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From the Personal Heresy to Ecocriticism: Moving Canons, Creating Reading Communities

Abstract I: Il presente saggio esamina alcune delle forme che gli studi letterari anglofoni hanno preso nel corso degli ultimi due secoli, ponendo un'enfasi particolare sulle comunità di lettori. Partendo dalla controversia su "The Personal Heresy" degli anni '30, si riassumono le origini dello studio istituzionalizzato della letteratura inglese, nella Londra del XIX secolo, per poi affrontare la Nuova Critica e i suoi vari approcci, 'teoria' che ha dominato lo studio accademico della letteratura negli ultimi decenni del XX secolo. Essa si oppone al formalismo con approcci eticamente impegnati, come il postcolonialismo e l'ecocriticismo, concludendo che, nelle loro iterazioni più altruiste, questi due approcci parlino a, e per conto di, una comunità di lettori inclusiva e planetaria e offrano la possibilità di un futuro eco-sostenibile.

Abstract II: This essay surveys some of the forms that Anglophone literary studies have taken across the last two centuries, placing a particular emphasis on reading communities. It opens with an account of "The Personal heresy" controversy of the 1930s, before moving back to a summary of the origins of the institutionalized study of English, in London in the nineteenth century. Subsequently it discusses New Criticism and the various approaches referred to as 'theory' that dominated the academic study of literature in the last decades of the twentieth century. It contrasts formalism with ethically committed approaches, such as postcolonialism and ecocriticism, concluding that in their most altruistic iterations, these two approaches speak for, and to, an inclusive planetary community of readers, and hold out the possibility of an eco-sustainable future.

This essay offers a selective overview of forms that Anglophone literary studies have taken across the last two centuries, demonstrating how the ways in which canons have been constructed reflect tacit, and not so tacit, assumptions about the reading communities to which the curricula on offer have been directed. Needless to say, the essay is itself implicated in the act of assuming a reading community, the audience of the Udine conference at which it was delivered and the readership of *Le Simplegadi*.

As a departure-point, I should like to revisit a controversy that took place eight decades ago. In 1934, C. S. Lewis published a polemical essay that took issue with the view of

literature expressed in E. M. W. Tillyard's book, *Milton* (1930), a work that argued that the real subject of poetry was the state of the poet's mind at the time of writing. Literature, Lewis contended, was what was on the page and it was heretical to suggest an extraneous personal alternative. Tillyard replied by saying that he was not proposing simple biographical readings of texts, but rather an approach that identified the mental pattern to be found in a poet's work, which was a reflection of the writer's personality. Further essays followed and the full debate was published at the end of the decade in a volume entitled *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (Tillyard & Lewis 1939). On the most obvious level, Lewis was proposing an objective hermeneutics to counter Tillyard's seemingly speculative subjective approach, but more was involved than just this. Lewis also saw Tillyard's reading of Milton as elitist, because it was founded on the belief that poets are superior beings, a belief that had reached its apogee in the Romantic period. Wordsworth became another touchstone in the exchange between the two men, though Milton, or at least the poetic persona who took it upon himself to "justify the ways of God to men" (Milton 1957: 212), confirmed classicist though he was, was clearly an earlier incarnation of a poet who addressed his readers *ex cathedra*. As part of his rebuttal of Tillyard's position, Lewis argued that poetry is "a skill or trained habit of using all the extra-logical elements of language – rhythm, vowel-music, onomatopoeia, associations, and what not – to convey the concrete reality of experience" (Tillyard & Lewis 1939: 108). This may sound something like formalism, and of course formalist approaches had been developed in Russia prior to the 1930s, but Lewis's supposed objectivity and his egalitarianism were predicated on the belief that all are equal *under God*. He opposed the notion that poets are spiritually superior beings in favour of a belief that saw them as the mouthpieces of a democratic deity who shared his favours evenly among the various members of the human race.

In some ways, the debate between Lewis and Tillyard was a controversy that was very much of its time and, as it was mainly conducted within the walls of Oxbridge colleges, where both were faculty members – Lewis at Oxford; Tillyard at Cambridge – it could be seen as a product of a particular reading community talking to itself. Nevertheless, dusting the cobwebs off this conversation offers a springboard for a consideration of what the subject of literature might be and the related issues of *how* it should be studied and *what* should be read – what might constitute a canon. To place this in context, I should like briefly to review how literature had been studied in British universities prior to this and then move forwards to review a few of the many constructions of canons and critical practices that have been in circulation in the decades since Lewis and Tillyard crossed swords. Piecemeal though this survey is, it illustrates the extent to which the construction of canons is linked with perceptions of what are appropriate objects of study for particular reading communities.

