

CHAPTER 8

**DECOMMISSIONING THE CANON: TOWARDS A DECONSTRUCTION OF  
THE GIVENS OF THE LITERARY CANON**

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**Abstract**

This essay examines the differences between high and popular culture, looking at Joyce and Heaney as synecdoches of canon-creation and a resultant decommissioning of that canon. This is done through a deconstructive reading of text and context, high culture and popular culture, and the notion of cultural capital.

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One day when Father Butler was hearing the four pages of Roman History, clumsy Leo Dillon was discovered with a copy of *The Halfpenny Marvel*. 'This page or this page? This page? Now, Dillon, up. "Hardly had the day"... Go on! What day? "Hardly had the day dawned"... Have you studied it? What have you there in your pocket?' Everyone's heart palpitated as Leo Dillon handed up the paper and everyone assumed an innocent face. Father Butler turned over the pages, frowning. 'What is this rubbish?' he said. '*The Apache Chief!* Is this what you read instead of studying your Roman History? Let me not find any more of this wretched stuff in this college. The man who wrote it, I suppose, was some wretched fellow who writes these

things for a drink. I'm surprised at boys like you, educated, reading such stuff! I could understand it if you were... National School boys. Now, Dillon, I advise you strongly, get at your work or...' (Joyce 1994, pp.12-13)

Here, in this passage from 'An Encounter' by James Joyce, we see the hegemonic imperative of the literary canon in essence. The connection which underwrites Father Butler's comments is that between literature and education; between certain works which are self-evidently of value, a canon, and others which are inimical to such notions of value. If one examines the context of Father Butler's criticism, however, problematic questions arise. Both texts, the Roman history book and *The Halfpenny Marvel*, deal with the structures of imperialism and resistance. In one, it is seen as culturally valuable to learn about the imperial practices of the Roman empire. It is culturally valuable to learn about the imposition of an empire on people who may have had little choice in participating in that empire. The essential core of Roman history is a description of battles fought and tribes vanquished. *The Apache Chief*, in contrast, is deemed culturally lacking in value. It is seen as 'wretched stuff', inspired by a drunken writer and not worthy of study. Yet it, too, deals with an imperialistic history of conquest and colonisation. It too, outlines the struggles of individuals in wartime conflict and it too speaks of the history of a people. It too, deals with battles fought and tribes vanquished.

Of course, there are situational and cultural factors to be taken into account here. Roman history and literature carry significations of Empire, civilisation and the Roman Catholic religion with them as part of their cultural baggage. Occupying a culturally hegemonic position, this literature is something to which people feel they should aspire in terms of cultural capital. At a racial and indigenous level, on the other hand, the Apache is associated with nomadism, primitivism and, given the binary oppositional role of the native American, or Red Indian, to use the term in commonest contemporary usage, with

obscurantist opposition to the civilising mission of the white race. It is a classic example of Said's notion of positional superiority as expressed in *Orientalism*:

The colonised are thereby constrained to assert a dignified self-identity in opposition to a discourse which defines them as, variously, barbarian, pagan, ape, female; but always subordinate and inferior. Hence 'positional superiority' puts the coloniser in a whole series of possible relationships with the colonised...without ever losing him the relative upper hand (Said 1978, p.7).

The canon in literature provides cultural validation for this positional superiority in terms of the accrual of cultural capital, to use Bourdieu's term. Cultural capital, in its institutionalised state, provides academic credentials and qualifications which create a "certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to power" (Bourdieu 1986, p.248). These academic qualifications can then be used as a rate of conversion between cultural and economic capital, and it is this conversion rate that Father Butler is enforcing in the above extract from Joyce. Roman history is a validation of the cultural capital that attaches to middle and upper class Irish Catholic societal values and, as such, is canonically validated by the educational system. *The Apache Chief*, on the other hand, has little cultural capital attached to it, and is hence a signifier of non-value.

