

WHAT IS LITERATURE?

In defense of the canon

By Arthur Krystal

There's a new definition of literature in town. It has been slouching toward us for some time now but may have arrived officially in 2009, with the publication of Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors's *A New Literary History of America*. Alongside essays on Twain, Fitzgerald, Frost, and Henry James, there are pieces about Jackson Pollock, Chuck Berry, the telephone, the Winchester rifle, and Linda Lovelace. Apparently, "literary means not only what is written but what is voiced, what is expressed, what is invented, in whatever form"—in which case maps, sermons, comic strips, cartoons, speeches, photographs, movies, war memorials,

Arthur Krystal's most recent book is *Except When I Write: Reflections of a Recovering Critic* (Oxford). His essay "The Worst of Times" appeared in the November 2009 issue of Harper's Magazine.



and music all huddle beneath the literary umbrella. Books continue to matter, of course, but not in the way that earlier generations took for granted. In 2004, "the most influential cultural figure now alive," according to *Newsweek*, wasn't a novelist or historian; it was Bob Dylan. Not incidentally, the index to *A New Literary History* contains more references to Dylan than to Stephen Crane and Hart Crane combined. Dylan may have described himself as "a song-and-dance man," but Marcus and Sollors and such critics

as Christopher Ricks beg to differ. Dylan, they contend, is one of the greatest poets this nation has ever produced (in point of fact, he has been nominated for a Nobel Prize in Literature every year since 1996).

The idea that literature contains multitudes is not new. For the greater part of its history, *lit(t)eratura* referred to any writing formed with letters. Up until the eighteenth century, the only true makers of creative work were poets, and what they aspired to was not literature but poetry. A piece of writing was "literary" only if enough learned readers spoke well of it; but as Thomas Rymer observed in 1674, "till of late years England was as free from Criticks, as it is from Wolves."

So when did literature in the modern sense begin? According to Trevor Ross's *The Making of the English*

Literary Canon, that would have been on February 22, 1774. Ross is citing with theatrical flair the case of *Donaldson v. Beckett*, which did away with the notion of “perpetual copyright” and, as one contemporary onlooker put it, allowed “the Works of *Shakespeare*, of *Addison*, *Pope*, *Swift*, *Gay*, and many other excellent Authors of the present Century . . . to be the Property of any Person.” It was at this point, Ross claims, that “the canon became a set of commodities to be consumed. It became literature rather than poetry.” What Ross and other historians of literature credibly maintain is that the literary canon was largely an Augustan invention evolving from *la querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, which pitted cutting-edge seventeenth-century authors against the Greek and Latin poets. Because a canon of vastly superior ancient writers—Homer, Virgil, Cicero—already existed, a modern canon had been slow to develop. One way around this dilemma was to create new ancients closer to one’s own time, which is precisely what John Dryden did in 1700, when he translated Chaucer into Modern English. Dryden not only made Chaucer’s work a classic; he helped canonize English literature itself.

The word *canon*, from the Greek, originally meant “measuring stick” or “rule” and was used by early Christian theologians to differentiate the genuine, or canonical, books of the Bible from the apocryphal ones. Canonization, of course, also referred to the Catholic practice of designating saints, but the term was not applied to secular writings until 1768, when the Dutch classicist David Ruhnken spoke of a canon of ancient orators and poets.

The usage may have been novel, but the idea of a literary canon was already in the air, as evidenced by a Cambridge don’s proposal in 1595 that universities “take the course to canonize [their] owne writers, that not every bold ballader . . . may pass current with a Poet’s name.” A similar nod toward hierarchies appeared in Daniel Defoe’s *A Vindication of the Press* (1718) and Joseph Spence’s plan for a dictionary of British poets. Writing in 1730, Spence suggested that

the “known marks for ye different *magnitudes* of the *Stars*” could be used to establish rankings such as “great Genius & fine writer,” “fine writer,” “middling Poet,” and “one never to be read.” In 1756, Joseph Warton’s essay on Pope designated “four different classes and degrees” of poets, with Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton comfortably leading the field. By 1781, Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets* had confirmed the canon’s constituents—fifty-two of them—but also fine-tuned standards of literary merit so that the common reader, “uncorrupted with literary prejudice,” would know what to look for.

