

**MYTH TO REALITY: THE CASE OF THE AMERICAN
LITERARY CANON**

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要約

神話から現実へ：アメリカ文学の正典の場合

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ここ数年来、現実^{まこと}に根を下ろした社会の影響力を正面^{まへ}に受けて、アメリカの学会では正典構成 canon formation の政治学が精密に検討されている。いわゆるアメリカ古典の伝承されてきた正典のリストの維持が、学問基準に与える影響としての文学の相互関連性とその多面的な神話との繋がりを疑問に付すこととなった。文学の組織者達 organizers に用いられている正典の概念の本質、定義、起源は必然的に宗教的な企てとなるのだが、文化的読み書き能力 cultural literacy の諸概念がもつ既得権益もまた精密な検討を招いている。

文体、主題、時代区分、ジャンルの類型化 typification は神話の分析に基礎を持ち、この神話化の企ては1930年の近代語学会 the Modern Language Association のアメリカ文学セクションの組織化と時を同じくしている。以来、アメリカでは政治的な目論み agenda が文学の正典構成のいかがわしい客観性の下にあることが非難され、そのことが正典の形成と維持に強い影響を与えてきた。同時に、神話化されたアメリカ文学の正典の作家達は大衆文化の現実と正面衝突をし、痛手を被ったのである。

資本主義の社会では売れることが正典への参入を保証するのだろうか。合衆国に独自の地理的、言語的な判定基準が存在しない以上、正典はアメリカの中心的神話もしくは「文化の中心的パラノイア」によって決定されるのだろうか。正典は版が重ねられ、主要な研究所の開架式書架に収められることによって決定されるのか。電子メディアは読むというプロセスそのものを変えつつあるように、正典も変容させるのだろうか。正典編成の宗教的／権威主義的基盤が、民主化された正典の定義の現実へと移るに際して、文化の諸神話が神話的な正典へと翻訳される過程が生じ、正典そのものの本質の再考が余儀なくされよう。

It's hard to organize literature.

—Irving Howe¹

There can be no general theory of canons.

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak²

“Literature,” Colin Falck argues, “in fact gives us our purest and most essential way of grasping reality or truth” (xii). To Joseph Campbell, “mythology was ‘the song of the universe,’ ‘the music of the spheres’—music we dance to even when we cannot name the tune” (xvi). In constituting a canonical list of classic American texts, the intertwining of literature and its multifaceted connections with myth has been as much of an influence as the standards of scholarship. The nature, definition and origin of the concept of canon as used by literary organizers is inescapably a religious project, as John Guillory reminds us in tracing the ancient Greek word *kanon* (“reed” or “rod”) to its familiar fourth century A.D. usage “to signify a list of texts of authors, specifically the books of the Bible and of the early theologians of Christianity” (“Canon” 233).

Falck makes a necessity of notice of the ways in which Christianity in particular has “increasingly tended to . . . “de-mythologize” [itself allowing] literature to “re-mythologize our spiritual awareness. The only religious ‘scriptures’ that can now be authentic for us may be poetry or literature to which our own culture gives us access” (xii). This connects with Joseph Campbell’s fourth function of myth, “the pedagogical function, of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances” (31). How can the critic or academic deal with these fluid statements? Typifying periods and genres bolsters the mythologizing in distorted directions. Bergonzi harks back to Auden’s summing up in the thirties of “representative types [as] . . . types became archetypes, and archetypes turned into myths; indeed, the writers of the Auden generation were inclined to mythicize their experience from the very beginning” (121). It is noteworthy that this mythicizing of experience was coincidental with the organization of the American Literature Section of the Modern Language Association in 1930. How far did the politics of the thirties create myths that were codified into canon; and how far will the minor tsunamis of “political correctness” of the nineties with its mythology of diversity reform a canon for the 21st century?

Accusations of a political agenda’s being beneath the touted objectivity of literary canon formation in America have strongly colored the process in our century. “The controversy erupting over this question has produced a great volume of polemical writing, so much in fact that one must say that the controversy is one of the more important events in the history of twentieth-century criticism” (Guillory 233–234). Politics may well be a measure of inclusion in the canon, and since America is uniquely situated as a mythical political paradise, Auden was easily followed by F.O. Matthiessen, who looked to a favorite myth to canonize the Big Five writers of the so-called American Renaissance—“devotion to the possibilities of democracy” (Smith 3). Judging inclusion in the canon by how well the moral philosophy of a nation’s founding fathers

is mirrored in the works of a gaggle of its romantic novelists mythicizes both democratic ideal and artistic achievement into larger-than-life categories. Guillory has argued elsewhere “that canonical choices are historically overdetermined, that they do not represent necessarily, or only, the arbitrariness of personal preference or the evaluative certainty of consensus” (“The Ideology of Canon-Formation” 195). It seems overly facile to apply this to the American canon, but one can hardly avoid it.

