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An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon

Charles Altieri

> These people think they follow the doctrine of interest, but they have only a crude idea of what it is, and, to watch the better over what they call their business, they neglect the principal part of it which is to remain their own masters.
>
> —ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*

1

Samuel Johnson is the canonical figure most useful for thinking about canons. If we are less in need of discovering new truths than of remembering old ones, there are obvious social roles canons can play as selective memories of traditions or ideals. But how do we decide that the selection is a good one, that any given canon should have authority? Johnson's observation on memory suggests an answer to this question. The answer, however, will lead us into some intricate and tedious arguments. Because we are not likely to locate truths univocally establishing values a canon can reflect, we must learn to negotiate the endless circles that constitute cultural traditions. We must find criteria for canons by provisionally accepting at least some received cultural values and by exploring hypotheses about human nature, themselves dependent on experiences mediated by these traditions. Indeed, we will find the theoretical terms needed to speak about a canon severely tarnished by the history that authorizes them. Ideals often cloak the most practical of special interests. Yet I shall argue that it is a mistake to read cultural history only as a tawdry melodrama of interests pursued and ideologies produced.

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Given our need for memory and the manifest power of various canonical works to transcend any single structure of social interest, I think it is possible to recover some of the force in classical ideals of a canon. Through that effort, we recover modes of thought about value and human agency sorely lacking in the dominant critical attitudes fostered by the hermeneutics of suspicion. That this hermeneutics can produce only demystifying accounts of canons strikes me as a sign of fundamental flaws in its grammar of motives—for texts and for our abilities to use them.

Such charges require particulars. Let me therefore construct a composite antagonist for this essay by attempting to define shared assumptions underlying a variety of "suspicious" critical stances. Jerome McGann's designation of a new principle—critical historicism—will give this antagonist a name and some fundamental beliefs. In contrast to the older hermeneutic ideal that led critics to identify fully with a given imaginative work, critical historicism insists that even the greatest masterpieces are dated: "Scrutinized through the lens of a critical rather than a hermeneutic method . . . [the work] will cease to be an object of faith . . . and become, instead, a human—a social and historical—resource." Scrupulously locating every aspect of the work in its historical setting "inaugurate[s] . . . disbelief" and thus establishes for the reader "ideological differentials that help to define the limits and special functions of . . . current ideological practises. Great works continue to have something to say because what they have to say is so peculiarly and specifically their own that we, who are different, can learn from them."[1] But, McGann asserts, what we learn must acknowledge that difference, must serve our freedom to explain rather than to imitate the values of the text.

Once we emphasize disbelief, we cannot maintain traditional notions of the canon. On the simplest level, what had been treated as transcending history now becomes merely evidence of its positivities. As Frank Kermode puts it in his influential "Institutional Control of Interpretation," canons are essentially strategic constructs by which societies maintain their own interests, since the canon allows control over the texts a culture takes seriously and the methods of interpretation that establish the meaning of "serious."[2] This sense of history has as its correlate Nietzsche's distrust

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of universals: all efforts to escape history are themselves historically determined. Thus, to accept any claims about transhistorical values is to blind oneself to potential sources of strength within the material differences shaping an agent's life in the present. The ideal of a canon, in this view, makes us a victim of that most dangerous of others—the fantasy of a best self to be excavated from our historical being. In pursuing such a chimera, we purportedly give authority to an other and condemn ourselves to inescapable self-alienation and self-disgust.

Finally, these "suspicious" assumptions about history and the self call for new perspectives on how to value the activities of criticism and the cultural heritage that criticism works upon. Projections of values—by works and by critics—are seen as overdetermined symptoms of needs and underdetermined assertions of hegemony that thus prepare their own undoing. Although McGann never clarifies what specific resources are found in texts liberated by this line of disbelief, there seems to be only one possible answer: historicist disbelief requires the other half of the relativist coin. Instead of idealizing the past (as under the older hermeneutic ideal), we are to impose on texts the forms of scrutiny that we apply to social life. In addition, we are to govern our practices not by the authority attributed to cultural canons but by the most clear-sighted grasp of our own present interests.

If the analytic attitude of critical historicism makes us suspect that canons have always served specifiable social interests, its accompanying political lesson is clear: any desire to put literature to work as a social force would require us self-consciously to build canons that serve our concrete, "political" commitments. Since the valuing dimension of criticism is inescapably ideological, we could either hope to impose a single canon that we see as favoring our own concerns, or we could take a more complex stance emphasizing the liberal play of interests in society.[3] If there are no longer any central stories that unify society but only stories defining the desires of distinctive segments within society, then our view of the canon should supposedly correspond to social reality, should perhaps parlay this fragmentation into articulate differences. Canons are simply ideological banners for social groups: social groups propose them as forms of self-definition, and they engage other proponents to test limitations while exposing the contradictions and incapacities of competing groups.

2

The past as essentially a record of ideological struggle, the present as a domain we liberate from that past by inaugurating disbelief and analyzing ideological overdeterminations, and the future as a conflict among the competing self-interests that determine critical stances—these are the stuff the dreams of contemporary theory are increasingly made

on. In opposition, I want to argue that the past that canons preserve is best understood as a permanent theater helping us shape and judge personal and social values, that our self-interest in the present consists primarily in establishing ways of employing that theater to gain distance from our ideological commitments, and that the most plausible hope for the influence of literary study in the future lies in our ability to transmit the past as a set of challenges and models. As ethical agents and as writers, we need examples of the powers that accrue when we turn critically on immediate interests and enter the dialectical process of differing from ourselves, in order to achieve new possibilities for representing and directing our actions.

My arguments involve three basic concerns. I shall analyze the concept of interests to show that one way we can best serve our personal interests is by elaborating transpersonal principles of value that link desires in the present to forms of imaginative discourse preserved from the past. Then I take up the question of how the traditional ideal of the high canon provides certain functions, or resources, of thinking that enable us to satisfy our interests. Finally, from my account of interests and functions, I derive three general criteria I consider deeply entrenched in our judgments of claims to canonical status, and I employ these criteria to advocate a model of reading I believe preferable to those inspired by critical historicism.

All my arguments, however, depend on our understanding why questions of criteria are so problematic for this enterprise. Arguments about canons depend on a certain kind of "foreunderstanding." Clearly, canons are not natural facts and do not warrant the kinds of evidence we use in discussing matters of fact. We are not likely to find general laws governing our acts as canon-formers, nor is extended empirical inquiry likely to resolve any of the essential theoretical issues. Canons are based on both descriptive and normative claims; we cannot escape the problem of judging others' value statements by our own values. What possible criteria could control such a complex evaluative discourse? It seems, in fact, that the critical historicist is on very firm ground, because what I claim to be canonical (or to be a criterion for determining canons) does depend on norms that I establish or, at least, on institutional norms that I certify. The entire process is profoundly circular. So the historicist would insist that no argument is possible: one can only hope to stand outside the claims, exposing the play of interests that create and sustain the circle.

