PHILIPP LÖFFLER (Ed.)

Reading the Canon

Literary History in the 21st Century

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Heidelberg, December 2016

Philipp Löffler

PHILIPP LÖFFLER

Introduction: The Practice of Reading and the Need for Literary Value

In their introduction to *The Cambridge History of American Poetry* (2015), Alfred Bendixen and Stephen Burt seek to explain their choice of authors and periods against the perceived challenge represented by roughly four decades of revisionist literary criticism. Bendixen and Burt argue that the ultimate goal in preparing the volume was to "provide the most comprehensive study of the practice of poetry in the United States" (2), conceding that this notion of comprehensiveness entails inevitable questions about selection criteria and an implicit understanding of literary canonicity. Hence, the "treatment" of the canon in the form of a literary history "must be both sophisticated and sensitive" (3), given "recent challenges to literary canons, and to even the idea of a literary canon" as such (2). Taking seriously these challenges, Bendixen and Burt wish to "join current scholarship in attempting to define and explore multiple traditions and multiple trajectories" rather than simply defining a "narrow tradition that can be traced back to Emerson or Whitman or some other single voice" (ibid.).

The assumed connection between comprehensiveness and multiplicity has a particular academic flavor; it represents a common-place in the contemporary literary studies world and can be explained mainly as the consequence of its institutional history since the early twentieth century. From the beginnings of academic English studies in the 1900s and 1910s to the host of politically motivated interventions into the field of the 1970s and 1980s, the challenge has always been to define a standard for literary representativeness on the basis of a self-reflexive engagement with the discipline's prior convictions and beliefs.[1] The current interest in categories that transcend the idea of the nation and

[1] For the British variant of this history see Crawford; McMurty; Tillyard. For the history of English Studies in the US see Graff; Graff and Warner.

instead focus attention on subnational, transnational or hemispheric fields of literary and cultural production constitutes the most recent chapter of this institutional history. There have been other relevant sites for the production of literary value, too. The nineteenth-century evolution of a high cultural literary public sphere, for example, was anything but academy-bolstered.[2] These forums still exist in one way or another, even though their location within the social world is different today, ranging from television shows, such as *Das Literarische Quartett* or *Lesen* in Germany, and *Oprah's Book Club* in the US to leading national newspapers and venues, such as the *London Review of Books* or the *New York Times Book Review*, representative bestseller lists, and literature prizes and awards.

Despite the variety of sites and practices of consecration, however, one tendency cannot be overlooked: throughout the later twentieth century, academically sheltered spaces of reading have attained unparalleled importance in defining the standards of literary relevance.[3] As a socio-cultural institution, the university classroom has become the single most important laboratory for the production and circulation of literary value today. For this reason, *Reading the Canon* focuses special attention on academic contexts of reading, thereby also reflecting the institutional contexts from which this book emerged. It seeks to examine how a particular reading environment generates its own disciplinary logic, its value hierarchies, and its modes of literary-historical storytelling on the basis of shared practices of scholarship. "Canon" and "Canonicity" are thus understood as complex theoretical constructs *and* as concrete manifestations of an institutionally sanctioned standard of literary relevance affecting the work of literary scholars on almost every conceivable level: it structures the scope of course programs and the forms of classroom instruction, it conditions departmental reading lists and exam requirements, it provides important assumptions about the periodization of literature, and, more generally, it functions as a norm for testing, questioning, and re-adjusting the conceptual premises of literary scholarship. But *Reading the Canon* also aims to inquire into the ways in which such forms of scholarship may attain broader social

[2] See Glazener, especially chapters II-IV; Dowling.

[3] For a more detailed discussion of this claim and its consequences see Fluck, Leypoldt, and Löffler.

significance: for example, when one and the same author is appropriated simultaneously and for quite different reasons within academic and non-academic fields of reading; when the academy functions as both an educational facility and a site of political conflict; or when the university classroom is understood not only as a space of critical disciplinary expertise but also as a training camp for future possible professionals seeking employment far beyond the confines of the university; finally, *Reading the Canon* also looks at moments of canonization that took place long before the English Department came into existence in its modern form and long before the university could attain the kind of authority that we ascribe to it today.