Prior to the personal heresy controversy, the constitution of English studies in British universities had been centrally concerned with Englishness and a belief in the discipline's power as a force for social engineering. The subject was originally introduced into the university curriculum at London University in the second quarter of the nineteenth century (Palmer 1965: 16). More or less simultaneously with this, it made an appearance in the curriculum on offer at working men's institutes, as a field that was supposed to have the socially beneficial function of providing the masses with a moral education. As a uni-

versity subject, it first appeared in the United Kingdom at the “godless Institution” (18) of University College London, which was founded in 1828. Convinced of the utilitarian benefits of language teaching, University College appointed a Professor of English *Language and Literature*. Shortly after this, the College’s rival, King’s College London, an institution founded by Anglican and Tory interests, which opened three years later, established a Chair of English Literature and History (16-18). In their different ways, both colleges disseminated an historical account of the evolution of Englishness. Queen’s College, an offshoot of King’s College established for the education of women, also played an important part in the early shaping of English studies, and in his introductory lecture there, no less a light than Charles Kingsley spoke of literature as a discipline that would equip women for *their* allotted role in life, while also referring to it as part of the “the autobiography of a nation” (39). So the emergence of English as a university discipline was linked with a nationalist mission, part of which was dedicated to the need to foster or, to take a less kind view, co-opt the energies of intelligent women and the socially less privileged. Marxist readings of nineteenth-century sport have seen the introduction of organized games as a means of controlling the aspirations of both the middle classes and the emerging industrialized proletariat (James 1969: 160 ff.), and arguably similar agendas were involved in the promotion of English studies. In any case, English made its academic *début* as a subject to be studied by workers and women. As Terry Eagleton puts it, it was “literally the poor man’s Classics”; and its “softening and humanizing” effects also made it “a convenient sort of non-subject to palm off on the ladies” (Eagleton 1983: 27-28).

Battles in the culture wars of the late nineteenth century were fought over the relative merits of teaching English and classical literature, but in the early twentieth century Greek and Latin lost ground to the parvenu younger sister of English literature, which secured converts across gender and class lines. The curriculum still nodded towards the Classics – the classical background to English literature would remain a London University paper until the 1960s – but the basic parameters established for the study of literature were historically and nationally grounded. The canon that emerged offered a supposedly definitive account of *English literary history*, creating an imagined community of academic readers, in which women characteristically had to interpellate themselves as men¹, working-class students had to resocialize themselves as middle-class, and the linear development of both English literature and the English language formed the cornerstone of study. In short, a national canon was created, which constructed a very particular version of English studies and in the United Kingdom this underwent few modifications until the third quarter of the twentieth century. As late as the 1960s, the London University English Honours curriculum had eight compulsory papers, which took undergraduates on an earnest historical journey through English literature and language from the Anglo-Saxon period to 1880, and three of these papers dealt with Old English or medieval writing. The optional part of the curriculum was made up of

¹ Eagleton points out that Sir Arthur Quiller Couch, appointed as the first Professor of English at Cambridge in 1912, characteristically began his lectures with the word ‘Gentlemen’, though the majority of his audience was female (Eagleton 1983: 28), and, of course, the use of the male pronoun to refer to the reader remained the norm until some forty years ago.

two further papers: Old Icelandic figured prominently here and the one 'modern' option on offer stopped in 1930. So a safe temporal distance was interposed between student and object of study and the paradigm that was followed was *historically* determined. Inevitably the writing being studied raised questions about spatial dislocation, translation and cultural connections, but the curriculum privileged history over geography and any emphasis on the intersections of time and space, as advanced in the work of cultural theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault, postmodern urbanists such as Edward Soja and cultural geographers such as Doreen Massey, was conspicuous by its absence. Foucault has said, "Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile" (Foucault 1980: 70; qtd. Soja 1989: 10), but if anything, this flatters the way the canon was shaped in nineteenth-, early-twentieth- and mid-twentieth-century English studies, since space was not really treated at all, even though a version of the English national imaginary was the cornerstone of the curriculum. It was to change in the 1970s and 1980s, with the advent of a multiplicity of theoretical challenges to this exclusivist status quo, and a broadening of awareness of what might reasonably be deemed 'literature', but before moving on to consider such developments, I should like to turn back to a highly influential school of criticism that came to the fore shortly after the personal heresy debate: New Criticism.

