The Canon Question and the Value of Theory:

Towards a New (Non-) Concept of Universality

The wide diffusion of theoretical awareness about literature has taught us to view the canon not as a thing, like a stone monument rising out of the desert sands or a bronze plaque with names engraved on it, but as an ongoing historical process. It is not as if the literary canon went unchallenged for thousands of years until critics suddenly woke up in 1968 and declared the need for a change. The canon throughout history has been continually forged and re-forged on new and different bases, and not without struggle and conflict: it has been constituted by recurrent, hard-fought negotiations issuing in periodic and sometimes precipitous change. Nevertheless, the presupposition of any theoretical debate over the canon is that claims concerning values communicated in and through literature can be intelligible to other peoples and perspectives — in other periods and in other cultural contexts — than those in which they originate, or in other words that they are capable of being understood and validated transhistorically.

Such transhistorical communicability of value is a minimum requirement for any work's being recognized as canonical. This constitutes universality in a sense far different from that represented by static categories held to be true in all times and places: it is a universality that can be apprehended always only *in the making*, never as a finished product but as in the process of being forged. Such

universality exists as discourse in the present being communicated into new and emerging situations and contexts and thereby making contact and connecting with other discourses in unrestricted ways and in all directions. Such universality might be more accurately called *omni*versality. This essay aims to elicit such a notion in its emergence from discussion concerning the canon in contemporary literary theory. To ground this notion, it will be helpful to start with a telescoped retrospective in an outline sketch (however summary!) of the metamorphoses of conceptions of the literary canon since antiquity.

The Alexandrian critics of the Hellenistic age, signally Aristarchus (c. 217-145 B.C.) and his pupil Apollodorus (born c. 180 B.C.), began to establish a canon of ancient Greek classics. Their doing so was steered by their own philosophically reflective standpoint, imposing allegorical interpretations that completely transformed and distorted the intentions of the literature, including Homer and the Greek tragedians, that they interpreted and evaluated. A few centuries later, the Romans from Horace to Quintilian elaborated a canon of Latin authors imitating Greek models selected and sorted and hierarchized according to a very different taste. Late in the life of the Roman Empire, Augustine and Jerome, among other fathers of the Church, excised and exorcized the authors canonized by classical pagan tradition in filtering them through Christian doctrine. Meanwhile, a new canon of Christian literature also emerged, particularly in Latin and including such authors as Prudentius and Sedulius. The medieval *accessus ad auctores* ushered in further selections and revisions, partly reflecting

the rise of new vernacular literatures that began making their own new claims to canonicity.

Renaissance Humanism sought to return behind patristic mediations to the classical texts themselves and at the same time disparaged popular medieval literature in comparison to their classical models. The *querelles des anciens et des modernes* revolved around open strife between different canons and particularly around differences over whether modern works needed to be based on ancient models in order to rank as canonical. Enlightenment criticism later rejected Latin influences and exemplary authors, such as had guided the Renaissance Humanists, and returned to their Greek progenitors as more original: Homer rather than Vergil, Pindar rather than Horace, Sophocles rather than Seneca. Romantic critics gave the canon a wholly different twist and emphasis with their valorization of nationhood and of the genius of the folk as the matrix of genuine literary creativity. In all these transitions, myriad works were re-evaluated; some were posthumously rediscovered and belatedly canonized, while others were un-canonized. Some were de-canonized and re-canonized several times over.[1]

Nearer to our own time of epochal shifts, some time in the 1970s, there began a concerted outcry against the canon of literary classics perceived as immobile and oppressive. This provoked reactions such as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987) against what was later called "canon bashing" (David

Bromwich). Thus arose the especially heavy debates of the years 1987-91.[2] After

a great deal of difficult discussion and oftentimes bitter strife and fighting,

universities saw some deep-cutting reconfigurations of the reading lists for their

courses in general culture and humanities. However, while the dissatisfaction

with a static canon of classics has been effective in bringing about change, the

question remains as to what constitutes literary value and why any particular

selection of texts should be held up and prized as deserving of study, as

exemplary of worthwhile learning and culture. Since literary theory has been

such a crucial catalyst in the revision and revaluation of the literary canon, it is

logical to look to theory for guidance in illuminating the grounds for canonicity

of the more dynamic type that theoretical reflection and questioning have

ushered in and established in our institutions of higher learning.