In effect, the canon formalized modern literature as a select body of imaginative writings that could stand up to the Greek and Latin texts. Although exclusionary by nature, it was originally intended to impart a sense of unity; critics hoped that a tradition of great writers would help create a national literature. What was the apotheosis of Shakespeare and Milton if not an attempt to show the world that England and not France—especially not France—had produced such geniuses? The canon anointed the worthy and, by implication, the unworthy, functioning as a set of commandments that saved people the trouble of deciding what to read.

The canon—later the canon of Great Books—endured without real opposition for nearly two centuries before antinomian forces concluded that enough was enough. I refer, of course, to that mixed bag of politicized professors and theory-happy revisionists of the 1970s and 1980s—feminists, ethnicists, Marxists, semioticians, deconstructionists, new historicists, and cultural materialists—all of whom took exception to the canon while not necessarily seeing eye to eye about much else. Essentially, the postmodernists were against—well, essentialism. While books were conceived in private, they reflected the ideological makeup of their host culture; and the criticism that gave them legitimacy served only to justify the prevailing social order. The implication could not be plainer: If books simply

reinforced the cultural values that helped shape them, then any old book or any new book was worthy of consideration. Literature with a capital *L* was nothing more than a bossy construct, and the canon, instead of being genuine and beneficial, was unreal and oppressive.

Traditionalists, naturally, were aghast. The canon, they argued, represented the best that had been thought and said, and its contents were an expression of the human condition: the joy of love, the sorrow of death, the pain of duty, the horror of war, and the recognition of self and soul. Some canonical writers conveyed this with linguistic brio, others through a sensitive and nuanced portrayal of experience; and their books were part of an ongoing conversation, whose changing sum was nothing less than the history of ideas. To mess with the canon was to mess with civilization itself.

Although it’s pretty to think that great books arise because great writers are driven to write exactly what they want to write, canon formation was, in truth, a result of the middle class’s desire to see its own values reflected in art. As such, the canon was tied to the advance of literacy, the surging book trade, the growing appeal of novels, the spread of coffee shops and clubs, the rise of reviews and magazines, the creation of private circulating libraries, the popularity of serialization and three-decker novels, and, finally, the eventual takeover of literature by institutions of higher learning.

These trends have all been amply documented by a clutch of scholarly works issuing from the canon wars of the Seventies and Eighties; and few critics today would ever think to ignore the cultural complicity inherent in canon formation.¹ Consider, for example, the familiar poetry anthology. As Barbara Benedict explains in *Making the Modern Reader*,

¹ In addition to Trevor Ross’s penetrating study, see also Jonathan Krammnick’s *Making the English Canon*, John Guillory’s *Cultural Capital*, and the excellent anthology *Debating the Canon*, edited by Lee Morrissey.

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the first anthologies were pieced together less out of aesthetic conviction than out of the desire of printers and booksellers to promote books whose copyrights they held. And because poets wanted to see their work anthologized, they began writing shorter poems to increase their chances for inclusion.

By the early 1800s, according to Thomas Bonnell, author of *That Most Disreputable Trade*, uniform sets of poetry or the “complete works” of writers were standard publishing fare; and because the books looked and felt so good—*The Aldine Edition of the British Poets* (1830–52) was bound in morocco and marbled boards with gilt on the front covers and spines—each decorative volume seemed to shout “Literature.”² But it would be small-minded, as well as excessive, to claim that commerce alone drove the literary enterprise. Simply because anthologies or serialization influenced the composition of poems and novels didn’t mean that writers tossed aesthetic considerations aside. Canon formation continued to rely on a credible, if not monolithic, consensus among informed readers.

In time, the canon, formerly the province of reviews and magazines, was annexed by institutions of higher learning, which cultivated eminent professors of English and comparative literature and later recruited famous poets and writers to act as gatekeepers. In 1909, Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard, claimed that anyone could earn a sound liberal-arts education simply by spending fifteen minutes a day reading books that fit on a “five-foot shelf.” The shelf, as it turned out, held exactly fifty-one books, which were published by P. F. Collier & Son as the Harvard Classics and went on to sell some 350,000 sets.