Our attempts to find a way to approach the problem place us at the center of the current reformation created by the overthrow of foundational metaphors for thought. When canons are at stake it is purposes that determine what count as facts, not facts that determine the relevant values. This easy linking, however, makes it crucial to scrutinize the assumptions involved. If antifoundationalist claims like Richard Rorty's

are right, and yet if for centuries there has been at least the appearance of cogent discussion about values, we may be doing ourselves a disservice when we simply congratulate ourselves for discovering the circular nature of arguments about canons. Are there not features of circularity itself which enable us to make judgments about values? Even if all our facts are constituted by our practices and purposes, it does not follow that we cannot criticize some practices and purposes on the basis of larger, more comprehensive ones. Circles admit of levels of generality and complex encompassings. Those whose specific beliefs place them in many respects within competing circles may still share wider principles—for example, general rules of evidence or ethical standards of justice—for adjudicating specific differences. In comparison, values prove quite sectarian, usually by not surviving historical changes—the complex of critical assumptions fostered by the New Criticism is a good case in point. But even this example reveals deep affiliations with other, more enduring cultural values, like the ideal of aesthetic unity or the desire to imagine literature as different from history, on the one hand, and philosophy, on the other. We can hope to criticize New Criticism in a way convincing even to New Critics because we can rely on such larger features of circularity. Nonetheless, this general possibility makes it no easier to locate specific circular features we can rely on for my discussion here. That will be a difficult, often elaborate task. But it is very important that we begin with the general awareness of the kind of inquiry we must pursue. I do not propose to offer clinching arguments. Instead, I shall try to elicit a fairly wide circle of shared values deriving from some dimensions of our common literary heritage, so that we can assess claims about roles the canon has played and can continue to play in literary culture.

Indeed, it makes no sense to theorize about canons unless the possibility of finding common principles of judgment within circular conditions is granted. Our practical ideas about the nature and workings of a canon rarely derive from explicit theoretical principles or empirical encounters with a range of texts. We have ideas about canons because we learn to think about literature within cultural frameworks that are in part constituted by notions of the canonical. This becomes apparent when we try to imagine how we could respond to someone demanding noncircular reasons for preferring the texts that are commonly asserted to comprise the core of the Western canon. I do not think we could produce independent reasons; instead, we would have to describe an array of basic works in different genres (like the *Divine Comedy* and *Hamlet*) in order to indicate the concerns they raise and the kind of experience they offer. Ultimately we would have to show the questioner the discourses such works breed and the ways other writers engage them. We would have to teach a literary history charged with struggles to evaluate and use the past. And when we were done, we would have no way to prove that the questioner was wrong if he denied the relevance of those considerations. He could create

a canon solely on the basis of what he enjoyed in our survey. We could, however, point out the price he would pay in doing that. For it would be very hard, then, not to take all his comments as circular in the most vicious of ways, because he would not care about contrary evidence. He would be making a canon unconnected to the very examples and arguments that create significant problems of definition in the first place.

Too much contemporary criticism takes the route of willful circularity as its response to the dependence of rationales for valuation on previous decisions about values. Ironically, this refusal to work out ways of locating common grounds for assessing these valuations forces such critics to repeat two of the most serious errors in the foundationalist heritage they reject—an emotivism about values and a narrow sense of literary works as primarily nondiscursive forms for rendering accurate representations of experience. These mistaken repetitions, in turn, compound error in debates about the canon because they deny the principles of idealization that the very idea of a canon requires us to take seriously. Works we canonize tend to project ideals, and the roles we can imagine for the canon require us to consider seriously the place of idealization in social life. By "idealization" I do not mean the projection of propaganda but rather writers' efforts to make the authorial act of mind or certain qualities in their fictional characters seem valuable attitudes with which an audience is moved to identify. In this sense, even the most ironic of writers use their authorial act to idealize their chosen stance. Canons, then, are an institutional form for exposing people to a range of idealized attitudes, a range I shall call a grammar. If a critic refuses to take such idealizations at face value or to locate grounds on which they can be discussed *as* idealizations before systematic suspicion is applied, he in effect binds himself within his own narrow circle. His instruments dictate the result of his inquiry. As an example of such sorry circumscription, consider Kermode's essay. In his concluding remarks, Kermode asserts that the canon is a valuable feature of our institutionalized literary education. But all his considerable interpretive energies have been devoted to demystifying the canon so that it appears to be only a means for reinforcing a given set of social values. He has, then, no terms by which to explain his evaluation of the canon's importance except a banal insistence on the variety of interpretations it guarantees. Thousands of years of culture have come to this—a stimulus to subjectivity.

3

It is unfortunately a lot easier to raise an arch eyebrow than it is to describe critical terms that might account for the values in idealization while preserving a pluralistic sense of possible canons and their uses. Instead of facing the challenge directly, I shall rely on what I call a

contrastive strategy. Were I simply to assert a traditional psychology with its attendant values, I would expose myself to a host of suspicious charges about my pieties and delusions. So I shall begin by concentrating on the limitations I take to be inherent in the empiricism of the critical historicists' position. If, by deflating idealization, their arguments prove reductive, they should provoke us to ask what it is they reduce. We will find ourselves forced back within the circle of literary and existential expectations I suspect most of us still share. But now we might appreciate the force and possible uses of that training when we measure it against all we cannot do if we accept an alternative stance. That we can measure at all, of course, may emerge as the most significant consequence of this experiment in using contrastive strategies.

The subject of self-interest provides us with a clear test among these competing positions, and it establishes some of the psychological concepts we will need if we are to describe the cultural functions canons can serve. Critical historicism concentrates on two basic aspects of self-interest—the desire for power over others and the pursuit of self-representations that satisfy narcissistic demands. Out of these aspects, ideologies are generated and sustained. But this is hardly an exhaustive account of needs, motives, and powers. I propose that at least two other claims seem plausible, each with important consequences for our understanding of the canon—that some people can understand their empirical interests to a degree sufficient to allow them considerable control over their actions and that a basic motive for such control is to subsume one's actions under a meaning the self can take responsibility for.[4]

There are many general considerations I could invoke to support my two other claims. Theories that we conceal our real interests from ourselves seem self-defeating to assert, since our real interest must belie the assertion. Even less extreme claims about the egoistic basis of all valuations run into obvious problems because they equate with self-interest all the interest the self has and thus equivocate on the term. They produce by definition an equivalence not evident in our varied accounts of our own motives. Finally, there is at least some intuitive evidence for thinking that we do in fact often describe our behavior accurately and take responsibility for it. Indeed, one fairly constant cultural value is respect for persons who stand by their word.