At first glance, however, theory seems to have far more to offer of a purely

negative nature, undermining whatever norms and standards may hitherto have

been applied in assessing and conferring literary value. Especially recent

developments in theory seem to preempt and render vain any efforts to establish

stable and valid criteria for evaluating literary art. The eminent literary theorist

Terry Eagleton, in his essay "The Rise of English," the opening chapter of his

widely read *Literary Theory* (1983), exposes the political motives for

mystifications that declare aesthetic value timeless and universal. According to

Eagleton, the canon of English literature has taken over from religion in

sanctioning these sorts of illusions that direct people's attention away from the

divisive class interests that otherwise threaten to discomfit society and upset its forcibly imposed order. The canon of superior literature exalted as timelessly true, universally valid and meaningful, shows up thus as a political construct serving a ruling elite.

Providing some empirical substantiation for this point of view, Richard Ohmann's "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-75" documented concretely how "aesthetic value arises from class conflict" and is dictated in indirect ways by the interests of "monopoly capital" and the common values and beliefs of the professional-managerial classes. In concluding that "[t]he values and beliefs of a small group of people played a disproportionate role in deciding what novels would be widely read in the United States" (70), Ohmann stressed that "the emergence of these novels has been a process saturated with class values and interests, a process inseparable from the broader struggle for position and power in our society, from the institutions that mediate that struggle, as well as from legitimation of and challenges to the social order (69).

More general philosophical grounds for undermining claims to canonical authority are adduced by another prestigious literary theorist, Barbara Hernstein Smith. The canon pretends to be based on disinterested aesthetic value, but according to Smith there can be no such thing. It is impossible even to define what aesthetic value is except in terms of other pragmatic use-values from which it is supposed to be independent. In her *Contingencies of Value* (1988), Smith insists on the contingent character of all aesthetic value against the Kantian

aesthetics of disinterestedness as founding a universally valid standard of taste. And she is voicing convictions that have been very widely shared and have spear-headed a great part of the new initiatives in criticism that have emerged under the aegis of theory in recent decades. Theory, seen from this angle, would seem to be naturally biased against any canon and against any claims for enduring, more-than-contingent values.

However, oftentimes attacks on the canon are predicated paradoxically on what turns out to be just the opposite assumption: they assume the validity of canonicity in general and its foundation in authoritative and enduring values even in the very attempt to challenge and change the canon's specific contents. Detractors from "the" canon, like Chinua Achebe in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" attacking Joseph Conrad as a racist and challenging his right to be honored as a classic author on grounds of political incorrectness, may be recognized as having an important and very practical impact. But it is not really against the canon as such, against *any* canon, that they are arguing. They are actually assuming the concept of a canon and assuming its legitimacy, but disputing prevailing views about which works should be accorded the honor of being included in it. This is appropriate, for the canon is an open and evolving body of works. Yet these arguments are not so much against the canon and its claim to universal validity as against certain results that the process of canonization has produced: they fall rather within the negotiations aimed at deciding which works will be valorized as canonical.

The complaint against the existing canon as invidious and exclusionary, as elitist and the instrument of domination, as represented by critics such as Paul Lauter and Lillian Robinson, usually presupposes that a canon could also work in a more even-handed and socially-progressive manner. What is being attacked is the imposition of a certain race's or gender's or class's literature as canonical. Generally, such protests are motivated not by objection to the idea of canonicity as such, but rather by a desire to participate in this claim and to have it work *for* rather than against one's own constituency. A more fundamental issue can be raised as to whether canonizing certain literary works and canonizing literature per se as a privileged mode of cultural expression is not itself inextricably ideological, political, and merely an enforcement of political and cultural power and not at all about appreciating ideals such as beauty and cultivating aesthetic taste or other generally valid values. All these softer, subjective phenomena may be unmasked as screens for asserting the interests of empowered groups and applying oppressive measures to control others. They are deployed to engender the consensus necessary for civil society by covering over breaches caused by conflicting material interests within society.

