CANONS, PUBLISHERS, AND LITERARY NATIONALISM: TOWARD A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Ian Chunn
Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing
Department of Communication
Simon Fraser University

"Our age has been canon-minded," remarks Hugh Kenner (1984), and the following notes are intended to participate in what Dermot McCarthy (1991) has called Canadian literature's "founding monomania," its nationalistic premises. Studies of canons and canon-formation have been something of a growth industry in academia for over a decade, with most of the action taking place in the humanities. The publisher's role has never been adequately stressed, however, and it is toward correcting that omission that the present study has been undertaken.

The *locus classicus* for an overview of the topic is the pair of issues of *Critical Inquiry* later issued from the University of Chicago Press as *Canons* (1984). The essays contained therein are rife with definitions of the key concept, one of the most appealing of which is Kernan's: "to mean (roughly) an enduring exemplary collection of books, buildings and paintings authorized in some way for contemplation, admiration, interpretation, and the determination of value," (1984:177). His interest is in music, where of course the term 'canon' carries a pun, but which is instructive to consider in comparison to literature, if only to see how much as a given we accept the centrality of certain 'classical' composers. We, in the twentieth-century, have cultivated nineteenth-century 'masterpieces':

> The idea of a canon had taken hold powerfully during the nineteenth century.... Beethoven always stayed at dead center...members of non-Teutonic nations grew increasingly restive over the difficulty of gaining places for their heroes. For from Hoffman's time on, the ideology which nurtured that growth included a strong component of nationalism along with historicism [and] organicism --- a concept applied not only to individual artistic structures but also to the canon itself. (Kernan, 1984:184)

The contested nature of the canon is a function of its concern with values, which are always radically contingent and the product of the dynamics of an economic system (Herrnstein Smith, 1984:15). Every literary work is the product of:

> a complex evaluative feedback loop that embraces not only the ever-shifting economy of the artist's own interests and resources...[but] also...all the other diverse forms of evaluation by which the work will be subsequently marked and its value reproduced and transmitted; that is, the innumerable implicit acts of evaluation performed by those who, as may happen, publish the work, purchase, preserve, display, quote, cite, translate, perform, allude to, and imitate it...and also such activities as the awarding of literary prizes, the commissioning and publishing of articles about certain works, the compiling of anthologies, the writing of introductions, the construction of departmental curricula, and the drawing up of class reading lists. (Herrnstein Smith, 1984:29)

Herrnstein Smith makes it clear that canon-formation is very much a social process, and Chandler (1984) suggests this invites a historicizing approach. To counteract this tendency, he supplies some of Raymond Williams' thoughts on 'tradition', claiming that *mutatis mutandis*, the same might be said of the canon. We tend to see tradition:

> not as an active and continuous selection and reselection, which even at its latest point in time is always a specific set of choices, but now more conveniently as an object, a projected reality, with which we have come to terms on its terms, even though these terms are always and must be valuations, the selections and omissions, of other men [sic]. (Chandler, 1984:197)

A deep-rooted tradition in the West is that of the Judeo-Christian bible, which the distance of time and popular unfamiliarity have homogenized into an unexamined monolith. Yet it may be seen as a paradigm of the questions of canon-formation and the promulgation of canonical texts, in that its writings may have been evaluated not according to 'literary criteria' but according to power criteria (Bruns, 1984:78). Tracing the outlines of what may be considered an early form of nationalism, Bruns develops the conflict that existed between the priests and the prophets. Bruns cites Ellis Rifkin on why Deuteronomy was promulgated as an authoritative text: "So long as the prophets had the freedom to speak out in Yahweh's name, no institution was safe, and

no authority, other than prophecy, sacrosanct," (Bruns, 1984:79). In response to this situation, the priests of the Second Temple founded a theocracy which resolved the crisis of Yahwism by placing its authority in a book (Bruns, 1984:80). Prophets were now limited; only from the authority of the Pentateuch could they speak.