² But it was literature with a small paradox at its center. Because each set was “complete” at the time of publication (though volumes might be added later), it was a hierarchy without levels. Wordsworth, for one, resented Bell’s edition of *The Poets of Great Britain* because Abraham Cowley and Thomas Gray held the same pride of place, simply by inclusion, as Chaucer and Shakespeare.

Eliot’s exhortations notwithstanding, the books were a publishing rather than an educational venture. It wasn’t until John Erskine of Columbia and Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago lobbied, in the 1920s, for a list of indispensable works in literature and philosophy that the canon became equated with a syllabus.

More than anyone else, however, it was Erskine’s student Mortimer J. Adler who popularized the idea of the Great Books. Adler, who also ended up at Chicago, went on to write the best-selling *How to Read a Book* (1940), whose appendix of “Recommended Reading” (all of it “over most people’s heads”) served as a springboard for the 1952 *Encyclopædia Britannica*’s ancillary fifty-four-volume series of Great Books of the Western World, selected by—who else?—Adler and Hutchins.

Although the canon could groan and shift in its place, as late as 1970 there was probably little disagreement as to what constituted literature.³ Despite the Nobel Prize’s being awarded to some unlikely recipients, as well as to Bertrand Russell, literature generally meant the *best* literature; and the canon, despite the complicity of institutions and the interests of those involved in the promotion of books, was essentially an aesthetic organism tended by literary and academic gardeners.

In a sense, the canon was like an imposing, upstanding tree, an elm or Sierra redwood, whose main branches originally consisted of epic poetry, comedy and tragedy, a few satires, some religious and philosophical treatises, and the shorter poems and prose works of various Greek and Roman writers. As the tree aged, other limbs formed capa-

³ Not everyone prostrated himself before the Great Books. Dwight Macdonald objected in 1952: “Minor works by major writers are consistently preferred to major works by minor writers. Thus nearly all Shakespeare is here, including even *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, but not Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* or Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi* or Jonson’s *Volpone*. Nearly all Milton’s poetry is here, but no Donne, no Herrick, no Marvell, or, for that matter, any other English poetry except Chaucer and Shakespeare.”

ble of sustaining Elizabethan drama, nineteenth-century novels, essays, short stories, and lyric poems. Adler's list of Great Books enumerates 137 authors (including Newton, Poincaré, and Einstein). Adler, who died in 2001 at the age of ninety-eight, may have regretted his strong constitution. The tree he had helped cultivate now bent dangerously under the weight of its own foliage. Other genres—mysteries, thrillers, science fiction, fantasy, horror, and romance—extended from the trunk, sprouting titles that Adler must have bristled at, including those by women and minority writers whose books flourished, so it was claimed, because of their sex and ethnicity.

In the late Seventies, the anti-canonites began taking over the universities, and the English-department syllabus, the canon by another name, was dismantled. Even critics who wrote for general-interest magazines appeared fed up with the idea that some books were better for you than others. Leslie Fiedler, for one, owned up to his susceptibility to not-so-great novels in *What Was Literature?* (1982). Fiedler maintained that he had been brainwashed by highbrow criticism to the detriment of his own natural enjoyment of pure storytelling. Certain novels, despite "their executive ineptitude and imprecision of language," moved him, and he wasn't going to deny it. Such novels, he argued, appealed on some primitive storytelling level; they expressed our need for myth and archetype and had to be considered literature even "at their egregious worst."

Terry Eagleton has recently gone one better: questioning whether "something called literature actually exists," in his 2012 book *The Event of Literature*. Eagleton, who once proposed replacing departments of literature with departments of "discourse studies," refuses, thirty years after the publication of his highly readable *Literary Theory*, to cede to literature a single objective reality. As he did in his earlier book, Eagleton incisively surveys the theory surrounding literature and concludes that it can't really sustain an overarching definition, since there is nothing verbally peculiar to a literary work, and no single

feature or set of features is shared by all literary theories.

In sum, we live in a time when inequality in the arts is seen as a relativistic crock, when the distinction between popular culture and high culture is said to be either dictatorial or arbitrary. Yet lodged in that accusatory word "inequality" is an idea we refuse to abandon. I mean, of course, quality. The canon may be gone, but the idea of the canon persists.⁴ Penguin Books is now issuing a series of "modern classics," which the publisher has decided are classics in the making. No doubt some of these novels deserve our consideration—Evan S. Connell's *Mrs. Bridge* shouldn't offend even unrepentant highbrows—but what about those books shoe-horned in because they occasioned "great movies" or constitute "pure classic escapism"? Do Charles Willford's *Miami Blues* and Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*, enjoyable as they are, rate as modern classics? Clearly the idea of greatness continues to appeal, and just as clearly our definition of it has changed—as has our definition of literature.