This notion of a canon, an *organon* of literary works selected according to purely aesthetic criteria, has long been central to the educational procedures of Western culture. That there are certain works which occupy a transcendental position within the culture, due to self-evidently superior aesthetic, stylistic and moral qualities, has been almost a truism in the study of literature. The very term 'canon' derives from scripture where it signifies the set of those biblical books officially accepted by any of the Christian Churches as genuinely inspired; or any collection or list of sacred works accepted as genuine. In this sense, a secular canon takes on this connotative dimension, being seen as an almost self-selecting order

of great works which are studied on purely aesthetic and moral grounds and which serve to enculturate new generations into high or middle-class culture as well as enunciating values and practices which are enshrined as desirable qualities in our culture.

As well as embodying the content of these great works, the canon has also come to stand for a particular attitude towards the study of literature, an attitude encapsulated by Christopher Norris in the following quotation:

Literary critics interpret texts. By and large they get on without worrying too much about the inexplicit theories or principles that underwrite their practice. Some of them very actively resist the idea that such theories can be found, or that bringing them to light could serve any useful purpose. (Norris 1985, p.1)

Where Norris himself stands on the issue of the validity of theory in literary criticism can be gauged from his observation that “one needs theory to avoid reading stupidly, accepting language at face value” (Norris 1988, p.11), as well as from his closely argued studies of the interrelationships of theory, philosophy and postmodernism. Perhaps a classic example of the type of thinking which I have termed ‘canonical’ is to be found in the work of F.R.Leavis, who begins his book, *The Great Tradition*, with the ringing assertion that the “great English novelists are Jane Austin, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad” (Leavis 1972, p.9). For Leavis, the term ‘Literature’ (the capital ‘L’ is symptomatic, as is the adjective ‘great’ in the book’s title) is a given, not to be questioned in any way. That its ‘value’ is cultural and societal, as Rick Rylance has noted, is clear from the example of Leavis’s pamphlet *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, wherein he “sought a way to moral and cultural health through...literary traditions” (Rylance 1987, p.2).

Leavis saw the act of reading as inevitably intuitive, and when asked by René Wellek to defend the philosophical choices inherent in his position, he refused to be drawn into abstract debate on the basis of the radical distinction between literature and philosophy (Widdowson 1982, p.129). His attitude to theory, and it is an attitude shared by some contemporary critics, was that it is outside the brief of the critic. For Leavis, theory was for philosophers, and he professed that he was “no philosopher” as he had “pretensions – pretensions to being a literary critic” (Leavis 1976, pp.211-212). The problem with this attitude is that, like Father Butler, there is no verifiable ground upon which to challenge the assumptions that give rise to the particular set of texts that are deemed to constitute the canon. In effect, groups of writers and readers become radically disenfranchised through their work being deemed to possess little cultural capital, and these groups have no right (write) of appeal in terms of their lack of standing. To claim that such choices are not theoretically based is disingenuous to say the least. It is useful to call to mind a wry assertion of Terry Eagleton’s, namely that “hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people’s theories and an oblivion of one’s own” (Eagleton 1983, p.viii).

In her discussion of the use of theory in *Critical Practice*, Catherine Belsey argues that Leavisite ‘common sense’, which seems to be anti-theoretical, is in fact based on an unstated theoretical model. The ‘assumptions’ about which Leavis expressed himself so reluctant to theorise, have been summarised by Belsey as drawing on the theory of ‘expressive realism’. This theory proposes “a *humanism* based on an *empiricist-idealist* interpretation of the world” (Belsey 1980, p.7). Belsey details the theoretical premises of this philosophy noting the “humanist assumption that subjectivity, the individual mind or inner being, is the source of meaning and of action” (Belsey 1980, p.3). The power of this argument is that it draws attention to the theoretical basis of all forms of criticism; the only difference is that some theories are explicitly stated, while others remain a series of shared assumptions, ideas and impressions.

In her view ‘common sense’ itself is ideologically and culturally constructed; it is produced in specific societies by the discursive practices employed by that society.

