

THE CANON IN THE CLASSROOM

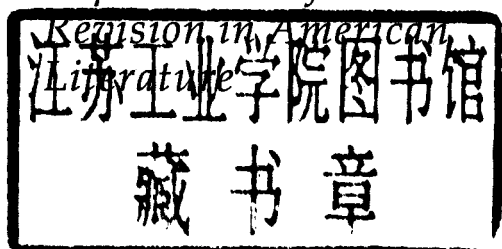
*The Pedagogical
Implications of Canon
Revision in American
Literature*

edited by

John Alberti

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General Editor's Introduction

The volumes in this series, Wellesley Studies in Critical Theory, Literary History, and Culture, are designed to reflect, develop, and extend important trends and tendencies in contemporary criticism. The careful scrutiny of literary texts in their own right remains today a crucial part of the work that critics and teachers perform: this traditional task has not been devalued or neglected. But other types of interdisciplinary and contextual work are now being done, in large measure as a result of the emphasis on "theory" that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s and that has accelerated since that time. Critics and teachers now examine texts of all sorts—literary and non-literary alike—and, more generally, have taken the entire complex, multi-faceted field of culture as the object for their analytical attention. The discipline of literary studies has radically changed, and the scale and scope of this series is intended to illustrate this challenging fact.

Theory has signified many things, but one of the most crucial has been the insistent questioning of familiar categories and distinctions. As theory has grown in its scope and intensified in importance, it has reoriented the idea of the literary canon: there is no longer a single canon, but many canons. It has also opened up and complicated the meanings of history, and the materials and forms that constitute it. Literary history continues to be vigorously written, but now as a kind of history that intersects with other histories that involve politics, economics, race relations, the role of women in society, and many more. And the breadth of this historical inquiry has impelled many in literary studies to view themselves more as cultural critics and general intellectuals than as literary scholars.

Theory, history, culture: these are the formidable terms around which the volumes in this series have been organized. A number of these volumes will be the product of a single author or editor. But perhaps even more of them will be collaborative ventures, emerging from the joint enterprise of editors, essayists, and respondents or commentators. In each volume, and as a whole, the series will aim to highlight both distinctive contributions to knowledge and a process of exchange, discussion, and debate. It will make available new kinds of work, as well as fresh approaches to criticism's traditional tasks, and indicate new ways through which such work can be done.

William E. Cain
Wellesley College

Reconstructing the Pedagogical Canon

The last twenty years have seen a revolution in the definition of "American literature." A radical critique—now broadly known as "multiculturalism"—has developed which questions the theoretical and political assumptions undergirding the discipline of American literary studies. A focal point for this critique has been the embodiment of those assumptions in the traditional "canon" of American literature: the list of supposed masterpieces that has come to be enshrined in college catalog course descriptions and the tables of contents of literature anthologies. Both poststructuralist literary theory and revisionist historical work have challenged the myth of the "timeless classic" by showing how the canon has functioned as part of a larger cultural effort to justify and reflect the values of the dominant culture in the United States. Along with this critique of the canon has come efforts to reclaim the "noncanonical" texts left off of syllabi and missing from the bibliographies of mainstream scholarship, texts often written or created by women, people of color, working-class and poor people. These texts represent a variety of cultural expression often rooted in aesthetic and cultural values that directly challenge those represented in the traditional canon. The perseverance of the scholars involved in this critique can be measured in the success with which they have moved their work from single articles and monographs to the creation of programs like African American Studies and Women's Studies and in the appearance of anthologies, textbooks and even hysterically written reactions against the movement by members of the traditional school.¹

But while much has been written about changing the texts we bring to class, not enough work has been done about what

happens *inside* the class with those texts, on what the connections are between theories of aesthetic merit, cultural analysis and scholarly purpose and theories about the nature and purpose of teaching.² Clearly, the movement to change the direction and focus of study in American literature has radical practical and, therefore, theoretical implications for pedagogy, as will be evident to any teacher replacing a traditional anthology of American literature representing fifty or so authors (predominantly male, northern European, Protestant and middle- to upper-class) with the over one hundred thirty voices found in the *Heath Anthology*—voices originating in Zuni, Spanish, Chinese and English, in the experiences of both colonized and colonizer, immigrant and Native American, rich and poor.

This collection, then, is based on the premise that the debate over the nature of the study of American culture must be as much pedagogical as it is theoretical and that, in fact, the radical critique known as multiculturalism must consciously resist the traditional academic split between research and teaching, scholarship and classroom practice, in order to *be* a truly radical critique. I see this collection as part of the beginnings of this theoretical-pedagogical critique and, therefore, as suggestive rather than definitive of this critique. In the preface to *Reconstructing American Literature*, Paul Lauter similarly describes that collection of multicultural syllabi not as an end in itself but as a “tool in a larger effort”—the effort described in the title of that work (xi). Continuing this effort, this collection hopes to initiate the creation of what might be thought of as a new genre, the theoretical-pedagogical essay.