Eighty-five years ago, in *The Whirligig of Taste*, the British writer E. E. Kellett disabused absolutists of the notion that books are read the same way by successive generations. Kellett concluded his short but far-ranging survey by noting that "almost all critical judgment . . . is in the main built on prejudice." This, of course, makes consensus about books only slightly more probable than time travel. But if there is even a remote chance of its happening, the first thing we have to do is acknowledge our own deep-seated preferences. The adept critic Desmond MacCarthy once observed that

one cannot get away from one's temperament any more than one can jump away from one's shadow, but one can discount the emphasis which it produces. I snub my own temperament when I think it is not leading me straight to the spot where

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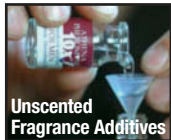
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a general panorama of an author's work is visible.

Although the snubbing of temperament is not easily accomplished, we can try. We can move from being ecstatic readers to being critical readers, hesitating to defend a book because we like it or condemn it because we don't. For when it comes to books, it isn't always wise to follow our bliss when bliss gets in the way of reason, and reason alone should be sufficient to tell us that *War and Peace* is objectively greater than *The War of the Worlds*, no matter which one we prefer to reread.

Here's the trick, if that's the right word: one may regard the canon as a convenient fiction, shaped in part by the material conditions under which writing is produced and consumed, while simultaneously recognizing the validity of hierarchical thinking and aesthetic criteria. Writers may not be able to "escape from contingency," as the new historicists used to say, but those sensitive to their prisons *can* transform the walls that confine them—a transformation that requires an awareness of the great poets and novelists who preceded them. Artists look backward in order to move forward. Which is why hierarchical rankings of writers are as natural as those teeming lists of great boxers, tenors, composers, and cabinet-makers. The canon may be unfair and its proponents self-serving, but the fact that there is no set-in-stone syllabus or sacred inventory of Great Books does not mean there are no great books. This is something that seems to have gotten lost in the canon brawl—i.e., the distinction between a list of Great Books and the idea that some books are far better than others.

In a word, Marcus and Sollors are wrong. "Literary" does not refer to "what is expressed, what is invented, in whatever form," and literature does not encompass every book that comes down the pike, however smart or well-made. At the risk of waxing metaphysical, one might argue that literature, like any artifact, has both a Platonic form and an Aristotelian

concreteness. Although examples of imaginative writing arrive in all sizes and degrees of proficiency, literature with a capital *L*, even as its meaning swims in and out of focus, is absolutist in the sense that all serious writers aspire to it. Although writers may be good or bad, literature itself is *always* good, if not necessarily perfect. Bad literature is, in effect, a contradiction. One can have *flawed* literature but not bad literature; one can have something "like literature" or even "literature on a humble but not ignoble level," as Edmund Wilson characterized the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, but one can't have dumb or mediocre literature.

The truth is we want from poetry and prose what Bob Dylan and advertisements and even many well-written commercial novels cannot provide. We want important writing (bearing in mind that not every successful poem, play, or story need be utterly serious) to explore the human condition, and we want our writers to function, as T. S. Eliot said of the metaphysical poets, as "curious explorers of the soul." Such exploration may be mediated by personal as well as historical forces, but the work will always reveal human nature to be more obdurate than are the institutions that seek to channel it. Indelible truths, as Auden might say, stare from every human face, and they are not at the whim of regime change. So while lesser writers summon enthusiasm or indifference, great writers power their way into our consciousness almost against our will.

More than the distinctive knit of his verse or prose, a writer is what he (or she) chooses to write about, and the canon is the meeting place where strong writers, in Harold Bloom's agonistic scenario, strive to outmuscle their precursors in order to express their own individuality. That's what literature is about, isn't it?—a record of one human being's sojourn on earth, proffered in verse or prose that artfully weaves together knowledge of the past with a heightened awareness of the present in ever new verbal configurations. The rest isn't silence, but it isn't literature either. ■