Criticism, like other modes of societal discourse, is theoretically based; therefore, this theoretical base, be it explicit or implicit, can be studied in the light of its mode of production. Linguistic, philosophical, psychoanalytic and ideological factors are intertwined at both extrinsic and intrinsic levels, and all can be subjected to theoretical critique. Hence, the canon, as a form of knowledge, is implicated in Foucault’s dictum that knowledge is a factor in the maintaining of a precarious system of power, as it is part of a “relation of distance and domination” (Foucault 1994, p.12).

Looked at from such a theoretical perspective, canonicity functions very much as an example of what Louis Althusser termed ISAs or Institutional State Apparatuses. These are the socio-cultural devices which allow for the enculturation of the next generations into the norms and default positions of the hegemonic group which controls the society. RSAs, or Repressive State Apparatuses, such as the police, courts of law and the military, are the ground on which compliance is enforced, but the ISAs – education, media, religion – are more subtle in their operation as they draw people’s assent to the hegemonic standards that are in force. In this sense, the identification with a cultural artefact, such as literature, can have a huge effect on the aspirational identity of different groups, races and genders (Althusser 1977, p.152).

Given that the term canon is religious in derivation, and that it has been defined in the OED as “the set of those biblical books officially accepted by any of the Christian Churches as genuinely inspired”; or as “any collection or list of sacred works accepted as genuine”, notions of origin are often elided in terms of the criteria which determined the inclusion or exclusion of certain texts. However, in the light of recent

theory attention has come to focus on precisely those criteria which motivated the choice of individual works. In Foucault's terms, issues of knowledge can never be separated from their contextual framework: "knowledge is always the historical and circumstantial result of conditions outside the domain of knowledge" (Foucault 1994, p.13). In other words, there are ideological factors involved in the choices which determine what is canonical and what is not: issues of canonicity are imbricated with societal control and hegemony.

Traditionally, then, canonical choices involve a classic binarism of 'either/or' choices: whether a work is canonical, and hence attaches some form of cultural capital, or it is non-canonical and hence of little cultural value. The canon here forms a coherent centre around which the edifice of a hegemonic culture can be established. However, in the context of Jacques Derrida's work on deconstruction, the whole epistemological structure of centrality has been brought into question. Derrida has discussed the concept of centrality in 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences' (Derrida 1978, pp.278-293). He makes the point that the centre in terms of any structure functions by limiting the 'play' of the structure (Derrida 1978, p.278). He goes on to define typical conceptions of centrality based on the Cartesian view of the transcendental subject as positioned anterior to language:

Thus, it has always been thought that the centre, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality...the centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its centre elsewhere....The concept of centred structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play (Derrida 1978 p.279).

The centre could no longer be thought of as a form of self-presence, existing anterior to the structure in question; it, like the subject referred to earlier, became a function in which “an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play”, and this process of sign-substitutions, which can be called ‘discourse’ became the constituent factor in the existence of the “central signified, the original or transcendental signified” which is never absolutely present “outside a system of differences” (Derrida 1978, p.280).

The desire to find a centre which conflates land and language, is deconstructed by Derrida’s notion of *différance*:

Every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system, within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality....*Différance* is the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences (Derrida 1982, p.11).

In this context, the issue of choice becomes all important: if there is more than one centre, then, by definition, there will be more choices to be made in terms of which centre one should choose. The Joycean example demonstrated the hegemonic force that a binary choice can enforce on notions of literature, culture and social class. In a deconstructionist context, such choices are now subject to as much interrogation as are their results. The motivating factors of such choices, what Foucault terms the interactions of power and knowledge (Foucault 1994, p.85) are in as much need of conceptual unpacking as are the choices themselves.

For Derrida, choices can no longer be outlined in simplistic terms of “this nor that; but rather this and that (e.g. the act of differing and of deferring) without being reducible to a dialectical logic either” (Derrida 1981b, p.161). The emancipatory effect that such a paradigm can bring to bear on issues of canonicity and, by extension, of social inclusion and of cultural validation, is immense. Foucault’s notion



of an epistemic shift in the seventeenth century, when the classical mind analysed things in terms of 'identity' and 'difference' (Foucault 1970, p.52) is a useful analogue here. The canon, as an unexamined cultural 'given', exercises a conservative and limiting force, maintaining a form of cultural control through a hegemonic structure of literary choice. On the other hand, once the criterion of sameness is replaced with that of difference, then new possibilities of transformation and pluralist engagement with literature and culture emerge.