The issues involved in fully testing any of these assertions, however, would lead us too far astray. Instead, let us take up some specifically literary features of experience that a theory of interest should account for. Insistence on the sectarian commitments inherent in self-interest is hard to reconcile with some basic phenomenological features of reading and with expectations about the authority literary texts might wield. Many readers see their interest in reading precisely as an opportunity to *escape* the empirical self, to undergo in imagination protean changes of identity and sympathy. Thus, the pleasure in the text is a pleasure in

forms of consciousness or eloquent reponses to experience we can only hope to have and to discover in imaginary worlds not congruent with our sectarian commitments. How else could we attribute the values we do to literary education? And how else can we explain the hopes of writers? Even if the writer wants only to assert power, she must imagine an audience vulnerable to the effort. It is no accident that those reader-response theorists who insist on the primacy of subjective interactions with a text do so not on the basis of literary history but by relying on the authority of contemporary psychological models of the self.[5] Nor is it an accident that claims about ideology rely on a similarly conservative view of the self.

Modern philosophy has for seventy years shared T. S. Eliot's desire to "attack . . . the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul."[6] But while critical historicists agree that one cannot self-reflexively gather the fragments of self into a coherent "I," they go on to describe or explain the self in action by resorting to the simplest hypothesis about the determining effects of cultural or biographical contexts. Nothing changes in the old "substantial unity" except the agent's ability to recognize and take responsibility for what seems patent to critical historicists. It is clear why they want the unity—they then have in the author's "self" a solid historical phenomenon they can attempt to explain. Were they to acknowledge the full play of interests, as well as the complex mental acts I think necessary to order these interests, their task would be much more difficult. But without an account of ordering powers, critical historicists' own claims to knowledge are subject to the same model of blindness and insight. Their critical behavior must be at least as symptomatic of history as the deeds of the geniuses they manage to disbelieve.

I wish I could consider the internal incoherence resulting from this model of suspicion to be a clinching objection. But there remains a possible defense, which requires me to shift the argument to more pragmatic concerns about the self. Many critical historicists claim no responsibility to the traditional imperative that explanation be subject to impersonal, disinterested criteria. Since they see "truth" as only a mask for power, their own work can get directly to the struggle for power without the "detour" of first having to satisfy truth conditions. By reducing truth conditions to features of rhetoric, such thinkers preserve their right to explain—by changing the nature of explanation. Although this shifting of grounds cannot be refuted, it might prove difficult to live by, and the difficulties may make us wonder whether our explanatory ideal is, in fact, reductive about our powers to know and to organize interests in relation to public criteria. If we can ask, as I am asking, whether we ought to enter the practice their claims create, it seems fitting to demand them to explain, in pragmatic terms, why their specific model of inquiry should be pursued at the expense of our older notions. Why should we reject the possibility that we can interpret ourselves and project purposes

which integrate various levels of our interests? Why should we reject the idea that the truth requires us to deny some ideas and interests? Finally, why should we reject the possibility of self-consciously articulating what Jürgen Habermas calls our "emancipatory interests"? I doubt that we can base emancipatory interests on Habermas' definitions of rationality or make them the only end of a political system: any public realm will also produce competing, nonemancipatory interests in how we establish authority or develop practical means for preserving order. Yet his model is extremely important for the aims of private subjects and the possible roles idealization can play in public life. Emancipation depends on correlating the negative critical work of demystification with the positive models and powers we can locate in culturally preserved forms of idealization. Once this dialectic between demystifying and idealizing emerges as a possibility, I suspect that our private interests will prove too greedy to condone endlessly repeating the self. We have, or develop, strong interests in expanding, not reducing, our interests. It may even be that linking private interests to models preserved by society will produce an interest in the public good.

4

I seem now to have gotten myself in a bind. I want to deny the substantial self but affirm the powers of consciousness for integrating levels of behavior, judging among interests, and establishing identities that complexly link us to the past. It will be through this bind, however, that we construct a psychological framework allowing us to connect the functions canons can perform to the picture of interests I have been developing.

To begin with, there is no need to equate powers of self-conscious integration with any foundational sense of the unified self. Recursive powers are common in formal systems. The distinctive unity we attribute to human projects need not require a genetic feature deeply private to the self, because that unity can stem simply from the act of establishing reasons or models for an action. As Eliot saw, destabilizing the private self is not debilitating so long as culture preserves a strong conservative element that establishes a repertory of public roles. And if the repertory offers a good deal of variety, the identities constructed need not be themselves wholly conventional. We work within and with conventions, bringing about new syntheses in the process. The public self begins as a simple shifter, an attribution to one physical being of properties available to any person. But because we tend to invest the "I" with imaginary forces, which Jacques Lacan describes, we have an interest in forming for the "I" a distinctive way of relating to the roles we learn to play. So in life, as in literature, convention and distinctive identity are not con-

tradictories but dialectically interconnected principles. We construct selves by weaving relations among conventions and acting in accord with reasons.

Eliot's remarks on the canon reveal the implications of this power to transform convention because he is forced to temper his conservatism with a Romantic codicil. He states that, at one pole, the canon defines genres that minor poets rely on in the same way in which public selves work minor variations on established social roles. But, at the other pole, major writers make something new of their heritage and create demands on others to explore the possibilities it offers for becoming strong identities. Thus, we must read the complete work of major writers, because their identity resides in the pressures they put on their inheritance and in the powers by which they transform empirical personality into an articulate public synthesis.[7]

Charles Taylor's essay "Responsibility for Self" goes a long way toward giving solid philosophical grounding to Eliot's vision of selves formed in a cultural theater.[8] Like Kant, but without any dependence on universals, Taylor makes a sharp distinction between empirical and self-defining choices, or what he calls preferences and strong evaluations. Preferences are judgments that something is good simply by virtue of the direct satisfactions it produces. All preferences are in a sense equal since they conform to no criteria beyond the specific desire of the chooser and no constraints except for practical considerations of possibilities and consequences. Strong evaluations, on the other hand, are second-order choices: something chosen not because of what it is but because it allows a person to represent herself as being an agent of a certain kind, as deserving certain predicates. Strong evaluations place a choice within a network of reasons, where the reasons in effect entitle a person to the self-representation if they fit the situation. The clear sign of second-order status is the nature of the constraints encountered in such choices. If I want to consider myself courageous, there are some cowardly things I cannot do—not because it is impossible or because I will be overtly punished but because the deeds are incompatible with a set of defining terms I have chosen for my actions. Second-order choices are contrastive because they are choices of meanings, not objects. Thus, they are constrained by the network of public associations that establishes meaning. Selves have public identity when they consistently maintain the contrastive schemes projected in their reasons for their actions.