Some attempts have been made to use purely socio-ethnic and -economic parameters in selecting works to read, and so give up the effort to make distinctions of literary value. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anymba in "On the Abolition of the English Department" (1968) argued for changing the criterion for inclusion from excellence to representativity. This

indeed directly challenges Matthew Arnold's idea of literature, articulated in his famous definition of culture, as the best of what has been thought and written. Yet it is doubtful whether value judgments can or should be avoided in selecting works to study as literature. If in the interest of being fair to all contenders no real distinctions of merit are made, then it becomes really arbitrary — from an aesthetic or artistic point of view — which works are selected as representative. Without at least this prospect of selecting works for their intrinsic worth, we will soon forget what we are reading for or why we are reading literature at all. The difficult business of evaluating what is excellent and worthwhile, with all the contentiousness that this must entail, can perhaps not be avoided. Any selection results in some kind of canon, and as E. Dean Kolbas points out, "the very concept of a canon necessarily involves qualitative judgment, because to be canonical also means to be exemplary" (2).

The more radical critiques and rethinkings of the canon are not those that wish to retain its authority in order to invest other works and traditions, those of their own choice, with the privileges thought to have been held to date too exclusively by an unjustifiably small circle of elites. Challenges of the latter type have sometimes been effective in actually changing the canon, making many more women and non-Western and non-elite writers staples in courses at elite universities. But this would hardly have been possible without the searching theoretical questioning that forced recognition of the relativity and changeability of any possible canon — its necessarily dynamic mutability. Theory has proved

invaluable for opening to investigation every aspect of the literary canon and every settled assumption about it. However, the unrestricted scope of its corrosive effect reaches to dissolving the category of the literary itself into ideological mists.

Indeed the prestige of literature as such has itself been subjected to severe questioning, and the privilege accorded literary writings in public instruction and cultural institutions has been challenged head on. Why should texts labeled literary be elevated above others as having enduring value beyond the pragmatic use-value accorded to instruction manuals, research data, and news reports? Such "distinctions," to use Pierre Bourdieu's term, have ideological implications.[3] These implications have been exposed forcefully, for example, by Raymond Williams's analysis in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) of the rise of a modern concept of literature in the 18th century as a special category of creative, imaginative writing in correlation with the rise of a new bourgeois middle class and its "sensibility" in response to industrial capitalism.

Consequently, there has been a tendency to impugn the status of literature as canonical, to challenge its cultural authority per se, without distinction and without questioning which works are worthy of canonical status and which are not. Yet even if the literary as such has no definable content that is constant across cultures, its characteristic freedom of form as a genre of unrestricted invention and creativity suits it to serve in the transit of contents and concepts from culture to culture. To this extent, literature surely can be a force conducive

to social dynamism. Although we have seen literature attacked for political reasons as associated inevitably with conservative ideologies, this ignores the key role that literature has also played in radical and revolutionary movements. Indeed, the early twentieth century modernist literary avant-gardes such as futurism and Dada wished to destroy libraries together with museums and the established institutions of society in general.

The attack on literature has been part and parcel of the wholesale attacks on all forms of cultural authority since 1968. Yet again these are typically bids to lay claim to cultural authority on behalf of parties representing themselves as disenfranchised. The more radical challenges deny the possibility of such authority altogether, and this is where the most searching theoretical reflection is apt to lead. René Wellek's essay, "The Attack on Literature," examines a variety of political and ideological reasons why literature per se has been denigrated in recent decades and then proposes that "[m]uch more serious and interesting is the attack on literature which is basically motivated by a distrust of language" (p. 5). Roland Barthes, for example, characterizes literature as "a system of deceptive signification," and Maurice Blanchot prophesies the "disappearance of literature" by its reduction to silence (p. 7). Wellek himself then points out that "[l]ess apocalyptically, literature and writing have been seen as a transitory form of human communication to be replaced by the media of the electronic age" (p. 8). These are challenges to literary value per se. Indeed if context and motives of social power alone are decisive in determining which books and which kinds of

discourse are treasured and kept, then texts are emptied of all intrinsic value and are canonized on only extrinsic grounds. The canon is considered to be a matter only of consolidated power, not of merit or aesthetic value.