Once notions of sameness and centrality have been replaced by those of difference and a decentred perspective, then the canon, as repressive cultural implement, can be decommissioned, and replaced by a pluralistic and transformative set of choices which will allow new forms of expression to accrue cultural capital and, hence, to enfranchise different social, cultural, economic and racial groups. Temporally, this means that the criteria which determine the canon can be seen to alter, and that structures of exclusion can no longer be maintained indefinitely. To extend the Joycean example, Joyce's *Ulysses* was banned by the American and British censors as a dirty book. In this case, Joyce's work was being equated with *The Apache Chief* in terms of its cultural value, or lack of value. Yet now, its status as a piece of literature is unchallenged. The text has remained unchanged, pace the Joyce wars; what has altered is the societal habitus, or *Weltanschauung*, which made these choices.

I would contend that such transformations of issues of value and cultural capital are an important part of the ethical function of literature and literary theory in terms of the ability to change the cultural and, by extension, social structures within which we live, and would adduce the work of Seamus Heaney to underscore this point:

I tended to conceive of English and Irish as adversarial tongues, as either/or conditions rather

than both/and, and this was an attitude that for a long time hampered the development of a more confident and creative way of dealing with the whole vexed question – the question, that is, of the relationship between nationality, language, history and literary tradition in Ireland. (Heaney 1999, p.xxiv)

In terms of Derrida's already discussed notion of *différance*, the similarity in phrasing and in epistemology is striking, with the process of *différance* being governed by a similar logic of 'this *and* that' as opposed to 'this *or* that'; of 'both/and' as opposed to 'either/or'. Clearly, both writers have come to the conclusion that only by some form of structure which accommodates selfhood and alterity within itself, can the complexities of identity be given an ethically correct enunciation.

Derrida has made the point, in *Of Spirit*, that the origin of language is responsibility (Derrida 1989, p.132), and Heaney is discharging his responsibility to a complex sense of interaction with the English language and culture through this act of translation and transformation. In terms of issues pertaining to the canon, and to notions of exclusivity contained therein, Heaney's analysis of a book setting out the canon of Pastoral poetry is worthy of study in terms of the liberating and emancipatory value of a deconstructive critique of the strictures of canonicity with a view to enabling a new type of canon, which is more fluid and less rigid.

For Heaney, the epistemological force of literature is complex and multi-layered, involving the granting of voice to different perspectives, as well as setting up cognitive and intellectual structures which allow for their interaction. In an essay entitled 'In the Country of Convention', in *Preoccupations*, about a collection of English pastoral verse, he is critical of what he sees as an oversimplification of response on behalf of the editors to the notion of what they term 'the pastoral vision'. Barrell and Bull (1975) see this vision as being ultimately false, because it posits a simplistic unhistorical relation between the land-

owning class and the workers, which mystifies and obscures the actuality of working conditions.

Heaney notes the influence of Raymond Williams on this point of view,<sup>1</sup> and goes on to criticise this “sociological filleting of the convention” as being guilty of a “certain attenuation of response” which curtails the consideration of the poems as “made things” as “self-delighting buds on the old bough of a tradition” (Heaney 1980, p.174).

The complexity of his position may not seem at first obvious in this essay; there is a polarity seemingly set up between what we might term intrinsic and extrinsic, or aesthetic and sociological criticism. While deploring the simplification of response, Heaney is also willing to grant the benefit of sociologically-driven criticism as “a bracing corrective” to what could prove an “over-literary savouring” of the genre as a matter of “classical imitation and allusion” (Heaney 1980, p.174). He is obviously not against extrinsically driven criticism *per se*; rather he is against any form of ‘attenuation of response’, any thinning of the plurality and complexity of the notion of literature. He sees the relationship between the internal dynamics of the poems, and their reflection, refraction, and transformation of external societal and cultural factors, as far too complex to allow the ‘Marxist broom’ to sweep aesthetic considerations aside in favour of the societal and economic. In terms of the construction of a canon, the issue which is the core of this essay, Heaney is arguing, in a Foucauldian manner, that the factors influencing choice are necessarily intertwined: there is a need to take into consideration both the extrinsic and the intrinsic, the sociological and the aesthetic, text and context, in determining these criteria.

