectified form. As Christopher Kuipers explains:

the literary canon [cannot] be historically triangulated...from all the anthologies that are in print at a given moment...The anthology is a *literary storage and communication form*: a textbook, (now) a digital archive, (once) a commonplace book, (perhaps still) the poems one has memorized for pleasure. The canon, on the other hand, is not a form, but a *literary-disciplinary dynamic*: it is a field of force that is never exclusively realized by any physical form, just as metal filings align with but do not constitute a magnetic field. (51, emphasis original)

According to this line of argument, the canon can only be conceived in thought and not in any material manifestation. Benedict's observation that anthologies foster a 'desire' for the canon is, from this perspective, a poignant description of the longing for an object that is always one step too far and is confined, as Guillory puts it, to the "imaginary" (*Cultural Capital* 30). Thus, Gates's interpretation of the *NAAAL* as the anthology that would "finally" provide African American literature with its own canon should not be dismissed as a simple promotional statement. Rather, it should be considered as yet another movement in the perpetual quest for what Charles Altieri calls an 'idea and ideal', of what the core of literary tradition would be like should one ever be given the privilege to behold it.

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<sup>90</sup> This particular aspect has not been reflected on at length by American scholars, whose attention has been more dedicated to the pedagogical function of anthologies in Academia. See for instance the special issue of *Symplokē*, 8.1/2 "Anthologies" (2000) as well as Paul Lauter's "Taking Anthologies Seriously" in *Melus*' special issue "Pedagogy, Canon, Context: Toward a Redefinition of Ethnic American Literary Studies", 29.3/4 (2004).

## Conclusion

This thesis has observed some of the critical debate in the United States between 1970 and 2000 in order to point out how this period fostered an intensification of the study of the literary canon that furthered the general understanding of the notion of canon and of its role in literary studies. More specifically, I have argued for the need to disentangle the study of the notion of canon from the debates on the canon that, while granting it initial visibility within the landscape of literary studies, also overshadowed its depth and significance by means of their polemical force.

Chapter One illustrated the increased critical attention received by the notion of canon between 1970 and 2000 against the backdrop of the Culture Wars and distinguished the distinct stages of development followed by the critical dialogues on the literary canon as well as the different approaches adopted by scholars. It observed how the discussion on the canon during the last three decades of the twentieth century was embedded within larger debates regarding the changing demographic and academic profile of the United States and how the polemical strength of these issues influenced the interpretation of the study of the canon as a particularly problematic area of scholarly investigation. This thesis challenged this conclusion by highlighting how some of the most important contributions on the notion of literary canon were in fact produced at this time, by positioning them in relation to their context of origin and by exploring their content, their theoretical assumptions, and the way in which they contributed to clarify particular characteristics of the notion of canon.

In order to outline the theoretical premises that underlied the canon debates examined in this thesis, Chapter Two engaged with the history of the term canon, and has followed the evolution of its meaning and usage focusing on Jan Gorak's distinction between Aristotelian and Augustinian approaches to the idea of canon as a means to explain modern diverging critical attitudes towards the literary canon.

Each of the three case studies addressed specific aspects of the notion of canon and the process of canon formation in relation to the work of Harold Bloom, John Guillory and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Chapter Three dealt with Harold Bloom and the role of *The Western Canon* as a transitional node from earlier to later formulations of his theory of the anxiety of influence. Chapter Four analyzed Guillory's critique of the canon debates and his reading of the problem of canon formation as secondary to the problem of access to the school system. Finally, Chapter Five engaged with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s definition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* as the definitive canon of African American Literature.

When observed chorally, these seemingly very different critical projects manifest some interesting similarities. First, Bloom's, Guillory's, and Gates's reflections on the canon share a profuse feeling of finality. *The Western Canon*, *Cultural Capital* and *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, all carry the traces of their author's responses to the ongoing debates and their ambition to assert the truth about the meaning and the function of literary canons. This aspect is, as I have argued in this thesis, symptomatic of the tensions specific to the historical context of their works and is particularly evident in Bloom's and Guillory's impatience with the current debates and shows its implications as we approach the



second of their common traits: the extensive use of metaphor and analogy to discuss the notion of canon.