The pre-canonized writers themselves did not see it this way at all. Both Melville and Hawthorne were rejected by a reading public devoted to what Hawthorne ironically called “a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight” (Smith 5). Smith’s argument is that the mythologized major writers of the American Renaissance collided head-on with the reality of popular culture and lost the battle. Part of the staggering loss was financial, and part was the loss of the “dreams of their youth,” the mythical missed dreams they are ironically lauded for.

Do sales guarantee inclusion in the canon? The “great first American best-seller debate” keeps several works in the forefront of the controversial canonical inclusion debate by contrasting them with non-sellers—Brockden Brown versus Harriet Foster or Susanna Rowson prefigures that of Hawthorne versus Susan Warner or Lydia Maria Child. Richard Ohmann has “drawn a sketch of the course a novel had to run, in order to lodge itself in our culture as precanonical—as ‘literature,’ at least for the moment” (208). In a capitalist society, the publishing, advertising and bookselling industries, along with the media, will inevitably influence canonical placement. Reality will not be denied; and yet myth still rears its persistent head.

The historical and social context within which a work is proclaimed fit for inclusion in the canon is in itself a myth, reflecting the values and themes of a narrow stage set of society. By fitting the work to the social values it embodies, one can easily proclaim it the greatest and best of “its” times. But what of the real context of the work? What of the works sold and read, the journals circulating, the topics writers chatted about over tea and pumpkin pie? How do these realities influence canonical selection at all? One might well despair of dealing with these questions upon encountering Michael Colacurcio’s “Does American Literature Have a History?” in 1978 followed almost immediately (in 1980) by Richard Ruland’s “The Mission of an American Literary History.”

Is the canon the literary history Mario Praz described in 1963 as a “Pantheon, a Valhalla, where the worthies of the past are safely and forever embalmed in the Hall of Fame”? Is it this “golden register of celebrated names [which] appears to be safely handed over from generation to generation”? (65) Praz claims it is not, claims that literary history is a dynamic system in which “the determining factor is not so much an absolute value of the seed, as the relative power of response in the recipient” (66). Certainly American literary history follows this formula, as Denis Donoghue reminds us that Irving “Howe maintains that the deepest desire in American literature is to be rid of every authority except that of the individual self, and he asks, in dismay, how and why American readers have made the unprecedented demand upon their writers that they create values ‘quite apart from either tradition or insurgency’” (8). Is the canon deter-

mined by a central American myth? Donoghue takes Howe's statement further in proposing that "the situation of an embattled self finding its freedom in a wilderness is certainly a myth in American literature so frequent and so enduring that it must amount to a difference in the structure of forces and motives to which it refers" (11).

Is the canon determined by what is in print and in the open stacks of the great academic research libraries? Will the electronic media alter the canon as they are altering the very reading process itself? Text storage and retrieval suggest that an increasing band-width of text accessibility, ability to "read actively for meaning" (Costanzo 51) and the decoding of meaning with hypertext-based cultural literacy aids will elasticize the canon. For more than thirty years now, the canon has been put through content analysis, heuristic models leading to multiple readings, and literary analyses of various sorts. New computer text-retrieval programs and the electronic storage of texts will only complement this process.

Concomitant with these new departures has been a harking back to an ill-defined notion of "the humanities." Beleaguered by old questions of canon and newer ones of the definition of American literature³, numerous scholars have called upon a fuzzy humanistic notion to buttress their arguments for text selection. Gerald Graff reminds us of our allegiance to the tradition of humanism stemming from Matthew Arnold, and how it has never recovered from its marriage to scientific research in the modern university (3). Defining "the humanities" is a tack the canon constructors have taken on as the move from scholarly myth to teaching reality gains momentum. Sheldon Rothblatt tells of a Swedish delegation sent to the United States to investigate the health of the humanities. He misinterpreted their mission as a mandate "to return home with information about [the humanities'] inherent characteristics, their place in the culture of advanced industrial democracies, their utility and meaning." On the contrary, the delegation was to discover the extent of support for the canon, "to take the humanities as a given, and to determine how, as educational subjects, they are supported and encouraged" (2).

