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The Making of the English Canon

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WHAT ARE the origins of the English canon? The answer to this question is deceptively simple: Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton achieved decisive status in the mid-eighteenth century, the moment when the terms of their reception were set for years to come.¹ These authors were first represented as a literary trinity and first described with consistency as “transcendent,” “sublime,” and “classic” in criticism written during the 1740s through the 1760s. To make this simple argument, however, one might wish to suggest two further and complicating points: first, that the elevation of older vernacular authors during the mid-eighteenth century confronted and revised earlier literary-historical models in which modern literature improved on the works of the past and, second, that the mid-eighteenth-century revision of literary history resulted from a shift in the perception of cultural consumption. The canonical form of English literary history emerged as a reversal of an earlier understanding of cultural change. This reversal occurred amid a transformative tension between allegedly high-cultural and mass-cultural works and between the social worlds they were taken to emblemize.

The now familiar insight of recent theories of eighteenth-century print culture locates in the book trade a new relation to the past, to rationality, and to community.² In opposition to an archaic or Gothic past, the present defined itself as refined and polite, as a public sphere of private subjects, and as a nation. But the making of the canon was not simply an expression of print rationalism or of nationalist sentiment. Rather, print commodities and their readers produced over time a retrospective investment in the past. This endowment was, in turn, a compound item, elaborated in positions often taken in opposition to one another. Seen from one perspective, the past was an object of irrecoverable loss, a loss that radiated a Gothic charm. Seen from another, this Gothic nimbus only obscured the past’s essential continuity with the present, a continuity extending into England’s imagined future. In these antagonistic versions of the past, mid-eighteenth-century critics attempted to fashion a new understanding of cultural transformation. One lasting monument of this attempt was the fixing of literary history and of the literary canon

for the modern age. In the following pages, I trace the formation of the canon through the initial moment of progress and refinement to the mid-century moment of decline and roughness. Bridging these two models is an important discussion among critics about the different status of commodity and aesthetic value and about the professional condition of critical activity itself.

I

Like all cultural developments, the formation of the English literary canon into its canonical form—Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton—was at once a reaction to immediate concerns and a long and complicated process of abstraction. Mid-eighteenth-century critics made their own history, as it were, but they did not make it just as they pleased. The terms and narratives of mid-century criticism were shaped by previous generations of thinking about the problem of literary change. Restoration and early-eighteenth-century critics like Thomas Rymer, John Dryden, and Joseph Addison made a great deal of the successive improvement of modern writers on their uncouth ancestors. English as both a language and a literature, in this account, culminated with such late-seventeenth-century poets as John Denham and Edmund Waller, whose “smooth numbers” signified the arrival of English verse at modern regularity and of the English language at polite speech. In Rymer’s paradigmatic formulation, “Chaucer found an Herculean labour on his hands; and did perform to admiration [but] our language retain’d something of the churl; something of the stiff and Gothish did stick upon it, till long after Chaucer. . . . In Queen Elizabeth’s time it grew fine but came not to an head and spirit, did not shine and sparkle till Mr. Waller set it running” (27). “Nothing is brought into perfection at the first,” echoed Dryden in the 1700 preface to the *Fables*; “we must be children before we grow into men. . . . Even after Chaucer, there was a Spenser, a Harrington, a Fairfax, before Waller and Denham were in being; and our numbers were in their nonage until these last appeared” (281).

Smooth enunciation and uniformity of measure may appear to be curious ingredients for literary canon formation, but one need only glance at the

conditions of early-eighteenth-century England to see their logic. Readers accustomed to the accounts of Jürgen Habermas and Terry Eagleton and before them of Ian Watt and Richard Altick will be familiar with the setting of literary culture during the period: the coffeehouse, the salon, the club room, and the like.³ Viewed on the widest sociological optic, this semiofficial culture of polite speech brought together the reformed aristocracy and the upper echelons of the mercantile bourgeoisie into what contemporaries giddily referred to as the “beau monde.” Habermas has this situation in mind when he nominates early-eighteenth-century England as the “model case” for the emergence of the public sphere. The significance of “rational discussion,” he argues, lay in the separation of the private sphere of economic production and the patriarchal family from the sphere of established politics, a development that he, like Hegel and Marx before him, views as singular to the capitalist epoch and as first instantiated in England (27). According to Habermas’s “basic blueprint,” this prizing apart of civil society from the state endowed taste with new importance as the vehicle of sociable affiliation.⁴ One need not accept the full narrative of the public sphere, then, to appreciate the way in which the broadly social project of abstracting “polite” language resulted in a rather strident fetishization of grammatical correctness and metrical regularity. As early-eighteenth-century print culture glanced at the works of the past, it retroactively barbarized old writers, whose versification was “gothic” and diction “impolite,” whose puerile language troubled the mature flowering of the public.

Readers familiar with *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* will recall how Addison and Steele’s *Spectator* enjoys a special place in the Habermasian narrative. The periodical’s interweaving of aesthetic discussion with widely topical matters represents for Habermas the dual project of broadening the scope of literary culture and refining the taste of the new reading public.⁵ In this account the emergent book trade was warmly embraced by Addison and his followers, critics who found in print culture a form of sociability not limited by aristocratic entitlement. Such is at least the crux of Addison’s famous claim, in *Spectator* 10, to have brought philosophy down from the heavens

and into polite society: "I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses" (Addison and Steele 1: 44). Addison's nomination of himself as the modern Socrates is inseparable, in his own estimation, from his being "possessed of the art of printing" and from the sale of his writing: "my bookseller tells me that the demand for these my papers increases daily," Addison boasts; "my loose tracts and single pieces" are "retailed to the publick, and every page submitted to the Taste of forty or fifty thousand Readers." In laying the grounds for rational discourse, the commerce in print allowed modern English culture to surpass even the culture of the ancients:

Had the philosophers and great men of antiquity, who took so much pains in order to instruct mankind, and leave the world wiser and better than they found it; had they, I say, been possessed of the art of printing, there is no question but they would have made such an advantage of it, in dealing out their lectures to the publick. Our common prints would be of great use were they thus calculated to diffuse good sense through the bulk of a people, to clear up their understandings, animate their minds with virtue, dissipate the sorrows of a heavy heart, or unbend the mind from its more severe employments with innocent amusements.