Unlike traditional handbooks or systematic histories, this volume does not aim at quantitative comprehensiveness[4]; on the one hand, *Reading the Canon* wants to offer an account of the theoretical complexities and contradictions that have defined debates about the function of the canon and literary value over the past three decades. On the other, the theoretical thrust of the book is complemented by a series of selected case studies that explore the practical consequences of these debates for the ways in which scholars explain and classify the evolution of literature throughout larger spans of time. Within the frameworks of this volume, canonicity and periodization are understood as signifying mutually dependent strategies of litareray-historical sense-making. The premise of this book is not that the literary canon is a problematic concept in and of itself but that it has been politicized in ways that have overshadowed and obscured a host of other aspects that are just as relevant to the study of literature and its historical contexts.

Reading the Canon is divided into four sections. In the first ("Periodization, Prestige, Genre"), the authors address some of the more general theoretical questions connected to recent debates about the function and the relevance of literary canons. Section II ("Classics in the Classroom") features essays on the production of literary greatness. The third section ("In the Name of Diversity") sheds light on the complex relationship between literary value and cultural diversity. The final section of the book ("Lost Figures, Unlikely Revivals, Newcomers") explores the historical contingency of canon formation by reconstructing

[4] For a number of comprehensive overviews see Heydebrand; Heydebrand and Winko; Rippl and Winko.

stories of once prominent works whose reputations have declined and recent, unexpected re-discoveries.

The selection of essays is deliberately transatlantic, featurering projects devoted to both American and British literature and culture. The questions addressed by this book, however, are hardly confined by national disciplinary demarcations. As an instituton, the Anglo-American English Department is situated within a broad English-speaking world of culture and literature. As such, it is bound to a set of similar and recurring questions and it is shaped by a historically continuous, transatlantic exchange of ideas and critical concepts—regardless of their orginal disciplinary emergence.

Languages of Pluralism

Despite the broad acceptance that reading lists and syllabi, anthologies, study modules, and teaching positions need to be attuned to and reflect the diversity of today's different social groups, a need for literary distinction has remained pervasive in academic discussions about literary value at any given moment. Aware that "the criteria by which we distinguish important poetry from mere verse have changed," Bendixen and Burt nonetheless maintain that there needs to be a somewhat reliable hierarchy allowing readers to differentiate the really great books from those not just as great or valuable: "this literary history does not shun the task of distinguishing major works form minor ones, while also respecting selected popular forms, such as poetry for children" (3). The rhetoric employed here is revealing, because it suggests that the reasons why, for example, Robert Frost should be part of the *Cambridge History*—his poetry is intrinsically 'major'—are not only different but ultimately more pertinent than the reasons for which one may justify the inclusion of poets that have long been disregarded as carriers of literary greatness: ethnic or political minorities, popular, commercialized authors, or authors of children's or young adult literature. Their literature may be politically and socially important, but it remains ultimately aesthetically deficient. The theoretical problem revealed here would of course not be solved if the history of poetry were told from the opposite perspective, that is, on the basis of more works by minority writers and fewer so-called classics.

The notion that one can distinguish between the politics and the aesthetics of a text provides an important reference point for examining how the idea of literary canonicity was turned into a political problem. Sacvan Bercovitch's mission statement as the newly appointed editor of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1986–2004) represents well the general suspicion about the assumed bulwark of ideology that produces the illusion of literature as a purely aesthetic artifact. Bercovitch's essay is significant not because its claims were revolutionary at the time (1986), but because it signalled the transition of the early revisionist agenda into a broad, institutionally accepted standard of scholarship that is still dominant in the contemporary literary and cultural studies world: the conviction that the field is in constant need of pluralizing its institutional and methodological frameworks, thus not only including new figures and new texts into the study of literature but also supplanting an aesthetic formalism still associated with the work of the New Critics in the 1920s and 1930s. Using the *Cambridge History* as a model project, he urges scholars to acknowledge that "questions of race and gender are integral to formalist analysis"; that "political norms of interpretation are inscribed in aesthetic judgment and therefore inherent in the process of interpretation," and that "aesthetic structures shape the way we understand history, so that tropes and narrative devices may be said to use historians to enforce certain views of the past" (637).

Bolstered by the rise of deconstruction and poststructuralism, the relationship between aesthetics and politics has been central to the majority of attempts to re-assess questions of canonicity in the name of politically disenfranchised cultures or communities of writers since the 1970s. The list of examples illustrating this political turn is familiar: gender and critical race studies, the New Historicism, queer and disability studies, postcolonial theory, and transnational and hemispheric literary and cultural studies. Whatever their precise nature and their concrete political agenda, most of these interventions have been identity-centered and they are conjoined by a shared theoretical premise: that canon formation is subject to or a reflection of the ways in which a particular ideological consensus is transmitted via central cultural institutions to the reading public. When reading the variously updated prefaces of major text collections, such as the *Norton* and *Heath* anthologies, this shift in perspective can hardly be missed.