Lately, it is not only literature but theory itself that has come under attack, and for similar reasons: the literature of theory, too, is viewed as privileging Western, white, bourgeois, phallogocentric discourse as normative and as in a position to judge all others. Voices from the margins identifying with minorities object to theory and the sort of exclusionary drawing of boundaries around the appropriate object of literary criticism, thereby establishing the canon, with which it is complicit. But this is rather too gross a generalizing view itself, and it ignores how theoretical work has actually highlighted the historical contingencies that go into making up the canon. The critics of the canon sometimes write as if it were a centrally organized conspiracy, whereas history shows the process to be much more complicated and aleatory than that. Beyond all deliberate manipulations, what effectively establishes a literary canon in the collective mind of a culture is more like an "invisible hand," the result of incalculably complex interactions of myriad individual, intentional efforts at the micro-level (Winko, "Literatur-Kanon als *invisible hand*-Phenomen").

Paradoxically, this linking of the canon question with that of the justification for theory is key to illuminating and even to "justifying" them both. Theory, like the canon, has come under fire , yet both these challenges are reflexes in which theoretical reflection turns back on itself and turns into self-questioning and self-

limitation or even self–liquidation. The questioning of literature and theory alike is an eminently theoretical activity. Whether theory is valorized or impugned, it is in any case actively deployed by such critique, and to that extent whatever is said depends on and assumes the value and validity of theoretical reflection as such. Likewise, the challenge to the canon belongs to the vocation of theory: this challenge is itself theoretical and cannot flourish without theoretical methods and instruments. Canonicity too is a theoretical—and originally theological—construct, and even the attack against the canon is a further manifestation of the self-reflexive and even self-subversive powers of critical reflection or theory.[4]

Even the argument "Against Theory" of Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp is in its own way an eminently theoretical argument. It takes a general position against theoretical criticism on philosophical grounds. The reason is basically that no matter what reasons are given the argument is first of all a practice that cannot account for itself theoretically except by producing and promulgating more beliefs that remain, however, always practical positions of belief rather than theoretically justified truths. The pretense of stepping—or of attempting to step—outside of one's practical commitments in order to ground them in some belief-neutral theory is exposed as bad faith. Even the highly pragmatist Stanley Fish succumbs to this temptation in presenting a general theory of how theory as such has no practical consequences. But then does not the same hold for Knapp and Michaels's own argument? As an intervention into literary-theoretical debate, it has a practical point to make. It ought not,

however, to be believed as a theory, and therefore its prescription that the theoretical enterprise be ended has no general validity. It may be implemented by those it happens to serve in strategic or pragmatic ways, but it is not justified and prescriptive on any universalizable grounds. It must not be allowed *theoretical* credibility or validity.

Theory is inevitably reductive inasmuch as it abstracts from the infinite complications of practice. It does, nevertheless, open a space for negotiations between different points of view because theory places certain of these practical assumptions into question. Our practical critical assumptions are indeed different and sometimes even incommensurable. The value of theory is the stimulus it provides to opening up the parameters of our discussions. It has no positive doctrine to offer: it is a facilitator, for theory projects a forum for discussion where none could previously be supposed because there is no self-evident practical intersection between disparate fields like modern anthropology and ancient Greek tragedy (Girard) or between the history of seventeenth-century religious conflicts and the use of signs by poets and artists in the early twentieth century avant-garde movements (Barthes). Theory invites to such hybrid discussions. Having no fixed framework of references of its own, it opens up an in-between space for comparison that might otherwise never be discovered. In opening up this space of free play, where boundaries and definitions are set in motion, theory behaves like literature—free from

constraints of fixed frameworks and set fields of objects, free to reconstrue them in creative and imaginative ways.[5]

In this vein, which opens to indetermination as a peculiar virtue, Gerald Graff, in "Taking Cover in Coverage," makes a case for featuring theory in the literature curriculum. Although he acknowledges the many conflicts with which theory is fraught, he maintains that the conflicts need not be resolved in order for theory to be taught. According to Graff, theory should catalyze exchange rather than become one more specialization. It is currently threatened with compartmentalization according to various disciplines, whereas it is suited by its nature to play a role between departments, fostering reflection on connections and contextualization. Rather than being consigned to the well-defined precincts of a special discipline, theory should be central to all the different specializations represented within academic departments, "not by putting theory specialists in charge but by recognizing that *all* their members are theorists" (201).