In her famous introduction to Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1968), Hannah Arendt talks about metaphor as an important instrument of knowledge: "Linguistic 'transference'", she says, "enables us to give material form to the invisible – 'A mighty fortress is our God' – and thus to render it capable of being experienced"

(14). Arendt furthers this point in *The Life of the Mind* (1978), where she explains:

The metaphor achieves the 'carrying over' – *metapherein* – of a genuine and seemingly impossible *metabasis eis allo genos*, the transition from one existential state, that of thinking, to another, that of being an appearance amongst appearances, and this can be done only by *analogies*. ... All philosophical terms are metaphors, frozen analogies, as it were, whose true meaning discloses itself when we dissolve the term into the original context, which must have been vividly in the mind of the philosopher to use it. (103-104, emphasis original)

The relevance of this passage for the present thesis and the questions it addresses is shown in Bloom's, Guillory's and Gates's use of linguistic transference to render accessible their respective interpretations of the notion of canon. Be it Shakespeare or a list, as in Bloom's case, the curriculum in Guillory's, or the anthology in Gates's, the use of recognisable concepts and images to better relate to the notion of canon reinforces the idea of an absolute canon as an idea that in its most perfected and complete form belongs to the imaginary, a point which Guillory addresses directly, as shown in both the Introduction and in Chapter Four of this thesis, but which is widely absent from Bloom and Gates.

This leads us to the third aspect shared by these scholars, which has to do with desire as a pivotal, yet often implicit, drive in the study of the notion of canon. Desire features in the conflicted dynamics described in Chapter One, as the longing for inclusion in the canon by cultural minorities. Desire can also be for the origin, the

*arkhé*, which is either a site of control, as I have explained in Chapter Two, or of artistic struggle for originality, as observed in Bloom. Again, in Chapter Four Guillory's desire for equal access to the pedagogical system drives his reading of the canon as cultural capital. In Chapter Five, finally, desire is doubled in both Gates's desire to validate the African American tradition through the canonical strength of a *Norton Anthology*, and in the desire for the canon that the diffusion of anthologies fosters, according to Barbara Benedict, amongst reading communities. Desire – of self-determination, of emancipation, of social and cultural recognition – drives the pursuit of a symbolic *locus* where literary traditions exist in their most perfected form. The recent exploration of the notion of canon from scholars of cultural memory studies precisely addresses the spatiality of the canon as a *locus memoriae*, alongside museums, archives, and historical sites. Both Aleida Assman's "Canon and Archive" and Herbert Grabes' "Cultural Memory and the Literary Canon", published in 2010 in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* address the canon from this perspective, and place it in dialogue with the idea of collective memory. Similarly, it is positive to notice that the notion of canon will be once again receiving sustained attention in Christopher Kuipers's forthcoming work *The Canon* (exp. 2013) for Routledge's *New Critical Idiom* series: a project that promises to reflect on the possibilities offered to the canon by the digital era.

It is exciting to look at the future of the study of the canon and see it moving on from its turbulent entrance in literary studies; it is however in these troubled years of discussion and discovery, that the seeds for scholarship to come were planted.

## APPENDIX A

List of Sessions on the Literary Canon  
Organized at the MLA Conventions  
1970-2000

1973

Developing a Canon of Proletarian Literature

1977

The Question of the Canon: Theory, Process, and Practice

Loading the Canon: Theory and Practice

Finding and Teaching Women Writers in the Earlier English Canons

1979

Changing the Canon: Resurrections

Celebrated Teachers, Celebrated Texts: Teaching Literature to Undergraduates-The Traditional Canon

1981

Sociology of Literary Canon in 20th-Century America

The Validity and Use of a Literary Canon

The Making of Masterpieces: The Sociology of the Literary Canon in Twentieth-Century America