Taylor's model is not without serious problems. There is much room for casuistry here but no more so than in utilitarian models and no less so than we need if we are to honor those who resist the temptation of casuistry. Moreover, in order to maintain a necessary flexibility and set of levels among choices, we must ensure that no single contrast is definitive. The opposition of courage and cowardice can be interpreted in many ways because the interlocking contrastive frameworks are not fixed categories but malleable structures. A person constitutes herself by establishing

the specific meaning of the contrast and acting in accord with the implications of that meaning. (Socratic dialogues might be considered complex strong evaluations.) In contradistinction, when we cannot see a connection between words and deeds or cannot place deeds in a contrastive context, then we simply cannot speak of moral identity at all. A person who calls himself courageous but acts in what would normally be called cowardly terms without offering (explicitly or implicitly) any alternative interpretation of those terms has no public identity, except, perhaps, as expressing symptoms. This person, I must add, could still have quite strong and determinate interests. What would be lacking is any process of self-subsumption, any sense that the person determined his interests with a stake in being a certain kind of person. Self-subsumption is a process of projecting images of the self and then adapting one's behavior to them. Within Western cultures these projections sustain claims to freedom and dignity to the degree that the agent can provisionally bracket his specific social setting in order to establish personal meaning for the public values available to him.

5

The process of strong evaluation dramatizes within practical life the two basic functions that canons serve within the cultural order. One set of functions is curatorial: literary canons preserve rich, complex contrastive frameworks, which create what I call a cultural grammar for interpreting experience. Given the nature of canonical materials, however, there is no way to treat the curatorial function as simply semantic. Canons involve values—both in what they preserve and in the principles of preserving. Thus, the other basic function that canons serve is necessarily normative. Because these functions are interrelated, canons need not present simple dogmas. Instead, canons serve as dialectical resources, at once articulating the differences we need for a rich contrastive language and constituting models of what we can make of ourselves as we employ that language. This interrelation, in turn, applies to two basic kinds of models, each addressing a different dimension of literary works. Canons call attention to examples of what can be done within the literary medium. The canon is a repertory of inventions and a challenge to our capacity to make further developments in a genre or style. But in most cases, craft is both an end in itself and a means for sharpening the texts' capacity to offer a significant stance that gives us access to some aspect of nontextual experience. So in addition to preserving examples of craft, canons also establish models of wisdom, often while training us to search for ways the two connect. This means that when we reflect on general functions that canons serve, we must take as our representative cases not only those works that directly exhibit exemplary features of craft or wisdom but

also the works that fundamentally illuminate the contrastive language we must use to describe those exemplary achievements. It matters that we read the *Aeneid* because there are strong reasons to continue valuing the tragic sense of duty the work exemplifies; it matters that we read Thomas Kyd because of the influence he exercised on Shakespeare and Eliot; it matters much less that we read George Gascoigne or Stephen Duck, the Water Poet, because they neither provided significant types exemplifying wisdom or craft nor influenced those whom we think did.

The curatorial and normative practices that we develop for such bodies of texts bring about three possible cultural consequences. The first, and most fundamental, is the most difficult to discuss. Canons play the role of institutionalizing idealization: they provide examples of what ideals can be, of how people have used them as stimuli and contexts for their own self-creation, and of when acts in the present can address more than the present. Harold Bloom offers a compelling account of the struggle a canon elicits, but his reliance on personal strength leads him to pay scant attention to other, equally significant effects of this heritage. It is the very idea of a canon and the example it offers that establish the standards writers try to meet. Indeed, canons are largely responsible for the frame of questions that allows Bloom's "agon," and, equally important, they establish the complex practices of argument by which critical evaluations can be articulated. Canons make us *want* to struggle, and they give us the common questions and interests we need to ennoble that project.

We share enough literary experience to obviate any need to elaborate these pieties. So I will proceed immediately to a second, corollary cultural consequence of canons. If ideals are to play a significant role for a culture, there must be a model of authority that empiricism cannot provide. When we offer an idealization from or about the canon, we must face the question of who will judge those features of the past worthy to become normative models—or, who will judge the kind of reasons we offer in our idealizations of those idealizations. We return to the dilemma of circularity. But by now I hope that our reflections on the canon will manifest some of the immanent capacities of the circle. The judges for the canon must be projections from within the canon as it develops over time. For here we can construct a normative circle, analogous to the principle of competent judgment John Stuart Mill proposes as his way of testing among competing models of happiness. Our judges for ideals must be those whom we admire as ideal figures or those whom these ideal figures admired. Only such an audience of judges can save us from the trap of an even smaller circle. For unless we can project audiences for our evaluations who are beyond the specific interpretive community that shares our reading habits, there is little point in giving reasons for our idealizations at all. All our reasons would do is identify our own community; they would say nothing significant about values in general

or would not give us the distance from ourselves requisite for both self-criticism and self-direction. Similarly, unless our audience were as capacious as the ideals we concern ourselves with, we would contaminate them (or ourselves) in the very process of attempting to make our strong evaluations articulate.

Even stating this ideal in a plausible form demands the witness of a canonical figure. I call upon Longinus:

> Accordingly it is well that we ourselves also, when elaborating anything which requires lofty expression and elevated conception, should shape some idea in our minds as to how perchance Homer would have said this very thing, or how it would have been raised to the sublime by Plato or Demosthenes or by the historian Thucydides. For those personages, presenting themselves to us and inflaming our ardor and as it were illuminating our path, will carry our minds in a mysterious way to the high standards of sublimity which are imaged within us. 2. Still more effectual will it be to suggest this question to our thoughts: What sort of hearing would Homer, had he been present, or Demosthenes have given to this or that when said by me, or how would they have been affected by the other? For the ordeal is indeed a severe one, if we presuppose such a tribunal and theater for our own utterances, and imagine that we are undergoing a scrutiny of our writings before these great heroes, acting as judges and witnesses. 3. A greater incentive still will be supplied if you add the question, in what spirit will each succeeding age listen to me who have written thus? But if one shrinks from the very thought of uttering aught that may transcend the term of his own life and time, the conceptions of his mind must necessarily be incomplete, blind, and as it were untimely born, since they are by no means brought to the perfection needed to ensure a futurity of fame.[9]

Of course, gods and heroes do not speak. These imaginative projections offer the typical openings to duplicity; but we know enough about such judges to project reactions we might agree on. Our projections would identify us with the appropriate realm of ideals and would replace the narcissistic circle with a common reference point for presenting and judging reasons. Finally, there is a powerful incentive built into the model because the richer our knowledge of canonical figures like Plato, Demosthenes, and their future incarnations, the sharper and less sectarian our judgments are likely to be. If we know our Plato, we will in all probability not let our reasons imitate the ones Phaedrus might give, especially if we are addressing an actual audience who shares that knowledge. An idealized audience will not sanction easy self-justifications. This model preserves as its arbiter not abstract laws but public images of personal judges capable of fully sympathetic and multifaceted comprehension.