Heaney’s notion of the relationship between text and context is far more complex and fluid. It could be seen as an example of the rhetorical figure of *anastomosis*, as cited by J. Hillis Miller in *The Ethics of*

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams wrote of pastoral poetry and conventions in broadly similar terms in his *The Country and the City*, and Heaney sees this book as in many respects a ‘companion volume’, incorporating “most of the texts he refers to and underlining or extending his discussion of them” (Heaney 1980, p.174). This aside demonstrates one aspect of the literary-

*Reading*, in terms of notions of ‘penetration and permeation’. Miller is also speaking about the relationship between text and context, and sees this notion of context as hovering “uneasily” between “metonymy in the sense of mere contingent adjacency and synecdoche, part for whole, with an assumption that the part is some way genuinely like the whole” (Hillis Miller 1987, p.6). It is here that he cites the trope of anastomosis, adverting to Joyce’s verbal example ‘underdarkneath’<sup>2</sup> as well as Bakhtin’s view of language as a social philosophy which is permeated by a system of values “inseparable from living practice and class struggle” (Hillis Miller 1987, pp.6-7).<sup>3</sup> One could just as easily see ‘con-text’ as a similar case, with one word, ‘text’ penetrating or permeating the other, ‘context’.<sup>4</sup> Here both words intersect and interfuse, but perform the dialectical action of remaining separate as well as blending. In terms of the canon, the parameters which structure the decisions are similarly interwoven. Canonical structures must, of necessity, be amalgams of their respective aesthetic, historical, political and sociological constituents, and it is the task of literature and theory to constantly interrogate and problematise these categories, as opposed to reifying them.

Heaney’s reading sets up a further contextual aspect of this dialectical structure which, far from attenuating our response, will thicken and enable it. Heaney laments the decision of the editors not to print translations of Theocritus, Virgil, Horace, Mantuan, and Marot,<sup>5</sup> as these were the ‘informing voices that were “modified in the guts of the living”’(Heaney 1980, p.175), which underwrote the

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political *nous* that becomes all the clearer as we read the essays and articles; he is ever-aware of the complications and connections between the world, the text and other critics.

<sup>2</sup> Hillis Miller’s Joycean example of ‘underdarkneath’, in *The Ethics of Reading* (Hillis Miller 1987, p.6), captures concretely the interpenetration of one word by another; the traces of the original ontologies of the words, and the neologistic relationship which is brought into being between syntax and semantic value through the anastomosis in question. He sees this as one of the generating linguistic tropes which brings about the crossings, displacements and substitutions between the non-linguistic and language (Hillis Miller 1987, p.7).

<sup>3</sup> The Bakhtin quotation comes from *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Volosinov 1973, p.471).

<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking context is a cognate of text, but I feel that the example is still a valid one, working as it does both syntactically, semantically and etymologically with ‘text’ deriving from the Latin for fabric or structure while ‘context’ derives from the Latin for ‘to weave together’ or ‘compose’ (Myers and Simms 1985, 64, 307).

pastoral poetry of Spenser, Milton, Pope and Thomson as they attempted to ‘adorn and classicise’ the native literature. He feels that such a ‘classical penumbra’ was automatic cultural capital for these writers, and thinks it a pity that the “ancient hinterland, the perspectives backward, are withheld” (Heaney 1980, p.175). Here, the textual-contextual anastomosis becomes more intricate, as this withholding delimits our reading of the pastoral genre, and of the specific English writing of this genre, as well as the complexities inherent in the title of the book, as well as decommissioning the canonical structure that the book itself initiates.