Contemporary Noncanonical Poetry in the United States

Aphra Behn: Toward a Canon for a New Edition

1982

Canon Theory and the Dynamics of Literary Criticism

Options for Inclusion: A Panel Discussion on Revising the Literary Canon

The Individual as Self: Thematic Implications in Robert Penn Warren's Canon

1983

The Uncanonized Jane Austen: What the great tradition leaves out

Noncanonical American Women Writers in the 1880s

New Approaches to the Canon: Marxism, Deconstructionism, Philosophy

American Indian Literature and the American Literary Canon

Regionalism, Reform, and Romance: Noncanonical American Women Writers in the 1880s

1984

Canon Formation in Film and Television

The Canon: Perception and Formation, 1984

Arguments concerning Women Writers and the Canon

Feminist and Multiethnic Perspectives on Early American Literature Canon

Gender/Politics/History: The Shaping of a Canon

## Canons of Combat: Women and the Literature of War

1985

The Canonization of Shakespeare

Gay and Lesbian Perspectives on the Canon

Canon Formation and Children's Literature: A Discussion of the Issues

The Social Function of the Teaching of Literature in a Time of Cultural Flux:

Changing Ethos, Changing Students, Changing Canon I

The Social Function of the Teaching of Literature in a Time of Cultural Flux:

Changing Ethos, Changing Students, Changing Canon II

The Politics of Women's Studies: Getting Promoted, Getting Tenure, and Changing the Canon

Women Who Shape Our Literary Canons: Editors, Publishers, Reviewers

Defining Modernism: Revising the American Canon- Critics and Their Writers

Golden Age Spanish Literature: Reexamining the Canon

1986

Feminist Responses to the 18th Century Canon

Expanding the Medieval Hispanic Canon

Ideology and the Canon

Canon Formation and Expansion in Black American Literature I: Resources

Canon Formation and Expansion in Black American Literature II: Methods and Theories

Canon Formation and Expansion in Black American Literature iii: Dramatic Performance

New Critical Approaches to the Canon of Frank Norris

Major Asian American Writers: Establishing a Canon

Women Writers in Exile ii: The Politics of Exile: Desire, Empire, and the Canon

The Canonic Question: Rereading Eighteenth-Century French Literature I-Sounding the Disciplinary Depths

The Canonic Question: Rereading Eighteenth-Century French Literature II--Designs of Exclusion

The Medieval Spanish Canon: New Approaches

1987

Canonical Texts

Matthiessen and the Canon

Publishing and Editing

American Poetry from the Vantage Point of the Little Magazine: Canon versus Context

Canonization and Its Discontents

Canonical Reconsiderations: Class, Colonies, Gender, Genre I

Canonical Reconsiderations: Class, Colonies, Gender, Genre II

Canonical Reconsiderations: Class, Colonies, Gender, Genre III

The Changing Canon of Twentieth-Century Irish Poetry

Women Writers and World War I: Gender, Language, and the Canon

Unconventional Approaches to Canonical Texts

Revising the Canon I: Images, Institutions, and Ideologies in Latin American Literature  
 Revising the Canon I: Translations of Culture in Latin America  
 What in the World? The Canons of World Literature

1988

Ellen Glasgow and the Canons of Southern Literature  
 Gidean Texts and Contexts: New Critical Readings of Noncanonical Works  
 Williams, Eliot, and the Canon  
 War between the Sexes in the Conrad Canon  
 Canon in Traditional Asian Literatures  
 Lists, Canons, and Academic Freedom  
 Race, Gender, Class in Life Writing: A Critique of the Canon  
 Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Issues in Canon Formation  
 The End of Renaissance Studies II: Period and Canon  
 Reading the Two Georges: Sand, Eliot, and the Making of Feminist Canons  
 The Preservation of Noncanonical Books and Manuscripts  
 Perspectives on the Profession I: The Canon, the Institution, and the Other  
 American Literary Promotion and Canon Formation  
 Twentieth-Century American Poetry: Issues in Canon Formation  
 Challenging the Canon in Traditional Asian Literatures  
 The Woman Reader and Reading's Pleasures: French Women and Their Canon  
 The Canon: Rereading Lessing and Eighteenth-Century German Literature