The commodity exchange of printed goods is at one with the standardization and refinement of the social activity Addison terms conversation: "Knowledge, instead of being bound up in books and kept in libraries and retirements, is thus obtruded upon the publick; . . . it is canvassed in every assembly, and exposed upon every table" (1: 507–08; no. 124). For Addison and others, it was also the prominence of "gentle" readers from the "female world," whose leisurely domesticity put "so much time on their hands" that augured the mannered elegance of modern English culture (1: 47; no. 10).⁶ This set the stage for subsequent calls for a "masculine" canon. Of equal importance, the opening up of the cultural product for a nation of readers darkened the past, when texts were read only by the literati and when writers composed in an obscure idiom. Addison's essays

on wit, on the pleasures of the imagination, and on the virtues of Milton designed a polite modernity by separating it from a "gothick" prehistory (1: 271; no. 63). Here the present not only produced its own past, of which it was the necessary and healthy descendant, but fashioned that past in a way that would persist into the future: whence enchantment, superstition, the mythic, the Gothic, and so forth.

This narrative of literary improvement, one might say, followed the course of what Benedict Anderson has denominated print capitalism. Anderson's thesis is now well known: one of the first fully capitalized commodities, print assembled vernacular languages and audiences into nations—"imagined communities" bound by language, territory, and custom. At this level of analysis, Anderson's argument would appear to explain the early eighteenth century's model of the canon: progress to national refinement. Yet it would be more correct to say that the narrative of refinement and the canon it bequeathed (Denham and Waller) set the terms for the mid-century's critique of refinement and for the lasting canonical trinity (Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton). At this point, the national canon could, in Anderson's words, "loom out of an immemorial past" (11). In editions, treatises, and essays written in the decades immediately following 1688, critics often claimed that English poetry and the English language reached their apex in the present, a moment of military triumph, political stability, and economic expansion. In addition to celebrating contemporary style, this modernizing perspective prompted active revision or rewriting of older works; rough language, indecorous bawdiness, and violence were censored to suit the reading habits of polite society. Dryden's "translation" of Chaucer was but one instance of a movement that included Addison's essays on Milton (1711), John Hughes's orthographically "improved" edition of Spenser (1715), Pope's laboriously regularized and sanitized edition of Shakespeare (1725) and "versification" of Donne (1735), and Richard Bentley's notorious *Paradise Lost* (1727). In all these versions of literary history, the pastness of the author, the text, or the period at large was an issue insofar as it had to be overcome.

II

As critics began to rethink the consequences of widespread reading and the commodification of books, an affirmative relation to the cultural market became increasingly difficult to sustain. The print relations and forms of literacy that, in the early years of the eighteenth century, bespoke the refinement of national taste were now regarded with some dismay. This sense of cultural crisis, in turn, impelled a transformation of critical theory. As the very “common prints” Addison saw as the condition of a polite and rational nation became the condition of an unstable consumer culture, the emphasis on decorous ease gave way to a revaluing of difficult obscurity. To the degree that linguistic difference still distinguished ancient from modern English literature, it only confirmed for many mid-eighteenth-century critics the valuable distance of older writers from market society. The consequent transformation in the narrative and method of literary history was rather drastic: Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton replaced Denham and Waller; philology replaced modernization; and the narrative of improvement became a narrative of decline. Yet it would be wrong to say that the mid-century simply broke from the norms of the Augustans. Rather, the earlier model of literary historical development—progress toward refinement—was turned on its head; the past crystallized by the Augustans was dialectically preserved by their successors as the radiant sheen of pre-enlightened, vernacular high culture.

Why did print rationality bring about a nostalgia for antique forms and language? In a suggestive gloss on Walter Benjamin, Habermas describes how the public sphere brought about a certain crisis at its very meridian:

Culture products no longer remained components of the Church’s and court’s publicity of representation; that is precisely what is meant by the loss of their aura of extraordinariness and by the profaning of their once sacramental character. The private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to determine its meaning on their own (by way of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and

thus state explicitly what precisely in its implicitness for so long could assert its authority. (36–37)

Benjamin’s narrative, in this analysis, is ultimately grounded in the social relations of artistic productions—the change in producers and consumers over time. The important point for the current argument is not so much the implicitly Whiggish story of art’s democratization, however, as the counter-narrative of the aura’s phoenixlike rebirth as the aesthetic. The affirmative culture of the market led to a skeptical critique of the circulation of cultural goods. Literary culture became an object of critical discussion and so formed a public sphere of private subjects, but as a result, its sacramental aura was debased by circulation and consumption. Far from disappearing in modern culture, the aura is in fact its product. Habermas’s analysis thus may be rewritten to cover the emergence of the English canon only by shifting the perspective to the moment in the 1740s and 1750s when the earlier emphasis on polite conversation bequeathed a compensatory revaluing of the past.