In this commonly held view, the humanities are the handmaiden of the canon; in other words, the mythical canon reigns in Olympian splendor while the reality of the humanities in student-oriented curricula is "where the action is." This view is of solid standing: Castiglione gives us the "famous [Italian] Renaissance view of the humanities, founding them solidly on letters and communication" (Rothblatt 4). Castiglione recommended his courtier to be proficient in "those studies which we call the humanities"; to have a large acquaintance with poets, orators, historians, to exercise skill in writing verse and prose, and of course to have a thorough grounding in the classical languages. This program closely skirts that of E.D. Hirsch in advocating the development of cultural literacy. Both Castiglione and Hirsch are concerned with the reality of communication between two literate people, and both define the real competence of a literate person by mastery of a canon. The "common reader" as "a person who knows the things known by other literate persons in the culture" is the modern courtier (Hirsch 19). Courtier and common reader are to be instructed in a specific canon, not in what Hirsch dismisses as the content-neutral information modules beloved by American

educators since Dewey (19).

The reality of the maintenance of a literary canon in a democracy, however, falls to the reality level of the value of the humanities as “an empirical question. In a culture of consumers, the final arbiter of their worth is not less than the free market, to which many intellectuals and academics have long paid homage, as the only guarantee of survival” (Rothblatt 6). But what are these market-based humanities, and on which axis do they cross the canon?

Rothblatt quotes from “The Humanities in American Life,” the National Endowment for the Humanities Report of 1980, “arguably the most important statement on the humanities to appear in the United States in decades.” In it we learn that they are language-dependent, they assist us in our quest for the nature of the human, enhance it with “insight, perspective, critical understanding, discrimination and creativity,” and reaffirm the individual autonomy and connection to “humankind across time and throughout the world” (7). All in all, the humanities project is not very different from other areas of study and endeavor. What makes the humanities a bitterly contested arena in America is their dependence on a fairly rigid canon in a way that the social sciences or science and technology are not. Control of the *a priori* canon leads to (lucrative) control in the areas dubbed “the humanities.” Guardians at the gate of the canon echo Hawthorne’s frustrated cry at the “d ____ d mob of scribbling women” able to fill the family coffers by pandering to the human experiential desires of their readers, in current cases, at mobs of prolific gender and ethnic scholars.

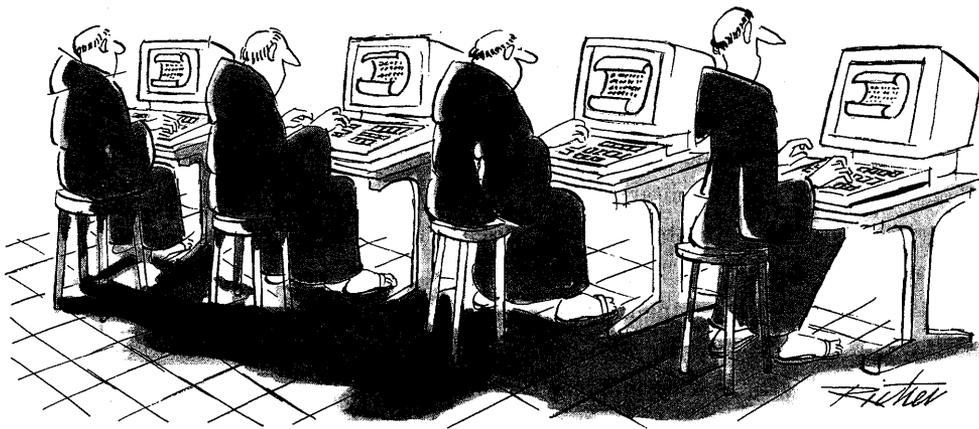
In the transition from the religious/authoritarian basis of canonical set-up to the realities of power-based canonical definitions, however, there is the necessary passage through the process by which the myths of a culture translate into mythical canons. Indeed, mythic narrative may be one of the most frequently used criteria for inclusion in the mythical canon. Shadowed by an awareness of the long inferiority complex (“In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?”⁴) attributed to American literature, the question of “What Is American Literature?,” posed by William C. Spengemann one hundred and seventy years later necessarily turns to the mythic foundations of “America” for an answer since the linguistic criteria used for defining national literatures do not apply⁵.