What is set out as *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, with all the canonical, imperial, and culturally homogenous connotations that are implied by the proper adjective ‘*English*’, becomes something different when placed in a dialectical relationship with these classical antecedents. Such external influences, in this case, far from attenuating the response to the lyrical impulse of the pastoral, thicken our reading of these works by complicating and interrogating how ‘*English*’ this genre actually is. This ‘perspective backwards’ is also a perspective outwards, pointing up the dependence of what is seen as the English poetic canon on generic and conventional borrowings from continental Europe. It is also a perspective inwards, as these extrinsic features have had a major influence on stylistic and thematic considerations, as well as on the aesthetic objectives of the genre. Here, the anastomosis between text and context is enacted in the permeation and intersection of the poems in the book and the poems which preceded them; of the English language and Latin and French; of Latin and French and translation; of classical pastoral convention and the English version of it and finally, of the texts that are present in the book, and those enabling translations from the classics, which are absent.

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<sup>5</sup> In later essays, the whole issue of translation is discussed in similarly complex terms, especially in the context of translations from the Irish language; see *The Government of the Tongue, An Duanaire*, and also translations from Eastern European poetry.

This complex interrogation of the categories of text and context calls to mind a similar interrogation in the work of Derrida who, in *Limited Inc.*, has noted that “nothing exists outside context”, and that, consequently, the “outside penetrates and thus determines the inside” (Derrida 1988, p.153).<sup>6</sup> Derrida has made a similar point in *Positions*, where he speaks of how each seemingly simple term is marked by the trace of other terms, so that the ‘presumed interiority of meaning’ is constantly being ‘worked on by its own exteriority. It is always already carried outside itself’ (Derrida 1981a, p.33). Heaney’s project will also demonstrate a view of poetry which stresses the transformative and interpenetrative mode of action through which poetry achieves its ends of breaking down opposed binary positions.

Having noted these points, one returns to the title, ‘In the Country of Convention’, and realises that this title is, like the essay, less simple than it might seem. While the country in question is England, as denoted by the proper adjective of the sub-title, ‘*English Pastoral Verse*’, the essay draws out the connotations of the diverse influences, literary, linguistic and political, that are present in the pastoral convention. The constituent factors of this genre are not English, but Latin and French in language, as well as in tone and theme. The ‘convention’ of the title derives from classical pastoral literature but, as translations of this literature are absent, the presentation of the ‘country’ in question is consequently attenuated.

As much of the poetry shares Thomson’s notion of “England as an after-image of Augustan Rome” (Heaney 1980, p.178), Heaney has accurately pointed out the weakness of the book, while at the same time providing a strong reading of the genre itself through an interrogation of this absence. Thus, Heaney allows the classical context to imbricate his reading of the English texts in the book, and both present

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<sup>6</sup> This point, made in the ‘Afterward’ of *Limited Inc.*, is part of what can be seen as a redefinition of one of deconstruction’s central axioms ‘Il n’y a pas de hors-texte’ (Derrida 1976, p.158) as ‘Il n’y a pas de hors contexte’ (Derrida 1988, p.136). Simon Critchley has an informative discussion of this point in his *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Critchley 1992, pp.31-43).

text and absent context permeate and penetrate each other in a fuller exploration in the essay than is given in the book itself. Heaney's reading can be seen, in the terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin, as heteroglossic, in that different voices and different languages are allowed to confront each other and achieve some kind of dynamic interaction, or dialogisation (Bakhtin 1981, 263).

Here Heaney pluralises the title of the essay so that the 'country of convention' opens its borders to other countries, other languages and other literary traditions. Just as Heaney's reading of this book sees text and context interpenetrate each other, so, by implication, the genre of English pastoral has also set text and context in a dialectical relationship, a relationship which ultimately calls into question the separateness of the English poetic canon as such. Heaney's reading of conventionality has become unconventional in its dislocation of the ground on which the epistemological premises of the book are based. In this reading, there is an obvious similarity with a reading by Derrida of Shelley's *The Triumph of Life*. Here, Derrida also questions the borderlines of a text, suggesting that a text is no longer:

a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) (Derrida 1992a, p.84).