Whereas Dryden and Addison attempted to overcome the difficult vulgarity of the past, mid-century critics found the linguistic distance and aesthetic difficulty of Shakespeare and Spenser (and on occasion Chaucer as well) important elements of what made these writers canonical. In *Critical Observations on Shakespeare* (1748), for example, John Upton writes that “without learning”—by which he means without “knowledge in ancient customs and manners, in grammar and construction”—Shakespeare “cannot be read with any degree of understanding or taste” (ix, 137). This emphasis on the oldness of Shakespeare’s language—the distance of its cadence and rhythms—led Upton to devote a third of the treatise to analyzing Shakespeare’s meter and defending its original scansion. Alienating the text from the very language of contemporary readers, Upton repeatedly suggests that the history of English is not an ascent to the modern ideal of polite speech. In fact, he argues, the weight placed on sociability produced a distorted account of the national canon:

The misfortune seems to me to be, that scarce anyone pays a regard to what Shakespeare *does* write,

but they are always guessing at what he *should* write; nor in any other light is look'd on, than as a poor mechanic; a fellow, 'tis true, of genius, who says, now and then, very good things, but wild and uncultivated; and as one by no means proper company for lords, and ladies, maids of honour, and court pages, 'till some poet or other, who knows the world better, takes him in hand, and introduces him in this modern dress to *good company*. (16)

A rational approach to the artifacts of the literary past consists in acknowledging their periodicity. This periodizing move then bestows a kind of high-cultural aura on literary texts as they fade into English antiquity. The rejection of the modernizing narrative, that is, values older works to the degree that they are difficult to assimilate into the community of modern readers.

As Upton examines how earlier criticism tailored Shakespeare for the public, he notes the social composition of that public, its confinement to the elite classes: "lords, and ladies, maids of honour, and court pages." Upton neither longs for the restriction of that audience nor celebrates its democratic overcoming. Rather, he argues that the category of audience itself has become a problem. This is a crucial move for the mid-century's variety of historicist or "scholarly" criticism.⁷ The public has forgotten how to read older texts; the national canon needs to be secured by specialist critics. As is common in such critiques, the representation of cultural degradation is provocatively gendered: "How far the corruption of even our public diversions may contribute to the corruption of our manners, may be an inquiry not unworthy the civil magistrate," Upton avers; "matters of these concerns are now left to the management of our women of fashion; and even our poets, whose end is *profit and delight*, are exceedingly cautious how they incur the censure of these fair umpires and critics" (17). The culture of refinement to which Upton responds has transformed from a genteel politeness to a female conspiracy, a public managed by women and bearing of "death and destruction to the little taste remaining among us" (11). In this light, Upton continues, "it seems no wonder, that the masculine and nervous Shakespeare, and Milton should so little please our effeminate taste. And

the more I consider our studies and amusements, the greater is the wonder they should ever please at all" (15). Shakespeare and Milton are strikingly embodied, not just manly but also nervous, their distance from modernity reified in the strength and resiliency of their corporal fibers. But Upton may be understood, as well, to be suggesting "nervous" in the modern sense of anxiety: Shakespeare and Milton look to the present and see their eclipse by effeminate mass culture. The past viewed from the present proleptically worries over its demise.

As critics became increasingly concerned with the slack effeminacy of the cultural market, they often turned to the alleged nonrelation of Shakespeare's idiom to the speech habits of the public sphere. In a series of articles in the *Adventurer* (1753) on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *King Lear*, for example, Joseph Warton argues that his period's corruption of literary value and misreading of literary history are both products of culture's dissemination during the Addisonian period.⁸ He characterizes the project of the *Adventurer*, in fact, as a rejoinder to the *Spectator's* celebration of print commodities and of the reading public:

Addison remarks that Socrates was said to have brought philosophy down from heaven to inhabit among men: "And I," says he, "shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies at tea-tables, and in coffee-houses." But this purpose has in some measure been defeated by its success; and we have been driven from one extreme with such precipitation, that we have not stopped in the medium, but gone on to the other. Learning has been divested of the peculiarities of a college dress, that she might mix in public assemblies; but by this means she has been confounded with ignorance and levity. (21: 289–90; no. 139)

The "engaged and easy" manner of the *Spectator* had the unforeseen effect of degrading the very learning and taste with which it intended to please the public (21: 288). Addison is right to suggest that the print market has made cultural goods objects of conversation, but this process has turned back on itself; "instead of learning having elevated conversation, conversation has degraded learning" (21: 290).

One striking feature of Warton's response to Addison is that Warton makes pointed reference to the "literary," a term and problem not defined by the *Spectator*. "I would not be thought solicitous to confine the conversation even of scholars to literary subjects, but only to prevent such subjects from being totally excluded" (21: 291). In the move from Addison to Warton, "philosophy" changes to "literary subjects," and "literary subjects" becomes a category at once in crisis and with an importantly educative effect on the public: "It seems therefore that to correct the taste of the present generation, literary subjects should be again introduced among the polite and gay, without labouring too much to disguise them like common prattle" (J. Warton 21: 290). Warton's desire "to superintend the morals and taste of the public" places special emphasis on the literary as the category fallen victim to Addison's publicizing of cultural products. What makes literary subjects literary is their alterity to "polite assemblies" and "domestic familiarity," their capacity to correct overly "polite" and "domestic" taste (21: 287). We know what literature is by knowing what it is not; "the tinsel of a burletta has more admirers than the gold of Shakespeare" (21: 291).

One experiences Shakespeare's golden literariness in his particularly compressed and transfigured language. Lear's exclamation on having found Kent in the stocks ("O me, my heart! my rising heart!" [*Lear* 2.4.116]) shows how

by a single line, inexpressible anguish of his mind, and the dreadful conflict of opposite passions with which it is agitated are more *forcibly* expressed, than by the long and laboured speech, enumerating the causes of his anguish, that Rowe and other modern tragic writers would certainly have put into his mouth. Nature, Sophocles, and Shakespeare represent the feeling of the heart in a different manner, by a broken hint, a short exclamation, a word or a look.