Insight into the contingency of all value judgments is actually theoretical insight—perhaps *the* essential theoretical insight. It is judgment that distances itself from immediate belief in any judgment—even in itself as concrete, determinate judgment. For theory is itself dependent on contingencies in reaching any of its judgments. They come about in certain historical conjunctures as the result of a whole set of contingent conditions and biases.

Theory etymologically means "seeing" (from Greek *theorein*). As such, it objectifies and knows, even while stepping back into a position of detachment.

Sight is traditionally the sense that affords knowledge at a distance and in detachment from what is known. However, while in principle theoretical knowledge is an objective and, to that extent, absolute knowing, as practiced it is relative; it is always a particular endeavor at theorizing that realizes one angle of vision in a determinate set of circumstances. Theoretical formulations cannot help positing themselves as having some sort of general validity, but their actual impact depends rather on their opening possibilities for communication between positions that in themselves seem to exclude one another. By taking a more objective view it becomes possible to recognize commonalities between alternatives that appear to be mutually exclusive. The significance of theory, accordingly, is in the possibilities it opens for negotiating relationships and making connections across what are apparently entrenched divisions and impermeable boundaries.

Theory has enabled and promoted the discovery of diversity and multiplicity of literatures and cultures through its insight into the contingency of purportedly universal norms and supposedly enduring or even unchanging standards. A theoretical perspective relativizes the motives for any particular viewpoint—that is what the objectifying, distancing look of theory is apt to do. It relativizes its object, that is, uproots it from its natural ground, detaches it from its unconscious assumptions, and places it in contexts in which it must negotiate complicated relations and sustain conflicts. While the object of the theoretical gaze is thus relativized, the gaze itself seems to reveal truth—though only until it too is taken

as object for further theoretical reflection. The pretense to objective knowledge, which is indeed objectionable for all the reasons that have been urged against the whole historical edifice of Western thought as metaphysics, pertains to first-order formulations of theory, but not to the life of theory as an ongoing process of self-critical reflection. Theory relativizes — only to turn, in turn, into a normative discourse itself: yet it is at the same time the capacity and the drive to subject its own new discourse to critical scrutiny. It is in its dynamic working rather than in any achieved results or static precepts that theory has its meaning and importance. The theoretical outlook distances from concrete claims and motivations, thereby relativizing them and opening up alternatives and catalyzing mutations.

Theory in the literal sense entails stepping back to see the field as a whole rather than being embroiled in contentions from a given position that obstructs one's outlook and restricts seeing. A theoretical position is presumably disengaged from all practical standpoints, and to this extent "objective." This is illusory, of course, yet as an ideal it can be efficacious in loosening the strangle-hold of apparently self-evident dogmas. Hence the rather piquant paradox that theoretical detachment is practically useful and even necessary, although it is strictly and rigorously — that is, in principle or in theory — impossible. This is all theory can do. It has no positive, prescriptive value, as Knapp and Michaels insist. Yet such an activity of detached analysis and evaluation does have practical consequences, even if it cannot control and prescribe them. It

fundamentally changes how literature, and consequently life, is viewed. Although it cannot impose any specific values, it frees and complicates literary value, exposing it as not given but as negotiated, as not natural but instituted.

Theory is thus never merely theory. It is always also, at the same time, a practice. Distancing and objectifying is always dialectically related to taking a position and manifesting one's positionality in ways that escape conscious control. As a moment of detached reflection, theory is a necessary and enlightened way to deal especially with the differences and conflicts that inevitably arise in all human affairs. This is why the view against theory, that "theory is nothing else but the attempt to escape practice" (Knapp and Michaels 30), is far too reductive. Just as this pragmatic attack uses a theoretical tone and form of statement to try and convince us that it is right, so other theories are to be evaluated always also in terms of their meaning as practiced. This is an insight traditionally found at the heart of hermeneutics — the theory of interpretation. Knapp and Michaels conclude, "Our thesis has been that no one can reach a position outside practice, that theorists should stop trying, and that the theoretical enterprise should therefore be abandoned" (30). Yet striving to achieve objectivity, to stand outside the limitations of one's current point of view, is crucial for the attempt to meet with others and interact with their practices so as to compromise and cooperate with them rather than only blindly playing out the conflicts between our different, apparently incompatible practices.