This is precisely the process of reading undertaken by Heaney in this essay; he takes the assumptions imposed by the title and format of the book, points to the attenuation of response that the selection criteria impose, an attenuation that has an analogous relationship to the Marxist broom and sociological filleting already mentioned, and proceeds to make them 'more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines'. He furthers this process towards the end of the essay by wondering whether the temporal and spatial limits imposed by the editors on poets who were included in the book are valid.

He questions whether the editors 'brisk dismissal' of the further possibilities of pastoral are well-founded, and goes on to suggest valid reasons for the inclusion of other writers – Edward Thomas, Hugh MacDiarmid, David Jones, A. E. Houseman – and also wonders about Louis MacNeice's eclogues which "represent the form as an enabling resource" (Heaney 1980, p.180). Finally, he further extends the limits of his critique by multiplying some 'strokes and lines' which figure as political borders, and asks whether such seminal works as Synge's *Aran Islands* (pastoral),<sup>7</sup> Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (anti-pastoral), and Montague's *The Rough Field* are "not to be regarded just as 'occasional twitches'" before finishing the essay with the ironic question "Or are these latter works held at bay in the term 'frontier pastoral'?" (Heaney 1980, p.180).

This final irony is instructive, as his earlier dialectical interpenetration of text and context demonstrated that the English pastoral had already crossed temporal, political and linguistic frontiers in appropriating Latin and French translations from classical antiquity into a specifically English landscape. However, to adopt another 'perspective backwards', the origin of the master trope of the pastoral was, as Barrell and Bull (1975) have noted, the Eden myth, which, together with classical dreams of a Golden Age "lies behind most versions of pastoral" (Heaney 1980, p.175). Here again, frontiers of language and culture have been crossed by the genre. So his question is, why stop at this particular frontier? If the genre has been sufficiently fluid to engage with the classics and the bible, perhaps it is also capable of engaging with more modern sensibilities. The frontier, denotative of a spatial binary opposition between one notion of place and another, functions here as both a borderline of the anthology and, at the same time, as

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<sup>7</sup> In a parenthetical aside, directly after mentioning Synge's text he notes '(prose, granted)', a point which underlines my own view that prose, while generically distinct, should not be factored out of any equation in terms of the study or analysis of a writer who is more celebrated within a different generic frame. If Heaney sees the prose of Synge, a playwright, as being important, this bolsters my own case for seeing the prose of Heaney as being worthy of a central place in his canon. It is also a further example of his stretching the borderlines of the book under review by questioning the automatic association of the pastoral with poetry.



a point of possibility which will allow the ‘English’ pastoral as genre, to develop. In a further expansion of these limits, this development would necessitate an ongoing problematisation of the notion of Englishness in the title as, now, some form of ‘Irishness’ would be included. Of course, as Heaney has already noted, the final poem in the anthology is Yeats’s *Ancestral Houses* (Heaney 1980, p.177), so there has already been a crossing of the ‘frontier pastoral’. It becomes clear, then, that his reading of the conventions of the pastoral becomes quite unconventional in its implications and in its reading practice. What we see are what Hillis Miller, in his discussion of anastomosis, terms a variety of “crossings, displacements, and substitutions, as inside becomes outside, outside inside, or as features on either side cross over the wall, membrane or partition dividing the sides” (Hillis Miller 1987, p.7), and I will argue that such transgressive and transgenerative crossings of frontiers are a central feature in Heaney’s epistemology of poetry.<sup>8</sup> They are also a crucial aspect of a deconstructive and theoretical reading of canonicity.