(21: 127; no. 116)

For Warton, the past and the present each maintain a particular type of "speech"; the one is defined by lyrical compression, the other by public expatiation. This reversal of Addison's model does not so much abandon the project of the *Spectator*, then, as extend some of its fundamental premises to their

ultimate negation. According to Addison, the language of the public sphere was the same as that of canonical authors, indeed was formed by them. Warton's subsequent formulation retains the problem of language but divides the linguistic into two irreconcilable modes. Public conversation and literary language oppose each other, as the prose essay does the lyric poem. This division had no small effect on the emergent category "literature" and on the English canon.⁹ After completing the essays on Shakespeare, Warton published *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Alexander Pope* (1756), which cast a despairing glance at modern composition (in particular at what it took to be Pope's overly didactic and pre-aesthetic satire) and contrasted this writing with the great works of the past. The *Essay* begins with a summation of English literary history: "Our English Poets may, I think, be disposed in four different classes and degrees. In the first class I would place our only three sublime and pathetic poets: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton" (vii). Warton's thinking through of the problem of cultural change, literary language, and print capitalism culminated in one of the first representations of the English canon as a trinity.

III

Literary language in the vernacular, according to this trinitarian reading, is most commonly found in the works of the past. Older texts, whose customary modes of expression defied modern sociability, particularly suited the lyrical negativity Warton associated with high culture. Consider the shifting reputation of Spenser over the course of the eighteenth century.¹⁰ From 1715 to 1751 only one modern edition of *The Faerie Queene* existed, and unlike Shakespeare or Milton, Spenser generated few treatises or essays. The 1750s and 1760s saw a conspicuous increase in the volume of Spenser criticism, however, along with a revival of Spenserian poetics. In *Observations on the Fairy Queen of Spenser* (1754–62), Thomas Warton, the younger brother of Joseph and one of Spenser's more assiduous champions, argued that an appreciation of Spenser's work demanded a singularly learned ascesis, including a familiarity with the remote world of Spenser's sources. A reader of older writ-

ers, according to Warton, “brings to his work a mind intimately acquainted with those books, which though now forgotten, were yet in common use and high repute about the time in which these authors respectively wrote, and which they consequently must have read” (2: 264). Reading is, in short, demanding. As Warton was fond of reminding his audience, he was a fellow of Trinity College and, by the publication of the second volume of his *Essay*, Oxford’s professor of poetry (see Vance; Pittock). Warton’s academic authority rested in his adaptation of classical philology and its methods of source criticism and textual analysis to vernacular texts.¹¹ He made recourse to an older form of textual studies to elevate English writing and stake a position in the field of letters.

Warton’s assertion of a professional prerogative tentatively reversed Addison’s inaugural gesture, bringing literature back from the “tea-tables and . . . coffee-houses” to the “closets and libraries, schools and colleges.” Yet the philological turn in mid-century criticism capitalized on the very understanding of the past it endeavored to supersede. Critics like Thomas Warton preserved the earlier weariness of older works as an aesthetics of unapproachable pastness. This dialectic is exhibited with perhaps no greater salience than in the trajectory of the word *Gothic* as it made its way from a term of abuse for older English culture to the consummate expression of that culture’s value. For while it is no doubt true that the gothicizing of the past represented a fundamental rethinking of English cultural history, it is no less the case that this history depended on the prior establishment of an enlightened and polite modernity against a misty and obscure antiquity. Consider the way in which Warton, like Upton, challenged the model of literary history represented by Dryden’s “translation” of Chaucer:

I cannot dismiss this section without a wish, that this neglected author, whom Spenser proposed as the pattern of his style, and to whom he is indebted for many noble inventions, should be more universally studied. This is at least what one might expect in an age of research and curiosity. . . . His old manners, his romantic arguments, his wildness of painting, his simplicity and antiquity of expression, transport us into some

fairy region, and are all highly pleasing to the imagination. It is true that his uncouth and unfamiliar language disgusts and deters many readers: but the principal reason for his being so little known, and so seldom taken into hand, is the convenient opportunity of reading him with pleasure and facility in modern imitations. For when translation, and such imitations from Chaucer may be justly so called, at length become substituted as the means of attaining a knowledge of any difficult and ancient author, the original not only begins to be neglected and excluded as less easy, but also to be despised as less ornamental and elegant. Thus the public taste becomes imperceptibly vitiated, while the genuine model is superseded, and gradually gives way to the establishment of a more specious, but false resemblance. Thus, too many readers [are] happy to find the readiest accommodation for their indolence and their illiteracy. (1: 197–98)

This recovery of older English literature crystallizes a series of oppositions inherited from Addison and elsewhere: original/translation, difficulty/ease, ancient/modern, literate/illiterate. Warton’s novelty is to suggest that in each case the first term’s having given way to the second is the condition of degraded taste and indolent readers. Literacy in this passage is a scholarly facility with older languages—not simply the ability to read, but the ability to read well. And reading well gives one access to the high-cultural works of the past. The twin project of reviving Spenser and revisiting his sources turns on the axis of the older Gothic romance, a genre with an important aesthetic pedigree; such “romances . . . were the source from which young readers especially, in the age of fiction and fancy, nourished the SUBLIME” (1: 188).

Warton’s cultivated retreat from the public sphere into the university was thus elaborated analogously in the preference for Gothic and sublime difficulty over beautiful and sociable ease. These institutional and aesthetic positions were then recombined in his preference for the Elizabethan court over the modern market. In Warton’s scholarship, the plot of *The Faerie Queene* is continually decoded as court intrigue. This reading advertises the scholar’s historical knowledge and emphasizes that the poem was written for a small audience centered on the queen. The determinate location of Spenser’s poem in Elizabeth’s “theater of romantic

gallantries” shapes its formal constitution as an allegory, and it is through allegory, Warton suggests, that modern readers may get a sense of just how distant *The Faerie Queene* is from contemporary cultural products (2: 89). That “allegorical poetry, through many gradations, at last received its ultimate consummation in the Fairy Queen” signals an overall decline in literary achievement after Spenser, as the center of cultural production moved from the court to the market (2: 112). “After the Fairy Queen,” Warton writes, “allegory began to decline,” and with it went the Gothic romance as well (2: 110).