The theoretical complexities that emerge when promoting a politically diversified standard for canonicity, however, are mostly obscured by such anthologies and literary histories. How, one may ask, does the political relevance of an author compare to an aesthetic ideal established on the basis of a universalist formal rather than historically specific social context? How, for instance, does the canonicity of Ralph Waldo Emerson's style, and the Transcendentalist movement as a whole, relate to the felt necessity to represent subnational minority cultures and literatures more prominently? Or, in more general terms, is the politics of a text in any way relatable to its stylistic makeup? How can we differentiate between our ethico-moral training as members of a specific national or socio-cultural group *and* attempts to define literary relevance by reference to structural and stylistic parameters? And if there were nationally separate canons for different social and cultural groups, would these not automatically reproduce an internal hierarchy of literary values based on exactly those formalist, aesthetic criteria they had sought to supplant? It seems counter-intuitive that every text within its appointed group would be worth the same (whatever the standard of relevance). These and related questions stand at the center of the essays by Jan Rupp, Dirk Wiemann, Katharina Gerund, and Johannes Voelz. Rupp explores the dangers and pitfalls of institutionalizing a "Black British Canon," highlighting not only its general theoretical and political implications but also problematizing its concrete pedagogical use as an instrument of classroom instruction. Wiemann traces the location of Indian writing in English within a transnational literary world, arguing that "instead of one globally unified canon of Indian writing in English, a plurality of 'vernacular canons' coexists with the powerfully normalised core canon defined at the centre of the world-literary system." Gerund traces the German appropriation of Toni Morrison and how her public image changed after she was awarded the Nobel Prize. Gerund shows that Morrison's success as an African-American author was based on an intricate interplay of German cultural institutions that are comparable in their function and thus relatable, but not identitcal, to those that secured her canonical status within American audiences. Voelz, finally, focuses on an American moment of transnational literary study, reconstructing the appropriation of Ralph Waldo Emerson both as an object of political critique within the formation of the so-called New Americanists and as

the figure that most effectively carried the New Americanists' attack against the hegemony of the nation-state.

Cultural Work

All of the questions raised above are connected on a conceptual level to another strategy of re-canonization that has been used to justify the inclusion of popular literary forms into more traditionally stratified reading and teaching environments. This pertains not only to the re-discovery of earlier, neglected genres and formats, such as the nineteenth-century serial novel, but also to the more recent academic appropriation of pop-cultural artifacts, such as television shows, movies, popular music, fashion, or web-design and blogs. The arguments deployed to justify such works as canonical or, at least, culturally representative are couched in a rhetoric of anti-elitism positioned against a particular tradition of liberal humanist education. The main objective of this critique has been the idea that philosophically deep and aesthetically refined works of art will further human progress by turning the recipients of such works into better people. This tradition originated in the later eighteenth-century (Johnson, Kant, Schiller), was continued in the nineteenth by Matthew Arnold and other critics, and evolved into a more explicitly elitist education program in the mid-twentieth century, when reformers like Max Weisman and Mortimer Adler advised readers that they will not "improve," "if all" they "read are books that are well within" their "capacity." Rather, they should "tackle books that are beyond" them, for only such books "will make you stretch your mind. And unless you stretch, you will not learn" (1972, 339). Holdovers of this tradition can be found in the works of critics associated with the ethical turn of the 1980s, insisting on the moral value of literature and that only the most aesthetically refined books will produce "finely aware and richly responsible" readers.[5] Similar arguments have been brought forth in recent debates about the decreased value of the Humanities in the academic landscape of the twenty-first century.[6] Sometimes, however,

[5] See Nussbaum "Finely Aware."

[6] See Nussbaum *Not for Profit*; Jay. For two counter proposals see Small; Fish *Versions*.

the canonization of particular authors was made possible precisely because their works transgressed the standards of political taste: J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* are among the better-known examples. Ellen Redling's contribution to this volume explores a similar phenomenon, as she examines the rise of Mark Ravenhill as one of the central figures in contemporary British drama. Redling shows that Ravenhill's 'In Yer Face Theatre' is best understood as a deliberate eschewal of aesthetic conventionalism, responding both to the cultural establishment of the Thatcher era and to the subsequent rise of a disenchanted, socially precarious youth generation.