1989

Authority and the Canon in Irish Studies  
 Rewriting the Classics: Object Lessons in Manipulating the Canon  
 Canon in German Literature  
 Emerging Canons in Minority Literatures  
 Questioning the Gald6s Canon  
 Gender and Francophone Challenges to the Canon  
 Double Messages: What's Involved in Canonization?  
 Drama Rewriting the Classics: Object Lessons in Manipulating the Canon  
 The Canon of American Poetry, 1880-1910  
 Literature in English Other than British and American Authority and the Canon in Irish Studies  
 Emergent Texts and the Canon I  
 Emergent Texts and the Canon II  
 New Literary History for Twentieth-Century Spain I: Canons and Generations  
 New Literary History for Twentieth-Century Spain II: Canons and Generations

1990

The Canon and American Literature I: The Marketplace  
 The Canon and American Literature II: The Anthology  
 Autobiographical Writing: The Question of the Canon  
 The Turn of the Century in the Twentieth Century III: Enculturation and Canon in Modern Literature  
 Canonicity and Hypertextuality: The Politics of Hypertext  
 Fictions of the Canon

Italian Women Writers: The Revision of the Canon  
Noncanonical Pedagogies: Gender and Class

1991

Kafka and the Critical Text: Language, Theory, and Canon  
Canons and Canonization: From Theory to Practice  
Recalculations: Canonical Figures on a Postcanonical Ground  
Strategic Action: Canon Formation in Seventeenth-Century France  
Challenging the Literary Canon: Antecedent Instances of Contention  
Challenging the Literary Canon: Patterns of Prescriptive Texts  
Latin American Women Writers and the Canon  
Evaluating Contemporary Critical Approaches to Canonical Eighteenth-Century  
Novelists: Has Difference Made a Difference?  
Challenging the Literary Canon: Forbidden Texts and Proscribed Publications

1992

Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Negative Dialectics of the Canon  
Texts for Teaching: Canonical, Pedagogical, Textual, and Theoretical Issues  
Literature Rewriting Itself I: Re-visions of the Patriarchal Canon  
Forming the Renaissance Canon  
National Writers and the Western Canon  
Candidates for the Canon  
Taking Shape: The Institutionalization of a Minority Literary Canon  
Canonical Heresy: Toward New Representations of Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-  
Century Spain  
Re-vision del Canon Literario Puertorriqueno y de las Practicas de la Formacion del  
Canon  
Rereading Robert Lowell: Canon, Collaboration, and Political Economy  
Canonicity and Innovation: Spanish Women Writers and Experimentation  
Noncanonical Genres and Ethnicity

1993

The Politics of Evaluation: Theory, Choice, and Acknowledgment in the  
Postcanonical Practice of Literature  
Defamiliarizing the Seventeenth-Century English Canon  
The Canonical and the Noncanonical  
Classing the Canon  
Contemporary Indian Fiction in English- Canonization, Decanonization  
Viet Nam War Literature: Issues of Canonicity  
New Souths, New Canon: Southern Literature and Anthologies in the 1990s  
Multilingual Medieval England: Canon, Nation, and the Question of the Vernacular  
Problems of Literary Periodization and Canonization, 1770-1830  
Canon and Canon Transgressions in Medieval Courtly German Literature

1994

The Dynamics of Genre Shift in the Conrad Canon  
Canonizing Mary Wroth's Urania Editing as Canon Construction: The Case of  
Middleton

Redefining the Canon: The Early Writers  
 De-authorizing the Canon: New Critical Approaches to Twentieth-Century Mexican Literature  
 American Literature and Canon Revision: A Progress Report  
 Tercentenaries and Canon Formation: Graffigny, Voltaire  
 Canons, Committees, and Careers: Concerns of the Two-Year-College Faculty

1995

A Workshop on Teaching the Unknown: Feminist Postcanonical Strategies  
 The Canonizing of Anna Letitia Barbauld: Agency in the Act of Editing-History, Theory, and Practice  
 Ins and Outs of the Early Modern Theater Canon: Whose Criteria?  
 Robert Frost and the Canon  
 Goethe Revised: Controlling the Text and the Canon  
 Making Canons: 1900-2000  
 Canonizing Elizabeth Cary's Mariam