A poetry succeeded, in which imagination gave way to correctness, sublimity of description to delicacy of sentiment, and majestic imagery to conceit and epigram. . . . The nicer beauties of happy expression were preferred to the daring strokes of great conception. Satire, that bane of the sublime, was imported from France. The muses were debauched at court, and polite life and familiar manners became their only themes. The simple dignity of Milton was either entirely neglected, or mistaken for bombast and insipidity, by the refined readers of a dissolute age, whose taste and morals were equally vitiated. (2: 111–12)

The importation of satire and the cult of versification during Charles II’s reign persisted into the next century in disguised form as the literature of “polite life and familiar manners” (that is, as the modern forms of satire and the novel). The passage’s concluding paradox—in which a “dissolute age” is at one with “refined readers”—may thus be explained with reference to the entire mode of literary production Warton criticizes, in which the Gothic age of restricted production has given way to the refinement of the market, and the aesthetic power of the sublime to the enervated politeness of sentiment.

The mid-eighteenth-century Spenser revival received its most elaborate and baroque expression in Richard Hurd’s *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762). Like Warton, Hurd complains that Spenser is unread by moderns: “The *Faery Queene*, one of the noblest productions of modern poetry, is fallen into so general neglect, that all the zeal of its commentators is esteemed officious and impertinent,

and will never restore it to those honours it has, once for all, lost” (49). In Hurd’s rather instrumental lament, the waning of Spenser’s audience during the eighteenth century is the condition for his critical revival as high culture:

Poor Spenser then
—“in whose gentle spright
The pure well-head of Poesie did dwell”
must, for ought I can see, be left to the admiration of
a few lettered or curious men: while the many are
sworn together to give no quarter to the marvelous.
(150)

Spenser’s oblique relation to the reading public ensures his “honours” as they are now returned to him by the champions of a vanquished past.

As with Thomas Warton, Hurd’s literary nostalgia is tied to a vision of premodern social institutions. In a prefatory discussion to the *Letters*, Hurd bemoans the passing of “the weight and influence of the old nobility, who engaged the love, as well as commanded the veneration of the people”:

The arts of a refined sequestered luxury were then unknown. . . . The preeminence of rank and fortune was nobly sustained: the subordination of society preserved: and yet the envy, that is so apt to attend the great, happily avoided. . . . In the mean time, rural industry flourished: private luxury was discouraged: and in both ways that frugal simplicity of life, our country’s grace and ornament in those days, was preserved and promoted. (49–50)

In this elegiac remembering of an organic past, the “feudal system” (99) amounts to a sanctified hierarchy free from bourgeois “envy” and the modern public-private distinction alike. The present holds a “disenchanted” relation to the past (154). Literary history is a privileged narrative for representing the condition of modernity after the loss of the feudal world:

At length the magic of the old romances was perfectly dissolved. They began with reflecting an image indeed of the feudal manners. . . . The next step was to have recourse to *allegories*. . . . But reason, in the end, (assisted however by party, and religious prejudices) drove them off the scene, and would endure these

lying wonders, neither in their own proper shape, nor as masked in figures.

Henceforth, the taste of wit and poetry took a new turn: And *fancy*, that had wanted it so long in the world of fiction, was now constrained, against her will, to ally herself with strict truth, if she would gain an entrance into reasonable company.

What we have gotten by this revolution, you will say, is a great deal of good sense. What we have lost, is a world of fine fabling; the illusion of which is so grateful to the *charmed spirit*; that, in spite of philosophy and fashion, *Faery* Spenser still ranks highest among the poets; I mean with all who either come of that house, or have any kindness for it. (153–55)

Hurd's counterenlightenment presents a comprehensive history of literature and social relations. Once magic and belief flee the modern world, they take with them "fancy" and "fiction" and leave instead the desolation of "strict truth." The inevitable supersession of "feudal manners" by consumer capitalism entails the equally insuperable waning of the aura, as the twin forces of rationality and commodity exchange root out the last vestiges of the premodern world and dissolve its various animisms. So much the better for the reputation of Spenser. As soon as the aura is buried, it is also disinterred and endowed with the nostalgic half-life of the aesthetic. The aesthetic in such formulations amounts to what Benjamin would later call the "profane cult of beauty," a secular attempt to reinvent the sacred world by substituting in its place a number of new categories: here, the sublime and the Gothic, but also fancy, fiction, wonder, transport, and literature itself. These categories emerge in Hurd, as elsewhere, through a necessarily belated and maudlin attempt to experience "what we have lost," both the "fine fabling" of poets like Spenser and their organic feudal world. Disenchantment is thus one with reenchantment as the past now shines with the "charmed spirit" drained from modernity. Reenchanting the past provides of course a refuge for disgruntled moderns, whose anomie may at least be temporarily relieved through reading and aesthetic experience. But it also redefines the cultural field of the present, at once devaluing cultural products written after what Hurd calls "the great revolution in modern taste" and constituting a domain of restricted culture within the vernacular (108). The

Gothicism of the Gothic—its "nobility"—means not only that Spenser "ranks highest" but that this ranking is preserved by a literary elect, the "few lettered and curious men."