From Matthew Arnold to Italo Calvino, theory has been extolled for its capacity of rendering practice indirect, and thereby of escaping from the typically deadlocked, polarized impasses of the political scene and its embattled institutions. Theory is necessary in order to see past the blinders of one's own practice and to see a little more than one does when one focuses on doing alone. According to Arnold, "A polemical practical criticism makes men blind even to the ideal imperfection of their practice, makes them willingly assert its ideal perfection, in order the better to secure it against attack; and clearly this is narrowing and baneful for them. If they were reassured on the practical side, they might be brought to entertain speculative considerations of ideal perfection, and their spiritual horizon would thus gradually widen" (271). In other words, try to see the other's point of view, determined as it is by a different practical angle and exigency that you do not share but can theoretically approximate and hypothetically adopt. That is how new, creative possibilities can emerge, in order to negotiate conflicts in creative ways, preserving what is valuable on both sides rather than surrendering to the logic of triumph of one over the other and consequent fortification and rigidifying of the one and erasure of the other.

The value of theory is demonstrated consistently by its weaning us away from too positivistic a view of literature and its value. We see how value is produced through relations negotiated in social fields rather than being inherent in the nature of linguistic products themselves. This outlook is enshrined in the basic structuralist insight into the relativity of linguistic significance dictated by the

diacritical nature of the linguistic sign (Saussure). From this insight rises the great tidal wave of theoretical rethinkings that have rocked the latter half of the twentieth century and continue their stir on into the present millennium. Such insight is effectively shown to dwell diffusely in a great variety of subsequent theoretical movements, many of them political in inspiration, for example, by Homi Bhabha's analyses of the mutual implications of nation and narration. Theory furnishes a more flexible outlook on the choices we make as to what to value in literature and which literary works to canonize. Certainly the intensive questioning of the canon in recent decades has been possible only on the basis of the theoretical ferment that opened up perspectives on literature and culture to reassessment and re-negotiation. The foundations of our cultural institutions and literary canons were challenged by free theoretical reflection which, in part, undermined theory and theoretical foundations and made the practical claims of literature paramount. Theory is a self-subverting discourse. Its vocation is to call everything, and ultimately itself, into question. That is what makes it so invaluable, even and perhaps especially to those to whom it is objectionable.

Why has theory evolved since 1968, over the 70's, 80's and 90's, away from the ostensibly disinterested and universal researches of structuralism, of hermeneutics, even of deconstruction and other forms of "high theory," towards ever more concrete forms representing specific groups and identities according to race, class, gender? This, too, is the work of theory. It is a necessary consequence of the self-critique to which Western epistemologies of universal

and necessary knowledge were subjected. It is the distancing movement of theory that has brought out the ethnocentric, class- and gender-interested character of traditional, elite Western culture and its epistemological models and methods. The rejection of theory is itself a theoretical gesture par excellence: it is the further pursuit and fulfillment of critical reason which has been the soul and inspiration of Western thinking since the first discovery of Logos over two and a half millennia ago in the speculatively theoretical texts of Parmenides and Heraclitus. With respect to the canon, the challenges and struggles over selection of texts are the continuation of the very process in which, historically, canon formation consists. There may be good theoretical arguments for the rejection of canonicity altogether, but this very penchant for self-critique and self-annihilation has been the most characteristic gesture of Western culture all along. This impulse is embodied quintessentially today in theory — together with the antitheory that it engenders.

It must be conceded that the relativizing discourse of theory can sometimes be experienced as stultifying and dis-empowering for particular political agendas. Barbara Christian speaks out against theory, or against the "race for theory," as she puts it, since there is and has always been a dynamic type of theoretical reflection antithetical to Western logic at work in the narrative and gnomic forms of the colored peoples, especially black, third world women, in whose name she speaks. This is another kind of "race" and another kind of theory that resists all expropriating generalization of its specific differences.