What Spengemann calls “our cultural paranoia” leading to “our present conception of American literature” (20) suggests a dynamic of other than belletristic forces has shaped the canon of “the subject we call American literature.” He notes the restriction of the category to texts in the English language and argues cogently against this narrow definition. Because American literature cannot be “American” in the same way that literature written in French can be “French” or that set down in Russian “Russian literature,” we are thrown back onto other considerations. Reflecting on what, then, is the American canon we profess, we can logically turn nowhere but to its mythical underpinnings, running the spectrum of “the Anglo-Saxon myth of America’s historical mission . . . [and] the religion of Anglo-Saxon progress” (Spengemann 17) or of Longfellow’s transmuted mythical treatment of the Native American Hiawatha legend.

The enormous need for a unifying myth of what could be agreed upon as “American” in the absence of a culture rooted in the mists of time or of a language unique within national borders led to reliance on a central mythical matrix easily seen in critical treatises on the “American Adam” or the “American pastoral,” but impossible of rigorous definition.

Moving then, from the authorial/authoritarian canon through the cultural myths translated into a mythical canon we are led on to the realities of politically based canonical definitions. The power to confer or withhold the means of livelihood, especially professional livelihood, has been debated endlessly in our democratized time, and the effect of this power on canon formation is unquestioned. However, the shift in locus of politically correct power bases is a mark of the late twentieth century American literary industry. This politically correct power, either associated with a ruling class (generally personified by the university tenure committee) or moving into the hands of the no longer ignorable opposition of non-ruling classes (generally vilified as gender and ethnic studies practitioners) is now pulled by the undertow of the infrastructure of transmission: the media and the publishing industry.

In considering how the canon is transmitted, an important consideration in the Middle Ages when the concept was refined, we picture a recently published cartoon depicting a row of robed and tonsured monks sitting in front of personal computers on the screen of each of which is a scrolled (an unrolled-parchment) text⁶. An amusing reference to the importance of the infrastructure of the canon, this cartoon also emphasizes the necessity of not only an existing, but an available textual corpus. Neither the traditional nor the upstart critical or academic class is able to assure availability any longer; this is the prerogative of the media infrastructure.



With the so-called democratization of post graduate studies, in an era when working class men and women achieve doctoral status and transmit the canon in ever-widening spheres of teaching environments, the question of availability of texts influences their canonical inclusion as directly as the great medieval libraries did the original Biblical

canon and apocrypha. In both cases, existing infrastructure and ready availability, resources influence the canon as much as human criteria do, and as the influence of resources has dramatically widened in time and space, the defense of the canon against an almost infinite elasticity has become again as pressing for the literary-academic institution as it was for the Church in the mid-sixteenth century. From libraries and their static locations to electronically accessible library holdings, from classrooms and their diverse but still limited inhabitants to distance learning systems, from books and their market-driven diffusion to electronically shared textual material, from grants and awards and their political correctness to self-employed-self-determined scholars, from learned societies and their self-perpetuating activities to the new frontiers of texts and interpretation found outside of the traditional arenas and their unlimited accessibility as machine-readable units, the pressures on the canon today, mounted from what we might call the canon-stretchers, are as frightening to the canon-preservers as Montanism was in the second century or Modernism was in the early twentieth. Diversity is fragmentation, heresy and destruction to canonical fathers in any age.

There is, for an example of this new elasticity, an all-electronic, Bitnet/Internet distributed, peer-reviewed, academic periodical called *EJournal*. According to the founder, Professor Edward Jennings, the editors are "particularly interested in theory and praxis surrounding the creation, transmission, storage, interpretation, alteration and replication of electronic text. We are also interested in the broader social, psychological, literary, economic and pedagogical implications of computer-mediated networks." But the paperless electronic journal will "provide authenticated paper copy from our read-only archive for use by academic deans or other supervisors."⁷

Other examples are so familiar as to be catchwords of non-canoncity: "women's," or the more neutral-sounding "gender" studies; "African-American" literature; "Asian-American" writing; "native American" tradition are all used prolifically and influence even non-canonical Charles Johnson, winner of the most recent National Book Award and his placement in an alien canon. Indeed, labeling apocrypha has long been a strategy of isolation.