1996

Building the Working-Class Canon: Three Contemporary Women Novelists  
 Without Rhyme or Reason: The Canon without Poetry?  
 Canonizing African American Literature I: Archives  
 Eastern Canon  
 Teaching English Literatures Other Than British and American: Issues of Canonicity  
 The Canon and the Web: Reconfiguring Romanticism in the Information Age  
 Anthologizing Romantic-Era Writing: Shaping the Canon for the Commercial Marketplace  
 Canonizing African American Literature In Anthologies

1997

Teaching the Eighteenth Century: What Does the Canon Look Like Now? Editorial Work and Pedagogy: Changing Canons  
 Popular Forms and Canonical Forms, 1660-1800  
 Feminist Approaches to the Canon

1998

Reclaiming the Canon: Issues in Spanish Translations of Catalan Feminist Literature  
 Canons and Canon Formation in Swedish Literature  
 Joyce and the Terms of Canonicity  
 From National Bards to Heroic Outlaws: The Appropriation of Canonical and Legendary Figures across Class, National, and Racial Boundaries  
 Unearthing the Atwood Canon  
 Canon Makers or Canon Breakers: The Literary Anthology in an Age of Dissensus  
 Margaret Cavendish and the Early Modern Canon

1999

Fragmentation and Reintegration: The Dynamic Construction of Epic Discourse in the Western Canon  
 Constructing a Hawthorne Canon

Hawthorne and the Construction of an American Canon  
 Saints and Sinners: Shaping an Italian American Canon  
 Disciplining and Interdisciplining the Spanish, Latin American, and Latino Canon

2000

Editing, Interpretation, Canonization  
 Expanding the Clare Canon  
 Refiguring the Latino and Latina Studies Canon: Genres, Population, and Approaches  
 Hawthorne's Noncanonical Short Fiction  
 Uncanonized American Indian and First Nations Writers  
 The Invisible Canon: Forgotten Names, Marginalized Texts  
 Historicism and Literary Values II: History and the Canon  
 Pressure Points: Spanish Women Writers and the Canon, 1898-1939  
 The Canonical Thoreau



## APPENDIX B

List of Papers on the Literary Canon  
Delivered at the MLA Conventions  
1970-2000

1970

Brooks, Cleanth. "The Early and Minor Works: A Re-evaluation of the Canon".

1971-1976

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1977

Lauter, Paul. "Caste, Race, and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties".

Sloma, Judith. "The 'Fragmentary Genres': Women Writers and Non-Canonical".

1978

-

1979

Rabine, Leslie. "Integrating Feminist Critical Theory into the Traditional French Canon".

1981

Breiner, Laurence A. "Masterpieces in Search of a Canon: West Indian Literature".

Bremer, Sidney H. "Chicago in Fiction, Masculine Hegemony, and the Literary Canon".

Fielder, Leslie. "Opening Up the Canon".

Gelfant, Blanche. "The Enlarged Canon: Ethnic Possibilities".

Hunter, J. Paul. "The Literary Canon and Literature since Last Tuesday".

Shuman, R. Baird. "The Importance of a Canon in the Teaching of Literature".

1982

Broderick, Catherine. "Exporting the Canon: The Politics of American Literature in the Foreign Classroom".

Pryse, Marjorie. "The Canon in the Canon: Vaginal Imagery and American Local-Color Fiction".

1983

Blackwell, Jeannine. "Deconstructing the Canon".

Darko Suvin. "Dramaturgic Types in Krleža's Canon".

Rabinowitz, Peter. "After the Long Climb: Ideology, Canonization, and Reading Strategies".

Ryan, Michael. "Conrad and the Canon: A Marxist and Deconstructive Reappraisal".

Schoeck, Richard. "Intertextuality and the Rhetoric Canon".

1984

- Avellaneda, Andrés. "Canon Literario y Censura en la Argentina".
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. "Canon and Context: American Literature and the Problem of History".
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