Hence, for Heaney, the two poles of an opposition, as exemplified here by text and context, are never simply set down in isolation; nor are they placed in a dialectic which produces a definite synthesis. Instead, his work produces readings which set up a relationship which is fluid and interactive, and in which both terms interact and reflect each other.<sup>9</sup> This relationship is what Theodore Adorno would term a *Kraftfeldt* (force-field), which contains transactional and dialectical interplay of different, and sometimes opposing, forces, and which comprises of juxtaposed clusters of changing elements that, according to Martin Jay, “resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle” (Jay 1984, p.15). In this essay, that is precisely the structure that is envisaged for a deconstructive notion of the canon: a forcefield which is deliberately chosen, and whose choices are,

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<sup>8</sup> Henry Hart makes a similar point in connection with Heaney’s volume of prose poems, published in 1975, entitled *Stations*, in his book *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions*, (1992, p. 99-118). I would argue that this *modus*

themselves, subject to verification and justification – that Roman history and literature should be part of a canonical structure is not necessarily to be disputed. However, that *The Apache Chief* also deserves a place in a parallel canon, constituted under different intersections of power and knowledge, is the point of this essay.

In a manner that is strikingly similar to the thinking of Heaney, Derrida has described a similar process, in *Positions*, where what he terms ‘undecidables’ inhabit an opposition, “resisting and disorganising it, *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics” (Derrida 1981a, p.43). The answers which Heaney’s enabling searches find are often similar ‘undecidables’, which encourage us to probe the interstices of the text, and to the “network of textual referrals to *other* texts” where each term is “marked by the trace of another term” (Derrida 1981a, p.33).

Perhaps the most important dimension of this deconstructionist reading of the canon is that of temporality. Traditional forces of canonicity were rooted in decisions from the past – the canon was always a retrospective structure, which delimited participation as opposed to encouraging new enunciations of culture and literature. All of the verbal map-readings offered in this discussion participate in one of literature’s primary responsibilities, namely that their “concept is linked to the to-come” (Derrida 1992b, p.38). By asking questions of the choices that are creative of the canon, by noting the structured, and hence motivated, nature of these choices, the canon has become many canons, perhaps of smaller calibre, but definitely of greater inclusiveness. It is now becoming common to speak of a postcolonial canon, a feminist canon, canons devoted to racial and class-based literature, gay and lesbian canons and various theoretical canons. The restrictive and conservative function exercised by

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*agendi* of Heaney’s can be seen as a driving force in all of his work. Hart’s study, which is an excellent, theoretically aware reading of Heaney’s poetry, pays comparatively little attention to his prose.

<sup>9</sup> As we shall see, there are often more than two terms brought into the equation.

literature through unthought and untheoretically grounded canonical assumptions has been replaced by a plurality of canons, hence allowing for the free movement of cultural capital in terms of different groups within society.

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida discusses what he terms *hauntology*, in answer to his question: “[w]hat is a ghost?” (Derrida 1994, p.10). In this book, he discusses the spectrality of many areas of meaning, seeing ghostly hauntings as traces of possible meanings. One might compare his *hauntology* to the different alternatives that have been repressed by the canon but which have now come into being in the alternative canons under discussion. This is not to say that notions of canonicity should be consigned to history: indeed, quite the contrary. The purpose of decommissioning the canon is to decommission the outdated binary ‘either/or’ mode of selection and rejection and to replace this modality with the more inclusive paradigm of ‘both/and’. As Derrida has put it, it is important for a community to “know its limit – and for its limit to be its *opening*” (Derrida 1995, p.355).

This paper attempts this process of seeing canonical limitations as openings to alternative notions of canonicity. By examining the choices which underpin the canon, and which are themselves related to their societal and cultural contexts, issues of validation and of participation in the activity of literature are interrogated from a perspective which is aware of issues of social justice. The imbrication of text with context, of canonical and non-canonical, of aesthetic and culturally sanctioned choices allows for the voicing, in what Bourdieu terms dominant cultural formations, of the hitherto unvoiced: women, people of colour, the colonised and those whose stories, like that of *The Apache Chief*, were only told as indices of non-value. Such canonical decommissioning deconstructs the rigid thinking that we saw at the beginning of this essay, where reading *The Apache Chief* was seen as inimical to notions of being educated. In a deconstructive paradigm, inclusion, as opposed to exclusion, choices governed by the

logic of 'both/and' as opposed to 'either/or', and the ability to enjoy, and critique, studies about ancient Romans and more recent Native Americans, is the desired index of education.

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