

Forum

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Defining the Canon

TO THE EDITOR:

What a delight to read comments about the literary canon from correspondents in the *PMLA* Special Millennium Issue (115 [2000]: 1987–2076), where the educational and social benefits of “opening” the canon to women and minority and postcolonial writers are quite rightly a recurring theme, although there is little talk of a round-the-world canon and no prospect of reading foreign works in their original languages. While these shortcomings must have been obvious to many readers, an analysis of the letters discloses a subtler theme.

As most of the letters show, literary scholars tend to define the canon extensionally, in terms of examples or specimens, rather than intensionally, in terms of the attributes of a canonical work. Two features of extensional discourse are the use of specimens to define a universal category and the assumption that validity is derived by consensus among a totality of observers rather than from the conclusions of an ideal observer such as one finds in the allegory of the cave in Plato's *Republic*. The first of these is illustrated by Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*, which devotes one chapter to each of twenty-six authors. Most critics probably agree that Bloom's concept of the canon is too narrow, but virtually every book and article about opening up the canon defines *canon* in terms of works that should or should not be included. As for consensus as the basis of validity, a sample of phrases from the Special Millennium Issue will illustrate: “We have begun to value the slave narrative” (Alfred Bendixen [2035]); “Other writers await our attention and inclusion in the canon” (John F. Crossen [2037]); “Postcolonial poetry has much to teach us” (Jahan Ramazani [2040]); “scholars must persuade teachers and administrators to include works from a variety of racial groups” (A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff [2040]). The plural pronouns and verbs imply that canon formation is a group effort, just as curriculum formation is a committee effort. Maybe *canon* is just a synonym for *curriculum*.

This presents certain philosophical problems. As Francesco Zanetti and I point out, in the extensional mode the concept of a canon is a logical impossi-

bility, even though, paradoxically, almost all modern discourse about literary canons takes place within this modality, probably because we regard extensionalism, especially in its distributive form, as more scientific than the other modes of discourse (Earl R. Anderson and Gianfrancesco Zanetti, "Comparative Semantic Approaches to the Idea of a Literary Canon," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38 [2000]: 341–60). When we think of the category "bird" in the extensional-distributive modality, we think of robins, sparrows, penguins and so on without differentiating "typifying" or "canonical" birds from "atypical" or "marginal" birds. Every example of a bird belongs equally and alike to the category "birds"; there are no better, best, or bad instances of birds. So with works of literature: in the extensional-distributive mode, every literary work is equally and alike a member of the set or category that we call "literature"; there are no better, best, or bad instances. In this mode, literature is a pile of books, and Bloom's *Western Canon* is fundamentally invalid, because it is not logically possible to exclude any literary work from the canon. Bendixen, writing about the American canon, states the problem: "Why has Faulkner replaced Hemingway as the premier modern American novelist? Why has Sherwood Anderson achieved a more significant place in our anthologies and literary histories than Sinclair Lewis, the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature?" He asks, "Can we articulate the relation between aesthetic value and literary history in any way that does not replace old essentialisms with new ones?" (2035). His questions imply that scholarly thinking about the canon needs to be concerned less with specimens and more with the attributes of canonicity. Zanetti and I go further, arguing that the idea of a literary canon can have validity only if defined in terms of its attributes, as Aristotle defines tragedy and epic in the *Poetics*.

Several Millennium Issue correspondents write in the extensional-collective mode, which implies a set of presuppositions according to which universals exist only as words—as a conventional way of speaking about individual things in relation to each other. The extensional-collective mode is apparent in the neohistoricist argument that the canon is a cultural convention, a strategy whereby the ruling class imposes its values and culture on society; thus,

Regenia Gagnier writes, "The literary canon as an elite cultural capital will probably cease to exist, except as a remnant of past bourgeois culture" (2038).

The four discourse modalities—the extensional-distributive one of logical positivism, the extensional-collective one of nominalism (and of Michel Foucault), the intensional-distributive one of Aristotle, and the intensional-collective one of Plato—coexist in philosophy, in scholarly discourse, and in ordinary language, so it is not surprising to find writers switching modes. Rey Chow writes that a canon "is understood to include not merely a set of texts with quality proven over time but also the standards by which to evaluate such texts." "[S]et of texts" implies the extensional-distributive modality of set theory, while "standards," recalling the ancient Greek sense of canon as a rule or measure, implies an intensional modality. Then, too, Chow writes that "it is necessary to remember that a canon is a site of power that specializes in reinforcing the continuity of selected traditions and institutions," a neohistorical statement in the extensional-collective modality (2037). When viewed narrowly from the perspective of logic, the mixed modalities of her discourse seem like three or four channels playing on a radio at the same time. But from the perspective of discourse analysis, they make perfect sense and illustrate our capacity to discourse in all four modes. The traditions of philosophy have historically privileged one or another of these modalities: the extensional-distributive is in favor at present. But because all four coexist in ordinary language and in human thinking, it is unlikely that any one will reign forever.

In our scholarly discourse about the literary canon, we should be aware of our presuppositions. If we define the canon in terms of specific texts that should or should not be in it, we are writing extensionally, either in the extensional-collective (nominalist) mode, in which *canon* is a label, not a substantive reality, or in the extensional-distributive (positivist) mode, in which the canon is the set of all literary works without exception. Canonicity and marginality are not logically possible in extensional discourse, but they are possible in intensional discourse, where universals like *literature* are defined in terms of attributes.

Earl R. Anderson
Cleveland State University