We can now move toward questions of social authority by going back to the issue of a cultural grammar. Canons, I argued, sustain complex contrastive languages by showing in concrete terms what competing choices are likely to involve. That curatorial, or semantic, function takes on considerable normative force when we recognize that the qualities of this idealized audience can also become features of the cultural grammar. We acquire a grammar for describing actions that also conveys a good deal of information about the consequences—the kind of community or kind of approval—we might expect from our choices. This extension of grammar need be no more dogmatic or conservative than the straight semantic functions. Cultural grammars constrain discourse only to the extent necessary to allow us to frame alternatives or pose ways of questioning our choices as we imagine possible judges for them.

Now if this much of my case is acceptable, it seems plausible to make the further claim that the set of values and judgments sustained by the canon helps constitute something like Northrop Frye's alternative society within the existing social order.[10] This is the ultimate consequence of insisting that our acts of forming and using canons are not reducible to interests—needs and desires—fully explainable simply in terms of a specific historical and ideological context. For in what resists such critical appropriations, we find grounds for criticizing any given social practice. If we imagine thinkers and artists over a long period of time criticizing the existing social order, producing alternative models, and seeking judgment from within these alternatives, we see clearly how the very concept of imaginative ideals requires a dialogue between empirical conditions and underlying principles. This dialectic is easily acceptable in relation to private life. We use alternatives the past provides in order to shape possible selves in the present. But once that is accepted, it is imperative that we produce a view of history complex enough to handle the ways agents base their actions on a range of contexts, each creating possible ideals and imaginary judges. In turn, that density within history affords grounds for basing arguments about the public good upon the models writers create as they reflect on the conflicts between the actual present and what the past suggests is possible or desirable. Canons give agents within history the double consciousness basic to the Socratic ideal of lovers of wisdom forming marginal elites to preserve principles that can transform society.

The ground of authority that I propose will always be difficult to gain, because it requires us to convince large segments of those who wield social power that they should submit themselves to the judgments fostered by an ideal community. This difficulty is one of the many reasons canons are not sufficient instruments for social change. But no intellectual critique is. Intellectual constructs move only those whose strong evaluation involves the appropriate contrastive language. For these people, the appeal of an authority based on imaginative projections from the past can be

enormously influential. At the very least, appeals to personal example or to ideals apparently shared by most great writers can have stronger claims on us than appeals based on vague assertions about carnival spirits or a political unconsciousness. The ideals are explicit and their authority implicit in our literary activity. In asserting this, I do not mean that canonical ideals can or should directly dictate our actions. In that way lies conservative madness. I claim only that canons afford directions or considerations about ends, which we can reflect upon in relation to practical exigencies. Even with these qualifications, however, our need for such a model of authority is a pressing one, as is all too evident in the problems that arise when critical historicism is extended directly to political issues.

Edward Said provides a telling example. Said now seeks considerable distance from the Foucauldian critical historicism central to most of his previous arguments. To Said, Foucault's unrelenting insistence on power and the traps of being situated within a discursive practice denies the possibility of free criticism and moral witness. Speaking against Foucault's treating the idea of justice as either "an instrument of a certain political and economic power or as a weapon against that power," Said insists:

> If power oppresses and controls and manipulates, then everything that resists it is not morally equal to power, is not neutrally and simply "a weapon against that power!" . . . Even if the distinction is hard to draw, there is a distinction to be made—as, for example, Chomsky does, when he says that he would give his support to an oppressed proletariat if as a class it made an ideal of justice the goal of its struggle.[11]

Said now claims it is the task of intellectuals to produce versions of justice applicable to a given social order. But that claim immediately elicits the counterarguments of Paul Bové, another descendant of Foucault:

> Who measures the *Truth* of this idea? Who determines that the justice pursued is an "ideal" and not "false consciousness"? Who understands how it has been made an "ideal"? In whose interest and why? By what criteria? How is it established that these criteria are not themselves part of the "regime of truth" whose function in our society leads . . . to regulative authority for intellectuals?[12]

Said cannot appeal against this to rationality per se because rationality characteristically produces means rather than ends. This is especially relevant if one is sensitive to the ethnocentric uses to which a foundationalist sense of rationality has been put in past discussions about values. Nor can Said appeal to common sense or ordinary morality since these are precisely what the critic of power must often oppose. Common sense is often the blindest of ideological forces. I see no way Said can find the authority he desires for his resistance, unless he grounds his claims against

power, on ideals he derives from what our culture tells us we can be, or must be, if we want to measure up to a certain kind of judgment. Only those models from the past that have survived such judgments can serve as basic moral arbiters of our future. Intellectuals do have a special political role to play—but only if they are faithful to levels of experience where the products of intellect have had substantial effects.

Implicit in this discussion of authority is the third cultural consequence of the curatorial and normative functions of canons, well worth elaborating in its own right. As Longinus saw, custodial concerns for past ideals have projective dimensions especially important for contemporary writing. The weight of the past puts pressure on writers to handle certain tasks or roles, and it establishes a level of questioning necessary if a critic is to propose a work as capable of shaping values in the future. Under this dispensation, critics impose on new texts the same kind of expectations they bring to classical works. Such impositions are not often greeted with gracious submission by writers. The typical role of contemporary writers is to create stances that oppose the overt claims their culture derives from the canon. But for the opposition to matter over time, it will probably need to address specific canonical works and engage the same degree of emotional and intellectual energy that canonical works provide. Critical pressure makes these needs explicit and helps focus the writer's response.