New Criticism, as represented by the work of American critics such as W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, was very much on the Lewis side of the personal heresy debate in that it rejected biographical and historical information in favour of an approach that concentrated exclusively on the text. Wimsatt was the co-author, with Monroe Beardsley, of the classic essay, 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946), which argued that authorial intention was both an unknown entity and an irrelevant factor in any assessment of a literary text. Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) is arguably the finest example of New Criticism in practice. Its close readings uncover meanings that may not have occurred to the majority of its readers, but which, once they are foregrounded, are very persuasive. I remember reading Brooks's analysis of Tennyson's 'Tears Idle Tears' and thinking it was considerably better than the poem itself. Tennyson opens by saying "Tears idle tears / I know not what they mean" (Tennyson 1992: 38). Brooks finds a convincing meaning for the poem, detecting productive paradoxes, where many readers see only a muddle, or at best a vague attempt to make sense of puzzling subjective emotions. Paradox is at the heart of Brooks's approach in *The Well Wrought Urn*. He takes the view that "the language of poetry is the language of paradox" (Brooks 1968: 1), but as with irony, spotting paradoxes often depends on the critic discovering ambiguities by bringing culturally encoded assumptions to the text. Discussing *The Rape of the Lock*, Brooks argues that it is mistaken to ask the question, "Is Belinda [the protagonist of Pope's poem, who has a lock of her hair cut off in a prank in Catholic high society] a goddess, or is she merely a frivolous tease?" (Brooks 1968: 66), because this is a false dichotomy. Belinda is both. This may seem like a comment on a very narrow subject, the character of a particular woman in a particular social group at a particular time, but Brooks sees it as a metonym for a larger hermeneutic problem: the tendency to construct 'either-or' oppositions, when the two categories concerned are far from exclusive. The poem is mock-epic, but in its way it is an epic for its age, as well as a fine critique of the upper-class society to which Belinda belongs through the parodic use of the epic form. Yet, brilliant though the

essay is, it is based on the question that Brooks chooses to ask, and many readers will come to *The Rape of the Lock* without being troubled by the supposed dichotomy between goddess and frivolous tease. As for the works discussed in *The Well Wrought Urn*, they are all poetic texts that sit comfortably within what were then prevalent notions of the English canon: they range from verse in *Macbeth* to Yeats's 'Among School Children'. And they are all by male writers, Milton among them, who were active between the early seventeenth and early twentieth centuries.

There was an inevitable backlash. In the U.S. in the 1960s, archetypal criticism, taking its departure-point from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), found recurrent mythic patterns in texts across periods and cultures, at its best opening up new avenues for cross-cultural dialogue, at its worst reducing cultural difference to a glib universalism. The literary pendulum also swung away from close readings, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as theoretical approaches such as structuralism, poststructuralism, Marxism, feminism and various schools of psychoanalysis travelled from mainland Europe, particularly Paris, into the Anglo-American academy. This congeries of discourses, frequently and reductively lumped together under the term 'theory', unsettled the older historical hegemony, enabling a shift towards a pluralist, more inclusive view of literature. It brought strange bedfellows such as pre-Althusserian Marxism and poststructuralism together, but, although these approaches may have cohabited uneasily, it opened literary studies up to new communities of readers. The wheel had come full circle from New Criticism. Far from being sacrosanct as objects that needed to be decoded without recourse to outside authority, texts were now healthily open to being read in a multitude of ways. To the best of my knowledge no one ever revisited Brooks's reading of *The Rape of the Lock* to say that it was not enough simply to replace 'either-or' interpretations with 'both-and', because the play of individual readers' minds could fashion numerous other responses to Pope's mock-epic mode, but pluralism replaced binarism in a majority of contexts. Along with the various theoretical '-isms' I have just been mentioning, reader response theory further democratized the study of literature, empowering individual readers to participate in a triangular relationship with writer and text in the production of meaning. And, after all, books remain closed and unread, devoid of meaning, until a reader opens them up and interprets them. People read books and books read people. Under this new dispensation, everyone was a critic. Wimsatt and Munroe had produced a second essay, 'The Affective Fallacy' (1949), a companion-piece to 'The Intentional Fallacy', in which they argued that readers' responses were as irrelevant as author's intentions, but this was debunked by the work of reader response critics such as Stanley Fish, who asked "*Is There a Text in This Class?*" (1980) and took the view that readers generate meanings as part of an interpretive community. Seen through this prism, C. S. Lewis's egalitarian community of readers became a reality, albeit without any of his sense of an overriding Christian message.