Hurd's vertiginous nostalgia takes aim not surprisingly at modern literary forms. Compare his account of Spenserian Gothicism to his passing reference to the modern novel in *A Dissertation on the Idea of Universal Poetry* (1766). In that study Hurd asks, "what are we to think of those *novels* or *romances*, as they are called, that is, fables constructed on some private and familiar subject, which have been so current, of late, through all Europe?" His answer is tart:

As they propose pleasure for their end, and prosecute it, besides, in the way of *fiction*, though without metrical numbers, and generally, indeed, in harsh and rugged prose, one easily sees what their pretensions are, and under what idea they are ambitious to be received . . . yet as they are wholly destitute of measured sounds (to say nothing of their numberless defects) they can, at most, be considered but as hasty, imperfect, and abortive poems. (7)

The "pretensions" of the novel lie in its attempt to usurp the space occupied by the older romance, which stands in greater relief when contrasted with its fallen descendant. The vulgarity of the novel, its inability to be properly "poetic," references in social terms the genre's cultural commonality. What may have provoked this curious digression on the novel? Hurd's literary history challenged the modernist hostility to older English texts and the characteristic genres of modern writing—a dual project united in its rethinking of the print market.

IV

The virtue of Hurd's little book is that it demonstrates with relative "zeal" how the reputation of Spenser and Shakespeare and the idea of literature they epitomized were products of a prolonged and pronounced cultural crisis. That crisis was reflected and transformed in Johnson's preface to Shakespeare (1765), one of the eighteenth century's most famous acts of canon formation. The preface gives us the opportunity once more to pose the question of

national literary history, to consider the conversion of the earlier model of progressive nationalism into a retrospective Gothicism and then again into a historical nationalism founded on reading.

Johnson's career, like that of many others, began with a calculated position taking in relation to his predecessors. Whereas criticism had once sought to be the expression of sociable refinement, he suggested, it ought to withdraw, slightly, from the public sphere. *Rambler* 23 (1750), for example, examines just how different Johnson's project is from that of the *Spectator*. The essay's conceit is that the *Rambler's* distance from publicity and refinement has, paradoxically, caused a stir in the public itself:

My readers having, from the performances of my predecessors, established an idea of unconnected essays . . . were impatient of the least deviation from their system. . . . Some were angry that the *Rambler* did not, like the *Spectator*, introduce himself to the acquaintance of the public by an account of his own birth and studies, and enumeration of his adventures, and description of his physiognomy. Others soon began to remark that he was a solemn, serious, dictatorial writer, without sprightliness or gaiety, and called out with vehemence for mirth and humour. Another admonished him to have a special eye upon the various clubs of this great city, and informed him that much of the *Spectator's* vivacity was laid out upon such assemblies. He has been censured for not imitating the politeness of his predecessors, having hitherto neglected to take the ladies under his protection, and give them rules for the just opposition of colours and the proper dimensions of ruffles and pinners. . . . (3: 128–29)

The public warily responds to a form of criticism that seems to come at an unusually oblique angle to its essential concerns and essential sociability. Yet the *Rambler's* suspicion of its public is not meant to signal a retreat from publication; as Johnson mentions over and again, his essays were produced for a market of readers whose demands shaped his "weekly labour" (128). Rather, it is the curiously antipublic publicity, the professed refusal to curb style or content to meet the expectations of his audience, that places Johnson in the thick of mid-century criticism. The calculated involution, moral posturing, and periodic bravura that formed his

critical personality were each overdetermined by the shifting perception of commodity culture. (We can perhaps quickly grasp how each of these stylistic tics would function in this context: the Latinate heaviness of the language wrenched the prose from the sprightly sociolect of coffeehouse parlance, even as the periodic balancing sought to add in its place Johnson's own brand of order; this order was then completed at the level of content by an exacting piety).¹² In any case, the posturing here takes what was even by then a familiar shape: public demands are experienced as a cloying, "female" presence, the solution to which is a rejection of the polite mode for that of a "serious, solemn dictator." It is in the mode of the dictator, then, that Johnson pronounces a summary end to the narrative of refinement: "taste and grace, purity and delicacy, manners and unities, sounds which, having been once uttered by those that understood them, have been since re-echoed without meaning, and kept up to the disturbance of the world, by a constant repercussion from one coxcomb to another" (3: 127).

Over the course of the 1750s, however, Johnson's thinking about the role of criticism in relation both to the literary past and to its public transformed importantly. In the parodic figure of Dick Minim in *Idler* 60 (1759), for instance, Johnson brings together the narrative of polite refinement and that of Gothic descent into a single critical error. The paper begins with the prototypical scene of literary history as modernization:

Of all the great authors he now began to display the characters, laying down as an universal position that all had beauties and defects. His opinion was that Shakespeare, committing himself wholly to the impulse of nature, wanted that correctness which learning would have given him. . . . He blamed the stanza of Spenser, and could not bear the hexameters of Sidney. Denham and Waller he held the first reformers of English numbers. . . . (2: 186)

The caricatured rehearsal of the stock terms of critical culture registers a certain crystallization of refinement after its dominance as a model for understanding the past and the past's relation to the present has already expired. Modern refinement is itself antique. But, as Johnson continues, the par-

ody also subsumes the antithetical position of mid-century historicism. In the second paper, *Minim*

often wishes for some standard of taste, for some tribunal, to which merit may appeal from caprice, prejudice, and malignity. . . . When he is placed in the chair of criticism, he declares loudly for the noble simplicity of our ancestors, in opposition to the petty refinements, and ornamental luxuriance. Sometimes he is sunk in despair, and perceives false delicacy gaining ground, and sometimes brightens his countenance with a gleam of hope, and predicts the revival of the true sublime. . . . (2: 190–91)

That *Minim* can move from the refinement of numbers to the “sublime” refusal of “petty refinements and ornamental luxuriance” demonstrates less a similarity between these two positions than their emergence as clear opposites: refinement and Gothicism. The professional trick of Johnson’s exasperated accounting of criticism’s favorite terms—refinement and recession, politeness and the sublime—is to make it appear as if he were somehow outside the institution he mocks.