At the same time that scholars have critiqued humanistic educational standards and their implicit high cultural bias, they have defended popular cultural products on grounds of their ability to perform important cultural work. It is "morally and politically objectionable, and intellectually obtuse," as Jane Tompkins famously argued, "to have contempt for literary works that appeal to millions of people simply *because* they are popular" (xiv). And the argument in turn has been that these works, novels by Susan Warner, say, popular detective fiction, and Hollywood blockbusters, are in fact relevant, *simply* because they are popular. Even if the style of novel like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "may seem saccharine or pathetic to us," it still "moved hundreds of thousands of readers in the nineteenth century because they believed in the spiritual elevation of a simple child-like idiom" (xviii). Tompkins has been persuasive enough to inspire a generation of scholars to explore and re-establish popular literature as an important field of study. The broader assumption needed to justify positions like Tompkins', however, is dubious at best, namely that mass consumption and popular appeal automatically signify cultural relevance, and that "cultural work" can be used to counter "unchanging formal, psychological, or philosophical standards of complexity, or truth, or correctness" (xviii).[7] And yet the

[7] Though hardly comparable in its underlying theoretical program, the work of scholars such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall, and the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in general, reflects a similar committment to including everyday cultural practices into an academic, politically-minded study of culture at large. For a comprehensive overview of the history and practice of British Cultural Studies see

question of how excactly popular culture accrues value remains largely neglected by such studies. The fact that many people do or consume something does not necessarily mean that what they do or consume is relevant or worth studying. Otherwise, every mass-consumed cultural artifact would have to be considered a potential candidate for an extended cultural and literary studies canon.

From Representation to Practice

The theoretical complexities that have emerged alongside the various attempts to pluralize notions of canonicity since the 1960s can be explained as the consequence of a view in which literary canons are representations of political power structures. Take Nina Baym's classic "Melodramas of Beset Manhood" as a paradigm case. Her argument is that the academic organization of literature was conducted in its early phase by an Ivy-League-bolstered group of male scholars and that, for this reason, the discipline of American literature was based by default on the fantasy of a universal literary subject projected as autonomous, liberal, and male. As a consequence, women authors were excluded from serious academic discussions almost categorically and had to "enter literary history as the enemy" (130). Originally in search for a universal form of literary Americanness, critics, such as F.O. Matthiessen, Richard Chase, and Leslie Fiedler, instead "arrived at a place where Americanness has vanished into the depths of what is alleged to be the universal male psyche. […] What a reduction this is of the enormous variety of fiction written in this country, by both women and men" (139).[8]

While it is true that processes of canon formation are inextricably linked with questions of socio-institutional power, the more complicated issue is how the canon can be used as an instrument for representing and thus reinforcing a politically or institutionally dominant paradigm at the

Turner, especially chapters I and II. For the political relevance of (British) cultural studies see Winter; Winter and Hörnig.

[8] For a similar account of how women writers were excluded from relevant fields of literary production in the nineteenth century see Baym *Guide*; for a more general account of how the American reading world was stratified around 1850 see Baym *Responses*.

same time that it suppresses the representation of other socio-cultural groups. For what is needed to make such a claim is a theory that would allow one to read the organization of literature as a mere reflection or reproduction of a pre-existing political world. It requires, in other words, that one read canon formation and the creation of literary value as a direct analogy to the formation of political realities and their implicit rules and values. Moreover, such a theory must assume that the transmission of political values into the institutional organization of literature rests primarily on the authority of singular judgments, just as if there was a "kind of secret and exclusive ballot that a certain elite group gathers together in order to decide which works will be canonized, and which not" (Guillory "Canon", 235).