One measure of our age is the difficulty we are likely to have in coming up with a good example of a poet who satisfies the standards of a high, transhistorical canon. With enough time I think I could argue that Bloom's misguided efforts to canonize John Ashbery as a visionary poet have, in fact, led us to concentrate on qualities of Ashbery's work that align him with great meditative poets like Wordsworth and Wallace Stevens. But negative examples from the contemporary scene can be briefer and more telling. Most criticism of contemporary poets seems to be content with questions that establish much weaker demands than those we characteristically impose on classical works. We often treat our writers as if they were descendants of Johnson's lady preacher, figures whom we praise not for doing a job well but for showing that it can be done at all. Both critics and poets have renounced, for the most part, the revolutionary spiritual ambitions of the sixties but not its distrust of the past. As a result they have nowhere to turn but to the ideals of earnest sincerity, careful attention to moments of delicate vision, and, above all, intricate manipulation of subtle features of the medium. Without a deeper and broader frame of reference and sense of cultural demands, we find only an impoverished vocabulary of motives masking as a careful, self-conscious commitment to lyricism. The ultimate irony is that such weakness allows poetry's role to be usurped by a theoretical criticism whose programmatic suspiciousness ensures a different but equally narrow human theater.

6

Once we know the roles a cultural structure plays, or could play, in our lives, we know how to assess any particular claims to be good instances of that structure. Functions establish criteria. Considerable difficulties remain in spelling out the appropriate criteria because, ideally, we would derive them from the canonical models of canon-formation we inherit and from analytic attempts (such as this one) to disclose the intrinsic principles within the circle of values we inhabit. Criteria for canons, in short, share the mix of historical and idealized features we have found wherever we looked. By now it should be clear that I take this circular feature as a strength in my argument, one more arc for the geodesic dome we build as we study our past. Here I want simply to offer the hypothesis that we can find within most disputes over a general high canon, three basic criteria that rightfully shape the process of discussion.[13] If the high canon transmits contrastive frameworks, exemplifies forms of imagination considered valuable in a culture, and provides figures of judgment for our actions, then our actual practice of judging literary works for the canon ought to capture these concerns. Conversely, spelling out the relation between our expectations and our evaluations should sharpen our sense of what we can or do share despite our differences.

These three criteria are difficult to state precisely, because they usually appear combined within specific discussions. The first is the most amorphous, requiring loose analogies to strong evaluation. I call it a criterion of forceful self-subsumption. For a work to play canonical roles, it must exhibit qualities which define it as a significant distinctive entity. Preeminent among these qualities is a capacity to interpret its own features by establishing a contrastive language for the situation it projects. *Paradise Lost,* in Addison's and Johnson's terms, presents a single action which integrates our most important concerns and establishes compelling moral categories for them. Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* integrates many of those same concerns by reversing Milton's moral categories and suggesting through its plays on language why this reversal is necessary and how it is possible. These cases are different enough from one another to indicate why I have little to say here beyond pointing out their conditions. All they have in common is that each establishes a model of what it means to have the self-defining strength to be a model on one's own terms. Conversely, all that good criticism of either work need have in common is a willingness to preserve demanding comparative standards that lead us to elicit the work's basic force.

If we ask what uses such force can have, we find ourselves in the central paradox of literary studies: the force of individual works qua self-subsuming individuals is important primarily because of the way it allows a work to become representative. Thus we arrive at a second criterion,

best expressed in Johnson's motto, "Nothing can please many and please long, but just representations of general nature." But this neoclassic formulation will not apply widely enough without a redefinition of what "representations of general nature" can mean. Canonical works are expected to provide knowledge of the world represented, to exemplify powers for making representations that express possible attitudes or produce artistic models, and to articulate shared values in a past culture that influence the present or to clarify means of reading other works we have reason to care about. But "representation" accounts only for the descriptive force of a work. The other, constitutive features of a work, which create a grammar of examples, require the broader concept of representativeness.[14]

With this concept we can organize discussions of cognition in terms of two opposed but overlapping directions of thought. In one direction, representativeness is a measure of semantic scope. A work is representative when it provides and responds to a sense of the typical or the general in any of the areas of expectation I just listed. The other direction involves measures of intensiveness. Representativeness is not usually determined by reference to specific states of affairs. Rather, the test of a work's force in this respect is its capacity to enable a reader to identify with the work so as to find in it the power to experience fully the central existential or literary situation it presents. These two features of representativeness—the sense of type and the sense of assuming a power of imaginative action—create a good deal of room for interpretive conflicts, often within the same cultural circle. For example, standards for how works provide the forms of knowledge worthy of a canon vacillate between demands for symbolic generality and demands for approaching the universal through a precise grasp of particulars. Similarly, one can emphasize or dismiss the emotional properties of a work, depending on one's sense of how emotions fit into claims about knowledge. So long as we insist that canons help us to know, we will have to argue about how we know and what best facilitates powers of action.

We need a third criterion because not all works of comparable scope and intensity have the same canonical status. We must, then, acknowledge the critical obligation to describe what we take to be the value of technical innovations or the wisdom and ethical significance of a work's overall content. We must evaluate by examining the powers of action a work clarifies or cultivates. Such questions soon lead to embarrassing impasses, because they pressure us to accept sectarian answers, either as dogma or as the liberal model of each sect's own ethical canons. And, indeed, the more we demand actual models of behavior rather than elements of a contrastive language, the more we will equate the ethical power of a work with an authoritarian program. But if we concentrate on the display of qualities in literary works and the creation of very general ideals, we have grounds for treating the ethical forms of a canon less on the model of a military academy than of a theater. The ethical force of canonical

models becomes a way of sustaining simultaneous levels of performance in a wide variety of roles. In fact, some canonical works—*Ulysses*, for instance—dramatize precisely this theatrical pluralism created by the synchronic presence of the canon. Here I cannot claim that competing critics share the same ethical concerns. Nonetheless, I can suggest that we can, to a large extent, get beyond our differences if we adapt an attitude similar to Joyce's. Then our basic ethical criterion becomes not what behavior a text will prescribe but what qualities of being it would make available for a variety of practical stances. On this model, works do not address social life directly but elicit fundamental forms of desire and admiration that can motivate efforts to produce social change. This is why and how Eliot can insist on testing works in terms of their power to make available a unified sensibility. And it is why Wordsworth dismisses works that do not align the intensities of subjective life with the "inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it, which are equally inherent and indestructible."[15] Finally, this is why Johnson's classicism seeks harmony not with external nature but with the emotions and judgments that align agents of diverse cultures and interests in a shared identification with the text. Canons themselves may form the very society they lead us to dream of and, as we dream, to see ourselves in our limits and our possibilities.