Another 'national' literature was formed a few hundred years later in Augustan Rome. The imperial capital attracted talents such as Ovid, Horace, Propertius, and the immediately-canonized Virgil. These authors encompassed all varieties of poetic mode, and their literature drew its basic impetus from another culture: they blended Greek elements with their Roman themes in what seems to have been "a deliberate attempt to create a Roman national literature to rival the artistic monuments of classical and archaic Greece," (Zetzel, 1984:113,107). One of the most successful models was Virgil's epic about the Trojan founder of Rome, Aeneas:

> [O]ne work that has always been considered canonical...is Virgil's *Aeneid.* It is canonical in that it has been, since the poet's death in 19 B.C., a school text and thus a part of the literary vocabulary of all educated people; it is canonical, in T.S. Eliot's refined and delicate definition of the 'classic', in exhibiting an extraordinary range of sympathies and sensibilities in a pure and elegant diction; and it is canonical in what might be called the ancient sense (although the word 'canonical' was not applied to literature until the eighteenth century), as an epic poem of broad scale and heroic subject, the highest and most important of all literary genres. (Zetzel, 1984:107)

By the eighteenth century, vernacular literature in English "had accumulated enough history to be thought about historically," (Kenner, 1984:364). Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry*, and Samuel Johnson's *Lives of English Poets* served patriotic and political needs, establishing a specifically national rather than global canon of 'classics', and defining the superiority of the national character (Chandler, 1984:202). It is true that Richard Mulcaster had argued as early as 1582 that English had become acceptable as a 'literary' language because its grammar had by then been extensively studied. His *Elementary* coincided with the spirit of Elizabethan nationalism, and its thesis would have suited those keen on increasing the English military and political presence in Europe (Court, 1992:12). English as a language was also

finding a "doctrinal centre of authority" among Dissenters. However, what finally produced the official recognition of English literature in the universities was

> the belief, promoted first by Adam Smith, that the study of the English language and its literature could be treated as an academic discipline, rather than as a simple exercise in the selective reading of great literary works of the British past....Smith believed English literary study was ideally suited to meet the challenges of industrialism and the increasing political influence of a rising commercial bourgeoisie. (Court, 1992:13).

The written word had greater persuasive power in the industrial age, and industrialists conceived of literary education as a form of assimilation into an all-encompassing national identity. In fact, this literary nationalism was perceived as an opportunity for the reconciliation of all social classes (Court, 1992:40).

Another society keen to reconcile classes in a professed democracy was the breakaway republic, the United States of America. Eighteenth century anthologies there fostered a literary nationalism, motivated by a desire "to build America's sense of identity by gathering an independent national literature to match and strengthen the country's newly achieved political independence....The term 'American literature', rarely used before the 1780s, became commonplace after the 1783 Treaty of Paris," (Golding, 1984:281). In the nineteenth century, literary nationalism became even more programmatic, with American critics calling for a national literature and praising it wholesale. Eager to convince British skeptics that an American poetry was developing, anthologists presented it in its historical range and claimed for it a moral advantage, superior to perceived European decadence (Golding, 1984:281). During the 1820s, a significant expansion of poetry writing was precipitated by this widespread literary nationalism, but by the end of the century, with the country's sense of political and literary accomplishment established, supportive anthologies documenting "the unique national characteristics and moral purity of American verse" were no longer needed (Golding, 1984:294). American literature was no longer "English literature that happened to get written somewhere else," (Kenner, 1984:370).

Indeed, American literature flourished in the twentieth century, and while modern American poetry has devolved largely to the university

presses and the academy, contemporary American fiction has achieved recognition through profitability and the book market (Ohmann, 1984:378). Characterized as "a nearly closed circle of marketing and consumption," (Ohmann, 1984:380) the path to pre-canonical status for a novel may be sketched out as follows:

> It was selected, in turn, by an agent, an editor, a publicity department, a review editor (especially the one at the Sunday *New York Times*), the New York metropolitan book buyers whose patronage was necessary to commercial success, critics writing for gatekeeper intellectual journals, academic critics, and college teachers. (Ohmann, 1984:385)

By contrast, the situation in Canada is a good deal simpler (Mathews, 1991:155). Commercial success is not required (e.g. *As For Me and My House*), nor is best-sellerdom (e.g. *The Mountain and the Valley*). An elite group of trend-setting journals need not single out the work. It is the end of the process that is most important, and that is "the simultaneous embracing of the work by the classroom and the academic journal," (Mathews, 1991:155). While those who control the U.S. scene may seem small in number, in Canada it amounts to little more than university teachers of English who profess some degree of interest in Canadian literature.