Curricular reform accompanied the various theoretical '-isms', to the point where Dead White Males were seen as *personae non gratae*. Now the issue was not so much what Milton was about and how he should be studied as whether he should be studied at all. There was a popular pun that the can(n)on had been fired and virulent culture wars raged through the late 1960s and 1970s, particularly in America. Those hostile to the broadening

of the canon argued that it had been infected by the shibboleths of political correctness, and this charge would also be levelled against the confederation of approaches that have most commonly been referred to as 'postcolonialism'. Nevertheless postcolonial approaches destabilized previous notions of *what* should be included in the canon in a more radical way than the French-dominated methodologies then widely being used for the study of literature, by upending the pro-Western and pro-Northern biases that had continued to dominate the discipline, even if postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak drew heavily on poststructuralism. That said, the impulse behind postcolonialism was invariably ethical and in this respect it had affinities with feminism's challenge to androcentric views, and the emerging discipline of ecocriticism, which challenged *anthropo*-centric perspectives. Ethical approaches to literature were not exactly new in Anglophone literary studies, but in the pre-1970s curriculum, they had usually been rooted in notions of liberal or conservative individualism. In the Euro-American academy, that changed with the advent of 'theory' and, following in the wake of various schools of Marxist and feminist theory, postcolonialism and ecocriticism brought a new spirit of planetary ethical concern to the study of literature. Both were loose coalitions of discourses, and like Marxism and post-structuralism they have sometimes cohabited uneasily, but at their best they belong together as approaches that have contested inequitable power structures and the exclusion of alterity.

Postcolonialism has meant different things to different people, but, despite attacks, it continues as a term that denotes a range of preoccupations that address asymmetrical power hegemonies connected with colonialism, its legacy and other geopolitical inequities. For historians writing in the aftermath of Empire, the term referred simply to the era *after* colonialism, but in literary and broader cultural contexts it soon came to mean more. For the authors of the influential *The Empire Writes Back*, published in 1989, it signified "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day", since they argued, very reasonably, "there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression" and so, they suggested, it is "most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted" (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989: 2).

A little over a decade later Helen Gilbert summed up the term's widening currency, saying that:

In many contexts, the term indicates a degree of agency, or at least a programme of resistance, against cultural domination; in others, it signals the existence of a particular historical legacy and/or a chronological stage in a culture's transition into a modern nation-state; in yet others, it is used more disapprovingly to suggest a form of co-optation into Western cultural economies. What is common to all of these definitions, despite their various implications, is a central concern with cultural power (Gilbert 2001: 1).

Beyond this, Gilbert pointed out that in certain quarters postcolonialism had become "a convenient (and sometimes useful) portmanteau term to describe any kind of resistance, particularly against class, race and gender oppressions" (Gilbert 2001: 1), and in their more

socially committed articulations, postcolonial practices have represented a form of epistemic activism against unevenly balanced economies, whether in the heyday of European colonialisms, or in the late capitalist neo-colonial global order. Where literature has been concerned, the term 'postcolonial' has been used to demarcate particular texts and areas of study that are variously characterized by temporal and/or geographical and/or ideological orientation, and to refer to methodologies that contest asymmetrical power structures, wherever they occur.

In the wake of postcolonialism's impact on literary and cultural studies, ecocriticism became a significant critical force in the late 1980s, though green activism had, of course, been prominent in academia more generally from the 1960s onwards, and in canonical literary and theological texts in the East and the West, the North and the South it has a much longer genealogy. Among classic Asian texts, Kausalya's *Arthashastra* (from the fourth century BCE) embodies the ancient Sanskrit belief in the need for sustainable eco-systems, predicated on the belief that the earth is a shared inheritance (Rangarajan 2014: 528), and a similar communal vision is encapsulated in the widely quoted Native American proverb, "We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors, we borrow it from our Children"². Similarly, ecological concerns figure prominently in numerous Western texts long before the Euro-American academy turned its attention to them. After all, the expulsion from Eden in the Book of Genesis can obviously be read as a trope for the loss of an idealized conception of nature and, at the risk of privileging Milton by referring to him once more, it is possible to read *Paradise Lost* as an ecological elegy for the disaster that ensues when imagined primordial natural environments are violated. And, to take a pair of further arbitrarily chosen literary examples, the two most obvious strains of ecocriticism, resistance to environmental damage and speciesism, can be seen in Thoreau's retreat to Walden pond and the killing of the albatross in 'The Ancient Mariner'. One should add that speciesism is itself a problematic category, involving far more than a binary opposition between the human and the non-human – without trying to recuperate the serpent in *Paradise Lost*, reptiles nearly always get a worse press than mammals. More generally, like postcolonialism, ecocriticism has embraced a wide variety of standpoints, with particular disjunctions between Northern and Southern approaches to environmental issues³.