“New” is, of course, a relative term. Certainly the works listed in note 2 prove that pedagogical theory is not new; there are books and journals devoted to the topic, most obviously in the fields of education and, as I mention below, composition studies. From a historical perspective, Paul Lauter points out in his Afterword that the lack of interest in pedagogy over the last two decades really represents a suppression of movements for radical pedagogical revision that accompanied the social and academic activism of the sixties, the same activism responsible for the contemporary multicultural movement.

Still, as a quick survey of the works-cited list shows, most of the important recent work in college-level pedagogy comes from a relatively small group of publishers, most notably the National Council of Teachers of English and the University of Illinois Press. Within the discipline as a whole, pedagogical theory is still positioned as a specialized subcategory ancillary to the “main” activities of theory and scholarship. By “new,” then, I mean not so much the creation of a new form as the demarginalization of the study of pedagogy within literary and cultural studies and a restructuring of literary criticism to match the restructuring of American literature, a restructuring that deconstructs the crippling institutional and intellectual oppositions between theory and practice, scholarship and teaching.

II

The history of the old canon helps explain why the attempt to reconstruct American literature is as much about pedagogical theory as it is about literary criticism. When critics talk about “canon revision” in American literature, they are usually referring to a revision of the New Critical canon. Lauter traces the process through which in the nineteen-twenties critical authority for the evaluation and interpretation of literature was consolidated on college campuses in the hands of a small, demographically homogeneous group of professors—mainly male, upper-class, from northern European Protestant backgrounds—who began to develop various strands of formalist and modernist literary theories into a set of critical principles that valorized formal complexity, self-conscious irony and aesthetic distance—the collection of aesthetic perspectives known as the “New Criticism.”³ Lauter goes on to show, as does Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs*, how the narrow cultural perspective represented by these scholars along with the narrowly defined set of formalist aesthetic ideals they developed (the emphasis on formal experimentation, irony and ambiguity), worked to narrow the number of texts included in literary anthologies and taught in classrooms.

This account of the development of New Critical theory is only part of the story, however, because, as Lauter also

demonstrates in the Afterword, in the case of the New Criticism, the argument about *what* to read and why was connected with an argument about *how* to read. Obviously much of the academic success of the New Criticism lay in the positions of professional status held by the New Critics as well as in their membership in the dominant cultural group, but much of the institutional success of New Critical theory—its enshrinement in literary anthologies, classroom syllabi and teaching strategies—lay in the pedagogical foundation that the New Critics built. Unlike most recent literary criticism, pedagogical theory was a part of New Critical theory right from the beginning. As Tompkins has shown, this eminently teachable pedagogy became part of a self-reinforcing process of literary evaluation (*Sensational Designs* 194). Works like *Understanding Poetry*, *Understanding Fiction* and the textbooks they generated both taught a way of reading poetry and provided a justification for the valorization of those literary texts deemed most amenable to such a method of reading. Open almost any standard textbook designed for introductory literature classes, and you will find the New Criticism: analysis of theme, tone, setting, imagery and irony as entities in and of themselves, with scant attention to social, historical or political context—or rather, with the assumption that social context is secondary to considerations of formal analysis. In the Afterword, Lauter describes this institutionalization of New Critical methodology as the “pedagogical canon.”

The revolution in literary scholarship over the past twenty years has countered the narrowness of the New Critical canon by bringing long neglected texts not only to light but now into print as well. Pioneering work by organizations like the Feminist Press have led to projects like the Rutgers University Press “American Women Writers” series, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* and the recent proliferation of texts and readers featuring a greater selection of works by women and minority writers. Introductory literary texts now contain Alice Walker, Tillie Olsen and Leslie Marmon Silko along with Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner and John Updike. But if “multiculturalism” has become, in one sense, mainstream and sometimes seems as much a marketing strategy as a sociopolitical movement, it is

because while those introductory texts now feature a more diverse index of authors, the (New) critical strategies recommended for the analysis of these texts remain unchanged.

As a result, while the names of some of the authors being read are different, the reading experience itself remains defined by the focus on the "close reading" of texts as part of an analysis and appreciation of the formal complexity of those texts. Literary merit is still defined in New Critical terms, with one of two results for the classroom. Either texts by women, working class, and minority writers are taught to show that these writers can write "just as well" as the traditional canonical writers (since their previous exclusion from the canon suggests that they were somehow deficient), or texts are chosen in order to be "representative"—a strategy that can lead either to reductionism (Kate Chopin provides the "women's" perspective), tokenism or often both. In other words, unless changing *what* we read involves changing *how* we read, we will not be able to articulate the difference made by reconstructing American literature or by studying texts previously absent in the classroom—indeed, we will not be able to account adequately for that absence by any other means but by those critical-pedagogical ideas that "justified" that absence in the first place.