The marginal position of such a discipline would hardly have surprised Matthew Arnold who scoffed, "Imagine the face of Philip or Alexander at hearing of a Primer of Macedonian Literature: are we to have a Primer of Canadian Literature too, and a Primer of Australian?" (cited in Surette, 1991:21). Nevertheless, we have moved a great distance from Arnold's position, and today it is quite legitimate to consider Canadian literature and to ask about forces involved in determining its canon. Ideally such an examination would involve an analysis of market forces, of the publishing and bookselling industries, of government attempts to patronize a national literature and its supporters, and of the dissemination of literary value in newspapers, magazines, scholarly journals, and books (Lecker, 1991:4). My current research concentrates on one aspect of the publishing industry, literary publishing, and its interaction with governments, to clarify the canon-forming process in English Canada.

Even though the process of canon-formation in Canadian literature may have largely taken place since the late 1960s (Scobie,

1991:57), it is nevertheless the case that almost as soon as English Canadians began writing, they began to try to define Canadian literature (Bennett, 1991:131). Once again, poetry anthologies prove an enlightening source of commentary. In 1864, E.H. Dewart claimed that "a national literature is an essential element in the formation of a national character. It is not merely the record of a country's mental progress: it is the expression of its intellectual life, the bond of national unity, and the guide of national energy," (cited in McCarthy, 1991:33). By 1889, W.D. Lighthall had noticed a new "tone of exultation and confidence which the singers have assumed since Confederation," (cited in McCarthy, 1991:35) and by the mid-1920s Logan and French perceived "how, gradually, (Canadian writers) expressed in literature the slowly emerging consciousness of a national spirit and a national destiny in the Dominion," (McCarthy, 1991:38). The national imagination coincides with the nationalist spirit, and cultural nationalism stands as the subtext of Canadian literary history. Lorne Pierce of the Ryerson Press echoes Dewart's observation concerning literature and national unity: "'the true source of our national greatness' will not be understood until French and English authors share equally in any attempt to trace the evolution of our national spirit," (cited in McCarthy, 1991:44). In truth, a sense of frustration at having to share the Canadian literary world with a large population group who wrote in another language was one of the few common grounds between French and English critics when they discussed the idea of a national literature (MacDonald, 1992:100).

Canon-formation is an intrinsically conservative process (Scobie, 1991:57), and the tendency to resist change is greatest in national canons, as they function to define a national literature in turn tied to the sense of nationhood. National identity, the growth of which seems to have been the 'plot' of Canada's national history, has been a crucial feature through the nation-building era experienced since the nineteenth century (Bennett, 1991:134):

> While expressions of concern about the need for a canon are a tradition in Canada the number of people who have been involved with its creation and preservation has been relatively small. Defining the canon has been of real importance to Canadian writers, and to a few academics, journalists, and publishers. However, the growth of governmental interests in the development and maintenance of Canadian culture, an interest that has been translated into funding for the arts, has made the

> canon an important institution. The expansion of the Canada Council and provincial arts councils, and the commercialization of things 'Canadian' as socially valuable have all given new and more general immediacy to the questions of what the what the important works in our literature are and by what standards we make judgements....With the expansion of the university system during the 1960s and with the expansion of the study of Canadian literature within the universities that took place at the same time, Canadian writing has assumed a new role in the marketplace. (Bennett, 1991:147)

The elucidation of the publisher's role in these developments will help us understand the dynamics of cultural production in a country where such activity has traditionally been marginalized.

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