Against the neutralizing tendencies of theory in general that would reduce new and emergent literatures to silence and non-existence, strong assertion of life requires unquestioning self-confidence and the projection—be they only mirages—of one's identity and ideology. Theory with its dissolution of myths is not helpful for waging wars either of repression or of liberation: the two are, in fact, inextricably linked in a theoretical perspective, however diametrically opposite, like good and evil, they are in the practical perspective of those who feel the duty to fight for what they deem right. And culture wars are no exception.

On the other hand, in another obvious paradox, the claims of difference and of race, of racial and gender difference, are being asserted against generalizing, presumably theoretical discourses thanks to the thought of difference which emerged on the wider critical scene emblematically with Jacques Derrida and the theory revolution spearheaded by the many theoretical movements influenced by deconstruction. These include the New Historicism and Cultural Studies. With varying degrees of acknowledgment of this indebtedness, Cornell West and Henry Louis Gates, as well as bell hooks, have attempted to incorporate theory into projects of showing specific racial differences as relevant to general philosophical thinking. Hence the motto: "race matters."

Such a theoretical viewpoint has seemed to entail the demise of any and all appeals to universal values. It would seem that no standard, no "canon" for measuring literary merit and thereby establishing the enduring value of literary

works is possible in such a perspective. Indeed no work has value simply on the basis of its intrinsic qualities alone, but only as a function of what these qualities can mean *to someone* in some concrete historical context. However, this can still be value of a universal nature, where universality is a matter not of fixed properties or even of definable content but rather of communication without restrictions, of opening outward towards encounter with readers in other times and places and in other cultures.

Although it is never over, history finds some way of deciding what is to be valued and credited with enduring worth, and the condition of this recognition and hence the criterion of canonicity cannot but be some form of communicability, a power to transmit and translate oneself and one's own meaning into other contexts and further matrices of significance. This is the universality not of a changeless Platonic idea but of discourse in action, a universality of which the content cannot be isolated and settled once and for all because it is constantly being re-negotiated and can only be discovered in its emergence as it transmigrates from one form of instantiation to another. This is universality in a performative sense: cross-cultural, transhistorical communication of value that is demonstrated in being enacted. Not without reason, then, theoretical reflection on literature has led to a new and acute sensitivity to the importance of "crossing borders" in validating literary and cultural values.

In recent decades, we have in effect witnessed the emergence of a new concept, or rather non-concept, of universality based not on the categorical thinking of a general concept but on the open-ended reaching out towards communication with others and connection in all directions of what remains conceptually undefined — or always newly to be defined. The concept is based on a cutting, a "cept" or incision. It works by exclusion. For example, the concept of *anthropos* as *zôon échòn lógon* cuts out and excludes all those beings which are not living or not logical, not endowed with reason. The new universality discovered through literary theory particularly in contemplating the canon works rather by inclusion potentially without restrictions; it is universal precisely in its unlimited openness to new connections and endless aggregation. This is a new understanding of universality, and it has been introduced and concretely worked out in relation to myriad literatures and discourses and peoples and nations and cultures. It issues in recognition of the exemplarity of works that are received as having something to say far beyond the original contexts of their production. Safeguarding and promoting this recognition is the work of theory as a malleable *koiné* of cross-cultural discourse. Such transfusion across cultures demonstrates how an idea of universal value, such as is enshrined in the concept of canonicity, lives and grows by transforming itself from age to age.

Notes

[1] In this historical sketch, I have followed Willems, as well as Grosse.

[2] Recent history leading to current debate is treated by Grimm and in Gorak. See also *South Atlantic Quarterly* 98/1 (1990)

[3] In addition to Bourdieu, *La distinction*, see Guillory, who uses Bourdieu's thinking to reflect on the impact of the institutionalization of literary theory on the formation of literary canons.

[4] Most helpful here are Cancik and Trowitzisch.

[5] Bissel gathers together a number of suggestive essays on this head.

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