The Church in the Middle Ages had a love of labels quite similar to the American dedication to the "lost generation" or "manifest destiny." Protesting way too much, scholars who produce textbooks of American literature warn that even terms like "realism," "naturalism," and "local color,"

while useful shorthand for professors of literature trying to 'cover' great numbers of books and long periods of time, probably do as much harm as they do good, especially for readers who are beginning their study of literature. The chief disservice these generalizing terms do to readers and authors is to divert attention away from the distinctive quality of an author's sense of life to a general body of ideas. In a letter turning down one of the many professorships he was offered, [William Dean] Howells observed that the study of literature should begin and end in pleasure, and it

is far more rewarding to establish, in Emerson's phrase, 'an original relationship' to particular texts and authors than it is to attempt to fit them into movements. However, since these generalizations are still in currency, we need to examine some of them. (Norton 6)

Do we continue to examine generalizations still in currency because we keep examining them, or do we teach a canon selected with love, as Helen Vendler suggests?⁸ How did towering literary achievements become relegated to a canonized status quo? How did towering literary achievements become omitted from a canonized status quo?

Frank Kermode addresses this in his provocative discussion of the "Institutional Control of Interpretation." Asking the basic question, "Can one really speak of a canon of literary-academic studies?" takes the scholar always back to the ecclesiastical canon, but necessarily by way of "the liturgical and juristic activities of the institution" (177). As references to E.R. Curtius indicate, "the relation between a canon and the historical situation of the institution which establishes it is close and complex" (177). When referring to the institution which establishes the literary canon, however, one is immediately faced not only with the question of definition of the institution, but of its ultimate authority—not the authorial rights of writing authors à la Harold Bloomian project of investigation into the generation of texts, but the rights of a quasi-divine absolute decision on truth or falsity of the Logos, the indisputable word of God. Originality takes on new nuances, as the origin of the Word as absolute value stretches to include the value of fresh approaches to arrangements of words.

Charles Altieri traces this evaluative shift in the section on "The Cultural Re-Production of Value" in his provocative article for *Critical Inquiry's* 1983 special issue on canons. "Like all other objects," he writes, "works of art and literature bear the marks of their own evaluational history, signs of value that acquire their force by virtue of various social and cultural practices and, in this case, certain highly specialized and elaborated institutions. The labels 'art' and 'literature' are, of course, commonly signs of membership in distinctly honorific categories." (23) Altieri argues that the academy reproduces itself by educating/creating a "subpopulation of the community" (Altieri's emphasis) to appreciate the academy's canon, a "canonical audience," if you will. He outlines the "worst-case" scenario, in which changed historical, social and market conditions delete a work from the canon, although it may reappear as an "unjustly neglected masterpiece" in later years.

In an extended discussion of the canonical adjustments from *authoritarian* through myth-based into reality grounded, we are brought up short by Thoreau, the spokesman of civil disobedience paradoxically remarking, "They speak of moving society but have no resting place without it." Even the real market forces are organized and pandered to, and the fringe groups seek to have their favorites "licensed for exegesis" as "successful heresies" (Kermode 180). As transcendent as we might wish the American literary canon to be, the fact remains that it began 115 years ago as "a means of illustrating the several periods of American history." Moses Coit Tyler at the University of Michigan in 1875 was "the first to make the history of American literature a separate academic

subject in an American university." Fred Lewis Pattee, who reviewed the college study of American literature in 1925, "credited the women's colleges as pioneers in introducing American literature" (Graff 211). The *teaching* of American literature, which is the entire *raison d'être* for the canonization thereof, was not in America (as not in England either) taken up by the "old patrician colleges of the eastern seaboard," which became America's institutions of canonization, until well after more democratic institutions has initiated it (Spengemann 173). Not the oldest educational institution, Harvard, not a central New England body, but the popular element in the society first established its central canonical core.

The process of canon formation and canonical inclusion and exile is, in America, then, a unique blend of a vision of civil destiny and the need for what Van Wyck Brooks called a "usable past" (Graff 213). The maintenance of myth is integral, even if it is the humanist myth, for the myth that centers America may be the only consolation for those who consider, with Berthoff, "the possibility that 'American literature is, very simply, *not* an organic or dialectical whole'" (Graff 211). Joseph Campbell equates mythology with poetry and yet says that it "itches the mind beyond [the] rim, to what can be known but not told" (163). In the end as at the beginning, we tell ourselves stories about the stories we've been told, and we call what we tell ourselves the interpretation of a canon of literature which "gives us our purest and most essential way of grasping reality or truth" (Falck xii). And who, in the four quarters of the globe, hasn't heard of the American truth?