7

I can imagine three basic critiques of my general argument: that I am more ideological than the ideological analysts I fault for being narrow, that my efforts to restore "transideological" grounds of intelligibility and value only repeat the bourgeois fantasy of universalizing a limited set of interests, and that all this talk of idealization is empty piety that has no practical effect except to delude us into believing in the health and possible authority of literary studies. In response, I want to call upon an unwilling ally, W. J. T. Mitchell:

> The more one reflects on the notion of "institutions of criticism," the more difficult it becomes to think of any kind of critical activity that is autonomous and independent of institutional involvement. And yet the idea that criticism has, or should aspire to, this sort of autonomy is a persistent illusion that has prevented criticism from taking a clear look at itself. . . . The question is not whether criticism will be involved in institutions but rather what kind of institutions we will devise to structure our activities and whether criticism is capable of turning its gaze upon its own institutional base.[16]

As soon as we deny foundationalism, we are likely to end up embracing a version of Mitchell's stance. But we must also worry about taking too

myopic a gaze at institutional bases. What, we may ask, sustains specific institutions or allows criticism of them? And how do we know differences are irreducible? If there is to be anything like the critical dialogue Mitchell dreams of, must there not be levels of institutional encompassing through which criteria are imposed on the participants and their gazes focused? How shall we invest our attention to avoid becoming a mirror image of what we reject (as, for example, by proposing claims about the primacy of self-interest as our critique of bourgeois ideology)? If we are not to deny the possibility of authority from within literature, we must direct our gaze at the complex relationship between institutions and what can possibly justify or extend their practices. Or, to put the same point another way, we must recognize the general role of institutions as constitutions, as structures with many strata capable of directing and organizing power to enable certain forms of activity. Criticism cannot be autonomous, but its primary role may be to use institutional materials as means for capacitating autonomous individuals—that is, individuals with the capacity to make strong evaluations on the basis of contrastive language constructed from a variety of institutional contexts.

Criticism's dependence on institutions does not entail its devoting itself to analyzing those dependencies. At the very least, there may be very different kinds of critical activities—one for analyzing institutional dependencies and another for actualizing what the institution makes available. The ultimate danger in the critical historicism Mitchell represents is that it undermines precisely what the traditional bases for literary study offer as values. Specific dependencies on social institutions are best defined by purely analytic or purely historical disciplines. But if we want to know what any given institution offers as valuable, we need ways of responding to the constitutive forces within a tradition. What positive terms critical historicism affords for these enterprises will not derive from literary material nor apply to the forms of life individuals can construct for themselves. As I see it, critical historicism relies on a grammar of motives capable of praising only the powers of criticism the institution makes available and the general political forces it marshalls against prevailing values. If we confine literary criticism to this model of inquiry, we must employ the same predicates about actions as the social sciences do—thus depriving us of one of the very few disciplines with the potential power to establish goals that individuals might pursue and to construct audiences that make the pursuit plausible and desirable. In surrendering this power, we risk producing a world where only humanistic psychology would claim authority to clarify the ends of individual self-definition. I cannot imagine that being OK for me or for you.

These arguments all come to bear on one pressing practical issue: How do we teach reading and, through that, create hierarchies for the uses of criticism? Positions like Mitchell's follow inescapably from the ideal of reading as a process of inaugurating disbelief, or, in Geoffrey

Hartman's term, of reading *against* a text. But then how does one defend the texts one reads *with?* How can criticism hope to mediate texts as anything more than cautionary examples? We may, in fact, have already developed a richer grammar for the symptoms in our texts than we have for the varieties of intended meanings. It would be foolish to deny the power, interest, or even utility of such cautionary efforts. This, however, is not the route to reconstructing a Longinian audience or readers capable of using the contrastive language that audience authorizes for their own lives. I think we do better—that is, we better fit the ideals about reading developed by those writers whom we take the time to read—if we imagine ourselves as reading *through* the work. By submitting ourselves to its provisional authority as an integrated work, we can hope to construct the best possible case for the text as a window on possible values in experience. This saves us from a rather vulnerable smugness; it forces us to extend our imaginations; and it keeps authority within the imaginative processes of a dialogue with great minds, rather than placing it in some contemporary interpretive practice.

This is not the place to work out all the implications of reading through texts. It should suffice here simply to indicate how such a model of reading enables us to preserve for a culture the functions of the canon I have tried to describe. The crucial enabling step is to insist on reading authors as I think most of them intended to be read—that is, as agents constructing a version of experience with a claim to influence the ways generations of readers would view themselves and their world. This does entail partially reading against historical specificity, so as to highlight those qualities of the work that transcend the genetic situation. Highlighting transcendent qualities does not mean ignoring the history nor does it require our denying the historical commitments of a given writer. We need the specificity of a work, need it to maintain an otherness with something different to say to us. Models of dialogue like Hans-Georg Gadamer's tend to deny this difference. In my view, we do not want dialogue with texts; we want to encounter the full force of what the author imagined, in the terms the author chose to present it. However, we have a specific use in mind for that force. We want to see how strongly it asserts claims on us—both as a model of behavior and as a possible audience figure in an ideal community. Texts can enter this canonical theater in a variety of ways—for example, by their power to interpret their own historicity, by their deep grasp of perennial features of human experience, or by their construction of compelling ideals for human work. In order to participate as readers in any of these achievements, we must try to state the author's probable intended action within history in the most abstract context of problems and responses. Then the author's achievement can step out of history. Dante's intense imaginative reconstruction of his world becomes a potentially timeless grappling with problems of exile, with concrete challenges for the reader to satisfactorily respond

to a range of perennial character traits and action types, with questions of how an individual comes to understand the nature of justice and love, and, finally, with dialectical paths through which one can give order to experiences that, taken singly, overwhelm one's ordinary understanding. Similarly, we can read Augustine for the drama of inventing autobiography and a psychology appropriate for resisting mainstream culture and its canons. All these themes obviously lead back to particular dramatic and stylistic observations but under the crucial pressure that we judge our own reading as commensurate with the strong evaluations others' readings have given of the author. We may not agree with those readings, but if we are to appreciate the power of identification and identities a canon gives, we should be able to offer competing reasons for our interpretive acts that are intended for the same level of audience. By seeing how canons can be normative, by understanding the judgments of judgments that form them, we are likely to make demands on ourselves to be strong readers who are also faithful readers. Anything more private is not in our interest, at least if we believe it possible to find in history, texts or agents who do not simply repeat an endless, self-justifying, self-deluding farce.