But if the last twenty years has seen a revolution in scholarship devoted to the discovery and publication of texts by writers belonging to other than the dominant cultural group, they have also witnessed revolutions in both literary criticism and pedagogical theory. Crucial to the New Critical enterprise was not simply the assertion of an alternative form of criticism, but the claim to have developed a kind of an objective science of criticism—the confidence expressed in titles like *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, and in terms like the "affective fallacy" and the "intentional fallacy." While Brooks and Warren didn't claim to understand everything there is about a given poem or story, they still felt their methods represented the proper way to that understanding. If Wimsatt and Beardsley would concede that the affective and intentional fallacies were almost universal readers' reactions, and that these reactions were not without critical interest, they were still *fallacies* as far as literary criticism was concerned. Perhaps the title of Brooks's

famous essay against a certain type of critical practice most neatly captures this sense of theoretical certainty, indeed, almost papal infallibility: "The Heresy of Paraphrase."

While important critiques of the New Criticism have existed from the start, particularly in the reader-oriented, multidisciplinary approach of Louise Rosenblatt, such theoretical certainty has come in for a battering over the last generation from the diverse group of theoretical schools, tendencies and strategies commonly referred to as "poststructuralism" (a term as variously defined and elusive as "multiculturalism"). While the diversity of these critical positions is itself one of the defining characteristics of poststructuralism, and while many critics who could be described as poststructuralists violently disagree with one another, poststructuralist criticisms—whether deconstructionist, feminist, New Historicist, reader-response, or poststructuralist Marxist—do share certain perspectives. Ironically—or perhaps "paradoxically" is the better word—the most important perspective they have in common might be the radical questioning of the idea of "in common" itself as part of a focus on the cultural construction and operation of difference. Rather than trying to achieve a consensus of how reading should work when done "correctly," or trying to settle on "standards" of literary merit, these theorists explore why and how readings and evaluations differ as a function of social, ethnic, gender and historical position. Instead of using theory to arrive at a single index of literary value, poststructuralists analyze what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls "contingencies of value." Her work can be taken as representative of the general poststructuralist view that "all value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things but, rather, an effect of multiple, continuously changing, and continuously interacting variables or, to put this another way, the products of a dynamics of a system" (30).

This move from absolutes to contingencies (a move a member of my undergraduate class in literary criticism ironically/paradoxically described as "common sense") has involved a radical decentering of authority in matters of literary interpretation and evaluation, and helps explain why the process of "canon revision" referred to in the title of this book is really a

process of canon elimination, specifically, the elimination of the idea of the canon as representing a centralized source of cultural authority.⁴ This same theoretical movement toward the examination of contingency also removes the "text itself," as it used to be called, from its central position as the stable determiner of the reading experience.

However, the traditional classroom is, if nothing else, a centralized place, typically involving a single instructor, a single syllabus, and a single lecture. Thus, the newly "multicultural" versions of the introductory textbooks referred to above represent a collision not only between canon revision and the New Criticism, but also between the decentralized assumptions of poststructuralism and the institutional and pedagogical centralization of the traditional classroom. But just as poststructuralist literary theory of the last twenty years has moved from absolutes to contingencies, from centers to margins, so too has pedagogical theory moved towards decentralized classrooms and the questioning of teacherly authority. Again, as Lauter more specifically documents in the Afterword, the same social activism (the civil rights and women's rights movements, most specifically) that led to the opening of the university both to women and minority students and to the study of the cultural experiences of women and minorities also generated a move towards more democratic pedagogies that acknowledge and build on the diversity of cultural experience in the United States, a diversity represented by the increasingly heterogeneous college student population.

The Brazilian educator Paolo Freire stands as both an example of, and primary influence on, this pedagogical trend towards the decentered classroom. In his classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he writes of the need to move from a "banking" model of education—where knowledge is a commodity "owned" by the instructor and "deposited" into the empty heads of the students—to a "problem posing" model of education building on a critical analysis of the contradictions and struggles encountered by students in their immediate social situations. Thus, Freire argues for a concentration on process and the student over content and the teacher. My shorthand use of "process" and "content" is itself more strategic and contingent

than absolute, however; rather than asserting a clear separation between process and content, Freire's pedagogy focuses on developing a critical awareness of how process leads to content—in short, how knowledge is created. As a result, Freire's pedagogy works toward students becoming active producers, rather than passive consumers, of knowledge and culture.