NOTES

1. Irving Howe is quoted along with John Erskine in an epigraph to Gerald Graff's "Introduction: The Humanist Myth" in *Professing Literature*. The use of Howe's comment seems to point to Graff's conclusion: "Those who argue that the humanities have become disablingly incoherent seem to me right, but many of them fail to see that coherence can no longer be grounded on some restored consensus, whether it be traditional 'basics,' revolutionary ideological critique, or something else. In the final analysis, what academic literary studies have had to work with is not a coherent cultural tradition, but a series of conflicts that have remained unresolved, unacknowledged, and assumed to be outside the proper sphere of literary education. To bring these conflicts inside that sphere will mean thinking of literary education as part of a larger cultural history that while acknowledging that terms like 'humanities,' 'science,' 'culture,' and 'history' are contested."
2. From Gayatri Spivak's "The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Culture Studies." Gayatri Spivak does not hold American citizenship, she calls herself a "not-quite-not-citizen" who has been a teacher of English in the United States for twenty-five years now. As such, she presents her argument "from within the debate over the teaching of the canon," a debate outside the scope of my article here. However, her statement: "This could in fact be the problem with all noncanonical teaching in the humanities, an implicit confusion between *descriptive* canonical practices within an institution and transformative practices relating to some 'real' world," does point to the present discussion of the reality-based canon.
3. Attempting to articulate a definition of American literature, William Spengemann proceeds through a logical process of elimination brought on by the realization that "although all

American literature is written in America, not all literature written in America is American literature." Because "we do not yet have an acceptable definition of the American language," we are forced to conclude that American literature is written in English and may mean "nothing more than *those few works of fiction, poetry, and drama which have been written in any place that is now part of the United States or by anyone who had ever lived in one of those places and which now rank among the acknowledged masterpieces of Western writing.*" But he quickly concludes that "the question is, how well does the body of material covered by this implicit definition serve our common ambition to identify the peculiar character of American literature?" In the end, of course, there is no satisfactory solution to the impasse, and "like America itself, which began to be discovered only when Europeans came to realize that they really knew nothing about it, American literature will remain a terra incognita until we are ready to admit that it is neither the earthly paradise nor the howling wilderness of our provincial imaginings but a strange new world where, as Columbus put it, "The farther one goes, the more one learns."

4. The well-known question by Sydney Smith, posed in 1820, is discussed at length in the equally well-known treatment of it by Jay B. Hubbell in *Who Are the Major American Writers?*. Durham: Duke UP, 1972.
5. Not only does Spengemann make the point about the difficulty of differentiating English from American as languages, but he asks the question about such "American" texts as those in English by Canadians, or Spanish by Mexicans, not to mention French, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch Americans.
6. The cartoon is from *The New Yorker*. However, in an enlightening modern real-world situation, John Malpas, in *Electric Word* 19, describes the Tibetan monks who are using wordprocessors to preserve their threatened-with-extinction literature. The "greater part of Mahayana Buddhist literature (the Kangyur and Tengyur collections) [will become] available to the world in a transliterated, machine-distributable form." The project has been underwritten by the Packard Foundation for the Humanities and is done by young Tibetan monks at Sera Mey Monastery in southern India. "The principal method of book reproduction traditionally utilizes wooden blocks," and these have been lost and are irreplaceable due to the lack of skilled woodcarvers. Machine-readable classic texts are the key to transmission into the future.
7. In a closer world, that of the academic scholar in an English-speaking environment, the prospectus of *The EJournal* informs us that "Members of the electronic-network community and others interested in it make up a large portion of our audience. Therefore we would be interested (for example) in essays about whether or not anyone should own a communication that has been shared electronically, about the pragmatics of cataloguing and indexing electronic publications, about net-based collaborative learning, about artful uses of hypertext, about the challenges that distance learning may offer to residential campuses, about the role of The Matrix in cultural history and Utopian polemic, about digitally recorded aleatoric fiction, about the significance of resemblances between the electronic matrix and neural systems, . . . and so forth.

The journal's essays will be available free to Bitnet/Internet addresses. Recipients may make paper copies; individual essays, reviews, stories—texts—sent to us will be disseminated to subscribers as soon as they have been through the editorial process, which will also be "paperless." We expect to offer access through libraries to our electronic Contents, Abstracts, and Keywords, and to be indexed and abstracted in appropriate places."

8. Helen Vendler's is only one in the ever-growing list of pedagogical agendas purporting to deal with the presentation of the canon rather than its formation. To limit the company of scholars with opinions on the subject to those found in the anthology of which she is a part, we find Hugh

Kenner, Harry Levin, J. Hillis Miller, David Perkins and James Engell voicing their urgent concern with the teaching of "a" canon.

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