The second claim that Baym makes, though never explicitly, is that there must be a huge number of literary texts by women writers that have been deliberately suppressed so as to ensure the hegemony of the critical academic establishment. Both the idea of a secret ballot and the assumption of an archive of suppressed texts are not empirically provable, although there is an undeniable imbalance between the groups that are included in the literary canon and those that are not. How, then, can we explain these imbalances? The belief that literary canons emerge primarily as the result of interest-related judgments about greatness or relevance comes at the cost of neglecting larger parts of the history of reading and writing and the idea of literacy that conditions the access to and the exclusion from dominant forms of literary production. In almost all cases, the reason why some groups of authors are represented more prominently than others has to do with the unequal distribution of knowledge and power rather than with the preferences of editors or academics in general. If, for instance, there are few African-American or Indian-British women authors anthologized in today's literary histories of the nineteenth century, the main reason is that the social position of these individuals never allowed them to read and write in the first place, not, however, that they produced an empirically verifiable archive of institutionally unacknowledged literary texts. Hence, the problem of canon formation indicates a broader social problem inasmuch as it reveals the inequalities that prevent certain groups from participating in and thus also defining symbolically valuable activities, such as the production and reception of high art literature. A comprehensive debate about the forms and the functions of the canon must take into account

the specific social and political conditions under which people were allowed to participate in or prevented from accessing institutionally prestigious fields of cultural production, rather than merely analyzing retroactive scholarly projections of literary greatness and their underlying ideological biases.[9]

What Baym's example shows is that processes of literary canon formation are not congruent with principles of representative democracy. What it also shows, however, is that the revisionist spirit of the 1970s and 1980s—still perceptible today—was based on the ambition to make the academic canon look as if it were representative of a broader democratic ideal. *Reading the Canon* attempts to complement such approaches by proposing to view literary texts as manifest forms of social practices and by attempting to determine more precisely where and how such practices emerge as particularly relevant or great. It thus becomes possible to explain the varied histories and institutional careers of literary texts independently of political response models in which processes of canonization can be hardly ever more than a symbolic extension of the nation-state, say, society, or even global capitalism. Why, for example, has William Shakespeare never lost much of his appeal?, a question explored in Peter Paul Schnierer's essay "Shakespeare's Complete Works: Canonization, Completion, and Collection in the Twenty-First Century." Why, on the other hand, was Walter Scott a literary superstar in the early nineteenth century, then lost much of his reputation, and is hardly read today except by academics and a few history buffs? By the same token, how can we explain the re-discovery of an author who was formerly unknown or considered to stand in opposition to relevant standards of literary excellence? A case in point would be Melville's rediscovery in the 1920s or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's institutionalization as a feminist author in the 1960s and 1970s.

As the contribution of Günter Leypoldt suggests, one way to think about these questions would be to conceive of the literary world as being shaped by shifting "spaces of singularity whose charismatic atmospheres

[9] For a systematic approach to the socio-historical relevance of reading, see Robert Darnton's seminal essay "What is the History of Books?"; for a more specific an account of the nineteenth-century reading world see Lyons; St. Clair.

shape our sense of cultural authority and our perception of literary presence." At once "market-sheltered" and "market-sustained," these spaces are bound to particular socio-institutional settings in which particular social practices and artifacts are endowed with authority otherwise denied. In that sense, they may be compared to museum spaces, facilities deeply imbedded within the social fabric but at the same time functioning according to an internal currency of value that does not necessarily translate into the vocabularies of commercial markets or other fields of professional expertise. Hence, spaces of singularity resist large-scale narratives of historical or economic progress and instead develop practices of self-legitimization that are authorized by their proximity to an immanent center of prestige or sacredness.[10]

Karin Höpker's essay on Frederick Douglass' long neglected and recently rediscovered novella *The Heroic Slave* provides an instructive case study of the complicated interplay between the socio-historical context of the novella itself and the institutional conditions that were necessary to retrieve the text as an important element of Douglass' oeuvre. Tim Sommer's essay examines the rise and fall of Sir Walter Scott vis-à-vis the career of William Wordsworth. The reason why Scott and Wordsworth appealed to different types of audiences and succeeded at different levels of the nineteenth-century literary market, Sommer suggests, had to do with their competing approaches to a Romantic model of charismatic authorship. While Wordsworth's market denial never brought him money, it helped him to secure literary avant-garde status in the later nineteenth century when Scott was already fading into critical obscurity. A similarly discontinuous history of reception is revealed in Sophie Spieler's essay "No Longer the Textbook of Any Generation," in which the author traces the fall of Owen Johnson's novel *Stover at Yale* into popular and critical oblivion. She thus shows that the production of canonicity also entails a notion of the non-canonical as its necessary conceptual opposite. Kirsten Hertel's contribution, "Highbrow—Middlebrow—Broadbrow? J.B. Priestley and

[10] The term "economy of prestige" is used in reference to James English's influential book *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2005). On the individual lives of things and commodities and their sacredness see, amongst others, Appadurai; Daston.

