

DIALOGUE

**An Uncanonical Classic:
The Politics of the *Norton Anthology***

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I have a colleague who used to go blank whenever the subject of the literary canon came up. He seemed to think that the concept was too amorphous to be of any practical use. And I will admit that my friends and I gave him every reason to hold this position. He had heard too many exchanges in which one party would demand, with passion and even anger, that Elizabeth Gaskell or some other writer be elevated to the canon and the other party would look confused and say, "I thought she *was* in the canon." After a few months of that you could hardly expect a reasonable person to put much confidence in the idea. He finally had an epiphany, however, and saw that canon in all its majesty and completeness: he was asked to teach the sophomore survey of English literature, a course he had managed to get through college without taking, and for the first time held the *Norton Anthology* in his hands. Now he knew what the canon was—and he could also see why our confusion over who was or was not canonical was mostly restricted to novelists. With poets we had only to look into the Book to see.

In some ways "canon" in literary studies has come to mean about what it means in music. In most musical canons the voices that begin later sing exactly what the earlier voices have. In the same way our canon has each sophomore read just what earlier sophomores have. We have the rule to follow, and it is clearly embodied in the anthology. It is interesting how natural discussion of the canon has become to us, for it is only recently that we have appropriated the idea of a set group of canonical works from Holy Scripture. In earlier days students of literature did not talk about "the canon," though they might talk about a tradition. Instead they talked about the classics. And the difference between the two ideas is very revealing.

"The canon" implies a set and limited group of works. It is a closed group, the chosen few that can be fit into the official anthology. That these works are chosen is as important as that they are few. For the idea of a canon implies the existence of some authority competent to say which works are to be read as Scripture and which are to be left as apocrypha, perhaps fit to be read for private edification but not worthy to base an argument on. The literary apocrypha will not be regularly assigned to students, or written about by assistant professors who know what's good for their careers. The Church has claimed the authority to set the scriptural canon. Our own profession and the publishers it supports have claimed the right to set the literary one. Where the idea of the canon differs from the idea of the classic is in just this question of authority. In the old idea of the classic, literary value came from all readers, and critics had to respect it. There was no point—even if you were the Great Khan of literature—in quarreling with what had pleased many and pleased long. Today the academic does not pay much attention to the common reader: Dr. Samuel Johnson and Virginia Woolf were naive in thinking that person's opinion of much value. We now seem to believe that common readers should, if they have any sense, enroll in a survey course and buy a *Norton Anthology*.

I bring up the difference between the canonical and the classic because I wish to ask that we listen to the voice of the common reader, insofar as common readers still exist. We should give the common reader our attention, I think, for the very reason that Johnson said "the common sense of readers" is to be considered the final arbiter of literary merit: the common reader is "uncorrupted by literary prejudice." The common reader is not a slave to the academic fashions, either generic or political, that form the canon.

To take a single case, I would argue for the inclusion in the canon of G. K. Chesterton. Like my old friends, some readers may be saying, "But I thought he *was* in the canon." But I will have no trouble answering that objection. You need only look in the second volume of the *Norton Anthology*, sixth edition, and you will find that the editors have found no room for Chesterton: no room for an essay—not even "A Defense of Nonsense"; no room for a story—the canon does not include Father Brown; no room for a poem—"Lepanto" has no place in twentieth-century verse. (The editors do mention Chesterton's influence on May Wedderburn Cannan, who has joined the War Poets in the *Anthology*, and footnote a reference to him in a story by Edna O'Brien.) Chesterton will not be found on the syllabi of many literature courses more advanced than the sophomore survey. He is not canonical; he is merely a classic. Our culture will not stop reading him. His books stay in print. His epigrams are still repeated, sometimes attributed to Johnson or Winston Churchill. Books about him keep appearing. The common reader has

made a decision; the professors have not listened to it.

There are a number of reasons for Chesterton's exclusion from the canon. To some extent he is a victim of the genres in which he wrote. Our canon takes a narrow view of which kinds of writing constitute literature. Poetry, realistic fiction, and drama are always literary. History used to be, but isn't anymore—Edward Gibbon is almost the last historian in the anthology. Biography was but isn't—James Boswell is the last biographer in the anthology. Sermons were but, of course, are not—John Donne is the last preacher in the anthology. Political oratory was literature when Edmund Burke called for conciliation with the colonies, but it had ceased to be by the time Churchill promised his people "Blood, toil, tears, and sweat."