Johnson’s double critique did not leave him without an account of public culture and literary history. In fact, he rejected Gothicism and refinement because of their inability to provide such an account. As is well known, Johnson’s remarks on literary works were often shaped by an overarching agon between the general and the particular, the grand and the small, the exemplary and the singular, the species and the individual.¹³ As a theory of canonicity, the preference for general forms turns on their transcendence of temporally or geographically curbed tastes, a transcendence bound up with a revised understanding of cultural consumption. This theory underlay many of Johnson’s seemingly idiosyncratic judgments in the years leading up to his edition of Shakespeare. Several times in the *Rambler* series, for instance, Johnson takes skeptical notice of the Spenser revival as a curious instance of literary nostalgia. “The imitation of Spenser,” he observes in *Rambler* 121, “by the influence of some men of learning and genius, seems likely to gain upon the age” (4: 285). What is disturbing about this influence, Johnson continues, is that Spenser’s language represents nothing so much

as the failure to be abstract: “His style was in his own time allowed to be vicious, so darkened with old words and peculiarities of phrase, and so remote from common usage, that Jonson boldly pronounces him ‘to have written no language’” (4: 285). In another *Rambler*, Johnson calls Spenser’s linguistic eccentricity a “mingled dialect which no human being ever could have spoken” (3: 202–03; no. 37). The point in either case is that the language fails to be used continuously enough for it to be recognizable to readers. The assertion is not simply that Spenserian diction has no use; it is rather that the use is too narrow, fixed to the particular moment of production, of singular mingling. “A *studied* barbarism,” Spenser’s idiom can only be reproduced by his epigones, never reconsumed by his readers (3: 203; emphasis added). And so Spenserianism is just nostalgia, a relation to the past shorn of any vital connection to the present: “the style of Spenser might by long labour be justly copied; but life is surely given us for higher purposes than to gather what our ancestors have wisely thrown away, and to learn what is of no value but because it has been forgotten” (4: 286; no. 121).

The final reference to value in this passage is telling. The name for culture’s exchange value here is memory, the accretion of particular uses into a general medium of recollection. In contrast to Spenser and the Spenserians, twin figures of nostalgia, Johnson begins to establish a version of the past secured by consumption. Accumulated acts of reading fabricate (or remember) a canonical entity named Shakespeare. For this reason, perhaps, the preface is notable for the volatile stridency of its opening pages. Above all other English authors, Johnson begins, Shakespeare deserves the accolades of antiquity:

That praises are without reason lavished on the dead, and that the honours due only to excellence are paid to antiquity, is a complaint likely to be always continued by those, who, being able to add nothing to truth, hope for eminence from the heresies of paradox; or those, who, being forced by disappointment upon consolatory expedients, are willing to hope from posterity what the present age refuses and flatter themselves that the regard which is yet denied by envy, will be at last bestowed by time.

Antiquity, like every other quality that attracts the notice of mankind, has undoubtedly votaries that reverence it, not from reason, but from prejudice. Some seem to admire indiscriminately whatever has been long preserved, without considering that time has sometimes co-operated with chance; all perhaps are more willing to honour past than present excellence; and the mind contemplates genius through the shades of age, as the eye surveys the sun through artificial opacity. (Johnson 7: 59)

Johnson's consideration of the honors paid to older works is suggestively fraught. The magisterial opening paragraph—an eighty-seven-word sentence—sets the tone and terms for the neater and more clipped periods that follow. The immense effort of hypotaxis breathing through the sentence displays Johnson's characteristic attempt to restrain, through style itself, the cultural problems with which he is concerned. The problem here might be termed pastness as such. After the syntactic upheaval of the opening paragraph, the balanced listing of the reasons the past may radiate a certain undeserved aura has a certain calming effect. But what is ushered in by these smaller units is a pronounced sense of Shakespeare's distance from eighteenth-century readers. As one looks backward to the cultural past one must gaze through "the shades of age."

Johnson's attempt to work around the aura of the past takes from it, however, a crucial term: Shakespeare, like Homer, resides in antiquity. This placement of Shakespeare in antiquity leads to what will become a singularly influential test of canonicity, the test of time:

To works of which the excellence is not absolute and definite, but gradual and comparative; to works not raised upon principles demonstrative and scientifick, but appealing wholly to observation and experience, no other test can be applied than length of duration and continuance of esteem. What mankind have long possessed they have often examined and compared, and if they persist to value the possession, it is because frequent comparisons have confirmed opinion in its favour. . . . Demonstration immediately displays its power, and has nothing to hope or fear from the flux of years; but works tentative and experimental must be estimated by their proportion to the general

and collective ability of man, as it is discovered in a long succession of endeavors. (7: 60)

There is an inevitable gap between the writing of a literary work and its ascendancy to high cultural permanence. This gap is literary-historical time itself, which must pass for the verdict of generations and ages to hold. As subsequent readers immersed in different life worlds, with newfound passions and distinct interests, repeat the preference of their ancestors, they confirm earlier opinions of a writer's greatness; they etch in stone the judgment of earlier periods. The accolades of successive generations designate Shakespeare an English classic: "The poet of whose works I have undertaken the revision may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient, and claim the privilege of established fame and prescriptive veneration." As history moves at its inexorable pace, it cleaves the aesthetic ("works tentative and experimental") from the empirical (works "demonstrative and scientifick") and throws forth the occasional genius whose "literary merit" (7: 61) shines "through the shades of ages." What distinguishes literature from science and philosophy here is less premodern enchantment than the immutable "general nature" and universal appeal that withstand the buffeting tides of readers. "The sand heaped by one flood is scattered by another, but the rock always continues in its place. The stream of time, which is continually washing the dissolute fabricks of other poets, passes without injury by the adamant of Shakespeare" (7: 70). The point of this memorable image is that literary works require a certain deferral before they become canonical. It is only after the fact that one can be sure that Shakespeare is not part of the sand and dross kicked up by history.