Cultural Re-Education in Postwar German Theatre," examines yet another space of literary singularity, showing how Priestly not only transcended traditional notions of highbrow prestige but also how he became a central figure for the Allied Forces to initiate what they believed should be the cultural reeducation of the German people after WWII.

Periodization, Clustering, Genre

The revisionist debates about the functions of a literary canon during the 1970s and 1980s have encouraged readers within and without the academy to rethink traditional conceptions of literary greatness from a political point of view; they have simultaneously triggered a new theoretical interest in forms of literary value production and dissemination and a consequent series of important book publications on the topic[11]; and, not least, these debates have changed the ways in which scholars approach the problem of writing literary history as such. Who are the protagonists we rely on when explaining what we mean by terms like "Romanticism," "Modernism," or simply "The Contemporary"? What are the groups of writers that we need in order to understand shifts in literary-historical evolution? And what are the contexts that scholars use to situate and explain such shifts? Individual nation-states? Global networks of literary activity? The political histories of colonization and decolonization?

A number of revised or completely new literary histories and anthologies have appeared over the past three decades, all of which have aimed to translate their individual disciplinary and political perspectives into new, diversified forms of literary-historical story-telling. The various *Norton* and *Heath* anthologies and the plethora of new *Cambridge Companions* are powerful examples. As a result, more ethnic writers, more women writers, and more writers of popular literary domains have been institutionalized within major literary histories. And the scope of courses offered in today's English Departments has

[11] Among the most relevant contributions see Baym *Guide*; Fiedler and Baker; Herrnstein-Smith; Heydebrand and Winko; Gates; Guillory *Capital*; Spivak; Tomkpins.

changed accordingly. Caroline Lusin's essay on Zadie Smith's *NW* and Franziska Schmid's essay on the uses of Sherman Alexie within the field of Native American Studies provide two case studies that explore the margins of literary discourse within the nationalist confines of Western literary canons. Lusin provides an intertextual reading of Smith's novel, showing how *NW* creatively appropriates the Canon in its originally biblical function to critique the history of the Western canon "in a manner that distinctly recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'carnival'." Schmid, on the other hand, argues that Alexie has been canonized within the field of Native American studies even though his most urgent concern as a writer has often been wilfully overlooked, namely the inclusion of Native American identitarianism within a more universal fight against social inequality.

Moreover, the strong emphasis on diversity representation has reproduced a rather inflexible, linear narrative of historical progress used to guide readers from the Early Modern era to Postmodernity and beyond. Titles, such as *Ethnic Modernism*, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, and *Black Literary Postmodernism*, are but a few tell-tale titles. The continuation of traditional literary historiography, to be sure, is an inevitable outcome of the revisionists' principles of critique: in order to question a list of representative authors, one is bound to re-appropriating the same system by which these authors were put in place. For example, the claim that the Romantic period in the US does not adequately represent the richness of American literary culture if it is reduced to Matthiessen's 'Big Five' (Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne) implies a foregoing moment of agreement on the centrality of the Romantic period as a somewhat coherent literary-historical system. And claiming that the Romantic period transitioned into something we still tend to call Realism in and around the mid-1800s also requires a specific set of arguments and authors to justify this transition as historically plausible. In other words: traditional literary history is premised upon a principle of pre-selection that remains completely untouched by any form of revisionist critique. If at all, such forms of critique affect the personnel deployed by scholars to speak

about the periodization of art and literature, albeit not the problem of periodization as such.[12]

Clemens Spahr investigates the majority of these problems in a theoretical essay on “The Problem of Periodization.” “Periodization,” he claims, “is a productive problem: the tensions inherent in the project of periodization make us confront our own silent assumptions about what history is, about how we select individual texts, and about how we write the history of American literature.” Spahr illustrates these issues by tracing the construction of the Harlem Renaissance as a movement designed to exemplify the tenets of African-American Modernism. At the same time, *Reading the Canon* also includes essays that uncover the principles by which period constructions can be authorized and challenged on the basis of singular author studies. Stefanie Schäfer reads John Neal’s *Brother John* (1825) as an important early nineteenth-century text that challenges “the canonized tenets of American Romanticism with a playful Romantic nationalism,” thus revealing how much generic period constructions depend on a rather limited cast of literary celebrities. Schäfer’s point then is that Neal is best understood as a Yankee-based American nationalist who may be included within a more traditional understanding of the Romantic period, but only if one is willing “to view this phenomenon in spatial terms.” Sascha Pöhlmann’s “Canon Fodder: Thomas Pynchon and the Invention of Postmodernism,” on the other hand, examines the functioning of the so-called “Pyndustry.” Focusing on the centrality of *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) as a postmodernist masterpiece, Pöhlmann argues that in as much as the book “was ‘postmodernized’ and used to construct the very paradigm it then typified and exemplified, Pynchon’s other texts and Pynchon the author were postmodernized” along identitical lines, at times by deliberately disregarding the distinct formal and thematic features of these texts (for example, *V.* and *Vineland*).