Much of Chesterton's work is in genres that have ceased to be literature. A great many of Chesterton's works take the form of the familiar essay, and that ceased to be literary sometime in the nineteenth century. Joseph Addison talking about manners, Johnson talking about the manifold forms of self-deception, even Charles Lamb talking about a roast pig: these are all literature. But in the twentieth century almost the only proper subject for prose that aspires to be literature is literature itself. The anthology includes a critical essay by F. R. Leavis but no essays from our century on the more diverse topics that essayists once were able to *make* literary. Of course there are many reasons for this strange exclusion. Literature has become more and more closely identified with the fictional, and works that are not fictional are demoted to the level of journalism. In recent decades the division has been encouraged by the critical schools, emanating from Toronto and Paris, that have defined literature as writing that is finally about nothing but itself. The dogma that insofar as a piece of writing is referential it ceases to be literary has helped narrow the scope of our canon. (Our limited idea of what is literary is embodied in the contrast between the *Norton Anthology* and the lowly *Norton Reader*: the *Anthology*, with its truly literary texts, is for the elect among sophomores who will major in English; the *Reader*, a mere collection of essays, is for the unlucky freshman who finds himself compelled to take a writing course.)

Chesterton's essays, enjoyable as they are, are not canonical in part because they expand beyond the limited bounds we have set for literature. Even when his subject is a literary genre, as in "A Defense of Nonsense," Chesterton always opens up to the great world beyond the books. If he had stopped at describing nonsense as a sort of writing that is not symbolical and refers to nothing beyond the limits of the text, we might see Chesterton as a precursor of recent critics who say the same about all literature. He would be a true critic and thus would have a chance of being considered literary. But when he proceeds to link the pleasures of nonsense to the sense of wonder, and then to something as embarrassingly non-literary as religious faith, he goes beyond the pre-

scribed bounds of literature, ceases to be a true critic, and becomes a mere essayist again.

In verse, as in prose, Chesterton wrote in genres that have ceased to be canonical. His verse is splendid and memorable—and still read: I have actually met a biologist who had bought a paperback copy of Chesterton's *Collected Poems* simply because he wanted to read them. But the canon is also controlled by a very restrictive view of tradition: the tradition that rules twentieth-century verse is modernism, and Chesterton is not a modernist by any stretch of the word. Chesterton writes rhyming poems in traditional forms, sometimes even ballads, like the "Ballad of the White Horse," or battle pieces, like "Lepanto." The quality of this work has hardly been discussed. It is not modern, either in form or in feeling, and therefore we need not even consider it for inclusion in the canon.

This same prejudice—call it a prejudice of genre or tradition—kept the World War I poets from their just place in the canon for a long time. I think it is time we did justice to their older contemporary. If nothing else, Chesterton's ballads will illuminate the earlier work of the War Poets (Siegfried Sassoon's earlier poems are not so different from Chesterton's joyful battle pieces). And men did, for a time, recite "The Ballad of the White Horse" in the trenches:

People, if you have any prayers,
 Say prayers for me:
 And lay me under a Christian Stone
 In that Lost land I thought my own
 To wait till the holy horn is blown
 And all poor men are free. (*Poems* 255)

What is more, Chesterton's poems are works of great artistry. "Lepanto," for instance, is a narrative poem in which most of the main action is told as a series of digressions. For most of the poem the journey of Don John to Lepanto is presented in parenthetical asides, while the main subject of each stanza is something else—the Sultan, the Christian kings who do not send aid, St. Michael on his mountain in the north, Mahound in his Paradise, and finally the galley-slaves suffering below the decks of the Turkish ships. We have not seen much of the skill displayed in Chesterton's verse because in the twentieth century we will not even look for skill in rhyming narrative verse. (Our view of rhymed narrative may be changing thanks, significantly, to the work of authors from the Third World. Vikram Seth and Derek Walcott, in part because of their Indian and Caribbean backgrounds, can work in forms that would mark an Anglo-Saxon poet as hopelessly quaint.)

There have been some attempts over the years to break the modernist hold on the canon. Philip Larkin's *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century*

Verse, for instance, presented a vision of what was poetry in the first half of the twentieth century very different from the one embodied by the *Norton Anthology*. Though we may not want to accept the idea that the true tradition in English verse flows through Thomas Hardy, it is good to be reminded that there are several traditions in English verse, not just T. S. Eliot's. Chesterton's verse is not canonical because the academy has found the main line of English literature and eliminated all who are not part of it. Fortunately we are now beginning to pay more attention to the branch lines and to question whether there was a single main line in the first place.