In the field of textual studies, the greatest work done on the application of the process model of pedagogy to the teaching of reading and writing over the last twenty years has come from composition studies, a field that has come into its own concomitantly with Women's Studies, African American Studies and other activist academic movements. Whereas the lecture model is still the norm in many literature classes in the United States, in composition there has been an increasing emphasis on what is called the student-centered classroom, with classes focused as much if not more on the process of writing than the end product. Peer review of student writing, along with alternative evaluation strategies like deferred and portfolio grading, is now fairly commonplace in the composition classroom.

Feminist theory, with its analysis of the centralized strategies of patriarchal power, has likewise questioned the centralized, top-down model of the traditional lecture class. Just as composition theorists have studied how to overcome traditional pedagogical methods that have silenced writing students and prevented them from developing an authentic sense of voice, feminist pedagogy has also developed strategies to counter silencing in the classroom, in this case, the systematic silencing of women's voices and privileging of men's.

Still, for all these simultaneous developments in literary and pedagogical theory, only recently has literary theory acknowledged pedagogical theory. Just as composition programs are often marginalized adjuncts of English departments, regardless of the scholarly and pedagogical success of these programs, pedagogy has long been the repressed Other of literary studies. That how to teach is something that "goes without saying" has been signified by nobody saying anything about it. Tompkins describes this repression of the pedagogical by saying that for most traditional college professors, "teaching

was exactly like sex . . . something you weren't supposed to talk about or focus on in any way but that you were supposed to be able to do properly when the time came" ("Pedagogy" 655). The fact that an essay collection like the present one has few recent predecessors is another indication of this fact; its existence, however, points to how this situation is changing.

The essays included here are representative of the revolutions in scholarship, literary theory and pedagogy defined above. Many are written by newly credentialed academics. This newness manifests itself in a diminished allegiance to the canonical past; in fact, many of the scholars represented here have been attracted to literary study by these revolutions in scholarship and theory, as evidenced by the feminist and African American studies perspectives found in these essays. Similarly, more and more new literary scholars have studied composition and pedagogical theory as part of graduate student teaching training and, as a result, carry with them both an awareness of and a respect for pedagogy and pedagogical theory.

Regardless of when the writers received their Ph.D.'s, however, their essays share the fundamental concerns of the theoretical and pedagogical trends I have outlined here: as much focus on *how* to teach as on *what* to teach as part of a larger trend to deconstruct the traditional binary opposition between "theory" and "practice," a dynamic view of education as a dialogic process of cultural analysis rather than the static transmission of information, a commitment to involve students as participants in culture rather than consumers of it, the use of what Freire calls "problem posing" and what Gregory Jay in his opening essay calls "problematics" as organizing structures of classroom instruction. Above all, these essays are radical in the sense that they call for a fundamental rethinking of the goals of literary instruction and the social purpose of cultural analysis. Embracing both the question of how and the question of what we teach, these essays insist on asking the question of *why* we teach.

III

If, as I have said, these essays are theoretically radical (whether overtly or implicitly), they also range in their scope,

from Gregory Jay's call to reinvent the nature of literary studies in general to essays like Anne L. Bower's, rooted in classroom practice and focused on the challenges posed by adapting radical theory to both the institutionally conservative sites of instruction and the institutional situations of the instructors. As a result, I have grouped the essays into three loose categories focused on rethinking the practice of study and instruction in American Literature at the levels of the profession as a whole, the individual course, and the interaction between student and teacher. As with the collection as a whole, these groupings are meant to be suggestive rather than definitive, and towards this end, each section is completed with an essay that serves as a transition to the following section.

The first section, "Literary Studies as Text: Rethinking the Profession," features essays that draw attention to the premises and purposes of literary studies in general as one of their main topics, although, as I have said, this question works as an operating problematic in all of the essays in the collection. Gregory Jay's essay, "The End of 'American' Literature," sets the tone for the section and the collection as a whole with his sweeping call for a restructuring of American literary studies, beginning with his opening sentence, "It is time to stop teaching 'American' literature," and continuing with his call for a "forceful uprooting of the conceptual model defining the field itself" based on his vision of the purpose of both scholarship and pedagogy: "Teachers have the responsibility to empower previously marginalized texts and readers, and to teach in a way that we risk surprising and painful changes in the interpretive habits, expectations, and values of our students—and of ourselves."

The following essays in the section work as both endorsements and important qualifications of Jay's powerful and articulate call for a truly radical multiculturalism embracing both the content of college curricula and pedagogical theory. Cornel Bonca's "In the Big Muddy: Art and Politics in the Classroom" cautions that the necessary focus on the political dimensions of canon revision or revolution should not blind us to questions of aesthetics, particularly as they relate to students' experience of literature. Renny Christopher likewise challenges the