I cannot provide that my model of reading should dominate. I cannot even wish that it exclude others. But I hope I can persuade some readers to reexamine our current critical preferences in relation to more traditional notions of canons, to help us at least work through the cultural circle of values we inherit as we define our allegiances. We have possible selves; we need possible worlds—much more than we need to base self-congratulations on the narrow analytic power of critical historicism. We must refuse to let it undermine perhaps the only hope we have of preventing our suspicious attitudes from becoming sufficient accounts of literary works. Instead, we owe it to ourselves to explore the stance that Ashbery's self-irony allows him to recoup from history:

> So I cradle this average violin that knows
> Only forgotten showtunes, but argues
> The possibility of free declamation anchored
> To a dull refrain, . . .
> . . . .
> Our question of a place of origin hangs
> Like smoke: how we picnicked in pine forests,
> In coves with the water always seeping up, and left
> Our trash, sperm and excrement everywhere, smeared
> On the landscape, to make of us what we could.[17]

1. Jerome J. McGann, "The Meaning of The Ancient Mariner," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Autumn 1981): 67, 65, 55. The term "critical historicism" applies to all schools of criticism—Marxist, feminist, or modified deconstructionist—which insist, with Terry Eagleton, that "criticism is not a passage from text to reader: its task is not to redouble the text's self-

understanding, to collude with its object in a conspiracy of eloquence. Its task is to show the text as it cannot know itself, to manifest those conditions of its making . . . about which it is necessarily silent" (*Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* [London, 1978], p. 43). The differences among critical historicists occur over how criticism can situate itself "outside the space of the text." Eagleton claims "scientific" knowledge; McGann is studiedly vague on this point; Jacques Derrida's deconstruction uses the issue of situating to reverse priorities so that historicism itself must be criticized as an evasion of what perpetually cannot be known however it influences our discourse.

2. See Frank Kermode, "Institutional Control of Interpretation," *Salmagundi* 43 (Winter 1979): 72–86. Kermode is not one of the full-fledged critical historicists. Like Jonathan Culler and Stanley Fish, he shares their relativism but not their passion about demystification, presumably because that too is only a reliance on one among many possible contexts.

3. Claims about self-interest exploit a basic equivocation. At times it is said that we are *determined* to pursue our self-interests, at times, that we *ought* to pursue our self-interests by developing the critical means necessary for freedom.

4. I use the term "empirical interests" in what I take to be a Kantian sense. "Empirical" refers to interests one simply accepts as preferences, without any need for justification. These interests invite ideological analysis, since, for Kant, they come essentially from outside as heteronomous rather than autonomous features of a subject's life. The opposite of "empirical," in this sense, is interests one tries to rationalize on principles that, at some level, have criteria not selected by the agent and also applicable to some other agents. For a historical account of the concept of interests, see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, N.J., 1977). For a clear conceptual analysis of problems in attributing all motives to self-interest, see Paul W. Taylor, *Principles of Ethics: An Introduction* (Belmont, Calif., 1978), chap. 3.

5. For a fuller analysis of reader-response theory, as well as defenses of the concepts of exemplification, strong evaluation, grammar, intention, and classic that I employ here, see my *Act and Quality: A Theory of Literary Meaning and Humanistic Understanding* (Amherst, Mass., 1981).

6. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (New York, 1950), p. 9. For a contemporary indexical account of the self that provides plausible alternatives to models of "substantial unity," see John Perry, "Perception, Action, and the Structure of Believing," forthcoming in a festschrift for Paul Grice. We find strange confirmation of my case about the "I" in relation to interests if we reflect on a problem of defining canon that I have so far ignored. My discussion has in effect stipulated the relevant idea of canon to be those texts a culture takes as absolutely basic to its literary education. I suspect that all my readers entered this circle sufficiently to understand that without this note. Yet the act of understanding requires considerable abstraction. There are many different kinds of canons, several of which an individual agent might subscribe to. There are personal canons and official canons, canons for what one needs to know and canons for undermining all one is told one needs to know—and each of these classes has several subdivisions. There are probably even canons for bathroom reading. Canons, then, reveal the same diversity and flexibility we find in the self's affairs. Does any one set of them comprise the self? Yet despite this diversity, we produce hierarchies of interests or stipulative constructs of selves appropriate for given situations and practices.

7. "It is the function of the superior members and superior families to preserve the group culture, as it is the function of the producers to alter it" (Eliot, "Notes towards the Definition of Culture," *Christianity and Culture* [New York, 1949], p. 115). Both the preservation of order and the production of change will require complex models of sameness and difference manifest in levels within the canon: "The Faith can, and must, find room for many degrees of intellectual, imaginative, and emotional receptivity to the same doctrines, just as it can embrace many variations of order and ritual" (ibid., p. 101; see also pp. 105–6). My comments on Eliot depend on his "What Is Minor Poetry?" and "What Is a Classic?," *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957), pp. 39–52 and 53–71.

8. See Charles Taylor, "Responsibility for Self," in *The Identities of Persons,* ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976), pp. 281–300. On the actual workings of a self not dependent on substantial unity yet basic to the use of idealizations within public life, see Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, 1975).

9. Longinus, *On the Sublime,* trans. W. R. Roberts, in *Critical Theory since Plato,* ed. Hazard Adams (New York, 1971), p. 86.

10. See Northrop Frye's essay on myths in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), and his discussions of authority in *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society* (London, 1970), pp. 22–56 and 241–56.

11. Edward W. Said, "Travelling Theory," *Raritan* 1 (Winter 1982): 65–66.

12. Paul A. Bové, "Intellectuals at War: Michel Foucault and the Analytics of Power," p. 27.

13. The evaluations I speak about involve the status of a work's content as a historical act. It is also possible to suggest questions we ask of candidates for a canon in terms of aesthetic properties of the work, as Monroe Beardsley does in establishing criteria of unity, complexity, and intensity. I suspect, however, that criteria like Beardsley's will not explain the power of a work to affect our sense of existential values, unless he defines "intensity" along lines similar to the themes I argue. Ironically, criteria of content may also prove more resistant to the historical change which now makes notions like unity very problematic.

14. I elaborate the concept of representativeness both in my "Representation, Representativeness, and Non-Representational Art," *Journal of Comparative Aesthetics* (forthcoming), and "Going On and Going Nowhere: Wittgenstein and Questions of Criteria in Literary Criticism," in *Literature and Philosophy,* ed. William Cain (forthcoming). That elaboration, of course, derives from Kenneth Burke.

15. William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems and Prefaces,* ed. Jack Stillinger, 2d ed. (Boston, 1965), p. 449.

16. W. J. T. Mitchell, "*Critical Inquiry* and the Ideology of Pluralism," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 610–11.

17. John Ashbery, from "Street Musicians," *Houseboat Days: Poems* (New York, 1977), p. 1.