While some genres are literature in some periods but not in others, other genres are never literature. One of these is, of course, the mystery story. Tales of detection may be entertaining yarns, but they are not literature, not like real novels. When critics turn their attention to the detectives, they do it with the air of a slumming aristocrat or of an anthropologist studying a primitive culture. We do not go to these stories for the criticism of life, or life-affirming exploration, or whatever it is, that makes real literature worth reading. If it happens to be there, we either do not see it or promote the unassuming detective story to the brevet rank of novel.

Chesterton's Father Brown stories are assertively mysteries. Father Brown fits the familiar pattern of the Holmesian detective: he reaches his solutions by perceiving the small details that escape others. He, like Holmes, is both a defender of justice and above the law. Like Holmes, he often lets the repentant thief go, though he can offer the penitent a fuller absolution than lies within the scope of his secular colleague. The stories all fit the formula of detective fiction. A problem is presented; by the end our hero solves it. But a great deal happens along the way. In "The Queer Feet," for instance, Chesterton uses the mystery form to reveal the way in which social class blinds both rich and poor. Father Brown deduces how the criminal has been able to make off with a treasure from right under its owners' noses because he has heard footsteps in a hallway changing from the slow saunter of a gentleman to the swift patter of a waiter. By altering his gait, the jewel thief has appeared to be a waiter among the gentlemen and a gentleman among the waiters. Both gentlemen and waiters wear evening dress, but if a man plays the role of a member of the other class he will be invisible to all.

Aside from the political statement embodied in the mystery, "The Queer Feet" is full of fascinating effects. The gentlemen, for example, are the members of a club called the Twelve True Fishermen. At their annual dinner they all sit on one side of the table so that each member will have a view of the garden. In the meeting of these useless parasites there are clear allusions to the apostles, especially as they are represented in Leonardo's *The Last Supper*. Some of the meaning of the story takes the

form of a "What Is Wrong with This Picture?" test. The reader has first to see the diners as Leonardo's apostles, then notice that what is missing is the figure who dominates Leonardo's painting. Besides a complexity in its images, the story also has a wonderful richness of language. Death, for instance, is always mentioned in political language:

There is in the world a very aged rioter and demagogue who breaks into the most refined retreats with the dreadful information that all men are brothers, and wherever this leveler went on his pale horse it was Father Brown's trade to follow. (*Father* 48)

To admit another criterion for inclusion in the canon, this story is wonderful to teach. When assigned in a literature course, it produces a fine discussion. Part of the students' pleasure comes from their findings so much in what seems to be "just a mystery story."

Besides being mysteries, many of Chesterton's stories also partake of an element of fantasy or fable. Think of the impossibilities of his greatest detective story, *The Man Who Was Thursday*. Our hero begins investigating anarchists and ends up answering Satan's accusations in God's own court, which is also a fancy dress ball in a London suburb. Fantasy rarely becomes part of our canon, and the more obviously fantastical the less likely it is to make it. (Tolkien, certainly a classic by now, has not cracked the canon.) Acceptable literary fantasy becomes "magical realism," an oxymoron that preserves the generic prejudice. We will accept a mixture of the realistic and the fantastical only if it is grim enough to show that we are not again slumming in another subgenre, kiddie lit. Franz Kafka's solitary accused will do, because he is grim and modern. Chesterton's solitary detective will not, in part because he is not at all modern in the exultation he feels in being alone against the world. And we do not hear much about Chesterton's influence on Kafka, or on Jorge Luis Borges, although both those canonical foreign authors read his works and were influenced by them.

In addition to being a victim of the genres in which he wrote, Chesterton has been left out of the canon because of politics—politics in several senses. Of course he has suffered because of purely literary politics: the other school won, and the rhymesters and men of letters were treated as dinosaurs while academics turned to figuring out the ambiguities of the modernists. But Chesterton's *politics* in the strict sense have also told against him. His political ideas are strange and foreign to most academics. He is too often quoted by conservatives for American professors to be comfortable with him. We like our canonical authors to be liberals or radicals. If they are not, the only truly effective disinfectant is a good dose of literary avant-gardism: that is what has almost effaced the scent of fascist sympathies that clings to many of the great modernists. Because