The question of how to cluster texts so as to make them fit their preconceived spot in literary history is in many ways related to the prestige of genre conventions and moments of generic change. Consider the ‘clash of titans’ between poetry and the novel in the second half of the nineteenth century as a representative example. Many of the texts now

[12] For a number of recent challenges to the practice of traditional literary historiography see Cohen; Hungerford; Underwood; Warren; Wegner.

used as characteristic works of a given period have attained their canonical status partly because they were already pre-selected historically as relevant texts by virtue of their belonging to a specific genre. For example, there is a substantial amount of allegedly Romantic poetry whereas the realist period is represented in most literary histories mainly by prose works. That is, the coherence of literary periods is not only warranted by representative works, but also by representative genres. Hence, on one level, the disproportionate representation of generic literary forms throughout history may reflect the choice of editors and historians—think of Ian Watt's reliance on Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding to explain the rise of the novel. But the more significant reason for this phenomenon is that the value of reading and writing changed historically inasmuch as different genres were appropriated as particularly useful markers of excellence within circles of the literary avant-garde. That Henry James used the novel as a literary form around 1880 was just as logical as it was for Walt Whitman to use poetry in the 1850s. Michael Basseler's contribution looks at the connection of canonicity and generic change from a broad theoretical perspective. Starting out from Hayden White's observation that explanations of changes in literary history and canons first of all need to tackle the problem of causality, the essay sheds light on the intimate connection between ‚the cultural dynamics of generic change' and the forms of literary canon formation." Heiko Jakubzik, on the other hand, concentrates on a close reading of Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction in which he discusses the reciprocity between the canonicity of Poe and the institutionalization of detective fiction as a distinct genre. His essay shows how Poe originally used a popular literary form that then travelled throughout time and across institutions to end up within the confines of the theory-induced university classroom.

Taken collectively, all contributions to this book stress the need to spatialize models of literary history according to different and historically flexible sites of literary consecration. That questions of canonicity are still discussed in conjunction with debates about political representation and the rule of hegemonic gate-keepers indicates the institutional background that helped to revive canon debates in the 1970s and 1980s. The premises of these debates, however, are still taken to represent a standard for literary scholarship that continues to reproduce a number of methodological fallacies, most of them pertaining to

the idea of a literary history as such. *Reading the Canon* therefore proceeds from the conviction that most of the predicaments typically associated with notions of canonicity—'Who can and should be represented?'—may be circumnavigated once scholars trace the individual trajectories of literary texts within particular literary practice spaces, thus uncovering the underlying currencies of value, the socio-institutional settings, and the specific readerships that are necessary for producing the greatness of some texts and the mediocrity of others. It is this sense of historically inflected scholarship that will help us acknowledge the prose of Hemingway *and* the poetry of Louise Erdrich, Shakespeare's tragedies *and* the novels of Zadie Smith (and many more) without having to defend any one of them against the other. Or, to put it differently, such defense mechanisms provide important instruments within political debates about the value of literature. These debates are vital within a broad, democratic public sphere. But they have relatively little to do with the ways in which the production of cultural value affects the conditions of contemporary literary scholarship.[13]

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[13] The "absence of reflection on the school as an institution," as Guillory put it, "is the condition for the most deluded assumption of the debate that the school is the vehicle of transmission for something like a national culture" (*Cultural Capital* 38). Pointing out the semi-autonomous status of the academy, he claims that "what is transmitted by the school is, to be sure, a kind of culture; but it is the culture of the school" (ibid.). Guillory's book combines a Marxist cultural materialism with Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the literary field. For Bourdieu's field model see, amongst others, his seminal essay "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed." For similarly prominent models of institutional autonomy see Fish; Kuhn.

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