Postcolonialism and ecocriticism have reshaped the contemporary canon through their shared ethically motivated concern to challenge asymmetrical power hegemonies and the exclusion of alterity, but they do not always sit comfortably together. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin fix on a significant example in discussing Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as a response to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). As they see it, Achebe very reasonably offers a corrective to Conrad's virtual exclusion of Africans from his fable about colonial greed, but he fails to focus on the source of Kurtz's depraved materialism – ivory (Huggan & Tiffin 2010: 141-149). So his response to what he has viewed as Conrad's 'racism' (Achebe 1988) does not engage with the speciesism that, one could argue, is present in the text, which makes no mention of elephants. Elephants could be the "brutes" that need

² Quoted *inter alia* in Thieme 2016: 101.

³ See DeLoughrey & Handley 2011: 20-25.

to be “exterminate[d]” (Conrad 1994: 71-72). Certainly they have been textually excluded, and Achebe’s failure to address *this* could be seen as not untypical of postcolonial texts and readings that remain locked within the Anthropocene, though there are obvious exceptions: a novel such as Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone* (1998), which locates itself entirely within elephant society, offers a striking instance of a contrary impulse. Literary work that is attentive to the despoliation of the landscape and the threat to endangered animal species along with human power imbalances does allow postcolonialism and ecocriticism to sit together comfortably. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004), which debates the inequitable treatment of subaltern minorities, the fate of species such as the Royal Bengal Tiger and the river dolphin of the Sundarbans area of West Bengal, and the threat to the unique eco-system of the region brings the two areas together fairly seamlessly. And in his more recently published polemic, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Ghosh provides a chilling clarion call for activism against the Anthropocene, among other things attacking the ‘realist’ novel for its reliance on “the calculus of probability”. As he sees it, such realism is built on a “scaffolding” that prevents it from “confront[ing] the centrality of the improbable” (Ghosh 2016: 23) in the form of sudden disasters that stretch the bounds of credulity by contradicting gradualist notions of meteorological change. *Pace* his own investment in realism in much of his fiction⁴, his position here could be said to be anti-literary, because it takes issue with commonly accepted notions of narrativization. It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider the possible ramifications of Ghosh’s position on the “calculus of probability”, but where reading communities are concerned, *The Great Derangement* comes across as a work that should appeal to an ecologically aware audience, providing it with a welter of information about the actual and potential effects of global warming, while also serving as a consciousness-raising catalyst for readers more generally.

By way of conclusion, I should like to ask whether there are any commonalities in the attitudes to the canon, explicit or implicit, in the various approaches I have been considering. It seems reasonable to suggest that a text such as *The Great Derangement*, along with other contemporary creative and critical writing that confronts ecological issues, is helping to shape new agendas, both by preaching to the converted and by endeavouring to win over sceptics. Such an approach may seem a long way from the tacit assumptions about reading communities that informed the work of critics such as C. S. Lewis and Cleanth Brooks, but they, too, both assumed some kind of consensual understanding of what literature might be doing and tried to persuade others of the right-mindedness of their way of approaching the subject. There, though, any shared ground ends. There is no appeal to activism in their mainly formalist approaches, and little more in the liberal and conservative attitudes of mid-twentieth century schools such as Leavisism and myth criticism that did embody ethical agendas. ‘Theory’ presented a diverse, if sometimes, confusing new set of orthodoxies in which ethics were sometimes to the fore and sometimes, in derivatives of formalism, shunned. Postcolonialism and ecocriticism have usually gone further by enfranchising new reading communities and sensitizing the Euro-American academy to issues which, while

⁴ *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), which have respectively been seen to draw on magic realism and science-fiction, are exceptions.

they have often been latent and sometimes been explicit in the literary texts that were admitted into the canon, seldom received attention as such until comparatively recently. The study of literary form remains as imperative as ever, as the way in which writing generates meaning. At the same time, a divorce between form and content now seems as unsustainable as the plundering of landscape and the annexation and appropriation of animal species that were commonplace in the colonial era in practices such as big game hunting and the transportation of animals to metropolitan zoos as trophies of conquest (Thieme 2016: 131-140). Ghosh's caveat about the "calculus of probability" deserves to be taken on board in the evolution of new forms and critical practices that embody sustainable agendas, but what perhaps stands out most where postcolonialism and ecocriticism are concerned is that at their best, in their most altruistic iterations, they speak for, and to, an inclusive planetary community of readers, holding out the possibility of an eco-sustainable future.

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