For Johnson, the collective body of readers was the agent and framework of literary endurance. This is no doubt why his criticism is so often identified with English cultural nationalism, a nationalism rooted in the sense that reading older cultural artifacts joins one to a community stretching back into an immemorial past. The reader thus is common not in his or her social status but in his or her lack of particular traits (of class, region, gender, and so on). The members of the reading public are alike in their identification with Shakespeare's char-

acters; "Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion" (64). Widespread reading depersonalizes individual tastes into the general medium of literature. Literature abstracts consumption into a perennial identification with masculine character raised to aesthetic law. The canon, in turn, rests on the stability of historical repetition, on one reader's reading like a generation of readers, on the sliding of reading into the adamant density of England's past.

How might Johnson be situated within the larger emergence of the English canon? Johnson's idea of reading occasions a tacit shift in the understanding of the cultural market. Many mid-eighteenth-century critics viewed the reading public as the source of degraded taste. The growth of the reading public ran parallel to the decline of literature. Whereas an exclusive public centered on the court had produced a robust national literature, the potentially boundless public founded on the market had produced the enervated literature of politeness and the novel. In this sense, the aesthetics of the particular in Joseph Warton's essays on Shakespeare bore a strict aesthetic analogy to the particularity of the cultural field. As long as authors wrote for a small audience their works remained in the literary language of the concrete. As soon as authors wrote "to satisfy the ladies and the beaux," their language descended to the expatiatory prose of the market (*Adventurer* 21: 124; no. 113). The effect of this literary history was to imagine the past in almost mythical terms. Johnson is fully in this tradition when he declares Shakespeare to be "an ancient." Popularity joins to value with the sobering ballast of historical time. The return to reading as the condition of national canon formation entails, however, a rethinking of what reading accomplishes. That is, reading is now understood according to an analogy between culture and the economy. Just as economic consumption leads to the abstraction of exchange value, cultural consumption leads to the abstraction of aesthetic value. The one defines the value of a commodity in terms of its exchange, its convertibility into the medium of money; the other defines the value of a text in terms of its survival, its convertibility into the medium of literature. Both

systems abstract from the particular uses of a given artifact and canonize lasting forms of generality.

The different positions of the Wartons and Upton, Hurd and Johnson represent a common effort to stabilize or at the very least to comprehend a cultural crisis of broad and significant scope: the long-term transformation of the reading public and the print market. It was then that the literary canon took on its modern constitution. No rewriting of literary history comparable to what mid-century critics performed on Denham and Waller would occur, in that time or ours. By Johnson's moment, criticism pieced together the Gothic account of sublime passiveness with the modern account of polite reading.

The English canon joins these antithetical models: reception secures value, but only over time. The antiquity of the national literature, in other words, depends on the constancy of its rereading. In the tendential suturing of antiquity to consumption, mid-eighteenth-century criticism responded to the problem of the cultural market by instituting a lasting contradiction: canonical works are both difficult and pleasurable, necessarily old and always new. This notion of the classical work of course no longer appeals to criticism and rightly seems the artifact of a past age. The canon's anachronism in the twentieth century should not, however, obscure its origins in the eighteenth. The dusk of the canon throws light on its making.

Notes

¹On eighteenth-century models of literary history, see Wel-
lek; Wasserman. On literary history and canon formation, see
Guillory; Reiss; Ross; Weinbrot; Patey.

²Recent work on eighteenth-century literary studies has been
importantly influenced by the historiography of print and by the
models of Jürgen Habermas and Benedict Anderson. Studies
that focus on the making of literary culture in particular include
Kernan; Klancher; Laugero; and Woodmansee.

³Habermas's seminal analysis of the English public sphere
proceeds from a reading of Watt's and Altick's studies of the
eighteenth-century reading public.

⁴On the history of the English book trade, see, e.g., Black;
Feather ("Commerce" and *Book Trade*); Ferdinand; Foot; Harris;
Myers and Harris (*Development, Economics, and Spreading*);

Plant. On the history of literacy, see Cressy ("Levels" and "Literacy"); Schofield; Stone. For a recent discussion of Johnson and literacy, see DeMaria.

⁵See Habermas 27–102. For one application of Habermas's thesis to the history of English criticism, see Eagleton.

⁶Nonetheless Addison greeted female literacy with notable ambivalence; see, for example, *Spectator* 15 on female sociability (Addison and Steele 1: 66–69) and 37 on female learning (1: 152–59).

⁷On the development of scholarly criticism, see Jarvis; Levine.

⁸Warton wrote two essays on *The Tempest* (*Adventurer*, nos. 93, 97) and three on *King Lear* (nos. 113, 116, 122).

⁹On the emergence of literature, see Ross; Williams; Laugero. For the argument that the category preexists the eighteenth century, see Terry.

¹⁰On the eighteenth-century reception of Spenser and its cultural context, see Wurtsbaugh; Kramnick.

¹¹In this respect, Warton followed the model of the Shakespeare editor Lewis Theobald, the first in a long line of classicists to turn to English texts. The transposition of method from classical to English texts replicates the formation of the vernacular canon on the model of the ancients even as it is an important development in that formation. See Jarvis; Kinney; Levine; Pfeiffer.

¹²On Johnson's style, see Wimsatt.

¹³Johnson's views on these matters are treated with considerable historical nuance by both Lynch and Reinert.

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