he “broke the pentameter,” we forgive Ezra Pound. Chesterton’s political ideas, aside from the traces of anti-Semitism for which there can be no defense, are not as reactionary as they have been made to appear. His distributist celebration of local control and his distrust of large and distant organizations seem akin to many recent liberal ideals. He was always a critic of the structures of power. He attacked the ideologies of his time that celebrated large structures—imperialism on one side and universal socialism on the other. Recent world events make Chesterton seem especially perceptive. The empires have now fallen, and the dream of a socialism that would dissolve national differences has vanished, but tiny countries have reestablished themselves. Chesterton on this subject is a better prophet than either Rudyard Kipling and the imperialists or Bernard Shaw and the socialists. In any case, Chesterton’s ideas are worth hearing. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* belongs in our courses with other utopian fictions like *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In the politics of the canon Chesterton has also been a victim of the religious views that animate his work. The academic’s bias is not religious, and I think it fair to say that the overtly religious writer is not likely to be welcomed by the American professor. Would Eliot’s reputation have proceeded in the way it did if he had begun by writing *Four Quartets* instead of poems about how the “Church can sleep and feed at once”? (Again, literary avant-gardism or a modernist grimness can be a disinfectant. Flannery O’Connor was quite right when she said that Graham Greene used seediness to make “religion respectable to the modern unbeliever” [201]. One might say she used grotesque violence for the same purpose.) Chesterton will always be identified as a “Catholic writer,” and that may keep him out of the mainstream of the canon.

I wonder if other militantly Christian English writers of our century will ever be made canonical. C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams are certainly skillful writers, clearly in some sense classics by now, but work on them seems ghettoized because they wrote science fiction and fantasy but also because their beliefs are unpopular in the academy. I cannot see a great difference in literary value between Lewis and, say, George Orwell, but one was a Christian and fairly conservative, the other a leftist without much use for religion. And the political pressures that form the canon favor the latter. Orwell is in the *Anthology*.

If Chesterton was a victim of politics in the formation of the canon, he continues to be now that the canon is being questioned and revised. Too often only a limited range of neglected authors has been considered for new inclusion, specifically those who can be seen as representatives or precursors of important contemporary developments. Thanks to the women’s movement, more women writers have been included in the *Anthology*. As the preface to the sixth edition says, the *Anthology* “continue[s] to increase the number of women writers, as well as to

enlarge the selections by some of the women included in earlier editions" (1:xxx). Almost all the works by women now included should have been there in the first place. (On looking at the early editions of the *Anthology*, one is shocked to see that "Goblin Market" was not considered an important part of Victorian literature.) But neglected authors who were not women remain neglected.

Evidently in response to the pressure to increase the representation of black writers in English courses, the editors added a selection of works by Walcott to the fifth edition. Walcott is a splendid poet whose work clearly belongs in any general anthology of poetry in English, but one wonders why a St. Lucian who teaches in the United States has a place in an anthology of writers born or working in the British Isles. Could it be that Walcott is Audenesque enough to fit the vision of English literature the *Anthology* embodies, while the more radical black poets working in Britain are not? In the same way one wonders why Walcott is not in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. I suspect it is because the vision of the African-American writer that informs the *Norton*, and several other anthologies, is restricted to the free-verse radical, like Imamu Amiri Baraka. A generic prejudice works against the inclusion of black poets who write in traditional forms, such poets as Walcott or Dudley Randall or Sterling Brown. (The exclusion of a writer from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* is not, of course, nearly so significant as exclusion from the English *Norton*, since no American anthology enjoys that work's hegemony. It is only in English literature that a survey can be colloquially referred to as "a *Norton Anthology* course.")

Anthologies with less restrictive views of literature than the one embodied in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* can be created. The *Heath Anthology of American Literature* has recently offered a view of American writing that includes many different traditions. Even more striking is the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (that the title does not include the loaded word "literature" is significant). In that anthology many forms of writing from warring traditions appear together: the twentieth century is not just William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, and Seamus Heaney; it is also the speeches of Eamon de Valera and the sermons of Ian Paisley. These anthologies may be bulky, but there is nothing wrong with that. Finding treasures the professor did not assign should be one of the pleasures an anthology gives the student. In the first volume of the sixth edition of the *Norton*, I am very sorry to find that the one poem by John Cleveland has been eliminated, because I remember stumbling on it in an earlier edition and then walking around campus with the dactyls of "Never Mark Antony dallied so wantonly" echoing through my brain.

I am delighted that many women writers who were left out of a canon formed primarily by men are being rediscovered and included in the

canon. I welcome the working-class authors whom some leftist critics are bringing to our attention. I hope, however, that in expanding the canon we will not simply remake it in the image of those who are currently powerful in our profession. The canon has reflected yesterday's winners, the movements and genres that came out on top. As we expand it, let us not simply remake it in the image of today's winners, the precursors of the movements that hold sway in the academy today. Let us spare some room for the fine authors who were in the past excluded from the canon because of politics and genre, even if, because of politics and gender, they do not have modern champions. Let us open the canon to the point where it includes even yesterday's losers—even the losers who have not shared in any posthumous victories.

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